

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 62

Prison Epistles – Part Two Ephesians, Part One

I. BACKGROUND

As noted in the last lesson, there are four letters Paul apparently wrote while under house arrest in Rome, ~59–61 A.D. Of these four, Ephesians and Colossians have a great deal in common. This week, we start looking at Ephesians. Then, we will follow with an examination of Colossians.

The Ephesian letter is missing many of the personal notes Paul so often places in his letters. Some scholars use that point to dispute Pauline authorship. The Ephesian message is very Pauline in thought and language. Early church authorities attribute it to Paul. Therefore, the lack of personal notes more likely means something else.

Consider, for example, that the church in Ephesus itself was a large church. Paul spent a great deal of time there, and just as Ephesus was the largest and most important city in Western Asia Minor (modern Turkey), so was the church. Absent a need to deal with particular people in a particular situation (for example Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi), Paul would easily find himself in a difficult situation of offending some he fails to mention once he singled out others for a personal message. It also bears remembering that Paul worked the surrounding areas from Ephesus taking the gospel into the smaller local towns. No doubt this letter was meant for these satellite churches as well, again making personal messages less appropriate and more awkward.

Paul's time spent in Ephesus was large compared to the proportionate time he spent in other churches. Paul, Apollos, and others spent time in Ephesus. The church there had already received more than "start up" doctrine and teaching. The Ephesians were not eating only baby foods, but they were also well along the maturity path on God and his word. Accordingly, we see in Ephesus some teachings of theological import that go into some greater depth than we see in other writings of Paul. Paul also sets out practical teaching as well that inspires the readers to change their daily life and live it in greater harmony with the will of God.

The outline of Ephesians we will follow is:

1. Letter basics and praise for the glory of Christ (1:1-14)
2. Prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-23)
3. God's purposes for the church (2-3)
4. Practical applications of the teachings (4-6).

Because of the riches in a number of the Ephesian passages that grow through careful attention to things such as verb tense, we will break this study into two weeks and spend a little more time in several of the passages.

II. THE TEXT

A. *Letter basics and praise for the glory of Christ (1:1-14)*

Like most first century letters, Paul begins identifying himself as the letter's author ("Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God"). He addresses the letter to "the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus." Paul greets the Ephesians with "grace and peace" from "God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's greeting combines both the Greek greeting of "grace" with the Hebrew greeting of "peace" meeting the heritage of all his readers.

Paul then begins a litany of praise to God that has great import for what it says about God, about Christ, and about us. Paul praises God as God and as Father of Jesus Christ. The praise emphasizes the blessings we have in the heavenly realms in Christ. 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. For the Christian, there is not some second reception of blessings to occur later in their Christian walk. We have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing whether we realize it or not!

Paul notes that we were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world – but importantly, Paul specifies what we were chosen for! We were chosen to be “holy and blameless in his sight” (1:4). How are we holy and blameless? Certainly not by our deeds and good works. Our holiness and blamelessness are firmly rooted in the substitutionary sacrifice of the sinless Messiah on our behalf. This is why Paul adds that we were destined “to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.”

Paul is not here urging a strong Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Paul is writing his readers/listeners a praise to God that from the beginning God had planned redemption for mankind through the sacrifice of Jesus. This is not just God’s will, but also his pleasure. Paul praises God and the glorious gift (“grace”) of Christ as our atonement. “We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (1:7).

Paul writes with great command the simple and profound truth that is the core of orthodox Christian thought. God knew, and God planned – out of his loving and giving nature – the rescue of mankind from sin and death. The rescue that comes from the sacrificial atonement of mankind by the death of a perfect lamb, Jesus Christ, God incarnate. But, Paul doesn’t stop there.

Paul adds that this gift was lavished upon us with the wisdom and understanding that unlocks the mystery that allows us the joy of seeing God’s hand and understanding his work. We see and understand that at the right time, heaven and earth will all be brought into its right place under the reign of Christ.

So, it is in Christ we were chosen. This was God’s plan that set his people out from before our very existence¹ for “the praise of his

¹ Paul writes with words that have historically created great debates within Christendom over whether God’s people are predestined or come to God out of free choice. The debate is valid and appropriate from this passage as well as others. In the process of engaging in the debate, however, we must always be careful not to miss the point Paul is making. Because Paul was not writing in reference to the debate that has arisen centuries after composing the letter. The core of Paul’s writing is set forward above in the text of this lesson. What the passage says about predestination we save for this footnote! Certainly, Paul uses words that strongly indicate God has predestined and chosen his people, but the passage is actually open to several interpretations. For those who believe in predestination, the passage is taken bluntly in its language that Christians “were predestined.” Others see the passage as a reference to the church, all Christians together, being predestined for salvation. That interpretation sees the predestination of the institution, but not of who is in the institution. In other words, the church

glory.” How are we for the praise of his glory? We live our lives understanding our creator, our role in his works on Earth, and our eternity in his care. This is our calling and our blessing. We live these lives with God’s presence, his Holy Spirit, in our bodies and lives. This is a deposit, a guarantee, of our place in God’s eternity. We are God’s possession, again to the praise of his glory (1:12-14).

B. Prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-23)

Paul then sets out his prayer for the Ephesians. Paul notes that ever since hearing of their faith in the Lord Jesus, and their love for the saints, Paul has not stopped giving thanks for them, remembering them in his prayers. His prayer is profound and worthy of our echoes on behalf of those we care about. Paul prays:

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (1:17-19)

What a prayer! Paul seeks wisdom and revelation for the Ephesians, but not merely so they might be wise with great insight. Paul wants them to have the wisdom and revelation so that they might know God better. Wisdom as an end to itself is worthless. Wisdom that brings greater intimacy with God is something we all need!

Similarly, Paul prays that the Ephesians’ eyes be enlightened so they might have greater understanding and appreciation of the confident expectation we have in Christ, of the riches that are ours as his children, and of the power that exceeds all known powers that is ours as well. This is the same power that brought Christ back from the dead to sit at God’s right hand. This is the power that placed Christ above all rule and authorities with all things placed below Christ. Christ is Ruler of rulers, King of kings, far above any title of any being in this age or the age to come (1:15-23).

C. God’s Purposes for the Church (2-3)

is predestined to be the recipient of salvation, but who is in the church is determined by the choices of man, not predestined by God.

Paul begins his message of God's purpose for the church by reminding them of their past. Paul writes that they "were dead in transgressions and sins." This is contrary to many views within parts of Christianity's historical teachings as well as the teachings of many other philosophies. Paul does not say we are well and good absent Christ. Nor does Paul teach that our sin has left us sick. Paul writes that our sin and transgressions have us dead. This is the truth from scripture's earliest parts. God himself indicated that the original sin and transgression of eating the fruit in rebellion in the Garden of Eden would bring upon man death. That death is not fully physical but also spiritual. Without the forgiveness of Christ, we are sinners in disobedience following the ways of the world and the rebellious spirit at work in disobedience. This explains living in a way that gratifies the cravings of our sinful nature.

So, what happened when we were dead? Out of his great love, our merciful Father made us alive with Christ. By the gift of Christ's sacrifice, we were joined with him and raised from our own dead state. No wonder Paul can write of the same Spirit that resurrected Christ as the Spirit of power at work in us. The Spirit has resurrected us from the death of our own sinful natures and lives. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms for the age to come. This is ours through the salvation we have in Christ. This salvation is not by our efforts. It is a gift from God made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. We meet that sacrifice in faith and are God's workmanship, not our own. It is God at work in us both to will and to work at his good pleasure.

Paul does not end his speaking of God choosing us before hand with our salvation by grace through faith. Importantly, Paul then adds that God has created us in Christ Jesus for a purpose. The purpose is "good works" which God "has prepared in advance for us to do." Paul includes himself with the Ephesians in this passage as it applies to all of us. God, the creator of the world, has prepared certain good works for each of us to do. God prepared these works beforehand. The import of this is significant. We can look throughout scripture and learn, and know without any doubt, that works God has prepared for us are works he has enabled us to do. In other words, we have the abilities, the resources, and the strength through God to do these works.

Paul then addresses the division that naturally arose in the first century church between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers. This is a natural transition when Paul has been speaking about the call and choice God exercised in his church, for God chose the Jews themselves.

Paul tells those who are Gentiles to remember that they were originally excluded from Israel, were without hope, and without a covenant relationship with God. The reason those Gentiles are now in covenantal relationship is the blood of Christ. Christ destroyed the barrier between God and man, just as he destroyed the barrier between Gentile and Jew. Christ took the Sinai covenant and satisfied it in all details. So now, we have a new covenant in Christ – a covenant that unites Jew and Gentile just as it unites mankind and God.

Gentiles are not strangers to God's people. Gentiles are God's people just as much as Jews. God's people unite in Jesus Christ to stand before God (Chapter 2).

Paul now goes into Chapter Three explaining his particular role as teacher to the Gentiles. Paul sees his work in the same way that he wrote of everyone's work in Chapter Two, as something God has set out for Paul to do. Paul was set out as the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul had insight into the revelation of Christ in a number of ways. Paul was a trained rabbi, schooled in Jerusalem at the feet of the outstanding rabbi of the age, Gamaliel. No doubt this strong Jewish upbringing and training led Paul to a great depth and knowledge of God and his work. Yet, that upbringing was not how Paul came to his Christian faith.

Paul came to his faith through revelation and the Spirit of God. It was God's gift and God's direction. As Paul explains this transformation, he chooses a wonderful Greek term, *μυστήριον* (*musterion*). This word is translated "mystery." The word does not denote something unknown, but rather something that is historically hidden but revealed in some measure. This is the mystery of Christ. Something known by God, planned for the ages, a mystery that Paul declared.

The mystery centers on Christ. Through Christ, the Gentiles are heirs with Israel in the promises of God. Through Christ, we all, Jew and Gentile alike, approach God “with freedom and confidence” (3:12). Through Christ, the wisdom of God is manifested to the world.

This brings Paul back to prayer for the Ephesians. Paul ends Chapter Three praying that God will “strengthen them with power” through his Spirit in their inner being. Paul prays that Christ might dwell in their hearts through faith, that they might be rooted in love, and that they might grasp “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”

Paul ends the prayer with a wonderful doxology of praise to God:

who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever! Amen.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. We have been blessed.
2. We have been chosen.
3. We have a great salvation.
4. God is at work through us and in us.
5. The great mystery is revealed.
6. God is able to do....