

## **SESSION 6: Ephesians**

### **Four main points**

1. Background
2. Theme
3. Issues
4. Application

#### **1. Background**

Reading: Ephesians 1:1-2:22

#### **2. Theme**

Reading: Ephesians 3:1-4:16

#### **3. Issues**

Reading: Ephesians 4:17-5:20

#### **4. Application**

Reading: Ephesians 5:21-6:24

Discussion questions:

What are the contemporary barriers between people that need to be surmounted in today's church?

Does being 'one in Christ' necessarily mean organisational unity between denominations?

## 1. Background

Paul founded the church in Ephesus on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18-21). Unable to stay for a long time Paul later returned to the city and seems to have made it the base for his wider mission in the region. The work was delayed by the disturbance created by Demetrius (Acts 19:23-41) who made silver shrines of Artemis (Diana).

Critical scholarship has often suggested that Paul did not write Ephesians, because differences in phrases and style suggest that another hand is at work or because similarities in phrases and style suggest that Paul would not bother to repeat himself! However, Paul's name appears in the body of the letter (3:1) just as it appears in other letters (2 Corinthians 10:1; Galatians 5:2; Colossians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:18). The self-portrait of the writer that emerges seems rather like the Paul that we meet in other New Testament letters. Ephesians was extraordinarily well attested in the early church and included with the other epistles of Paul. The suggestion that this letter was a late work of a student of Paul, or of anyone else other than Paul, seems unfounded.

The destination of the letter is rather more uncertain. The place name 'in Ephesus' (1:1) is absent in many of the best manuscripts (including the Chester Beatty papyrus dating from about AD 200, the earliest extant MS of the Pauline Epistles). Paul had worked at Ephesus for two or three years and yet the letter lacks words of personal greeting or encouragement, saying only that Paul had 'heard' certain things of his readers (1:15) as they had 'heard' of him (3:2). There are also no personal greetings either from Paul and his friends (e.g. Timothy, who was with Paul in Rome and well known in Ephesus, Acts 19:22).

While some readers are threatened by 'textual criticism' there is no need to be frightened of it. It's simply important to try to establish the most reliable and accurate text of the Bible, a book where even the newest parts are nearly 2,000 years old. If 'in Ephesus' is not part of the original text then we have to consider various possibilities. It seems unlikely either that Paul was writing to a church with another name or that he left the letter without a name so that the blank could be filled in as required. The latter option would have been most unusual in the ancient world and no manuscript has been found with any other name inserted.

One solution to the problem is that Paul wrote the letter to Christians living in the Roman province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital. It was therefore not addressed to any particular congregation but to all of them. The seven churches of Revelation (Revelation 2 and 3), as well as Colosse, were in this area of modern Western Turkey.

The date of Ephesians depends on its place of origin. If Paul wrote from Rome then this letter dates from about AD 62-64. At this time one of Paul's closest friends, Tychicus, a native of Ephesus, was with him. A possible interpretation of events is that Paul wrote Colossians, the more personal letter to Philemon and the letter to the Ephesians in fairly quick succession.

Debate about the first recipients must not hide the content of the opening chapter. The theme is wonder and thanksgiving that God has poured out his love in Christ. Paul speaks of God's love as a love that never began as well as a love that will never end. By his death Jesus sets us free from sin and his resurrection is something in which we can share. The work of the Father is made manifest (the mystery made known) in the Son and sealed by the promised Holy Spirit. To this Paul adds the analogy of the Holy Spirit as a 'deposit' (KJV 'earnest'), the first instalment of blessing.

## 2. Theme

Most of Paul's letters were written to address particular circumstances or controversies but this does not seem to be the case with Ephesians. Paul describes himself as a prisoner of the Lord (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), which not only indicates his circumstances but also shows that he was aware of the divine purpose. Paul was imprisoned on several occasions. Here he implies that he was still able to preach the gospel despite his imprisonment (6:20), which seems to point to Rome (where he had constant visitors, Acts 28:30-31) rather than to Caesarea (where only friends could visit, Acts 24:22-23). It seems Tychicus (6:21-22), who carried the letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:7-8), carried the letter to Ephesus, perhaps on the same journey.

