

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Ephesians: The Mystery Of Christ And His Church

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:1-2)

Lord willing, this will be the first in a series of sermons on Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. You may recall that I've spent some time over the last year or so trying to flesh out the doctrine of being in union with Christ. I think this epistle tells us what it means to be in Christ and what being in Christ requires of us. There are a lot of themes that run through the epistle, but if I had to summarize it all under one heading, I would say that it is about the mystery of Christ and His Church. I don't believe there is any other place in scripture that will inform you on that topic like the book of Ephesians. You're either a part of the church (the body of Christ; the bride of Christ) or you're walking "according to the course of this world" (Ephesians 2:2). Just look around – we're living in a sea of people characterized by hopelessness, despair, meaninglessness, self-absorption, thanklessness, vanity, delusion, discontentment, death, drug use, drunkenness, fornication, adultery, psychotherapy, confusion, victimhood, entitlement, and irrational hatred for and rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only One who can help them. Why would anyone want to be a part of that?

Beloved, please don't discount or have contempt for what we have here in being part of the body of Christ. I hope that by the time we get through Ephesians you'll have a better grasp of how precious and valuable the church is in the sight of God. Of course, you can't talk about the mystery of Christ and His Church without laying down fundamental truths of Christianity, so we're going to come into contact with many jewels of both doctrine and practice in Ephesians. Very high level, the epistle is divided in half, with chapters 1-3 focusing more on doctrine and chapters 4-6 focusing more on practice (it's not a hard dividing line, though – there is much overlap). And one more thing to consider: when reading this, or any other epistle, keep in mind that this is not some ivory tower PhD dissertation that some soft, unexercised academic wrote in a musty room somewhere. An epistle is a letter, and this one was written by Paul, who had boots on the ground, and whose active, fervent devotion to the Lord puts all of us to shame. He was writing to real people in real places living in real circumstances and facing real problems. It's not academic – it's very practical. And the timeless truths in it are just as helpful and practical for us.

Moving on, the church of Ephesus holds a unique place in the Bible. It is the only church that we can follow through some 40 years' worth of history. We can see their exciting formative years in Acts. We can read about those things that Paul thought would be most helpful to them in their circumstances in the book of Ephesians. We can see some of the problems that they had to combat in 1 and 2 Timothy (remember that Timothy was in Ephesus – 1 Timothy 1:3). And we can see what had become of them by the time the Lord Jesus addresses them in Revelation 2. So, before jumping into the book of Ephesians itself, I would like to do a brief overview of their history and give a few comments along the way which will hopefully be edifying. Once done with that, we'll get into the first couple verses of Ephesians.

Paul encounters the Ephesians three times in the book of Acts. In fact, he spends around three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31), which is probably more time than he spends anywhere else on his so-called missionary journeys. With a busy harbor on the Aegean Sea, Ephesus was a major cultural and economic hub in the Roman empire. It was located in a region referred to in the scripture as "Asia" (which we know as "Asia Minor" – modern-day Turkey). At the time Paul was there, it had a population of around 200,000 (± 50,000). It was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world – the Temple of Diana (or, Artemis).

Paul's first visit to Ephesus is short-lived and it is near the end of his second missionary journey. You can read about it in Acts 18. After his sermon on Mars' Hill in Athens, Paul moves on to Corinth where he meets fellow tent-makers Aquila and Priscilla, a married couple who, along with other Jews, had been ordered by the Emperor Claudius to depart from Rome in c. 49AD. You see how the providence of God is at work here, where an edict from a pagan emperor had resulted in these two packing their bags and moving from Rome to Corinth, to be there for Paul. After spending some time in Corinth, Paul travels with Priscilla and Aquila to Ephesus, arriving c. 52AD. Paul reasons with the Jews in the synagogue there for a time but cuts his stay short so he can get to Jerusalem to keep one of the feasts.

He leaves Aquila and Priscilla behind in Ephesus, with the intention of returning at a later date "if God will." (Acts 18:21). It is during this time that Aquila and Priscilla meet up with the eloquent Apollos (from Alexandria, Egypt) in the synagogue. Apollos has some deficiencies in his understanding, so Aquila and Priscilla take him aside "and expound unto him the way of God more perfectly." (Acts 18:26). We can learn from this example. They could have publicly humiliated him by correcting him in front of everyone, but instead they took him aside and apparently taught him privately. There must be humility from both the one being instructed and the one giving the instruction. Also, you may notice that there is a female involved here – Priscilla. While there are offices in the church that God requires to be filled by men, that doesn't mean that there are never occasions where a woman can provide instruction. From

here, Apollos moves on to Corinth carrying letters of commendation from the brethren in Ephesus (Paul references Apollos repeatedly in 1 Corinthians, which he wrote from Ephesus).

