

## “To the Saints Who Are in Ephesus”

### The First in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

*Texts: Ephesians 1:1-14; Genesis 11:27-12:9*

---

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was said to be John Calvin’s favorite book of the Bible. I know that a number of you would likewise answer “Ephesians,” should someone ask you to identify your favorite portion of Scripture. I am choosing to preach on this epistle not only because it is an important letter in terms of its rich doctrinal content, but also because of the fact that Paul sent this circular letter to the churches in western Asia Minor including Ephesus. Ephesus is the same city which was the home of the Apostle John who composed his three epistles about thirty years after Paul wrote this letter. Therefore, this is an important letter for us to study on its own terms, but a study of this epistle fits well with our previous series on the three Epistles of John.

F. F. Bruce once called this letter the “quintessence of Paulinism.”<sup>1</sup> I couldn’t agree more. While it is difficult to discern any single theme in Ephesians, this epistle is loaded with doctrinal content which would have been very important for any number of the congregations scattered throughout western Asia Minor. Paul discusses his two-age eschatology (how the end-times unfold), the Lordship of Christ over all things (including death), he offers a powerful declaration of salvation based upon God’s gracious and eternal decree, which is worked out through the person and work of Christ and received by faith alone (the famous declaration in Ephesians 2:8—“*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*”) Paul also discusses the role of Jews and Gentiles in God’s redemptive purposes, and as well as setting forth how the church comprises a new society, one in which God turns all other fallen human societal structures (i.e. racial division, social status, etc.) on their head.<sup>2</sup>

Given the somewhat impersonal tone of this letter—which is surprising in light of the fact that Paul spent several years in the city of Ephesus and certainly knew many of the members of this church—this may be an indication that this epistle is a sort of circular letter which eventually became associated with the church in Ephesus.<sup>3</sup> In light of this possibility, a number of commentators have argued that Ephesians was a theological tract, which originally circulated in the form of a letter. One writer even calls Ephesians a commentary on Paul’s letters, picking up on the fact that the letter lacks a central theme and doesn’t address any specific controversy, as is typical of most of Paul’s letters. While it is probably not the case the Ephesians is a summary of Paul’s other letters, it is clearly a revelation of the mystery of Christ, set forth by Paul, as the wisdom of the age to come.

In light of this epistle’s unique features, a number of critical scholars deny Pauline authorship of Ephesians. I hate to spend our time on such things, but these arguments regularly appear in places like Discovery, The History Channel, along with the National Geographic Channel, so it is important to

---

<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free (Eerdmans, 1977), 424.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of this in: A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians, Word Biblical Commentary, (Waco: Word Publishing Company, 1990), lxxxviii-xcvii. I wholeheartedly reject Lincoln’s contention that this epistle was not written by Paul, but by a follower.

<sup>3</sup> Note textual variant in 1:1 regarding the absence of “In Ephesus.”

respond to these critical theories. The critics contend that the way in which Ephesians is structured, along with the theological issues addressed by the author, are quite unlike the letters which we know to have come from the hand of Paul (i.e. Galatians, Romans, 1 Corinthians). The structure of the sentences, the vocabulary used, and the supposedly differing theological emphasis from Paul's other letters, are all mentioned as "compelling" arguments against the traditional view that the apostle Paul did indeed write this letter while imprisoned in Rome.

But as is usually the case, these objections are easily answered. For one thing, if Paul was writing a circular letter which later became identified with the church in Ephesus, then, of course, the letter would have a bit more of an impersonal tone than it would have had if Paul were writing this letter to a congregation with whom he had been present for several years. For another thing, a circular letter would also explain why Paul doesn't address any specific controversy, as well as his utilization of a slightly different vocabulary and literary style. Even critics admit Ephesians is 90% Pauline in its language. Think about this for a second. If you were to write a letter for a general audience—say a letter to an editor, or some other such thing which was intended to be public—you would write in a different way than you would if you were sending a letter to your employees (for example), instructing them what to do in your absence (something similar to several of Paul's known letters). The one is for public consumption and is therefore more general and impersonal, the other is "in house," with more specifics.

