

Many scholars believe that Ephesians was a letter intended for distribution among several of the churches in western Asia Minor, with Ephesus being the major city and church. Colossians and Ephesians have much in common. Both letters, along with Philippians and Philemon, were written while Paul was in prison, probably in Rome. The situation was probably that Epaphras, perhaps the founder of the Colossian church, had reported to Paul in Rome how the church was doing. While there were many reasons for joy, there were also some serious doctrinal problems plaguing the church. Paul wrote Colossians to address these problems, exalting the person and work of Christ.

As he reflected on what he wrote to the Colossians, Paul was caught up with the glory of God's purpose for His church, the riches of His grace toward us in Christ, and how these great truths should effect how believers live. So he penned Ephesians, intending it to be circulated among all of the churches of that region. Peter O'Brien (The Letter to the Ephesians [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 57) explains, "He writes Ephesians to his mainly Gentile Christian readers, for whom he has apostolic responsibilities, with the intention of informing, strengthening, and encouraging them by assuring them of their place within the gracious, saving purpose of God, and urging them to bring their lives into conformity with this divine plan of summing up all things in Christ (1:10)."

As readers in the Ephesian region of Asia Minor would know, he had been arrested on the charge of having brought a Gentile into the temple (Acts 21:28-29; 28:16). Ethnic or cultural division between Jew and Gentile was a major issue in the Ephesian church (cf. Acts 19:17), and Paul, was one of the best qualified writers of antiquity to address both sides intelligently.

From his detention under Roman authorities (probably in Rome), Paul is also aware of the possibility of imminent persecution and the need for the church to be a good witness in society (cf. especially comment on Eph 5:21-6:9). He is also aware of the church's struggle with its own background in the occult practices of Asia Minor- magic (Acts 19:19), astrology and attempts to escape the astrological power of Fate (cf.

At the same time, Paul also wrote the short letter to Philemon, pleading for forgiveness for his runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul had led to Christ. He sent these three letters—Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon—back to that region with Tychicus, a faithful worker who was with Paul in Rome (Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21; Philemon lived in Colossae), sometime around A.D. 60-62.

#### CONTENT AND THEMES:

Ephesians falls into two parts. In chapters 1-3, Paul presents our position in Christ in the heavenly realms, all because of His sovereign grace. The main idea is that God's wisdom, glory, and power are displayed in His eternal purpose for the church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, reconciled in Christ. After the introduction, he outlines the incomparable blessings that come to us because the Father chose us (1:4-6), the Son redeemed us (1:7-12), and the Holy Spirit sealed us (1:13-14), all "to the praise of His glory." Because these truths are so profoundly important and deep, Paul prays that God will open our minds to comprehend the riches of all that God has given to us as members of the body of Christ, the head over all (1:15-23).

In chapter 2, Paul contrasts what we were before we met Christ, dead in our sins, with what He has done for us by His grace (2:1-10). He raised us from the dead and seated us with Christ in heaven! He wants the Gentile Christians to remember that formerly they were completely alienated from God and His covenant promises, but now they have been brought near in Christ Jesus. He Himself is our peace, who reconciled the Jews and Gentiles into one body through the cross, so that together we are being built into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (2:11-22).

In chapter 3, Paul begins by mentioning that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles. This thought gives him concern that his imprisonment may cause some of the Gentile believers to doubt God's sovereign control over these trials. So he

digresses to show them that God had revealed to him the mystery that had been concealed in the past, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and members of the body of Christ. God's wisdom is now being displayed through the church in accordance with His eternal purpose. So Paul's tribulations were on behalf of the Gentiles, for their glory (3:1-13). This causes Paul again to break into prayer, that God would, according to the riches of His glory, grant that these believers could comprehend the unfathomable love of Christ, that they may be filled up to all the fullness of God (3:14-21).

