

EPHESIANS: A STUDY OF THE CHURCH

Ephesians 1:1-3

Introduction:

The Church – the body of Christ. Churches come in all shapes and sizes. There are bodies of believers with thousands of members meeting in large assembly halls. There are small groups, just a handful of believers, meeting in a small room or even a home. The buildings vary in size, style and appearance. But the building is not the church. The church is the body of Christ, comprised of believers all over the world, yet meeting in smaller groups, each one representing the ministry of Christ to the world.

The church in Scripture always refers to the local church—a group of believers who meet together, who love and serve one another, and live out the gospel in their city or community.

One of the prominent early churches of New Testament times was the church in Ephesus. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesian church, which is a part of our New Testament Scriptures. It is a letter that has been loved by Christians throughout the ages. I did a series of messages from Ephesians here almost 10 years ago, but I felt that it was time to revisit this important letter.

What I want to do this morning is to introduce the book of Ephesians. We will look at some background regarding the city of Ephesus and the church that was established there. Then we will look briefly at the nature of this letter, its structure and some of the key themes that Paul builds around in it.

Ephesus: The City

Ephesus was a major port city on the western coast of the Roman province of Asia (today Turkey). It was a wealthy and influential center during NT times. The city boasted many large and impressive architectural wonders, some of which are still standing today. There was a very large amphitheatre, which seated over 20,000 people. In recent years, it

has been excavated and can be seen in the city of Ephesus today. There were various fields and a stadium where athletic events were held.

The city also boasted a number of temples dedicated to the worship of various gods. These included imperial cult temples for the worship of Caesar, and most famously the temple devoted to Artemis, or Diana. The Ephesians were proud of their temple and statues of Artemis. She was not only worshipped but was also a large part of the local economy, through the making and selling of those statues.

There is evidence of great wealth in the ancient city of Ephesus. Inscriptions have been found referring to a guild of silversmiths, even naming some of them. However, there would no doubt have also been many slaves, creating a great disparity of rich and poor in both the city and the church there.

Ephesus: The Church

That brings us to the church in Ephesus. It appears that the Apostle Paul was instrumental in the founding of the church in Ephesus. You can find the details in Acts chapters 18-19. On his second missionary journey, while he was in Corinth he met a couple named Priscilla and Aquila, who had recently come from Italy. When he left Corinth to return home, he took Priscilla and Aquila with him. They stopped in Ephesus for a short time (Acts 18:18-21). He spent a brief time reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue, then pressed on to return to Caesarea and on to Antioch, leaving Aquila and Priscilla behind in Ephesus.

Some time later, as Paul set out on a third missionary journey, revisiting some of the churches, he returned to Ephesus (Acts 19). What he found was a small group of Gentile believers, who were still very immature and unknowledgeable regarding the ministry of Christ and the Holy Spirit. They were basing their belief on the teaching of John the Baptist and his message of repentance, but knew nothing of the Holy Spirit. On learning more, they were baptized in the name of Jesus and received the Holy Spirit. This was really the beginning of the church in Ephesus.

Paul stayed in Ephesus for the next two to three years, preaching, teaching and establishing the church there. There were many events which occurred during his time there – see Acts 19.

After going on to Macedonia and spending some time there visiting and encouraging the churches, Paul returned to Antioch. He did not stop at Ephesus, as he was in a hurry to reach Antioch, but he did send for the elders of the church to travel to Miletus to meet with him there. They bid each other a very fond farewell, and as far as we know, that was the last personal contact Paul had with the church in Ephesus.

However, it was approximately 5 years later, when Paul was under house arrest in Rome that he wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus, which we have preserved for us in the Holy Scriptures.

Ephesians: The Letter

That brings us to the letter of Ephesians. The authorship of this letter is rarely contested, except by those critics who would like to question the very authenticity of the Scriptures. There is really no reason to doubt that it was written by the Apostle Paul.

There does not appear to be any particular occasion for Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. In fact, this letter is somewhat unique among the Pauline epistles. It is not really a theological treatise, meant to teach the great doctrines of the faith, like the epistle to the Romans. There is plenty of theology in it, but it is not laid out the way Romans is.

