

EPHESIANS

Introduction

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July 21, 2004

Welcome to a verse-by-verse study of the “most precious” Good News in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. What does it say to us today? Can it still do for us what it did for those people of the first century? What was the secret of its power to change people’s hearts? Why was Paul so moved to write it?

In particular we want to see how this little book in the Bible of only six chapters casts special light on the “most precious message” of salvation by faith. Its message must yet illuminate the earth with the glory of “the truth of the gospel.”

If there are questions any of us may have about that message, a study of Ephesians will clear up our perplexities. The ideas that permeate the book are refreshing Good News to people of all churches and religions. In fact, they are explosive in their impact even today.

Ephesians, rightly understood, is brimful of Protestant “Good News” ideas. It presents the gospel in a clear light in harmony with the work of Jesus as our High Priest in His closing work of atonement. We live in these last days of earth’s history when the world’s great High Priest is doing something never done in previous ages—preparing a people to be ready for His second coming. Our study will follow Him into His Most Holy Apartment

of the heavenly sanctuary where He is accomplishing this very special work.

There are two other great letters that the apostle Paul wrote that appear on the surface to outshine this letter to the Ephesians—Romans and Galatians. Some say they’re the ones that proclaim the gospel with the deepest theology. But Ephesians may top them both in its effectiveness in lighting the world of Paul’s day with these sunlit truths. Some scholars believe that Ephesians was not originally addressed to any one church, but was a general letter for all churches everywhere—for the world at large.

The reader can see for himself why this might be plausible. The letter is unusual in that it doesn’t have Paul’s personal notes of greetings to this or that individual, as we find in most of his other letters (which we now call “epistles”). One could conclude that this letter was intended for all the churches, yes, that it could be an “evangelism” document for non-Christian Gentiles as well as for believers. Paul wrote it while he was in prison in Rome, apparently with leisure to compose an edited evangelism message to be sent all over the world.

And for sure, if some pagan who had never heard of Christ or His gospel should have chanced across a copy of this letter now addressed to the Ephesians, his heart would have been warmed. And unless that soul had resisted the seeking grace of Christ, he would have been won to the faith. So it is quite likely that Ephesians did play a large part in the phenomenal spread of the Christian faith in that early century.

And now today, this “letter” is more up-to-date than tomorrow’s media news because it pulsates with the life of Christ’s urgent message He wants to go to the world. Here is that glorious gospel which “is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). It has been described as “the Alps of the New Testament.”

The water of life flowing out of Paul’s heart comes from a hidden spring deep in his soul. His work is incomparably greater than that of any mere theologian or philosopher. He loves people as Christ loves them! He specializes first in declaring the objective gospel—what Christ accomplished for the world even before we were born; then he zeroes in on the subjective gospel—how this objective truth of what Christ did for us motivates us subjectively to devote our lives to Him. The demarcation line between objective and subjective gospel within the letter is so sharp and clear you can’t help seeing it in chapter 4, verse 1.

John M. Fowler has gathered testimonials from thoughtful readers of Ephesians:

The great Reformer John Calvin said it was his favorite letter; William Barclay called it “the queen of epistles;” Charles Dodd, “the crown of Paulinism;” E. J. Goodspeed, “a great rhapsody of the Christian salvation.” May it become to us a beloved source of saving truth in preparation for the second coming of Christ.

Paul inspired and trained other fellow-laborers in Ephesus. None were jealous of him and he never shows the slightest envy of their success. For once, in the story of his labors in Ephesus, we see a clear

demonstration of what the special love of Christ known as agape did for a group of workers. There was Apollos, himself “mighty in the Scriptures” and “an eloquent man,” but Paul worked with him smoothly and in love (Acts 18:24). There were Priscilla and Aquila who were also imbued with the same spirit that motivated Paul (vs. 26).

Apollos was from Alexandria, the second most important city in the Roman Empire. Highly educated, a Jew converted to the baptism of John the Baptist, he was an eloquent preacher. But he knew nothing of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and he needed to be instructed in the way of Jesus.

Then dear Aquila and Priscilla, in a kind and courteous way, told him what he needed to know, and thank God, Apollos listened! Sometimes we ministers may not be deficient in the same way that Apollos was, but there are also empty places in our knowledge. The Lord then sends someone to correct us and instruct us and fill in the gaps.