Paul's second visit to Ephesus is near the beginning of his third missionary journey, arriving in c. 53AD, and you can read about that in Acts 19. His stay this time is much longer. He initially runs into 12 disciples who, like Apollos, have some deficiency in their understanding and require some instruction. Here's what happens next:

And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God. But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:8-10)

Even though Paul had a special commission from God to be the apostle of the Gentiles, his pattern throughout Acts is to start off in the local synagogue. He boldly preaches there about the things concerning the kingdom of God. But after three months, he stops. He departs from them, and he takes the disciples with him, separating them from the evil people in the synagogue. Why does he leave that place? Why doesn't he just keep preaching there? After all, this is a major crossroads in the Roman empire. New batches of people would have been constantly coming and going at that synagogue. Were they too smart for him? Did he get bored with them? Did they hurt his feelings? Was he too scared? No, of course not. He left "when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude." Once it became clear that he was dealing with a group of hardened sinners who were publicly speaking evil of the way of Christ, it was time to go. In rejecting Christ, they had judged themselves unworthy of everlasting life, so it was time to move on to the Gentiles (see Acts 13:46). He did it also for the benefit of the disciples, "*so they might not be infected and corrupted by them.*" (Gill). There's a more fundamental principle here, though, when it comes to dealing with individuals and groups who have rejected Christ. We have commands and examples of Christ like the following:

A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed. (Matthew 16:4)

Then Jesus said unto them, Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth. While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light. These things spake Jesus, and departed, and did hide himself from them. (John 12:35-36)

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you. (Matthew 7:6)

But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch. (Matthew 15:13-14)

These commands can't be ignored. The hard part, though, is in discerning when they apply. In fact, this might be one of the hardest things to do. It frequently involves us having to put aside rebellion, stubbornness, or foolish pride.

But it's important to see that Paul doesn't leave the synagogue and then stop preaching altogether. He doesn't create some ridiculous monastery to hide in. He doesn't go into retirement. He doesn't become a hermit. Rather, he does something different - he moves down the street to the school of Tyrannus, where he disputes (i.e., preaches, reasons, discourses) daily for two years. This, incidentally, is the only time in the Bible that we find the word "school" (Greek: *scholē*, which roughly means "leisure from manual labor employed in learning"). Nobody really knows what this place is, but it was probably a lecture hall owned by a guy named Tyrannus (or nicknamed as such by his students, since the name means "tyrant") who let Paul use it when it was available. But whatever it was, it was from this launching point that the word of God was heard across all Asia. We aren't given details on the logistics of how that happened, but based on what we've seen in this church, it doesn't take a whole lot of imagination. Now, if you go back and look at Acts 16:6, you'll see this: "they...were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia." Now in Acts 19, the word goes viral in Asia – everyone hears it, both Jews and Greeks. Why would God forbid it, and then a few years later arrange to have it spread all across the region? I don't know. But He knows, and it's His Word, it's His plan, and we're on His timetable.

In Acts, Luke gives us four little vignettes that give the essence of Paul's stay in Ephesus:

And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them. (Acts 19:11-12)

These miracles are unique things that God did in the early days of the church to confirm the message, as we see in Hebrews 2:3-4 – "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?" This was a thing that God

found to be necessary at this time and this place for the furtherance of the gospel. And it leads directly into the next story:

Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. (Acts 19:13-17)

They see Paul successfully casting out evil spirits in the name of Jesus, and they want in on the action. These are called “vagabond Jews, exorcists” meaning that they were charlatans who wandered around from city to city, looking to see how they could make some quick money by duping people about the spirit world. Well, it doesn’t work out for them – the story speaks for itself. Can you imagine being an eyewitness? Seven guys sashay into a house, and a few minutes later they come running out naked and wounded. They go in thinking they’re going to cast out some evil spirits, but they’re the ones who are cast out.

This is another unique event that God did for the furtherance of the gospel. It’s a strange event, isn’t it? You can’t make this stuff up. We’ve seen our fair share of strange events where a) you can’t believe you’re seeing it, and b) you can’t believe that it’s resulting in the word of God being spread far and wide. Here, you have God working miracles by the hands of Paul compared to a group of phonies who think they can monetize the name of the Lord Jesus by using the word “Jesus” as some magical incantation. You have the real thing vs. the fake thing set side-by-side, and as a result of it, “the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.” Just picture Paul’s delight as this scene unfolds before his eyes, as this group of clowns unwittingly glorifies God.

