

2.19.2023 Introduction to Ephesians

Today we begin a study that will certainly take up much, if not all of 2023. I expect **Ephesians** will take that much time because the writing is dense with Christian Faith and Practice. There is no fluff. No waste. No filler. It's been called "a great rhapsody of the Christian salvation." It's also been called "the Waterloo of Commentators," meaning the book is not without significant challenges: questions for which we simply have no answers.

Still, the book is **full of inspired words** that are central to our faith and practice, metaphors that blew me away as a college student, and verses I memorized in my youth. Like 1:21 describing Jesus at the Father's right hand: "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." Because of its musical nature it's seared into my brain.

How about **Eph. 2:8** For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this *is* not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; **9** not a result of works, so that no one may boast. How many of you memorized this foundational thought in Sunday school or at Bible camp?

Or in ch3 when Paul prays 17 ...that you, being rooted and established in love, **18** may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ... Or **6:11** Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

This NT book has contributed greatly to the growth and formation of the Body of Christ [the Church] which is exactly what it was intended for. But there are some issues the **intelligent Christian** needs to be familiar with- *so that when some skeptic brings it up it doesn't cause you worry.. Ephesian Enigmas- unanswered questions*

First of all, In **Corinthians or Galatians or Philippians** there are specific situations referenced and people and complaints and comments that indicate Paul had been there, lived there, knew the people there. *But there's none of that in "our Ephesians."* And while it's traditionally referred to as Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the letter itself SOUNDS LIKE **Paul had never visited these people**. **Eph. 1:15** For this reason I too, **having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus** which *exists* among you and your love for all the saints, **16** do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention *of you* in my prayers;

That's a problem because according to Acts Paul spent 3 years teaching in Ephesus. In Acts 18:19ff Paul is headed elsewhere but he passes through Ephesus and spends time in the synagogue with Ephesian Jews. They want to hear more and he promises to return- which he does in ch19. He finds some followers of Jesus who only have part of the story. He fills them in. For **3 months** he teaches about Jesus **in the synagogue** until they make it clear he should go. He moves to a local lecture hall and keeps teaching. Things really take off with miracles and demons cast out, sorcerers burning their magic scrolls, etc. For two years this went on and the Ephesian church grew.

Then **Demetrius** the silversmith realizes: if this Paul convinces people our gods are nothing but stone my souvenir artemis-idol making business is done for.

He riles up the metalsmiths guild and there's a riot, and some of Paul's associates get dragged before the crowd. **Paul wants to face the crowd.** But the church members restrain him from doing so. When it all calms down Paul finds the Ephesian Christians, encourages them and says farewell as he heads for Macedonia. So considering all that shared experience, it seems unlikely he would say: *having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you...*

And there's this: This is the **Codex Sinaiticus** on display in the British Library's Treasures Exhibit. It contains the majority of the Greek Old Testament and the oldest COMPLETE copy of the New Testament. It is one of the three oldest, most complete mss of scripture from the 3rd and fourth century [Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus]. **And in each the words "at Ephesus" ARE NOT in the address of the letter** There are copies of "Ephesians" with the words "in Ephesus" but they are later so less reliable.

So what do we make of this? This has been a conundrum that has stymied NT Experts as long as the book has been in our scriptures.

The **notorious** [heretic] **Marcion** published the first collection of NT books and concluded our Ephesians was, in fact, **the letter to Laodicea-** Paul mentions in Colossians: 4:16 ...for your part, read my letter *that is coming* from Laodicea.

Some **Church Fathers** quote the letter, but not the "**in Ephesus.**"

So we've got a canonical NT letter, traditionally understood to be sent to Ephesus; but the writer sounds as if he's never been there, and the oldest and best NT MSS have a blank where "**at Ephesus**" should be. How do we explain this?

Lots of Bible experts have come up with many creative scenarios.

For instance: as Paul's letters were being collected a BIG FAN of Paul's work who'd practically memorized Colossians wrote "our Ephesians" as a sort of "**Intro to Paul.**" **It's suggested** that while it's "tricked out" as a letter, it's actually a **sermon** written to be shared with new converts at their baptism- to remind them who they are in Christ and how they should live.