But we are painfully aware that sometimes our dear ministering brethren in a past era were not like Apollos: they may have been “mighty in the scriptures” and could argue, and like him had gaps in their understanding that the Lord in His great mercy sent His messengers to fill in, but they were not like Apollos; they were not ready to listen and learn. In a great degree, history has told us, they resisted and even rejected the light that God would have them accept.

Now we have come collectively to the very end of time, and where “we” have corporately failed in past

times we must now overcome. Time is getting short. Now may Ephesians get through to us!

There is a very important detail that can easily be overlooked. After Paul had labored in Ephesus and raised up that church and strengthened it, he left it in the care of the unprofessional elders. Were they men engrossed in the amusements and folly of that city who were half way in love with Paul's message? Did they sneak attendance at the theaters and stadiums to watch on the sly the alluring gladiatorial combats and sports? You can be sure, no. These elders were consecrated men who had overcome their love of the world, and were diligent in their study of Bible truth for their day.

Elders in our churches today have a distinct responsibility; they will earn a glorious reward by their fidelity. Paul told these elders in his day to "watch," "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:31). Those words were spoken not only to ordained pastors, but to elders. They are very important people. They "purchase to themselves a good degree" in God's estimation (1 Tim. 3:13, KJV).

Ephesians needs only to be "translated" into modern language so that the apostle is allowed to open his mind and heart to today's world, telling the content of his faith; then Ephesians again will come to life. When Paul pleads with the Corinthians, "we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20), we know that was also the burden of his heart in writing Ephesians. Now he is

appealing beyond Corinth and Ephesus to all the people out there in this world.

Simply substitute modern amenities, clothing, and language, and Ephesus is transformed into a modern New York, Tokyo, or San Francisco. People are identical. There are the poor serfs or slaves who today are technically "free" but they are still caught in dreary boredom; there are the wealthy, as always, obsessed in making more money, and there are the masses in love with violence and sports. The ancient and modern worlds are virtually identical!

Ephesus had its huge amphitheater and arena, as modern cities have today. Archaeologists have unearthed the ancient theater which seated about 25,000 people bent on the same pleasures many gravitate to today. The temple of Diana was the center of idol worship in the city. Four times the size of the Acropolis in Athens, it had columns 66 feet high, as impressive to the ancients as St. Peter's is to us today. Huge crowds attended the feasts of the goddess whose statue was believed to have descended from heaven.

Further in presenting a challenge to the lonely evangelist of Christ, Ephesus boasted the great banking business of Asia Minor because the worship of Diana fueled the economic life of the city. Let Paul touch the economy, and will they ever hate him!

On the north side of the city stood the stadium where the races and gladiatorial combats were held. The people were drawn to watch men kill each other. The more violence the better the people

loved it (aren't even our video games often based on a secret fascination for killing people?). The Odeum in Ephesus was another theater seating 1500. Self-indulgence and pleasure were all the people knew to live for. Can you imagine—prostitution was a religious duty! How could Paul ever get through with the gospel effectively to people such as these!

But all the great cities of the Roman Empire were much the same as Ephesus. Pagan people were bored with life except for sensual pleasures of gourmet food, alcoholic drink, violence, and sex. They would feel right at home if they could be resurrected and set down in our modern cities with our sports, games, and TV amusement. As a public evangelist, Paul was challenged by these pagan people to win their attention, and then to win their hearts. He met the challenge with the message we find in his Ephesians.

Chapter 1

The Secret of Paul's "Fire for the Lord"

— Ephesians 1:1-3 —

Paul's zeal for the gospel is legendary. Many martyrs have given their lives in their devotion, but no other New Testament character so poured out his soul in spectacular self-denying ministry as did Paul. What motivated him so?

Ephesians 1:1:

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,"

Through the centuries, Paul has been so poorly understood that he has inadvertently discouraged some good people. They consider his theology in

Romans and Galatians so over their heads that they think he is not understandable, so why read him? Even the apostle Peter said that people in their day misconstrued Paul's letters and would "wrest" his meanings and wrongly conclude that he writes things "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Therefore we needn't wonder that people today think the same of his writings.

Further, the intensity of Paul's devotion to the Lord, the totality of his consecration, makes people afraid. They think they could never be so all-out for Christ—they have a deep fear it may be fanaticism. They're afraid of Paul; if he goes to heaven on a first class ticket, let him have it with all the grand mansions in the New Jerusalem that he deserves. Ordinary people can't accomplish such all-out devotion; they're content to have a third class ticket—just so they end up somewhere inside. They'll be happy to sleep on the grass; they don't want a mansion like Paul will have; a shack somewhere would be fine just so long as it's inside the pearly gates. Leave us alone in our comfortable spiritual state of semi-devotion, half and half, is their attitude.