But the best refutation of the critics who deny Paul's authorship is to simply consider that in two places (the opening verse and 3:1), Paul explicitly identifies himself as the epistle's author. Now, to my mind, one thing about which the critics have not been very convincing is when they contend that it was a common practice for the student of a famous teacher to write in the teacher's name—so-called "pseudonymity." But how is that someone can write in the name of someone else, and this is not an act of forgery, or out-right deception. I think it rather obvious that if someone other than Paul, wrote a letter as though the Apostle himself were writing it, that person would be lying. This point is especially important in light of the fact that two times in this letter (4:15, 25) the author exhorts us to speak the truth and put aside falsehood—not exactly what the author was doing if he was pretending to be Paul. Critics cannot be allowed to glibly overlook this kind of thing as they are so apt to do.

Furthermore, the author, goes on to say in Ephesians 1:15, "*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints,*" and then prays for them in 1:16. "*I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*" These statements imply some sort of first-hand knowledge. And then in closing out this letter, Paul asks his readers to pray "*for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.*" These comments would make no sense whatsoever, unless they come from Paul. The reader is led to assume that the Apostle himself has heard of their faith and that it is he who is praying for them. So, unless and until there is some compelling reason to believe otherwise—and there is not—we must assume that this letter comes from the hand of the one who is named as its author, in this case, the Apostle Paul.<sup>4</sup>

As we make our way through this letter we will find that it breathes forth the spirit of Paul in every verse. There is a great deal of Pauline language and theology, as Paul speaks of justification by faith alone, the centrality of God's grace in the life of a Christian, our struggle against the flesh, the work of Christ in securing our redemption, the role played by Israel and the law in redemptive history, in addition to a

---

<sup>4</sup> Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 305-307.

discussion of various aspects of the Christian life.<sup>5</sup> Given the similarities between this letter and Paul's letter to the Colossians, it would appear that the Apostle produced these two letters about the same time, probably while he was imprisoned in Rome (as recounted in the final chapters of the Book of Acts). In fact, three times Paul mentions that he is imprisoned. In 6:21 he informs his audience how he is holding up under his ordeal. "*So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything.*" Therefore, it falls to Tychicus, the one delivering this letter, to let the faithful know the latest regarding Paul's case before Caesar. We know that Paul was eventually released in Rome, before being re-arrested and martyred about AD 66, after yet another missionary journey. This would place the date of the writing of Ephesians at some point in the early 60's of the first century (about the same time Paul wrote Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon).

Although the letter to the Ephesians does have an impersonal and circular quality to it, this epistle was associated with the church at Ephesus from the earliest days. Therefore, we are perfectly justified in accepting the traditional view that this letter (which may have been a circular letter) was identified with the church in Ephesus, and that it comes from the pen of Paul from the time he was imprisoned in Rome in the early 60's of the first century, about thirty years before John writes his three epistles to Christians in the same general area. It is a shame to spend much of our time on speculation of the critical scholars, but hopefully this serves as an introduction to the circumstances under which Paul wrote as well as telling us something about the Apostle's purpose in writing.

One of the most important things to notice regarding Ephesians, is that Paul is not writing to refute a particular controversy or error as is the case in other letters from Paul. Based upon the contents of this epistle, Paul is instructing Gentiles about the grace of God in Jesus Christ (who has reconciled all things unto him) and the relationship of Jesus Christ to his church, as seen in Paul's analogy of the relationship of a husband to his wife (in which Christ has reconciled people from all nations unto himself).

The Book of Ephesians has two main sections, each three chapters long. After a very brief introduction in verses 1-2 (the subject of this sermon), Paul immediately turns his attention in Ephesians 1:3-3:21 to a discussion to the way in which God has made his people alive with Christ and is now forming them into a new society. In verses 3-14 of chapter one, Paul directs us to praise God for the redemption he's accomplished for us in Christ—a redemption that entails divine action from eternity past until we are raised from the dead at the end of the age. In Ephesians 1:15-23, Paul offers up both a thanksgiving for what God has done, as well as a prayer for those who will be reading this letter. In chapter 2:1-10, Paul speaks of how God redeems us (by grace, through faith) from our horrible condition (dead in sin and children of wrath). In chapter 2:11-22, Paul discusses how Jew and Gentile are to relate to one another in God's redemptive purposes—Christ tearing down the racial barrier which divided Jew from Gentile. In chapter 3:16, Paul speaks of the mystery of Christ now revealed, and explains how believing Jew and Gentile are united together in one body—Christ's. In verses 7-13 of chapter three, Paul goes on to speak of how God's eternal purpose has been worked out, before closing this section in a prayer for his readers and a doxology in light of the grace of God.

