

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

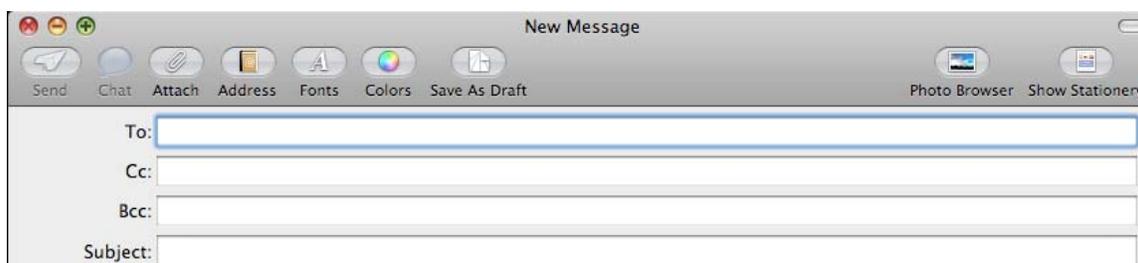
Lesson 31

Letter to the Ephesians

In 1984, I got out of law school and took a job at one of the largest law firms in the world. I became the second assignment to a young secretary named Valerie. Valerie was extremely proficient at typing on her IBM Selectric. In 1984, Fulbright and Jaworski had just begun to add primitive computers for word-processing. Most secretaries, like Valerie, used basic typewriters for document production.

Once a document was finished, we were able to make a copy on the copy machine. That was an advance from earlier in my life. I can remember the smell of purple ink from the mimeographs made by teachers in the pre-copy machine era. I also remember the purchase of carbon paper for ready-made copies from typed documents.

I am not sure how many people younger than me remember the role that carbon paper played in most any important document. As I type this lesson on my MacBook Air, just a few clicks will get me to my email screen where I will see a window:



Here we see where our pre-computer life has left its mark in the computer world. See the abbreviations “Cc” and “Bcc?” Those are meaningless in a computer world. The “Cc” was an abbreviation for a “carbon copy,” while the “Bcc” was a “blind carbon copy.” No carbon paper is used with the computer, however. We live in an era where copying this lesson, an email, a letter, or most anything else is simple, economical, and easy. I think nothing of receiving or sending emails where I am part of a chain of dozens or even hundreds of recipients.

But, it was not always this way! Consider Paul and his time period. Paul had spent the better part of several years working with the Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding areas. Ephesus was a central town in a region of modern Turkey (ancient “Asia”) where banking, pagan worship of Artemis, and many other regional activities commanded the attention of many area towns and people (see lessons 19 and 20). Luke explained that from Ephesus, Paul preached and taught

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“for two years, so that *all the residents of Asia* heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). It is important that we remember that Ephesus was a launch pad and central place for church activity in a number of surrounding areas.

Now in our study of the life of Paul, we have reached a point where Paul is writing to a number of churches from his imprisonment at Rome. Last week, we covered Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. This week, we study his letter our English Standard Version bibles label, “The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians.” Consistent with the title, this version translates the first verse, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, *to the saints who are in Ephesus*, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.”

According to the oldest manuscripts, the insertion in the verse of “in Ephesus” was not in Paul’s original letter. What happened? Scholars understand that Paul wanted his letter to go to a number of these churches around and including Ephesus. Paul did not have an email chain, a word processor, a copy machine, mimeograph machine, or even some basic carbon paper. Paul would need the letter to be carried to the different churches and read in each one. Otherwise, someone would need to handwrite out a copy of the letter so that others could read the copy. Paul does not write this letter to simply one church body. He writes a bigger scope addressing concerns beyond that of a particular congregation.

In Ephesians, then, we read magnificent verses that reach to the cathedrals of heaven with profound depth yet also go straight to the human heart with the core simplicity of faith. This is a book we will return to in a number of lessons on Paul’s theology. Today, we try to see and understand the book as a unity rather than carving it into pieces for greater inspection.

EPHESIANS

Chapter 1

After writing his greeting, Paul begins his letter with a long sentence of blessing and praise to God. In Greek, this sentence covers 12 verses of our English Bible. It is as if Paul cannot pause and interrupt his praise of God for even a breath.

Paul blesses God, the Father of our Lord Jesus for already blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing¹, just as God already chose us to be holy, just as God chose us in love for adoption into his family through the blood of Jesus. This is the blood that has brought our redemption, our forgiveness of sins. God did not

¹ The verb tense Paul uses here is important. Paul uses the Greek “aorist” tense. That is a special kind of past tense. It means that we have been “blessed” at some point in history. The blessing has occurred already. It is not something that is to happen in the future. Nor is it something that is happening now. These are blessings with which we have already been blessed. We have already received “every spiritual blessing” in Christ.

reek out these blessings; they were lavished upon us, as God had planned from the beginning. Of course, we did not know it from the beginning; God had kept it a mystery, yet now in Jesus it is made plain as God's plan to unite all things in Jesus.

