

Introduction to Ephesians

The Fullness of the Believer's Inheritance in Christ

Ephesians 1:1-2

"It is very difficult to speak of Ephesians in a controlled manner because of its greatness and sublimity. Many have tried to describe it. One writer has described it as 'the crown and climax of Pauline theology.' Another has said it is 'the distilled essence of the Christian religion, the most authoritative and most consummate compendium of our holy Christian faith.' What language! And it is by no means exaggerated." This quote, by the highly regarded preacher of the 20th century Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones, serves well as an introduction to our Bible study this year on the book of Ephesians. There really is no way to overstate the glory of God that is revealed in the text we will study. Ephesians is truly a treasure house of truth for the believer, a depiction of fullness, abundance, and lasting encouragement. This encouragement, grounded firmly in the themes of God's grace and all-sufficiency, will challenge each of us to return to the basics of the Gospel, and yet go deeper in these truths as well. Who is this God we serve? What is He like? What has he done? These are just a few of the questions we will be challenged to examine anew, all for the purpose of growing in our love relationship with the Lord.

Scattered among the themes of God's all-sufficiency and grace, we will come to see that believers have more resources at their disposal than their lives tend to reflect. Sadly, the common journey of many Christians today is to live their lives in a state of spiritual infancy, simply because they fail to tap into the storehouse of spiritual nourishment at their disposal. Tragically, these believers find themselves spiritually malnourished, when all the while God's desire and provision for them is that they be vibrant and rich in the things of God. Of course, any one of us can operate in this way at any given moment. Indeed the flesh and the devil are deceptive, and well adept at keeping us from walking in our resources. Yet, that is not what God desires or has planned for us! His riches and provision transcend all obstacles, and are **continuously** accessible because of our union with Jesus. As MacArthur says, *"The Lord's heavenly resources are more than adequate to cover all our past debts, all our present liabilities, and all of our future needs- and still not reduce the heavenly assets...In our union with Jesus Christ, God has made us 'fellow heirs with Christ.'"* (Rom. 8:17) What hope these truths give to every believer!

Running alongside the main theme of God's grace revealed in the believer's riches, we will see additional themes regarding the church unfold, namely the mystery previously hidden that the **"Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."** (Eph. 3:6) This truth coupled with the idea that church is the body of Christ, a living organism containing the very life blood of the Savior, through which God is

faithfully at work in the world, will challenge each of us to examine where we fit into His plan. The previously veiled metaphor of the church being the bride of Christ will also be unpacked, proving to us that God's plan for the church is a vital component of our faith that must be embraced by each of us for God's glory to be maximized.

Additionally, an interesting thing we will notice is that there is no specific occasion, problem, or controversy that the author, Paul, addresses in Ephesians. As Martin Lloyd Jones says, *"the peculiar feature and characteristic of the Epistle is that here the Apostle seems to be, as he puts it himself, 'in the heavenly places,' and he is looking down at the great panorama of salvation and redemption...his great concern was to give to the Ephesians...a panoramic view of this wondrous and glorious work of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."* For many it may seem foreign or even unsettling, to focus so heavily on the rich doctrines of salvation, seemingly to the detriment of their daily walk of faith. After all, how does learning more about God's work in salvation affect one's daily life? Isn't it enough to simply focus on the gift of Jesus, what we know and have already been taught about him? While it is true that we should never lose the childlike wonder of knowing our Savior, God's desire for us is that we would continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ! As was alluded to earlier, remaining in a state of spiritual infancy can have tragic results, (Eph. 4:14-16) and subsequently the Lord has given us the *entirety* of his Word for our good! His plan for us is that we be well acquainted with the *whole* counsel of God so that we might have true understanding of him, for a true understanding leads to the right worship of him. He desires that we would each seek to love him with our whole self, and this includes exercising our minds, for as John Piper says, *"The mind provides the kindling for the fires of the heart. Theology serves doxology, Reflection serves affection. Contemplation serves exultation. Together they glorify Christ to the full."*