Actually, these people don't know it, but what they want is the "lukewarm" state that Jesus speaks of in His message "to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans." "He says, "You are lukewarm [and] I will vomit you out of My mouth" (Rev. 3:15, 16; a closer rendering of the Greek would be, "You make Me so sick at My stomach, I feel like throwing up!").

This half-and-half spirit deeply disappoints Jesus, for the truth is that Paul's total devotion to Christ

was the appropriate response of any believing person to the tremendous self-sacrifice of Christ in giving Himself for us. Paul's response was not an extreme measure of devotion; it was only a proper mirror-reflection of Christ's devotion for us. Water merely reached its own level in Paul's devotion.

But this is what many people have never been privileged to grasp. May this book be so clear that many will be privileged to see what Paul saw; for it was what the apostle saw that motivated him. He was not trying to earn a reward in heaven—the idea probably never crossed his mind.

In his second letter to the Corinthians he discusses how people felt about him, and goes into quite some detail:

1. He wants above all else to defend his ministry before them: "We persuade men, ... and I also trust are well-known in your consciences" (5:11).

2. He wants to give them occasion to glorify God on his account: "We do not commend ourselves, ... but give you opportunity to glory on our behalf" (vs. 12).

3. He recognizes they are inclined to think he is extreme or fanatical: "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you" (vs. 13).

4. But the source that stirs him to such apparently extreme devotion is the far more prodigious or extravagant love of Christ—for him and for us: "The love of Christ constrains us" (vs. 14, KJV). Paul saw very clearly what that love means. The idea that he has learned regarding its dimensions has captured his soul; nothing the world can offer him henceforth

can compare. Paul's devotion is at the opposite spectrum from self-righteousness. Sensing himself the humblest of men, the most unworthy, still he can with no embarrassment tell people to "follow me" (Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6).

Paul knows that the love of Christ has found an enthusiastic disciple in himself, and it is not sinful arrogance for him to say so.

5. This inquiry into the secrets of Paul's inner heart will explain the mystery of his apostleship. "In Christ" he is sure of his calling. Transcending the vagaries of emotion that are up one day and down the next, solid logic has captured Paul's soul forever: "We judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died" (2 Cor. 5:14). Just that simple, like $2 + 2 = 4$!

It's an inescapable equation: all men belong in the grave! All men would be dead if One had not died for them, instead of them. That puts "all men" under a common obligation, and Paul simply recognized the truth of it.

From the day of his conversion on that road to Damascus, he has reckoned that he does not belong to himself. He has no idea that self-sacrifice is involved on his part; he deserves no compliments or praise. What he realizes he deserves is only the grave, so everything he has that is better than a grave has to be a gift of God's grace occasioning joy and gratitude.

Here is the Paul who writes this letter "to the Ephesians." He has to share the treasure he has found "in Christ."

6. So, we need to get acquainted with the author of “the letter to the Ephesians” so we can better understand why he wrote it. Before his conversion, he had fully expended his energies in fighting against God; he actually hated Jesus Christ and His followers, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, ... so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1, 2).

Combined with this persecuting zeal was a keen intellectual grasp of the theology of apostate Judaism. At this time he was a wild fanatic in the utmost limits of legalism. No one can be further from the Lord than a legalist fanatic who thinks he is holy and righteous because of his legalism. A steel armor encases the heart. Paul is not just mouthing polite phrases of contrition when he says he is “chief” of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), “one born out of due time, ... the least of the apostles, ... because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor. 15:9); he tasted the depths of a hellish hatred of the Savior. Living before the time of the remnant church, no one has ever in anticipation known more intimately the “dragon’s rage with the woman [and] ... the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (cf. Rev. 12:17).

In the heart of the unconverted Saul of Tarsus flared the fires of the great controversy of Satan against Christ; he was wholly devoted to Satan’s side. If he had not been converted when he was, he would very likely have authored the most devilish books of anti-Christ teaching. What would have

been the teachings of Saul of Tarsus worked out in the dogmas of the Great Apostasy of the Dark Ages which he described to the Thessalonians in his second letter (2:1-10)?

7. It was divinely appropriate that this intimate cohort of Satan should be converted on that road to Damascus when he “saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 26:13-15).