Our heavenly inheritance is found in Jesus. This is God's choice made long ago; so that those first putting hope in Christ do so bringing glory to God. The Ephesians² were similarly sealed with God's Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their heavenly inheritance.

Paul has heard of how these churches have been growing, showing their faith by their love to others. Hearing of their faith and love moves Paul to prayerful thanksgiving to God. Moreover, Paul prays that they would not have peaked, but would continue to grow with spiritual wisdom and revelation in their knowledge of and intimacy with Christ. This wisdom should include an even greater understanding on their part of their heavenly inheritance, the riches of their Christian life, and the great power of God working in them. This great power is the very same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in authority in heaven over all powers and dominion in this or any other age or era, past or future.

Chapter 2

This resurrection power is at work also in believers, for "you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked" (Eph. 2:1). God in his mercy used the resurrection power on our behalf when he resurrected Christ and made us alive in him, doing so before we ever asked for it or sought it out. Through God's power, we are raised with Christ not just for what it means now, but in the age to come.

This is the fruit of our salvation by God's gift; his grace through faith rather than works. We have no works of which to boast, but we do have works that flow from our salvation. Since our salvation is a gift from God and his redeeming power, however, even our good works bring praise to him. They occur because we are God's workmanship and God prepared these works for us long ago!

This salvation, this resurrection power, this walking in grace working for God, is something that applies across the board to all the redeemed. The Gentiles were originally estranged not only from God but from Israel also. But in Jesus, both Jew and Gentile have peace, peace with God and peace with each other. We both enter into God through Jesus and we are put together into one body, one dwelling place for God.

² We use "Ephesians" here as a matter of linguistic convenience recognizing that Paul is writing to a larger audience.

Chapter 3

Paul is able to write to the Ephesians of this because he has lived through God's revealing the mystery³ of merging the Jews and Gentiles into one common body in Christ. Even though Paul was undeserving, this was the ministry God gave him. This was one of the "good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" that Paul wrote of in 2:10.

Chapter 4

Paul sees the way this expands in God's wisdom and planning. God used Paul to preach the mystery and see the unity between Jew and Gentile. God then uses the church to show the message on an even greater scale. All this is the culmination of God's long anticipated plan. At once, it makes Paul and others bold to ask God for help with confidence God will answer. It also sends Paul to his knees praying that the Ephesians will find strength from the power of God working inside them, that they will grow and mature in faith with understanding the great measure of God's love – its height, breadth, length and depth.

In this, Paul offers more worship to God for his ability to do "far more exceedingly abundantly than all that we ask or think" to the praise of his glory and the glory of Christ.

Paul then shifts his attention to the practical implications of these thoughts. Paul reminds the Ephesians as he goes into the practical section of his letter that Paul is a prisoner for the Lord as he writes for them to walk in the right manner before God. Paul practiced what he preached! The believer's walk should reflect the believer's calling with humility, gentleness, patience, love, and unity within the church.

Unity is God's plea and plan. God has one body and one Spirit. He calls us to one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. We maintain God's unity even though we are distinct people with distinct gifts. God dispensed gifts through Christ's gift. As Christ ascended, he individually left gifts for the church to function and grow until his return.⁴ Thus, some received gifts as apostles,

³ As Paul explains this, he chooses a wonderful Greek term, μυστήριον (*musterion*). This word is translated "mystery." The word does not denote something unknown, rather something that is historically hidden while still revealed in some measure. This is the mystery of Christ. Something known by God, planned for the ages, a mystery that Paul declared.

⁴ Paul uses a passage from Psalm 68:18 to explain his point. As Paul explains the Psalm, when Christ ascended, "he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men" (4:7-8). The translation of the same Psalm in our Old Testament reads differently than the way Paul uses it. The Psalm reads, "You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men." See the difference in the Psalm and the way Paul quotes it? "**receiving** gifts from men" rather than "**gave** gifts to men." Why the difference? Scholars differ in their suggested reasons. Some teach that Paul was using a rabbinic approach that allows a translation of the word "receive" allowing for a meaning of "take and get" or "redistribute." Others offer that Paul made a purposeful shift in the passage to emphasize that Christ has a greater focus on giving than an earthly king about whom the passage was originally written. It is useful to note that Paul will

prophets, evangelists, teachers, shepherds – all to the end of building up the church and equipping her members.

