



## Ephesians Masterclass

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# Background to the Epistle



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## 2.1 Introduction

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### 2.1.1 The Epistle

The Epistle to the Ephesians has been called the “Queen of the Epistles” and the highest reach of New Testament thought<sup>1</sup>. Coleridge described it as,

*“The divinest composition of man”*

Spurgeon said of Ephesians,

*“The Epistle to the Ephesians is a complete Body of Divinity. In the first chapter you have the doctrines of the gospel; in the next, you have the experience of the Christians; and before the Epistle is finished, you have the precepts of the Christian faith. Whosoever would see Christianity in on treatise, let him “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the Epistle to the Ephesians.”*

One of our more recent prophets, Tony Ling, said of Ephesians: -

*“Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is, perhaps, the most spiritually profound and yet practically applicable book in the Bible.*

*Like the rest of Scripture it focuses, first and foremost, upon Jesus. It explains his person; his purpose – and here Paul is at pains for us to grasp that purpose by earnestly praying for a revelation in our hearts (1:15-18) and a realisation of the immeasurable dimensions of Christ’s love (3:14-19) – and the process by which that purpose is achieved. Ephesians is also a book of metaphors of the church. It is a building (2:19-23); a body (4:3-13); a bride (5:22-33). God has made Christ head over all things for this church; manifests his wisdom through this church (3:10) and receives glory in this church (3:21).*

*Here we discover our spiritual position – seated in the Heavens in Christ (2:6) and our spiritual possessions – standing against the devil with the whole armour of God (6:10-18). Paul instructs us as to how this heavenly company is to conduct itself on earth, not just in its conflict, but in its very culture. Its attitudes and actions are to be like light in the darkness.*

*Such actions are in no way divorced from the profound spiritual revelations that open the book – they are the outworking of them.*

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<sup>1</sup>Endnotes

*Letter to the Ephesians*. Barclay, William; © 1975 The Westminster Press, Philadelphia.

*Wives submit to husbands and husbands love wives because our earthly relationship reveals a heavenly reality: Christ and his church. Fathers encourage children and children obey parents in an enacted parable of a heavenly Father and earthly children rewarded with a long and fruitful life. Slaves obey masters as if they were serving Christ, and masters treat slaves as their heavenly master treats them – such heavenly revelation; such earthly response!”*

## 2.1.2 Ephesus and the Region

Ephesus was a city of the Roman province of Asia, near the mouth of the Cayster river, 3 miles from the western coast of Asia Minor, and opposite the island of Samos. The city had an artificial harbour which made it accessible to the largest ships, and rivalled the nearby harbour at Miletus.



DRAWING BY T. ALLOM

Standing at the entrance of the valley which reaches far into the interior of Asia Minor, and connected by highways with the chief cities of the province, Ephesus was the most easily accessible city in Asia, both by land and sea. Its location, therefore, favoured its religious, political and commercial development.

In this sense like many other places the Holy Spirit led Paul to, this city and region was of strategic importance in the propagation of the gospel through Asia. The city stood upon the sloping sides and at the base of two hills, Prion and Coressus, commanding a beautiful view; its climate was exceptionally fine, and the soil of the valley was unusually fertile. The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia observes: -

*“Upon the death of Attalus II (Philadelphus), king of Pergamos, it was bequeathed to the Roman Empire; and in 190, when the Roman province of Asia was formed, it became a part of it. Ephesus and Pergamos, the capital of Asia, were the two great rival cities of the province. Though Pergamos was the centre of the Roman religion and of the government, Ephesus was the more accessible, the commercial centre and the home of the native goddess Diana; and because of its wealth and situation it gradually became the chief city of the province.*

*It is to the temple of Diana, however, that its great wealth and prominence are largely due. Like the city, it dates from the time of the Amazons, yet what the early temple was like we now have no means of knowing, and of its history we know little except that it was seven times destroyed by fire and rebuilt, each time on a scale larger and grander than before. The wealthy king Croesus supplied it with many of its stone columns, and the pilgrims from all the oriental world brought it of their wealth. In time the temple possessed valuable lands; it controlled the fisheries; its priests were the bankers of its enormous revenues. Because of its strength the people stored there their money for safe-keeping; and it became to the ancient world practically all that the Bank of England is to the modern world.”*

### 2.1.3 Founding of the Church in Ephesus

During his second missionary journey Paul made a short stop in Ephesus, leaving Aquila and Priscilla behind in the city as he set off for Caesarea. In [Acts 18](#) we find Luke’s account of that first visit to Ephesus.