In the second half of Ephesians, Paul stresses how those saved by grace through faith become a new humanity (the church) with new responsibilities. The first of these responsibilities is keeping the unity of the Spirit (4:1-6). This leads to a discussion of the gifts that God has given to his church, enabling us to

---

<sup>5</sup> Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 305-307.

grow in love for one another (4:7-16). Paul then exhorts us to live as children of the light (vv. 4:17-5:21), before giving directions for family life, specifically exhortations to husbands and wives (5:22-33), parents and children (6:1-4) and then slaves and masters (6:10-18). Paul concludes by urging us to put on the spiritual armor he has given us (6:10-18), exhorting his reader to pray for Paul (vv. 19-20), before the Apostle extends his final greetings in Ephesians 6:21-24).

With that, we now turn to the short introduction to Ephesians, verses 1-2.

**W**ith that, we now turn to the short introduction to Ephesians, verses 1-2. *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* This is the regular (dare I say “typical”) pattern used by Paul to open his letters. As he does in many of his letters, Paul reminds his reader/hearer that his office (“an apostle of Christ Jesus”) is something bestowed on him by none other than the risen Christ himself—i.e., “by the will of God.” “Apostle” is not an office which Paul desired, nor something he had earned. How Paul came into this office is an important consideration because this explains why his letters come to the church with the authority of Christ himself. Paul’s conversion is recounted in Acts 9:1-9, and it would be good to hear again the account of how it was that Paul came to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

*“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”*

The account of Paul’s conversion is very important to keep in mind whenever you begin the study of one of Paul’s epistles. Paul was not a disgruntled Jew, seeking something more out of life. Paul was trained under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. Although a Hellenistic Jew from Tarsus (in what is now Turkey), and steeped in Greek culture, Paul was a rising star in Judaism. He was well-known among his peers for his zeal to stamp out the new heresy of Christianity (called “the way”) in those years immediately following the ascension of Jesus, when the church was still composed mostly of Jewish converts and was still centered on the fringes of the local synagogues. Paul wanted nothing to do with Christianity. He rejected all of its claims. He saw it as a threat to the faith of his people, and wanted it wiped out.

In Philippians 3 (also written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome), Paul looks back on his attitude during these days before his conversion. *“For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* Paul saw himself as a faithful Jew, in full compliance with the law (at least in terms of external righteousness). In fact, he was such a zealot that Paul was present when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death, an event which began the separation of the church from its roots in the Jewish synagogue. According to the opening verses of Acts 8, *“and Saul approved of [Stephen’s]*

*execution.” As a result of Stephen’s death, “there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul [Paul] was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”*

Paul was so devout he is on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus because he has heard that there were Christians in the synagogue there, when Jesus appears to him and blinds him. When Paul tells the Ephesians that his calling is “from the will of God,” he is reminding his audience that he comes to them with the authority of Jesus himself, that same authority which called him from his former life as a Rabbi to that of apostle. Those who knew the story of God’s sovereign call of Paul would have immediately thought of the story of Abraham. As we saw in our Old Testament lesson from Genesis 11-12, Abram too was going about his business, when YHWH sovereignly called him to leave both his father’s house and country, and go to a land some 600 miles to the west where Abram is told he will be blessed by God. As Abram was the father of Israel, so too by virtue of Christ’s sovereign call of the Apostle Paul, Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles. The point of Paul’s conversion echoing Abram’s call is that Paul’s gospel is not something he made up, but that the Apostle stands in direct continuity with Abraham, the great patriarch of Israel, the father of all those who believe God’s promise to save sinners.

That Paul has been called by the will of God gives his apostolic instructions divine authority. But this point is also important in laying the groundwork for Paul’s reminder later in chapter one that all Christian believers are called because God has sovereignly chosen them before the foundation of the world. Furthermore, God has accomplished salvation for those whom he has chosen by sending Christ to redeem us through his blood, and to provide for the forgiveness of our sins. Those whom God has chosen, and for whom Jesus has died, are likewise called when the gospel is preached to them. In addition to speaking of his own call, Paul speaks of God’s sovereign will in electing to save sinners (who, based upon their merits, are unworthy to be saved) more than any biblical writer except John in his gospel.<sup>6</sup> While Paul was called, given faith in Christ, and forgiven of his sin, he was set apart as an apostle. But his calling, while including a call to a unique office (apostle), is the same as the calling every other Christian, who will remain indifferent to the gospel unless and until God summons them to faith.