Does this mean there will never be questions we will stumble upon that challenge our thinking and cause us to feel unsettled? Certainly not! But we mustn't be afraid of the process of having our thinking challenged. That, after all, is what the Christian life is all about- God renewing our minds and changing us through the avenue of his holy Word. John Stott, speaking of this candidly says it this way, *"We need to repent of the haughty way in which we sometimes stand in judgment upon Scripture and must learn to sit humbly under its judgments instead. If we come to Scripture with our minds made up, expecting to hear from it only an echo of our own thoughts and never the thunderclap of God's, then indeed he will not speak to us, and we shall only be confirmed in our own prejudices. We must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior."* While it is by no means easy to have our perceived security disturbed, and our thinking entirely reoriented, this in and of itself is a tremendous gift of grace! Our perfect and loving Father knows that truth is the very thing we need to walk more closely with Him- in the freedom and fellowship we were created for. He also knows that humility before him is the very

posture we need to remain in to grow and thrive. So, as we jump into our study for the year, let us humbly and prayerfully plead with God to make us women who seek to know and worship him in both spirit and truth (John 4:23).

Author

Starting out in verse 1 we read, ***“Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...”*** While brief and to the point, we mustn’t gloss over this introduction statement. Born a Jew in the year 6AD (app.) in the area known as Tarsus, Paul was given the birth name Saul, likely as a way to honor Israel’s prominent fellow Benjamite, King Saul. As a child, Saul’s upbringing was exemplary, as it related to Jewish cultural ideals. Educated in the Jewish traditions and Scriptures from the earliest age, Saul learned would have learned to read and write by copying long passages of Scripture, even learning ancient Hebrew, alongside Aramaic, and Greek. As a boy, hours and hours were spent in the Jewish synagogue where his impressionable young mind was influenced by the most powerful sect of Jewish leadership at the time- the Pharisees. As a teen, Saul even was privileged to spend years studying in Jerusalem under the famous Jewish rabbi, Gamaliel, steeping him further in Phariseism and causing him to become very zealous.

Phariseesism was a sect of Judaism that was severely confronted by Jesus, for its rejection of Him as Messiah, and false teaching that salvation is obtained through obedience to the law. What is easy to miss about the Pharisees is that they did embrace many true doctrines central to Christianity. For starters, they were strongly monotheistic, and embraced the Old Testament Scriptures as authoritative. They affirmed the reality of demons and angels, and had a strong belief in life beyond the grave and the body’s resurrection. Going further they were even missionary-minded, and sought to convert the Gentile. They believed God was concerned about the life of every individual, and affirmed people were responsible for their behavior. Yet tragically, the Pharisees partial embracing of truth proved to be their demise. Their pride blinded them from seeing their desperate need for Christ, and the fact that He indeed was the fulfillment of the very Scriptures they were so well acquainted with. This is the very system Saul was steeped him. Most commentators agree that Saul was well on his way to becoming one of the greatest leaders within the sect, evidenced by his impeccable training and the role he took in arresting and persecuting Christians. That is until Jesus Christ Himself “arrested” Saul. 😊

In Acts 7:58 we first learn of ***“the man named Saul,”*** and what is mentioned about him is his deep involvement with Stephen’s martyrdom. Stephen embodied what Paul hated- he had embraced Jesus as Messiah and was a powerful witness for the truth of the Gospel. Saul despised Christians, particularly those who were well versed in contradicting his interpretation of the Scriptures. Yet, it can be argued that Stephen’s martyrdom was used by God to transform the very hard heart of Saul in the end.

In Acts 9 we find that Saul ***“is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,”*** and has gone to great lengths to secure that saints be shut up in prison or murdered for their faith. In Acts 26:11 Paul himself makes clear that he ***“punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme and being exceedingly enraged against them, persecuted them even to foreign cities.”*** Saul’s heart was filled with hate. But in God’s grace it was at this very moment that the Lord Jesus intervened. As Saul was journeying to Damascus to arrest more Christians, a blinding light suddenly appeared to him and the voice of Jesus said to him, ***“Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?”*** It should be noted that this question always gets to the crux of humanity’s heart issues. “Why do we treat the Lord with such disdain?” Saul replies, ***“Who are you, Lord?”*** and the Lord says, ***“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”*** In that very instant the hard heart of Saul was changed and he replied, ***“Lord, what do you want me to do?”*** As we know, the story unfolds dramatically and Saul goes from being Saul the great persecutor of Jesus, to Paul the devout follower of Jesus.

