

Ephesians Background and Overview

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Ephesus was an important port city during biblical times on the west coast of Asia. The city boasted about its 'temple to Artemis,' and the citizens even would chant, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" when they would gather in the arena (Acts. 19:28). A diverse range of citizens would have called Ephesus home. Right outside of the city center were many lavish houses. We even hear of guilds of silversmiths (Acts 19:24). However, like most Roman cities, there would have been many servant-class citizens who would have called Ephesus home.

The city of Ephesus had a particular fascination with the occult or magic. This could help explain why Paul focuses intently on the power of God and the ascension of Christ. The Ephesian Christians needed to be reminded that Christ is the ultimate power in their world and is the ultimate power in their own lives.

Paul was intimately acquainted with the church at Ephesus. We learn in the book of Acts that Paul planted the church at Ephesus, devoting hours of personal instruction to the church (Acts 19:9-10). Paul spent right around three years with the Ephesian Christians, so this congregation would have been one of the more learned churches of Paul's ministry. We even see his tearful final charge and goodbye to the Ephesian elders at the end of Acts 20. This helps to shed light on the purpose and scope of the letter: it is a summary of the Gospel teaching that Paul had left with them.

The Ephesian church would have been comprised of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, but Paul seems to be addressing the Gentiles more so than the Jews. The reader will see the juxtaposition between the Gentiles life before being welcomed into the family of God and life after. This is seen most explicitly in Eph. 2:11-12: *"Therefore remember that at one time **you Gentiles** in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."*

DATE + TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Unlike some of his other letters (even some of the others that address the church at Ephesus), this letter seems uniquely general. There is no specific problem that Paul is addressing in the congregation. Instead, his letter is written for the purpose of instructing and edifying the believers in Ephesus and anybody else who would have heard the letter read or seen a copy.

When Paul leaves Ephesus (~AD 53-55), he will install his understudy Timothy as the lead pastor of the church. Later, Paul will write additional letters addressed specifically to Timothy to help address issues of false teaching that had arisen in the church at Ephesus (1 and 2 Timothy). The Ephesian church will also be addressed in Revelation 2, admonishing them for neglecting their first love, Jesus Christ.

Paul is writing in ~AD 61-62 from house arrest in Rome at the time. It is worth noting the parallels between Ephesians and Colossians. 34% of Ephesians is contained in Colossians, and 27% of Colossians is contained in Ephesians. This suggests that the two were written at roughly the same time by Paul and written for the same general purpose. Paul tasked his trusted friend and confidant Tychicus to deliver the letters.

BREAKDOWN OF BOOK

The content of the book is uniquely Pauline. It was typical in Paul's writings for there to be indicatives (simple statements or facts) followed by imperatives (Do this! Or Be this!). Paul writes in such a way where he first presents the indicatives - what God has done - and then imperatives - in light of these indicatives, act this way or do this. The book of Ephesians is that on a larger scale.

Paul spends chapters 1-3 detailing the great indicatives of Christian salvation and chapters 4-6 detailing the imperatives that correspond to the aforementioned indicatives. Paul ends chapter three with a prayer for the spiritual strength of the Ephesian Christians, effectively wrapping up the indicative section, and he begins chapter 4 with "*I, therefore... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*"

In light of this, a helpful structure of the book is listed below:

Ephesians 1:1-2 - Opening Greeting

Ephesians 1:3-3:21 - Doctrines (Indicatives) of Christian salvation

Ephesians 4:1-6:20 - Application (Imperatives) of Christian salvation

Ephesians 6:21-24 - Closing Greeting

KEY THEMES

- **"In Christ"** - Paul grounds all of the Christian life in the key doctrine of a believer's union with Christ.
- **"Church"** - There is much time and attention given to the church throughout the epistle. The church is the 'body' and Christ is her 'head.' As the church grows "*to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*" (Eph. 4:13), Paul points to the unity of the church as 'one new man' consisting of both Jew and Gentile that forms the 'household of God.' Paul grounds the church in her Christological founding, in that the church finds her origin, identity, and calling in Christ, and her eschatological role, that the church should rightly understand her place in redemptive history. Paul goes to such length to define the church's role and identity to show the Ephesian Christians who they are in relation to the world - they are holy, set apart, a new creation, one new man, etc.
- **"Powers"** - Paul spends a lot of ink detailing the "powers" throughout the letter. He does this to show the scope of the spiritual battle that is happening: "*the rulers... the authorities... the cosmic powers over this present darkness... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*" (Eph. 6:12). He pits the 'dark' powers against the universal rule and reign of Christ, as they are consistently reminded of their defeat by Christ: "*so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*"
- **"Cosmic reconciliation and unity to Christ"** - Eph. 1:9-10 says, "*making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*" This is the pivotal statement of Ephesians and the high point of Paul's opening dialogue in chapter 1. Uniting the whole created order in Christ is the overarching goal of God; this is the mystery of God and is where the created order is headed.