Upon his return ([Acts 19](#)) during his third missionary journey Paul found twelve disciples who had received John’s baptism but not that of Christ Jesus himself - the Holy Spirit. Here again we see the normal New Testament pattern. Not always was every birth normal or by the book but the early disciples always brought what they found into line with their own understanding and revelation where possible, as Priscilla and Aquila had done with Apollos.

These disciples, who formed the core of the church, immediately prophesied upon their baptism, which should perhaps challenge our expectations when we pray for the baptism of the Holy Spirit for others. We perhaps have an expectation that prophecy comes later, with practice; whilst it is true that practice helps us hone the gift of prophecy, even babies can prophesy!

Paul’s time in Ephesus was unusually long, three years ([Acts 20:31](#)). Many things happened during this time including: -

- Paul preaching in the synagogues and at the School of Tyrannus<sup>2</sup>
- God working many miracles through Paul

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<sup>2</sup> Tyrannus may have been (1) a Greek rhetorician - This is the common opinion, and many identify him with a certain Tyrannus, a sophist, mentioned by Suidas. Paul would thus appear to be one of the traveling rhetors of the time, who had hired such a hall to proclaim his own peculiar philosophy (Ramsay, Paul the Traveler, 246, 271). **or** (2) a Jewish rabbi - Meyer thinks that as the apostle had not passed wholly to the Gentiles, and Jews still flocked to hear him, and also that as Tyrannus is not spoken of as a proselyte (sebomenos ton Theon), this schole is the beth Midrash of a Jewish rabbi. "Paul with his Christians withdrew from the public synagogue to the private synagogue of Tyrannus, where he and his doctrine were more secure from public annoyance" (Meyer in the place cited.). **or** (3) Another view (Overbeck) is that the expression was the standing name of the place after the original owner. [SOURCE: - *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*: Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor; © 1915]

- Paul's fame had reached the attention of evil spirits working in the area - he was considered a dangerous man
- This acknowledgment became a catalyst for the fear of the Lord coming upon everyone including those who were involved with magic and sorcery, i.e., serving those very spirits.
- It was this fear of the Lord that caused many who had already believed but not left this old way of life behind to come to full repentance and turn their back on it at great cost, demonstrable to all.
- All of this caused a reaction in those who had most to lose, the craftsmen who made the idols! The enemy was on the run and knew it.

The work in Ephesus can teach us many things but most obviously from the above we can see that it was the fear of God which proved to be the key in people's lives really changing. There may be many who come into the church fond of much that it has to offer, but ultimately it was reverential fear that caused real and substantial change in those in Ephesus - a cutting off of the old life. If we are to build well today, we need to ensure that every new believer has a revelation of true Godly fear. Earlier in Acts Luke carefully records this connection between sound growth and the fear of God: -

“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”

### Acts 9:31

Finally, we see once again God working the systems of man. At the height of the riot in Ephesus, it was not Paul with persuasive words that was able to calm and then dismiss the crowds. No, it was the city clerk who reminded them of their status and reputation and the legal regress available to those with grievances. We do not know if the clerk was an agent of Christ, at least willingly, but we do know that Paul used this tactic more than once to avoid the attacks of the enemy. The church should remain mindful and wise to the laws of men, for they can be used as tools to stand in the way of the enemy's sometimes frenzied attacks. Similarly when laws are proposed which we feel may hinder the gospel, perhaps we should apply our energies to



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using these laws for the purpose of the gospel of Christ Jesus.





## 2.2 Author and Recipients

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### 2.2.1 Author

Most accept Paul to be the author of Ephesians, as did the early church. However there are some who have questioned his authorship in the past. Paul himself twice claimed authorship of the letter<sup>3</sup>. So why have some questioned this?

- **Style**

For some their reasoning simply lies in the fact that the style, they say is simply not Paul's. The style of the epistle is different both in Greek and in our English translations.