So, how did this happen? One moment Saul is plotting to kill Christians, the next moment he has become one! The answer to this question lies in two simple words: God’s grace. The unmerited favor of God reached down and opened the blind eyes of a man who was living in darkness, thinking that he was doing God a service by killing the saints (John 16:2) In an instant he truly sees the Lord, despite the fact that he wasn’t even looking! In fact, he was arguably the Lord’s greatest enemy at the time! This moment changed Paul forever, and impacted his ministry more than any other fact. He knew his changed heart was all because of God’s grace (Rom. 15:15-16, Gal. 1:15, Eph. 3:7-8) and that is why in Acts 20:24 he summarizes the entirety of his life’s mission as follows, ***“But I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”***

This grace that Paul had experienced entirely framed his ministry *as a disciple of Christ* (literally means learner, student, or follower of Christ), and more specifically as an *apostle of Christ*. It is critical for believers to understand the difference in these terms. Apostles of Christ do not exist today, for it would be impossible for them to meet the criteria. To be an apostle one had to have been a physical eye witness of the risen Christ in the flesh (Acts 1:22; 10:39-41, I Cor. 9:1; 15:7-8), appointed by Jesus personally to fill the position (Mark 3:14, Luke 6:13, Acts 1:2,24, 10:41), and able to authenticate that apostolic appointment with miraculous signs (Matt. 10:1-2, Acts 1:5-8; 2:43; 4:33; 5:12; 8:14, 2 Cor. 12:12, Heb. 2:3-4) While Paul’s apostleship did not conform to the normative pattern for apostleship, he nevertheless met the criteria. He was simply the last apostle Jesus appeared to and commissioned to fulfill the role. (I Cor. 15:7-10) It was only ***“by the will of God”*** that he became Paul, the devout follower of Christ, as well as the last apostle. (Acts 9:15)

Background

To understand the context of Ephesians it is helpful to grasp a general timeline of Paul's life. As was stated earlier, Paul was born around 6AD. Nearly all commentators agree that Paul likely never had any direct contact with Jesus prior to his conversion, which seems to have taken place around 33-34AD. After his life changing encounter with the Lord, Paul was led by the Spirit to "Arabia" (area around Petra), where he was specially taught by Christ for three years. This was a time of equipping for Paul, similar to the three years the apostles had been equipped by Christ. Following this, Paul went back to Damascus where he received his first real threat, and then on to Jerusalem where for the first time he met Peter. His relationship with Peter and the rest of the church got off to a rough start, apparently due to their suspicions of his conversion and claims to apostleship. (Acts 9:26) His journey as a disciple and apostle had indeed been different from the rest, but no less valid! Paul had been taught by the Lord directly, (Rom. 15:1) just as the others, and with a little time the apostles and church at large embraced his conversion and his authoritative role as apostle. (Acts 15:26, 2 Peter 3:15-16)

After Paul's rocky visit to Jerusalem he spent approximately 8 years ministering in and around Cilicia (near Tarsus 37-45AD), and then at the end of this time had a fruitful ministry based in Antioch. (Acts 11:26) During this time he saw many people come to know Christ, but also endured a horrendous stoning by the Jews. (Acts 14:19) Yet this in no way could stop Paul! Following this, his ministry to the churches and role as an itinerant preacher really began to take off. In the years 46-47AD, he traveled on his first missionary journey and wrote his first letter to be canonized, Galatians. Then in 48-51AD he traveled on his second missionary journey and during these years befriended most notably Timothy, Priscilla, and Aquila, ministered at Corinth, and wrote I and II Thessalonians, among many other things. During all of this time Paul was passionately building up the church and strengthening countless believers as he traveled and endured hardship for the sake of the Gospel. Finally, in the years 52-55AD Paul traveled on his third missionary journey and during this time had a marvelous ministry at Ephesus that lasted about three years.