This is important. The church can grow, and its members grow beyond the influence of shifting people and shifting doctrines. As the church walks in truth and love, it grows in a singular body with each part working for the good of the whole.

So, the church should be wary not to walk as if they were blinded Gentiles with no knowledge of God or his work. Hardhearted people who callously ignore God greedily live in sin. But that is not the believer! We were taught better! We were taught to put off that old manner of life with a renewed mind walking in a new spirit imitating God in his righteousness and holiness.

We see this in the most basic interactions with each other and our neighbors. We should be honest; we should not sin in anger; we should work honestly for what we get, seeking to share with others out of our bounty. Our words should reflect our calling. We should speak fitting for the occasion bringing joy to the Spirit within us as we set aside any bitterness or other attitudes of malice. We are to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving, just as we received such care and forgiveness from God in Christ.

In this, we are children seeking to imitate our Father God, walking in the same love that moved Christ to sacrifice himself on our behalf. This is why we should never have any sexual immorality, impurity, or covetousness among us. It is not proper for God's saints! Instead of filthy talk or crude joking, we should speak thanksgiving. The impure, immoral, coveting are not inheriting the kingdom, regardless of what others may tell you! That is the darkness we came from, not the light where we are to live!

Some need a wake up call here!⁵ We are to wake from the dead world of sin and walk wisely in the will of God. Instead of getting drunk, we should find the intoxication of God's Spirit with the joy in our hearts and mouths as we address each other in holy song. This is a life of submission to each other because of our love, respect and reverence of Christ.

This is a full submission in the sense that wives submit to husbands as to the Lord. The husband then is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. Of course,

later (verses 11-13) explain his understanding in a bit more detail. As Paul does so, Paul shows that the gifts Jesus "gave" are all gifts that bring more to Jesus. In other words, he gave gifts that lengthen his train and the gifts he receives from men.

⁵ Paul quotes something lost to time here writing, "Therefore it says, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you'" (Eph 5:14). We suppose he is quoting a contemporary hymn.

Christ's love for the church put him into a role of loving service to the church. Husbands have the charge of living their lives out for the good of their wives. This is how the husband is to serve the wife, who then submits to him. It is a full relationship that tends to everyone in a way that glorifies Christ and the church. It profoundly reflects the glory of Christ and the church as husbands and wives love and serve each other making themselves one flesh rather than two.

While discussing family, children should obey their parents in the Lord. They are to follow the command to "honor your father and mother." It is important; it brings a promise of a better life for the children. Fathers need to carefully rear their children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord.

Slaves should obey their earthly masters as they would Jesus. God will make it right in the balance; so do not let others dictate how you live before God. God is the reference point for how we walk, not others. This applies to masters as well as slaves. The masters need to treat their slaves remembering God is the ultimate Master who makes things right at the end.

Before closing, Paul finds an image that is real clear in his eyes daily and uses it as a teaching tool. Paul the prisoner, under 24/7 guard by Caesar's best, must have had great discussions with his guards over the pieces of armor worn and the purposes of each. Paul grabs this image and urges the church to put on their full armor, the armor of God.

This armor will enable one to stand against Satan and his schemes. That spiritual battle is the real struggle. We do not see it, but it is no less real. It requires we stand firm with a belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, and shoes of the gospel of peace. We carry a shield of faith to extinguish Satan's darts and a sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Thus armed, we pray non-stop, keep alert, and intercede for other believers.

Paul closes with a personal request for prayer and a personal note that Tychicus (who likely carried the letter) would give a full report of Paul's well being and activities.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (Eph. 1:16).

Paul offered an incredible prayer for the Ephesians. This is a prayer we should regularly offer on behalf of our family, friends, and loved ones. Paul's prayer: "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may know what is the

hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance of the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:17-19).

2. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Eph. 2:1).

One can easily find three different views of the nature of fallen man. Some view mankind as innately good, and getting better all the time. Others view man as somewhat sick in our sinful condition. Paul did not offer either of these first two views. Paul taught a third view that as a sinner, man is just a dead man walking. There is no medicine to make him better, no doctor who can rescue fallen man with a brilliant procedure. On his own, man will never have enough goodness for personal rescue or redemption. As dead men, we need a rebirth, a new life. That is the only answer. This is the rebirth into the death and resurrection of Christ. As Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8). Salvation is God’s gift to a dead humanity. It is his calling from before time.

3. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1).

The life of one who has redemption from God, who has life after the death of sin, is one of imitating his holy and loving Father. Our actions should never be dictated by the deeds (or misdeeds) of others. Nor should they proceed from the nature we lived in before our salvation brought us into a new life. Our actions should reflect the reality of whom we are – children of the King!