However Paul didn't write Ephesians to address a specific situation as he did with so many of the other epistles. The WORD of God itself contains progressive revelation<sup>4</sup>, that is to say that the revelation of mysteries unfolds as the WORD of God was written. Paul was part of this progressive revelation and when he wrote Ephesians he was close to the end of his life. His revelation was unprecedented at this point which is what makes the language, style and content so bold and majestic - and perhaps ... the sentences are so long!<sup>5</sup>

- **Non-Pauline Later Addition**

There is also another reason for the doubts, which is tied up with the similarity with the letter to the Colossians. It is said that, with varying degrees of similarity, 75 of the 155 verses of Ephesians are found in Colossians. See Appendix One for side by side examples. The plan and argument of the two letters is also similar<sup>6</sup>.

In 1937 an American scholar named Edgar J Goodspeed put forward a theory, not new but one he had formulated alone<sup>7</sup>, that in about AD90 in Ephesus the letters of Paul were collected together and circulated to the church at large. Good speed postulated that an unnamed disciple of Paul wrote Ephesians as an introduction to the Pauline corpus.

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1<sup>1</sup> and 3<sup>1</sup>

<sup>4</sup> God has progressively revealed himself throughout history, as Paul points out at the start of his letter to the church in Romans through the nature of things that could be seen, but also in the Old Testament primarily through the prophets and finally through his Son. As the writer to the Hebrews says, *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son"* [Hebrews 1<sup>1</sup>]

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 1<sup>3-14</sup>, 15-23; 2<sup>1-9</sup>; 3<sup>1-7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ephesians - Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*: Foulkes, Frances © 1989 Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, UK.

<sup>7</sup> *An Introduction to the New Testament*: Goodspeed Edgar J ; © 1937, University of Chicago Press, Chicago Illinois.

Barclay points out that this theory breaks down on one *salient fact* - any imitation is inferior to the original. However it is difficult to argue Ephesians as being a second grade copy of Colossians. Most theologians would argue Ephesians to be the greatest of all Paul's works. One commentator's rebuttal of this theory was thus:

*"Can we believe that in the church of Paul's day there was an unknown teacher of this supreme excellence? The natural assumption is surely that an epistle so like the work of Paul at his best was written by no other man than by Paul himself."*<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2.2 Recipients

Not only the traditionally accepted author but also its assumed recipients have also been questioned. One of the main reasons for this has often been the lack of a personal touch. Remember that Paul stayed with the church for three years, however we find:

- He talks about *hearing* of their faith (1<sup>15</sup>)
- He checks that they have heard of his experience of revelation (3<sup>2</sup>)
- He questions what they have been taught (4<sup>21</sup>)

Add to this the fact that none of the early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament have the words *in Ephesus* in them. Instead they begin *Paul, ... to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus*. This has led many to believe that Paul did not originally intend it for Ephesians, or perhaps we should say, not *just* for the church in Ephesus. Here are the prevailing theories: -

- **Letter to Laodicea:** - This idea is based on Paul's statement in Colossians where he asks them to be sure they read the letter from Laodicea<sup>9</sup>. However he did not say *to* Laodicea, so it is an assumption to say that he was referring to his own letter (Ephesians) that was present in Laodicea at the time. The other factor in the endurance of this theory is Marcion's canon in the mid second century, which was his list of Pauline Corpus and had Laodicea instead of Ephesians in the list. However we find that Tertullian later criticises Marcion for this.
- **Circular Letter:** - Tychius, who also carried Paul's letter to the church in Colossae and to Philemon, was the bearer of this letter and is thought

<sup>8</sup> *The Literature of the New Testament*: E. F. Scott; © 1932 New York.

<sup>9</sup> Colossians 4<sup>16</sup>



to have carried this letter to many other churches in the province of Asia.

- ***Paul's Spiritual Testament:*** - Addressed and intended for the church as a whole.
- ***Introduction to Pauline Corpus*** by Paul himself. A holistic theology for use by the church.

## 2.3 Dating and Contents

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### 2.3.1 Date of Writing

As we have already seen, those who hold the letter to be the work of an imitator or disciple of Paul's have put AD90 as a probable date for its composition. However holding as we shall, due to the belief in the WORD of God as being inerrant, to the letter itself to be from the pen of Paul, we know that he was imprisoned at the time of writing Ephesians<sup>10</sup>. Due to the close association with the letter to the Colossians many have considered Ephesians to have been written at the same time, i.e., at the time of his first imprisonment around AD64.