Ephesus was a strategically located, capital city on the Roman province of Asia that was steeped in idolatry and the occult. There was a large harbor there that brought in immense trade and commerce, plus the world-renown Temple of Diana which attracted a host of visitors. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple measured 418 feet by 239 feet, stood 50 feet high and with no less than 100 columns. Within the sacred enclosure of the temple stood the idolatrous image of Diana, the supposed goddess of fertility that invoked worship by so many. Sadly, cultic prostitution was a vital part of her worship, and hundreds of "priestesses" were available for the taking. The temple was also an immense source of wealth for the region, and many were dependent on her revenue, which proved to be a real challenge

for Paul and the believers there. Ironically, this is the setting in which we find Paul having a vibrant ministry in the years 52-55AD.

The ministry he had those three years in Ephesus is summarized in Acts 18-20, and as Wiersbe says, *“In Acts Luke does not describe Paul’s second missionary journey in detail because his main purpose is to get Paul to Ephesus. He wants to share with his readers the marvelous ministry God gave to Paul in that strategic city so steeped in idolatry and the occult.”* Upon his arrival, Paul found some disciples of John the Baptist there who had not yet heard of Jesus, but were receptive to the Gospel and ended up being baptized and radically filled with the Spirit. There were about 12 men in all. The fact that these men knew of John, along with the fact that the great teacher, Apollos, (and Priscilla and Aquilla) had just come through the area preaching the Scriptures, revealed that the Spirit had indeed been paving the way for a great awakening. These events were only the beginning of what God was about to do!

Luke, summarizing the ministry of Paul at Ephesus says in Acts 19:20, ***“So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”*** What a tribute to Paul, his passion for teaching the Word, and most importantly the work of the Spirit! Entering Ephesus, Paul spent the first three months preaching boldly in the synagogue, ***“reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.”*** (Acts 19:8) God had equipped Paul to be a great apologist, and was using his training in the Scriptures to be able to explain in detail how Christ indeed was the Messiah! After three months there, Paul was seeing that many Jews were continuing to harden their hearts, so he moved his ministry to a place called the Hall of Tyrannus. In this setting, Paul spent 5 hours a day for 2 years teaching and training people about Christ, also going from house to house ***“with humility, tears, and trials”*** (Acts 19:19) - never shrinking back from declaring the truth, so that amazingly ***“all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”*** (Acts 19:10) MacArthur speaking of this time says, *“The Word of God was the dominating force at that point in Ephesus.”* He goes on to explain that the result was that in addition to multitudes being saved, and a healthy church being established, it is likely that all seven churches spoken of in Revelation were established during this time! People saved during Paul’s ministry likely went out and evangelized the surrounding regions making the Gospel spread like wildfire. The passion of the converts at Ephesus was evidenced in many ways but Luke notes, ***“many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.”*** (Acts 19:19) Furthermore, the heart change of these former pagans was so dramatic that it began to anger the non-believing residents because it was threatening their livelihood, actually leading to a riot! They proclaimed, ***“Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with human hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also***

that the temple of the great goddess Artemis (Diana) may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.”

Acts 19:26-27 What a testimony to the power of the Word! Lives were being changed and consequently many businesses of ill repute were actually struggling to survive! After the riot, Paul felt strongly that his time in Ephesus had come to a close, for the church was well established and the Spirit kept pressing on him that he needed to go to Jerusalem. He did have one more encounter with Ephesian elders in person though, and chose to leave Timothy behind to continue the work.

After leaving Ephesus, Paul sent for the elders to come to him at Miletus. He had much to say to them but largely wanted them to know this was the last time they would see each other this side of heaven. He also expressed his feelings over the extended time he had spent with them, reminding them of his sacrificial investment of both himself and the Word. He desperately wanted his service at Ephesus to serve as a pattern for the church's future ministry there. Sadly, he also gave them a stern warning on their need for vigilance as elders. They were to pay close attention to themselves and to all the flock, to protect and shepherd those under their care sacrificially, being watchful because fierce wolves were going to come in among them, even arising from among themselves speaking twisted things which would draw others away from the Gospel. Sadly, if we look forward to his letters to Timothy nearly a decade later, we see this indeed did happen. Yet a positive consequence of these trials was that Paul wrote I and II Timothy in response, which have proven to be incalculably beneficial to the church throughout the centuries.