Just like Jesus confronting the apostate Jews in His Father’s house (the Temple) a few weeks earlier, Paul’s approach to them after his conversion is totally confrontational. In a flash, all the learning of his Jewish scholarly past came into focus: Jesus of Nazareth is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! That “light ... brighter than the sun” was a vision of the cross of Christ. Every brain cell was flooded with an intensity of brilliant light; decades of distorted, perverted twisting of biblical truth suddenly were clarified. A panorama flashed like a bright video before his soul’s eyes—“Christ and Him crucified.”

The breath was knocked out of him; he was paralyzed until the heavenly Voice said, “Rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you” (vs. 16).

That vision on the road to Damascus explains his life-long obsession with the preaching of the cross. The Eleven were of course henceforth richly blessed in ministry, but a new champion who had never seen Jesus as they had seen Him but who probably perceived Him more clearly through the word was now to proclaim him to the multitudes. And thank God, Christ is proclaimed to us also in these last days as we now open the Letter to the Ephesians.

Paul's Heart-burden

Ephesians 1:1, 2: "To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus: grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ."

When one of our Popes died in 2005, some of his fans started a campaign to pressure the Vatican to make him a "saint" immediately, a process which in the Roman Catholic Church usually takes generations. Paul uses that quintessential word "saints" to describe all the people in Ephesus who were believers in Christ, joined in church fellowship. How could he?

Are we to conclude that they were perfect in their spiritual development? Obviously not; in comparison, we know that the believers in Corinth were far from spiritual maturity, so it is highly unlikely that just a few miles away in a similar Adriatic city given to idolatry, the new believers in Christ there were more mature.

Why then did Paul call them "saints"? Would he say of you that you are a "saint"?

The answer is yes if you have committed your heart and your life to your Savior, even if you still stumble, stagger, and fall. (Getting up again, not giving up, is the key to receiving that holy title!).

Paul addresses the people in the Corinthian church who are "called to be saints," as "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2), and yet his two letters to them give evidence that they were far from being perfect. But in our letter to the Ephesians Paul also makes it clear that pure unselfish living is the expected fruit of being "called to be saints." "Fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints" (Eph. 5:2). Those who in the last days demonstrate such a character will be recognized as "saints" who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12).

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ": This is not an empty, conventional greeting like our hasty "good mornings" and "how are you's." If you had met Jesus on the sidewalk, His "good morning!" would have truly blessed your soul, because it was always sincerely genuine and caring. Paul has conveyed to you both "grace" and "peace" as coming from the Father and from Christ, not from himself—let the reader simply believe that they are real because the Father is real, and he will know these simple greetings are more genuine than any he has ever received.

Is there turmoil in your life, maybe in your home, or your place of work? As the word of God, even this simple salutation "is living and powerful, ...

piercing even to the division of soul and spirit” (Heb. 4:12). To “know” that joy is Christ “Himself ... [being] our peace, who has ... broken down the middle wall of division between us, ... that he might reconcile ... both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near” (Eph. 4:14-17). This has meaning in the most profound spiritual sense, but also in our simple, practical heart-need today. What your heart yearns for is that peace; Paul is the conduit through whom it flows into your heart from the Father and from Jesus.

Ephesians 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”

The word “blessed” simply means “happy.” It is often translated so in the Today’s English Version—in this instance as “Let us give thanks ...” To hear us say “thanks” to the Father makes Him happy, too. It’s a new thought to many that it is in our power to make God happy. (You end up becoming happy, too!)

Who are the “us” who are so blessed?

Of course, the believers in Christ, the “saints”! But there is a real sense in which the “us” means also the entire human race. Jesus is “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42), “the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:10). Paul distinguishes between two concepts of Christ being “Savior”—one that applies to “all men,” those who worship Him and those who don’t; and the other

that applies to believers. “All men” should “bless the Lord” because it is Christ who “gives life to the world,” and therefore the life they already have He has given to them. Jesus said, “the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:33, 51). If you are a person in the world, you should therefore give thanks to the Lord!

The “life” that anyone experiences, believer or unbeliever, is the purchase of the sacrifice of Christ. In that legal or corporate sense, “all men” are “in Christ,” because Christ is the second or “last Adam” who has become the new Head of the entire human race. Now when the repenting sinner believes, the legal sense becomes experiential.

As believers, those who respond to His message of love are “in Christ” experientially.

The good news of the gospel gets better and better as we proceed in Ephesians!

Christ has given us “every spiritual blessing” to make us happy! Paul meant that any pagans were free to read his letter, believe it, and then rejoice forever more “in Christ.”