The themes of Colossians and Ephesians are very similar. Ephesians appears to be a letter to Gentile Christians (1:10) who are to be united in one body with Christians from a Jewish background. Colossians was probably written from Rome and the common ground suggests that Ephesians is a further 'prison epistle'. Ephesians is a wonderful summary of the Christian gospel that has stirred the hearts of many great Christians including the eminent reformer John Calvin. Paul was the great Apostle to the Gentiles but he was not intent on presiding over a divided church. The great theme of the letter, therefore, is God's plan to bring people from every nation and background together in Christ (1:10).

An important theme in Colossians was the headship of Christ while in Ephesians Paul emphasises the church as the body of Christ. Through his death upon the cross Jesus has brought reconciliation between God and humanity. By the power of the Holy Spirit individual Christians are brought together (reconciled to each other) in Jesus Christ. In Colossians Paul had spelled out the supremacy of Christ. Christ is the one through whom all powers of the universe were created and who by his death and resurrection has triumphed over all that stood against him. Paul now considers the relationship of the church, the body of Christ, to its risen and exalted head.

The earlier letters (especially Romans and Galatians) show Paul's great concern with the doctrine of justification by faith. Ephesians does not neglect this important theme (2:8-10) but moves on to show that salvation is not purely some private matter but that the divine purpose is to bring all creation to a place where it finds its true headship in Christ.

The church is composed of men and women who have been reconciled to God through Christ - but this is not the whole story. The church is also composed of men and women who have been reconciled to one another in Christ, for they are united to him in faith. This is true of Jews and Gentiles and applies to any other barrier that might be erected. It is by fellowship in Christ that barriers are broken down and divisions removed. When Christian people are seen to be the community of the reconciled then the message of reconciliation is proclaimed more faithfully and powerfully.

The second part of the letter shows the practical implications of the theory that Paul has been expounding. The purposes of God must be furthered by the lives of his people. Christians are to show the effects of the new life in Christ in their daily living. This will come about by different kinds of people being one in Christ. It will also be shown by purity and love in Christian behaviour. The Christian is called to be a member of God's new society (Stott). This affects relationships at home and in the family and gives stability in the fight against all the principalities and powers of evil. The letter is, therefore, a blend of Christian doctrine and Christian duty, of Christian faith and of Christian life.

### 3. Issues

Unlike some of his other letters, Ephesians was not written to combat error or expose false teaching. Nevertheless, Paul's great theme of unity in the headship of Christ was not simply theoretical but addressed the practical demands of Christian living in a hostile society. God's ultimate purpose is "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (1:10). At the time of writing, the Mediterranean world was politically unified under Rome's imperial government. Paul wanted to show that unity finds its ultimate goal only in Christ. It is he who represents the coordinating principle of all life. It is under Christ's rule that humanity is united in one, worldwide church. In contemplating such a hope, Paul pours forward words of praise and prayer.

Paul begins by focusing on what God has done in Christ (1:3-14). Christian faith and life find their centre in the Lord Jesus Christ. Christians are called to be 'holy and blameless' (1:4), that is set apart for God to reflect his purity and free from blemish. Under Roman law, an adopted son enjoyed the same status and privileges as a natural son. Christ is the Son of God 'by nature', believers are sons by adoption and grace but nevertheless co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). It is through Christ that the believer is redeemed, more specifically 'through his blood'. The price of salvation was costly beyond measure, the lifeblood of Christ, poured out in a sacrificial death. It is in this inheritance that Jews and Gentiles are equal partners.

Paul spells out the process of becoming a Christian. Hearing, faith and salvation were immediately followed by the sealing of the Holy Spirit. At the moment that they believed, the Ephesian Christians received the stamp of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2). In the commercial world, the word that the NIV renders 'deposit' (Eph. 1:14, KJV 'earnest') was a first instalment, a down payment in hire purchase. Receiving the Holy Spirit is the first instalment of the Christian's inheritance.

The situation of the Christian is so different from the hopelessness of being without God, cut off from him, dead in transgressions (lapses) and sins (shortcomings). People were wandering about the earth in the grip of sin but God in his grace has, by the power that raised Jesus, made us alive with him and made us part of a new creation. After his resurrection Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father (1:20-21). These events have their counterpart in the experience of believers. The way that salvation is apprehended (made our own) is by faith. Any kind of self-effort is comprehensively ruled out. There can be no self-congratulation. It is all because of God's grace (2:8). Nevertheless, though works play no part in securing salvation, good works attest its reality.