Another proposal offered that people in Paul's environment were **embarrassed** that this "True Revelation of God" [Jesus death and Rez] had come **so late in history** ["nothing new can be true"]. They feared the gentiles might be feeling like their salvation was an afterthought on God's part. So "our Ephesians" was written to **boost their ego as Adopted sons and daughters of God.**

There's not really any evidence to support these "creative" theories.

The dull, and most likely, situation is that "Our Ephesians" was NOT written to the church at Ephesus but was, in fact a "**circular letter,**" probably written to Christians in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor around the time Colossians was written [they sound very similar]. **It was intended to be taken from congregation to congregation and**

read aloud. The blank was where the reader would insert the appropriate city or region.

Sometime after Paul's death when his letters were being gathered and preserved, it could be the Ephesian church had a copy of this letter; and so someone assumed the letter was sent there and so over time we get copies WITH "at Ephesus" and WITHOUT.

The authorship of "our Ephesians" has also been actively debated. Some think it doesn't match a certain Pauline perspective or attitude found in Romans or Galatians- **so he can't have written it**. Its language is **definitely more formal** than the rapid-fire, street-level debating style of Galatians or Corinthians. **Linguistically it sounds more polished than those**.

In response I have two great Bible scholars who say the idea of "an imitator of Paul" at this level is **just silly**. It's actually much more sensible to imagine Paul wrote it as a sermon in a more formal style on purpose. Remember, you and I change our writing style all the time. You don't use the same language to write an official letter to your bank as you do to text your kids. Paul is quite capable of shifting styles.

Fortunately the mark of **Holy Spirit "inspiration"** for any of our NT scripture is not **what city it came from or who wrote it**. *Inspiration is the working of the Holy Spirit within the words of humans so the words of humans can also be the Words of God.*

One marker of this inspiration is USEFULNESS. Has the writing proven itself to be useful in promoting faith and practice and building up Jesus' followers? And we can definitely say "our Ephesians" has proven itself over the centuries to be incredibly useful to the Church- reminding us of our status in Christ, and our obligation to live a life worthy of that status.

So while it's dressed like a letter, we will think of Ephesians as a formal sermon – written by Paul, in a particular rhetorical style while he was in prison; and intended to be taken from town to town and church to church to encourage Asia minor believers in their faith.

Now I'm going to try to give you an overview of the whole book. And in this I'm borrowing heavily from an excellent animated video overview of Ephesians produced by **The Bible Project**. [Check that out at home]

So what can we expect to encounter as we walk through this sermon?

To begin with, "Our Ephesians" is nicely split into two equal halves. Ch 1-3 and 4-6. In the first half [1-3] Paul explores **the Gospel story**. This is the theology half of the letter. It's all about Jesus and His work on the cross and in the resurrection to create a new multi-ethnic community of followers. *The first half is all about what God has done for us all in Jesus and who we are because of it.*

A “**Therefore**” in 4:1 connects the first half to the second. Here we pivot from theology to the real-life practice of our faith. Because of everything God has done for us in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection; and because of who we are in him, “**therefore**” every part of our life should be transformed: personally, with our neighbors, in our community relations, and in our families.

The **Gospel Story of 1-3** is expected to effect every part of **Our Life Story** as in 4-6.

Ch1 begins with a Jewish style poem [v3-14]- a blessing- Paul praises God the Father for all the things He’s done in Christ Jesus.

Since Gen 1 God’s purpose has been to choose and bless a covenant people – Think Abraham in Gen 12. Now, because of Jesus anyone can be adopted into the family of God [1:5]. Whoever we are, our sins and failures are covered by Jesus’ death [1:7]. And His death allows God’s grace to be lavished on us [1:8]. And the purpose of it all -we’re told in 1:10- is to bring all things together in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.

Gods plan was always to have a huge family of renewed humans who are unified in Jesus the Messiah. In v12 the “first to hope in Christ” were the **Jewish Christians**. And in v13 after **the Gentiles** heard the gospel, and believed they were “sealed” by the Holy Spirit- **Unifying Jews and non-Jews into one family** [a new Israel].