Then, in chapters 4-6, Paul shows how comprehending God's glorious purpose for the church and our position in Christ (chapters 1-3) should cause us to live in practical godliness in this world. From 4:1-6:9, Paul describes four (or, five) different "walks" and their effects: the worthy walk in the one body (4:1-16); the purposeful walk in the one new man (4:17-32); the loving walk, which also is a walk as children of light in this dark world (5:1-14); and, the careful walk of wisdom, especially as it affects the family and the workplace (5:15-6:9). He concludes by showing (6:10-20) that to walk well in this evil world, we must learn to stand against the unseen forces of evil by putting on the full armor of God.

Because in chapter 2 Paul described how we are seated with Christ in heaven, in chapters 4 & 5 he outlines how we are to walk in this world, and in chapter 6 how we, the body of Christ are to stand firm against the forces of evil.

In unfolding these marvelous truths, Paul emphasizes a number of themes. One is God and His sovereign, eternal purpose of summing up all things in Christ (1:9-11; 3:11). The rich salvation that He has graciously bestowed on us in spite of our sin is another wonderful theme (1:3-23; 2:1-22). In this regard, the word "riches" occurs five times; "grace" occurs 12 times; "glory" occurs eight times; "fullness," "filled," or "fills" occur six times; and the phrase, "in Christ" occurs 15 times. Because God's gracious salvation and the depths of what it means are incomprehensible to the unaided human mind, twice Paul prays for God to give supernatural understanding into these glorious truths (1:15-23; 3:14-21).

Closely coupled with salvation is that the church as the body of Christ is at the heart of God's purpose (1:22-23; 2:19-22; 3:4-11; 5:25-27, 29-32). Related to that is the mystery, hidden in the past but now revealed, that the church is a new creation, made up of both Jews and Gentiles on equal footing (2:11-22; 3:1-12). This means that the unity of the church is very important, which is another dominant theme (2:14-22; 4:1-13, 25).

Although there are great similarities between Colossians and Ephesians, in Colossians there is only one reference to the Holy Spirit (1:8), whereas in Ephesians He takes a major role. We have received the seal of the Spirit as the pledge of our salvation (1:13-14; 4:30). We have access in one Spirit to the Father (2:18). We are being built into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (2:22). The Spirit now has revealed the mystery of Christ to the apostles and prophets (3:5). The Spirit strengthens us with power in the inner man (3:16). We are to maintain the unity of the one Spirit (4:3, 4). We must be careful not to grieve the Holy Spirit (4:30), but rather to be filled with the Spirit (5:18), to take up the sword of the Spirit (6:17), and to pray at all times in the Spirit (6:20).

Of course, foundational to all of these themes is the centrality and supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ. God has purposed to sum up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ (1:10). Thus we must know Him and His power (1:17, 19). God raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand, far above all other powers, not only in this age, but also in the age to come (1:21-23). Everything in God's dealings with us centers in the person and work of Jesus Christ and our organic unity of being "in Him." These, then, are some of the great themes that we will try to understand in a deeper way as we work through this rich epistle.

Keep in mind (as Lloyd-Jones reminds us, p. 23) that these profound, unfathomable truths were not written to great scholars or theologians, but to ordinary church members. Many of them were slaves. Most of them were Gentiles who were formerly pagan idolaters with no knowledge whatsoever of the living and true God.

Ephesus was noted for its temple of Artemis or Diana, a structure that was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. It was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Artemis herself was a many-breasted idol, worshiped through immoral encounters with prostitute priestesses. Her annual festival drew much revenue into the city, like the debauched Mardi Gras in New Orleans. When the many new Christians stopped buying silver shrines of Artemis, it led to a riot by the silversmith guild, whose prosperity depended on that business. Ephesus was also a center for occult practices. When the gospel took root in Ephesus, the new believers burned their occult books, which Luke reports as being worth 50,000 pieces of silver, probably equivalent to 50,000 days' wages (Acts 19:18-41)!