Now, let me caution everyone to not come away from this story with a simplistic general rule like “every time someone is humiliated or put to shame, that is evidence that they’re frauds.” Remember that Christ Himself was humiliated and put to shame, and that at the hand of satanic forces (see Luke 22:53). In Acts 16, Paul cast out an evil spirit in the name of Jesus Christ. He then had his clothes torn off, was beaten with many stripes, and was thrown into prison with his feet in the stocks. The end result? The Philippian jailer and his house were saved. So, God has many tools in His arsenal to spread His word, often involving his servants suffering shame and contempt, but not always. Ephesus was known at that time for its obsession with the “curious (i.e., magical) arts” and God had determined to show them a stark

contrast between a true servant of God and a fraud, and that God is sovereign over all things, including over evil spirits. This incident with Sceva's seven sons is what they needed to see at that time to get the message that God is true and their curious arts and other idolatries were false. And many of them got the message:

And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed. (Acts 19:18-19)

There appears to be two groups of people here. "Many that believed" and "many of them also which used curious arts." The first group consists of those people who had already professed a belief in Christ. This event with Sceva's sons had caused them to see that they were still holding on to some sin, and when the full weight of that sin fell on them, they confessed their deeds to be what they were – sins against God. Notice several things here. First, believers can still hold onto old sins. We don't suddenly become sinless when we believe. We despise sin, and we fight against sin, and we make it our business to depart from iniquity, but we don't become sinless. Second, when you're immersed in a sinful culture, it is hard to extricate yourself from that. Third, God is not going to let one of His sheep hold onto a sin forever. He is going to sovereignly intervene, like He did here. Part of our sanctification involves God arranging things to show us our sins. Once it becomes clear to them by the grace of God that they had been sinning, they don't try to justify and excuse the sin – they repent. The life of a Christian is a life of repentance. In other words, repentance is not a "once and done" activity.

The second group consists of those who are steeped in the "curious arts." This event with Sceva's sons also causes them to see that they had been sinning. I love it that this same event was used by God not only to chasten and correct some of His loved ones who already believed, but to call many new sheep into His fold. Here we see grace in action. Anyone who is sinning against God has full warrant and obligation to come to the Lord Jesus Christ, immediately, for mercy. And those ones who found grace in the eyes of God did just that. This second group is in the middle of their superstitious sins and rebellion against God, and they believe and come and confess themselves to be sinners. Not only do they not continue in their sins, there is a dramatic public display of them forsaking their sins, and such a display as is at great cost to them. This isn't some censor coming in and mandating a book burning – this is people willingly giving up their own anti-God books, destroying them to show their contempt for them and removing the temptation so they might not be a trap for them in the future. I say they do this at great cost to themselves – this is no small thing. 50,000 pieces of silver! Many commentators say that a piece of silver was a day's wages. At this rate, a working man would have to toil for 137 years, 7 days a week, no holidays, no vacations, no weekends, no sick days,

to make 50,000 pieces of silver. So, there is quite a stir going on in Ephesus, and the word grew “mightily” and “prevailed” – two words that show that the power of God’s Word was being put on full display.

But not everyone is happy about it. Whenever the word is spreading with great power, you have enemies. In fact, it is about Ephesus that Paul penned the words “For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries.” (1 Corinthians 16:9). In another stark contrast, you have people willing to burn valuable books as the fruit of repentance vs. a guy named Demetrius who is absolutely outraged that Paul’s preaching is causing him to lose money in his business of making “silver shrines for Diana.” (Acts 19:24). Worship of Diana was big business in Ephesus. Citizens would take these silver shrines and wash and dress them so they could carry them around in religious festivals and weekly processions (they were very pious people). The temple of Diana (the Artemision) was the centerpiece of this worship. It was 450 feet long and 225 feet wide (by comparison, a football field is 360 feet by 160 feet). It had 127 marble columns, each 60 feet high and 6 feet in diameter. At one point, 36 of the columns were overlaid with gold. There was more money and land associated with the Artemision than anything else in the city of Ephesus.

And the same time there arose no small stir about that way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen; Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth. And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians. And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre. And when Paul would have entered in unto the people, the disciples suffered him not. And certain of the chief of Asia, which were his friends, sent unto him, desiring him that he would not adventure himself into the theatre. Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together. And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander beckoned with the hand, and would have made his defence unto the people. But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians...[The town clerk dismisses the assembly.]...And after the uproar was ceased, Paul called unto him the disciples, and embraced them, and departed for to go into Macedonia. (Acts 19:23-20:1)

So, we have an unlawful mob, many of whom don't even know why they are there, incited by a lowlife rabblouser, where a government official has to intervene to keep the peace. This sounds very familiar to me. No doubt the headline in the next morning's *Ephesus Times* was something like "Peaceful Silversmiths Drown Out Christian Hate Group." In 1 Corinthians 15:32, Paul makes reference to fighting with beasts in Ephesus. Some tie that to this mob event or the events leading up to it, where the general vibe in the city was, they wanted to kill Paul. Indeed, the phrases "they were full of wrath" (v. 28) and "rushed with one accord" (v. 29) indicate that violence is on their minds. This mob takes place in the "theatre" which is still standing in Ephesus today. It was the official meeting place in the city and seated around 24,000 people. Once the uproar is over, Paul leaves the city in c. 55AD, and never sets foot in it again. He heads into Macedonia and Greece, and eventually swings back around to meet with the Ephesian elders in Miletus a couple years later in c. 57AD. From this point on, Paul's main trajectory will take him to Jerusalem and ultimately to Rome.