[Notice Father, Son & Spirit work together in all this.]

Ch1 closes with a magnificent prayer asking that all this new family of Jesus would personally experience the hope and glory and power of the gospel. It’s a prayer they will be **energized** by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and put Him as the exalted Head over the whole world.

Ch2 opens with Paul telling the story of how the non-Jewish Christians came to know Jesus: trapped in a purposeless life of selfishness and sin and deceived by dark forces of spiritual evil. **Eph. 2:1** And you were dead in your offenses and sins, **2** in which you previously walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air,

But amazingly **God, in great love and mercy, saved them** and forgave all their sins and joined their lives to Jesus’ resurrection life and brought them back to life [2:4-5] with new tasks and purpose. And they got a NEW FAMILY because Jesus fulfilled the Law and broke down the dividing barrier between Jew and Gentile. **2:14** For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall... In Christ, these two ethnic groups have become a new unified humanity that CAN live together in peace.

In ch3 Paul is delighted and astounded that God would **choose him to share the** “unfathomable riches of Christ” with the gentiles, the non-Jews [3:8]. Ch3 closes with Paul praying a passionate prayer that these followers of Jesus would be equipped to grasp -with ALL the saints- how wide, and long and high and deep is God’s love for His people [3:18]

The 2nd half begins in 4:1 with that **pivotal “Therefore.”** **Because** of the length and breadth and depth of God’s love, **because** the wisdom of God has been made known in the unity of Jew & gentile, **because**, in Christ, they are now one multi-ethnic family, **because** God’s great Love and Grace and resurrection power has saved us, **because** all things are in subjection under Jesus’ feet, **because** Jesus is the head and the church is his body, and **because** this has been God’s plan from the beginning... **THEREFORE** if you are His, your own Life Story must reflect the Gospel story.

And he starts right in on the every day life of the church- a big family with lots of different people – so **humility, gentleness and patience** are in order [4:2]. As is [4:3]- **WORK** to maintain that **Unity** 4:4 *There is one body and one Spirit*, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all. That’s a lot of unity. **But unity is not uniformity.** There’s one Spirit. But that Spirit gives all sorts of enthusiasm, gifts, abilities to serve each other and build up the church.

Eph. 4:7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. [Apostles, evangelists, teachers, etc. 4:11-12]

In this Paul uses a couple interesting metaphors: one is building up the church as a new temple [2:20-22]. The other is that they are all becoming **a new humanity with Jesus as the Head** [4:15-16].

He talks of our “old humanity” like **dirty clothes** to be “put off” and trashed [4:22] **24** ... put on the new self, which in *the likeness of* God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. **For instance:** Instead of lying, new humans speak truth. instead of getting revenge, new humans forgive. Instead of getting drunk new humans come under the influence of God’s Spirit. [4:25-32]

This influence of the Spirit -as we try to imitate God [5:1]- can be seen in **singing** [5:19], a spirit of **continuous gratefulness** [5:20] and a willingness on the part of all disciples of Jesus to “submit yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ [5:21].

Paul follows this up with some specific examples of this **Mutual Submission** in relationships like: husband & wife, parent and child and slave and master [5:22ff]

Paul closes the “therefore” half of the letter reminding us: **12** ... our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the *spiritual forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. Those forces want to undermine the unity of Jesus’ people and compromise their “New Humanity.” **So we need the armor of God.** The armor images come from Isaiah’s depiction of the Messianic King [Is 59:16-17]- suggesting that as **Messiah’s followers we need to take on the Master’s attributes** because, until He returns, we are his body on earth.

“Our Ephesians” probably wasn’t written specifically to the church at Ephesus. **BUT** its vital message is **intended for every single follower of Jesus.**

It tells us who Jesus is and who we are in Him and it gives us practical instruction for where the **rubber** of our practice **meets the road** of our faith.

So as we make our way through this inspired text, let us pray for each other as Paul prayed for all who would read this letter: **18** *I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, **19** and what is the boundless greatness of His power toward us who believe.