Gentile Christians can easily forget the former disadvantages. Gentiles were 'separate' from Christ. God in Christ could bridge even the great divide between Jew and Gentile. In Christ any barrier can be overcome. 'Christ' and 'Messiah' mean the same but Paul now adds the historical name 'Jesus'. He is the meeting point for God with all humanity. Jesus' death on the cross is the one means of peace with God for all without distinction and the common bond in him surpasses all, not simply that Jews and Gentiles should be reconciled to each other but that both of them together should be reconciled to God, in one body by one Spirit. Christians are bound together by one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (4:5). Yet we are all individuals too. We need to complement one another and grow together. For believers to grow together requires us to be in a right relationship with the head, which brings the body into the correct order. We must grow in love and truth.

The Scriptures never give the impression that the Christian life will be easy. It was anything but easy for Paul in prison. The Christian is engaged in a battle and it is a profound spiritual struggle (6:10-24) but the Christian is not left without powerful weapons or full armour (panoply) with which to stand (standing ground).

#### 4. Application

As in previous Pauline letters, the first part of Ephesians is doctrinal and the second part practical. Paul[’s] exhortation is that the Christians must live a different kind of life from the one that they once lived. Living as a Christian means breaking with the past. While Jewish Christians must be careful not to return to Judaism, Gentile Christians must not fall back into their old self-indulgent habits either. Christians must live lives that are different from people who are spiritually insensitive. Instead, their previous lifestyle is to be discarded. Christians are on a new journey, not progressive degeneration, which is heading for the grave, but a journey of being made new (4:23).

The new self is the complete opposite of the old self and shows its nature in various characteristics. Falsehood in all its forms must be rejected over against ‘the truth that is in Jesus’ (4:21). ‘True righteousness and holiness’ (4:24) must replace ‘deceitful scheming’ (4:14) and ‘deceitful desires’ (4:22). Anger and bitterness are not characteristics of the Christian community. These must not be allowed to simmer away overnight, or take root in the hearts and lives of the family of God. The believer must be prepared to work hard and not to steal or to pilfer.

Not only will Christians do good (4:28) but they must speak it too. Bad language, malicious gossip and slander and quite clearly the enemies of the Christian community and must be eliminated. Instead, Christians will say only what is calculated to build up the church (2:21, 22; 4:12, 16). While God is the ultimate source of blessing, the channel of that blessing can be human, so that the everyday conversation of Christians can become a means of grace to others. As the Holy Spirit dwells within the believer, it is possible for the Holy Spirit to be grieved by the words and deeds of others and by the thoughts, words and deeds of the believer in whose heart the Spirit dwells.

The Christian needs to get rid of malicious traits and replace these with kindness, compassion and forgiveness. Christians have not yet attained the ‘full measure of perfection attained in Christ’ (4:13) but believers are called to imitate God, just as a boy wants to grow up to be like his father.

Christian behavior is ‘a life of love’ (5:2). Immorality, impurity, greed and the lust for more were common characteristics in pagan society which made a god of what it sought to possess (5:3). Christian behavior is different from this. ‘Obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking’ are out of place in the Christian community (5:4). Instead, the Christian’s goal should be to please the Lord and live as a child of the light, having no share in the fruitless deeds of darkness. The believer should also be wary of strong drink (5:18). Instead of being drunk the Christian should be filled with the Spirit. The filling with the Holy Spirit is not a once and for all experience but a continuous replenishment (‘go on being filled’).

All relationships between Christians should be different from the world at large – in marriage, between children and parents and slaves and masters. Paul addressed children directly (6:1), expecting them to hear the letter and to be part of the Christian community.

Living differently is not simply a challenge, it is a battle. It is spiritual warfare and the Christian must be on guard, particularly against the devil’s schemes (6:11). Enlisting into the army in peacetime is one thing, but the believer has enlisted in a time of war. However, the believer is not left without the resources to fight and to win through.

Paul concludes with his customary greetings. If life is not easy for the Christians to whom he wrote, they should bear in mind it was not easy for him either. Tychicus will update them with all the news in the hope that they will take heart. He offers the blessing of peace, love, faith and grace.