One final note on the background of the church at Ephesus is that the apostle John speaks to them in Revelation 2:1-7 some 40 years (AD 95-96) after Paul's initial ministry there. He commends them for their doctrinal vigilance and endurance, but rebukes them for the loss of their first love. MacArthur speaking of this says, *“To be a Christian is to love the Lord Jesus Christ. But the Ephesians' passion and fervor for Christ had become cold, mechanical orthodoxy. Their doctrinal and moral purity, their undiminished zeal for the truth, and their disciplined service were no substitute for the love of Christ they had forsaken.”* While the Apostle John did urge them to repent, and promised restoration if they did, history reveals that the church at Ephesus did indeed die out as John had warned, serving as a sobering reminder to us all that love for Christ must be the driving force in our personal lives and churches for without love we have nothing.

Date

So, in light of all this background information the question still remains; when did Paul write the book of Ephesians and who actually was it addressed to? In verse 1 we read that it is ***“to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.”*** There is actually some

controversy surrounding whether or not the letter was written to the church at Ephesus. This is because in some of the earliest manuscripts the phrase **“in Ephesus”** is missing and the letter mentions no local situation or individual believer there. Yet from an early date the letter very much did come to be associated with the Ephesian church. Most likely as Macarthur says, *“the letter was an encyclical letter, intended to be circulated and read among all the churches in Asia Minor and was simply sent first to believers in Ephesus.”* Going further it is even more important to understand that the book was written to all believers throughout all the centuries; for **“the saints”**- those whom God has made holy, and for **“the faithful”**- those who have trusted Christ as their Lord and Savior. Additionally, by opening with **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,”** Paul is offering so much more than a wish for the faithful saint’s well- being- he is also acknowledging the divine grace and completeness in which they stand through Christ.

As for the timing of the letter, most scholars agree Paul wrote it sometime between AD60-62 when he was under house arrest in Rome. (Eph. 3:1) Several years had passed since his original time in Ephesus, and faithful Timothy was still there ministering. As Paul was nearing his death, the reality of the inheritance of the believer and the glorious gospel of grace was only captivating him more, and the clarity and passion with which he wrote was inspiring. While on house arrest he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon and then was released for a short time before being rearrested and martyred sometime between AD64-67 in Rome. Shortly before his death he was able to speak with confidence of the grace that had worked within him when he said, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” 2 Tim. 4:7-8** The one time blasphemer and enemy of Jesus Christ, had finished his assignment as the Lord’s ambassador and was certain of the eternity that awaited him- all because of grace!

References

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7. John Macarthur, Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship
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Discussion Questions

Page 1

What do you think a healthy Christian looks like?

What are some of the resources God has given us to be healthy in our walk with Him?

What are some obstacles that keep us from walking in our resources?

Page 2

Why do you think some Christians shirk at the idea of studying “theology”?

How have you seen Piper’s quote on page 2 at work in your own life?

“The mind provides the kindling for the fires of the heart. Theology serves doxology, Reflection serves affection. Contemplation serves exultation. Together they glorify Christ to the full.” Piper

How should understanding that the Bible is first and foremost a book about God, affect our study of it?

**“If our reading of the Bible focuses our eyes on anyone other than God, we have gotten backward the transformation process. Any study of the Bible that seeks to establish our identity without first proclaiming God’s identity will render partial and limited help. We must turn around our habit of asking ‘Who am I?’” We must first ask, ‘What does this passage teach me about God?’ before we ask it to teach us anything about ourselves.” Jen Wilkin Women of the Word*

Pages 3-4

Paul’s conversion experience impacted everything he did. How have you seen your conversion experience impact your daily life? Do you return to it often or is it a distant memory to you? Why or why not?

Pages 5-8

Paul’s passion for the Word, combined with his love for Christ and others defined his ministry. As a result mighty things happened! What can we learn from this? How much does the Word shape your ministry to others? Why is it important to not merely love in word and speech, but in action and in truth? (I John 3:18)

In Revelation 2:1-7 we see that there had been a breakdown in the above truths. The great tragedy of this was that just as God had promised, judgment came in the form of the church

dying out there. Do you see why health in our relationship with Christ matters? It doesn't just affect us.

How do you hope this study will help you to become a healthier Christian? We should all remember Paul's words to Timothy when he was at Ephesus, ***"The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and a sincere faith."*** (1 Tim. 1:5) This is what all of our study should be about.