It is also not a corrective letter like Galatians or the Corinthian letters. They were written to address doctrinal errors, in the case of Galatians, or sinful practices, in the case of the Corinthians. Nor is it an instructional letter like the personal letters Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, to instruct them in areas of church and pastoral ministry.

Ephesians seems to have been written simply to encourage the believers and remind them of the wonderful purpose and plan of God in calling them to salvation, along with the importance of their response to that calling. Its focus is on the eternal blessings of salvation and the life we live in the body of Christ.

The letter divides rather neatly into two parts—chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6. The first part focuses on what we have in Christ—our spiritual blessings. The second part deals with how we ought to live in the light of that. (Swindoll – Our Position in Christ, Our Practice on Earth.)

The first part is theoretical and doctrinal, outlining the joys and blessings of salvation—our calling, our redemption, our inheritance. The second part of the letter is practical, outlining God's calling to live in unity and harmony within the body we call the church. Taken together, what we really have is a study of the church—a picture of what the church should be. Charles Swindoll entitles this letter as "A True Portrait of the Church."

Our Challenge for Today

So, we have looked at a great deal of background about the city of Ephesus, the church in Ephesus, and the letter to the Ephesians. But you may be wondering, what is in the letter and what is the message for us today.

Let me just share with you a bit about some of the major themes of this letter and then we will look at the introduction to this epistle in the first couple of verses. First, some of the common words and phrases that show us what was really on Paul's mind when he wrote this.

- Grace – used 12 times, 3 times in vv. 3-14
- Glory – used 6 times
- In the heavenly places – 5 times
- Purpose – 5 times, 3 times in vv. 3-14
- Riches – 5 times, referring to the riches we have in Christ

One of the key themes of this letter is God's purpose being fulfilled in the church. Several times Paul refers to everything being brought about according to the purpose of his will. The obvious question we must ask ourselves in the light of that is: Are we submitting to his will, so that his purpose can be fulfilled in us?

We will see more of the themes that Paul dwells on as we move through the book, but for now, I just want to look for a moment at Paul's introduction in vv. 1-2 – *read them*.

Three elements – he identifies himself, he identifies those to whom he is writing, and he offers a blessing to them. As Paul introduces himself, he already introduces the idea of God's will and purpose being carried out, this time in his own life and his calling to be an apostle.

His original readers were the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus. Saints—not some superspiritual, special individuals, but the believers—those called to be holy, separated, sanctified.

His blessing is identical to what he used in many of his letters, calling for God's grace and peace to be their experience as they walk with the Lord Jesus.

So what is our challenge? I want to draw your attention to something regarding the church in Ephesus that I believe is important for us as a church as well as individuals. Note Paul's mention of their faithfulness in v. 2. This was written in approx. AD 62. The church in Ephesus had only been founded a few years earlier. They were growing and they were showing their faithfulness in love and ministry for God.

Now fast-forward a few years. When the Apostle John, who had pastored the church in Ephesus for many years, was exiled to the island of Patmos, he was given a revelation of things to come—the book of Revelation. It begins with a series of messages to seven churches in Asia. The first of those was the church in Ephesus.

Do you remember the message of Jesus to the church in Ephesus? Let me read it – *read Rev. 2:1-7*. This message came approximately 30 years after Paul had written his letter to the Ephesian church. What had happened? They had become careless in their devotion to Jesus Christ. They were still doing all the right things, but their love and devotion had faded. I wonder if Paul would have still used the word faithful if he had been writing then.

Conclusion

So what does this mean for us? We need to be careful in our walk with God. We need to realize that just because we are faithful today does not guarantee anything about tomorrow.

Paul reminded his Ephesian readers of the great blessings God had imparted to them because of Christ. But he also reminded them of their responsibility within the body of Christ to live worthy of that. We would do well to keep our eyes on those things as well, so that our devotion to Christ does not fade as it happened to the church in Ephesus.