### 2.3.2 Contents – A Book of Two Halves

In the immortal words of a modern day commentator, Ephesians is a (letter) of two halves. It divides into two contrasting halves - **chapters 1-3 and 4-6**. Watchman Nee, in his book Sit, Walk, Stand says in this respect: -

*“The letter abounds in spiritual riches, and yet at the same time is intensely practical. The first half of the letter reveals our life in Christ to be one of union with Him in the highest heavens. The second half shows us in very practical terms how such a heavenly life is to be lived by us down here on the earth.”<sup>11</sup>*

At this point we could turn to a standard list of contents, with the strong preface that this is simply one author's summary of the epistle. In this module we shall plot our own course, together and as individuals, as God speaks to us. One skill we need to nurture is that of being able to read and digest the summaries of others whilst pressing into God for our own memory of this great Biblical work. You will note our first homework is to read Ephesians and put together our own personal summary. Here is Donald Guthrie's summary<sup>12</sup> ...

- i. Greeting (1<sup>1-2</sup>)
- ii. Doxology (1<sup>3-14</sup>)
- iii. Thanksgiving & Prayer (1<sup>15-23</sup>)
- iv. Doctrine (2<sup>1-3</sup>2<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 3<sup>1</sup> and 4<sup>1</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Sit Walk Stand*: - Nee, Watchman (Nee To-Sheng) Victory Press (Evangelical Publishers Ltd) © 1962 (Reprinted 1970)

<sup>12</sup> *The Pauline Epistles – New Testament Introduction*: Guthrie, Donald; © 1966 The Tyndale Press, London

- Christian Salvation (2<sup>1-22</sup>)
    - Personal (2<sup>1-10</sup>)
    - Corporate (2<sup>11-22</sup>)
  - Ministry of the Church (3<sup>1-21</sup>)
    - Paul's Commission (3<sup>1-9</sup>)
    - Church's Vocation (3<sup>10-12</sup>)
    - Prayer for his readers (3<sup>13-21</sup>)
- v. Practical (4<sup>1-6</sup><sup>17</sup>)
- Unity's Traits (4<sup>1-6</sup>)
  - Gifts (4<sup>7-13</sup>)
  - Achieving Unity (4<sup>14-16</sup>)
  - Old & New (4<sup>17-32</sup>)
  - Warnings (5<sup>1-14</sup>)
  - Use of Time (5<sup>15-21</sup>)
  - Christian Homelife (5<sup>22-6</sup><sup>17</sup>)
    - Marriages (5<sup>22-33</sup>)
    - Families (6<sup>1-4</sup>)
    - Boss/Servants (6<sup>5-9</sup>)
  - Christian Warfare (6<sup>10-17</sup>)
- vi. Conclusion (6<sup>18-24</sup>)

In the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, Salmond says of the letter: -

*"In the judgement of many who are well entitled to deliver an opinion, it is the grandest of all Pauline letters. There is a peculiar and sustained loftiness in its teaching which has deeply impressed the greatest minds and has earned for it*



*the title of the ‘Epistle of the Ascension’. It tarries largely among ‘the Heavens’*

...

*It is characterised by a dignity and a serenity which is entirely in harmony with the elevation of its thoughts. It has little to do with the questions of ceremonialism or with the personal vindications which fill so large a space in others of the great epistles of St. Paul. The polemical element is conspicuous by its absence. There is scarcely even an echo of the great controversies which ring so loudly in the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians.”<sup>13</sup>*

As we now begin our exposition of this esteemed epistle, in the next section, we shall start by following Paul to *tarry largely among the Heavens* ...

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<sup>13</sup> *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*: (Ed.) Nichol, W. Robertson, © 1988, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, US.

## Group Activity

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Break down into small groups and write bullet point summaries of the main themes or issues covered or addressed by any of the Apostle Paul in his letters (except Ephesians): -

Romans	1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians	Galatians
Ephesians	Colossians
Philemon	1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Timothy	Titus

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