So it was to ordinary Christians from this pagan background that the inspired apostle wrote this letter. He knew that these great themes, including God's sovereign choice and predestination of us before the foundation of the world (which he plunges right into in 1:4-11) were essential for all of us to know and rejoice in if we want to live holy lives in this evil world. So don't dodge them! I find that many Christians avoid the doctrine of election because they cannot understand it or it causes a lot of controversy. So they shrug their shoulders and skip the many verses that state this truth. In so doing, they miss a good portion of the riches that God has provided for their spiritual growth and health.

With that as a general overview and background, let's spend the rest of our time on the introduction (1:1-2). We can sum it up:

God wants us to know who we are in Christ and how we came to be in Christ.

First, there is Paul, the author of this letter. His description of himself tells us some things about who he was and how he came to be that way. Then, there are the believers. His designation of them also tells us much about who we are and how we came to be this way. Finally, his greeting sums up both how Paul and all believers came to experience this great salvation in which we now stand.

1. Paul's self-description tells us who he was in Christ and how he came to be that way (1:1a).

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..." (1:1a). As you know, Paul's given name was Saul. He was a Jew, born into the tribe of Benjamin, whose namesake was the first king of Israel. Paul was trained as a Pharisee under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his countrymen, being more extremely zealous for his ancestral traditions (Gal. 1:14). He heartily approved and assisted when the Jewish leaders stoned Stephen to death. After that, Paul had ravaged the church, entering homes and dragging off both men and women to put in prison and put to death (Acts 8:3; 9:1).

As he was on his way to Damascus to bring any Christians from that city bound to Jerusalem, God' sovereignty intervened in Paul's life. A bright light from heaven suddenly blinded him. He fell to the ground and heard the Lord say (Acts 9:4), "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" When Paul responded, "Lord, who are You?" the Lord said (9:5-6), "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." Paul was not dissatisfied with Judaism. He wasn't considering various religious alternatives. Rather, he was militantly opposed to Jesus Christ and the gospel when (as he puts it in Gal. 1:15-16), "God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles...."

In other words, Paul did not have anything to do with his dramatic conversion and his appointment as an apostle. Rather, it all happened by the sovereign will of God. Paul was fiercely opposing God at the very moment that God literally stopped him in his tracks, blinded him physically, but opened his eyes spiritually to see the risen Savior. As an apostle, Paul was appointed and sent by God to preach the gospel especially to the Gentiles, whom he formerly despised with a passion.

While perhaps none of us have had such a dramatic conversion as Paul had, if we know Christ as Savior we know that it was not our doing. We were spiritually dead in

our sins (Eph. 2:1), living in futility, darkened in our understanding, excluded from the life of God because of our ignorance and hardness of heart, given over to sensuality and impurity with greediness (4:17-19). While we were in that condition, the glorious words of 2:4-5 broke into our lives: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)....” It was all because of “His kind intention, which He purposed in Him” (1:9)!

2. Paul’s description of believers tells us much about who we are and how we came to be this way (1:b).

“To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus” (1:b). First, we are “saints.” Contrary to popular usage, “saints” is not a term describing extraordinary believers, who stand a notch above the rest of us. Rather, in the Bible, all believers are saints and all saints are believers. The word means, “set apart ones,” “holy ones,” or “sanctified ones.” It means that we have been cleansed from all our guilt by Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf (Heb. 10:10, 14). Thus we are separated from this evil world and set apart unto God for His holy purposes.

The church is the assembly of saints that is made up of all who are in Christ. We must always look at this assembly as “in Christ” or “in Him” (one of the key ideas in Ephesians).

All kinds of religions have various rituals for cleaning from sin or wrong doing. There is only one way to be cleansed from your sin and guilt, and that is through faith in the blood of Jesus, who offered Himself as the substitute for sinners.

God has a view the church. It begins with the idea of it being a planned community.

A. God in grace planned my entry into the assembly of saints.

1. God chose us (1:3-4). There is only one subject and one main verb in the Greek sentence (1:3-14). This subject and verb is “he chose”. God is the subject and

2. God chose us in Christ (1:4; cf. 1:6). The Holy God could not choose to richly bless sinners apart from his Son and what his Son would do through his work of redemption.