Paul addresses his letter to the saints in Ephesus. Although one of the reasons why critical scholars have a problem with this letter coming from Paul is that the words “in Ephesus” are missing from the best and earliest manuscripts—although the Greek text is very awkward and unnatural if the words “in Ephesus” are not included. This may indeed be a case of Paul composing a circular letter with a place to “fill in the blank” for the church’s name when the letter was read.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not this letter was a circular letter or addressed to a particular congregation, Paul speaks of the recipients of this letter as both “saints” and “faithful in Christ Jesus.” Whenever we hear the word “saint,” we are apt to think of someone who lives such as exemplary life that we regard them as holy (or at least holier than most everyone else). But this is a serious misunderstanding of what Paul means when he calls every Christian a “saint.” In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (the LXX), the

---

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Barth, Ephesians 1-3, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 65.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, The Epistles of Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 250.

same word is used of the congregation as it assembled for worship. In calling his predominantly Gentile readers “saints,” Paul is referring to his pagan-born brothers and sisters using a title traditionally reserved for God’s covenant people, Israel. In speaking this way, Paul is connecting God’s redemption of his people Israel under the Old covenant, to his work of redemption under the new.<sup>8</sup>

But that point immediately leads to another. Throughout the Old Testament it is clear that it is God who makes his people Israel “holy.” Likewise, as Paul puts it in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, our holiness stems from God’s eternal decree. “*For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*” Here in the opening words of Ephesians, Paul reminds his hearers that this sanctification (holiness) which stems from God’s decree, is accomplished through Jesus Christ. This means that everyone who is united to Christ through faith is a saint. Their sin has been imputed to Christ (whose death is said to redeem them and provide for the forgiveness of their sin) and Christ’s righteousness (his perfect obedience to the law of God) is imputed to them through faith. Therefore, everyone who trusts in Christ is as righteous as the blessed Lord Jesus himself. This point is wonderfully set forth in Q & A 60 of our Catechism:

Q 60. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ: that is, although my conscience accuses me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

Notice too that Paul also speaks of believers as “faithful in Christ Jesus.” But as many commentators have noted, “believers” is a better translation, because “faithful” implies that it is the quality or intensity of faith that renders us holy, when in fact, it is faith which unites us to Christ, whose perfect holiness is imputed to us. What renders us “holy” (a saint) is not our faith, but the righteousness of Christ received through faith. Faith unites us to Christ so we receive everything that he is and that he has for us.<sup>9</sup>

As is common for Paul, the apostle extends a epistolary greeting to his hearers before going on to discuss specifics. “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Grace and peace are words taken from public worship and now declared to the congregation through this epistle. But Paul does something quite remarkable. Grace and peace not only come from God, they also come from Jesus Christ, whom Paul now places on an equal footing with the Father. For Paul, the grace of God is the grace of Christ. In a sense then, Paul takes the famous Aaronic Blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 (“*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace*”) and shows that all of these blessings from God come to us through the person and work of his son Jesus Christ. In effect, by pronouncing this blessing, it becomes a reality—not in some sort of magical way (an abracadabra), but because Paul is an Apostle and is called to extend to us the blessing of Jesus himself.

---

<sup>8</sup> Barth, Ephesians 1-3, 66-67.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce, Ephesians, 250-251.

What then do we say in terms of application?

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a letter with which every Christian ought to be familiar. So, the first point of application is to encourage you to read this letter and meditate upon it as we make our way through it. Ephesians is filled great doctrine and exhortations for living a life of gratitude, and we cannot know this letter too well, nor read it too often.

In light of Paul's opening greeting let us consider the high calling to which God has called each one of us. Beloved, we are saints. The guilt of our sin has been paid for by Jesus, and his perfect righteousness has been reckoned to us. Through Jesus Christ, we've been incorporated into the people of God, just as Abram was called to Canaan, just as God chose Israel, just as he called Paul while on his way to hunt down and arrest Christians. And like Abram, Israel, Paul, and all believers in God's promise to save sinners who call upon his name, God did this because he is merciful and not because we have done something to earn his favor. In fact, as Paul will go on to say, God did this even though we are by nature, children of wrath. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."*

And so Paul writes to the saints who are in Ephesus the following greeting, *faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* But the very same word comes to us this Lord's day. To the believers in Jesus, who worship in Anaheim. *"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*