3. God chose us before the creation of the world (1:4). Therefore, our own works, repentance, faith or anything else did not cause God to choose us.

Comment: Since we are limited by our own experience, this may be hard to understand. It may seem to us like we came to God, but the Bible teaches that God came to us (1 Jn 4:19).

4. God chose us to be holy and blameless before him (1:4). God's design is to save sinners from their sins (Mt 1:21).

5. God chose us to bring praise to himself (1:6). The Biblical doctrine of election should always produce worship and joy!

Apply: Every follower of Christ should praise God for election.

B. God in grace providentially watches over me.

1. Having chosen us, God did not let chance determine the outcome. No, in love he predestined us (1:5).

2. Predestination covers all the parts of God's plan (1:11-12). Otherwise, one small event might cause the whole to miscarry. In a mysterious way, God allows free agents to make their choices freely, but he also works at the same time to carry out his choices. The chief example is the crucifixion of Christ (Ac 2:23).

World history may look like a mess, but the end will be for the praise of God's glory.

Paul's second phrase to describe believers is that they are "faithful in Christ Jesus." "Faithful" may mean that they are reliable or obedient, but here it probably has the meaning, "believers." No one is saved apart from believing personally in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the object of our faith, and so we must understand something of who He is and what He did when He died on the cross.



While saving faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29), it is at the same time something that we must exercise. When God opens our blind eyes to see our own guilty condition and also the beauty and glory of the person of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross, we cease from our efforts to save ourselves. We cast ourselves totally on Christ. God places us “in Christ Jesus,” so that all that is true of Him becomes true of us. As Paul puts it (1 Cor. 1:30-31), “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

3. Paul’s greeting sums up how we came to experience this great salvation in which we now stand (1:2).

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is Paul’s common greeting, but it is more than just a greeting. As Lloyd-Jones puts it (p. 36), “No two words are more important in the whole of our faith than ‘grace’ and ‘peace.’ Yet how lightly we tend to drop them off our tongues without stopping to consider what they mean. Grace is the beginning of our faith; peace is the end of our faith.”

Grace is often simply defined as unmerited favor. We deserved His judgment, but He saved us and blessed us. But it is really so much more.

In most cases the concept is in fact far bigger than the words normally used to refer to it, even when the words in question appear frequently. Three examples suffice to make the point, namely, grace, exclusion and gentleness.

A number of biblical words are relevant to an understanding of grace, including mercy, love, kindness and beneficence. The vocabulary of grace denotes spontaneous kindness and acts of generosity grounded in a disposition of compassion towards those in need. However, the biblical concept includes the notions of loyalty and constancy, often in connection with the covenant. Grace, as an attribute of God, grounds divine-human relations in his generous initiative and sustaining faithfulness. Of course,

the concept of grace can be present, and often is, even when the related words are absent, especially when God visits people for the purposes of blessing and salvation.

Grace saves us, seals us, sanctifies us and secures us. Each of these is initiated and completed by God through various means through the New Covenant Person Jesus Christ.

Grace is wonderful and is all encompassing for our lives and is violent.

Violent grace is not usually a term that is used in relation to the grace of God. But for true reconciliation to occur between God and man, violent acts must take place.

Peace with the holy God is the basic need of every sinner. We cannot appease Him by our own sacrifices or good deeds, because these cannot erase the stain of our sin. But, as Paul puts it in 2:14, "He Himself is our peace." Christ reconciled us to God; He gives us peace within our hearts, even in the midst of trials; and, He reconciles us to one another.

When we experience God's grace at the cross, instead of being our Judge, God becomes our Father and Jesus Christ becomes our Lord. Rather than running from God because we wanted to hide our sins and because we feared His judgment, we can draw near to God with hearts washed clean (Heb. 10:22). Instead of proudly running our own lives to promote our own interests, we can and will submit gladly to Jesus as Lord and Master, seeking to do His will and all of this submission required violence to be done.