So, for his third visit with the Ephesians, Paul lands in Miletus (about 30 miles south of Ephesus) and calls for the elders of the church. I don't know why Paul didn't just go back to Ephesus to meet with the elders there, but something must have happened in Ephesus where Paul thought the wise thing to do would be to not go back there. His meeting with them is very emotional because he is going to go to be bound in Jerusalem and this is the last time they will ever see him. He spends a large part of his words recounting his own ministry there and using himself as an example for them to emulate. The heart of his meeting with them is this:

And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. (Acts 20:25-31)

Now friends, there are a number of theories on why Paul wrote the epistle to the Ephesians. Nobody sits down and puts pen to paper for no reason. I think that one of the major reasons he wrote the letter can be found in this passage – he knew that grievous wolves were going to enter in among them, not sparing the flock. And he knew that some of these wolves would arise from within the eldership of the church. So here in Acts, he pleads with these men – this is the church of God they're dealing with. This is a thing that is so priceless to God that He purchased it with His own blood, so woe to anyone who would not oversee it properly! It's

within 5 years or so of this meeting with the Ephesian elders that Paul writes the book of Ephesians, and I think his concern about the wolves not sparing the flock is at least partially why he hits such fundamental doctrines as predestination, election, salvation by grace and not works, union with Christ, etc. These are the things that the wolves love to come in and pervert. In Ephesians, Paul gives those people in the church a good, solid understanding of the sovereignty of God and of their identity in Christ. This would have been invaluable not only to strengthen them in their fight against sin, the world, and Satan, but it would specifically help protect them against the wolves. Unfortunately, even as he writes Ephesians in c. 62AD, the storm clouds are already starting to gather when it comes to false teaching:

That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive. (Ephesians 4:14)

And just a few years later, when he writes 1 and 2 Timothy, it has become a big problem. What a difference just a few years can make! See 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 19-20; 4:1-3; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:16-18; 3:4-9, 13; 4:3-4.

Now, fast forward about 30 years. Revelation 2. The church has had some time to mature. By this time, it looks like they have dealt with the wolves and that is commendable, but the pendulum has swung too far. It's quickly heading in the direction of becoming an empty husk of a church because "thou hast left thy first love" (Revelation 2:4). What a difference 30 years can make! In the book of Ephesians, Paul talks more about love than he does in any of his other letters. Now the Ephesians have left their first love. This means they've left their love of Christ, and of one another. They might have correct doctrine, but for the wrong reason. They might have correct practice, but they're only going through the motions. It's essential to have right doctrine and practice, but if a church has left its first love, the Lord's going to depart from that place. There's only one solution for them:

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. (Revelation 2:5)

And in fact, the sad truth is that this church DID have its candlestick removed a long time ago. If ever there was a danger for our church, it's that we would get so fixated on doctrine and practice that we would leave our first love.

Now, having gone through a bit of the historical context of the Ephesian church, let's begin going through Paul's epistle to the Ephesians:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:1-2)

The author is Paul (which, incidentally means “small”), but given his extensive history with these Ephesians, why would he need to identify himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God? After all, they already knew him well. Very simply, it is a formal opening to a formal letter. This is no casual thing. He’s reminding them up front that he is the emissary of God, speaking the words of God. These are not the opinions and suggestions of Paul – these are the very words of God, sent by the will of God.

The recipients are identified as “saints” and “the faithful in Christ Jesus.” Of course, “saint” means “holy one.” These ones are set apart by God to be His people, and to live sanctified lives. This idea of holiness will be a major theme throughout the book. These saints are “the faithful in Christ Jesus,” which either means that they have faith in Christ Jesus, or they are faithful due to the fact that they are “in Christ Jesus.” Either of those things is true. I should mention that when you see “the saints which are at Ephesus” you don’t have to necessarily envision a single local body in Ephesus. There could have been many “house churches.” It seems, for instance, that Aquila and Priscilla had a church in their house (see 1 Corinthians 16:19). In fact, some people believe that the letter was intended not just for Ephesus, but to be passed around as a cyclical letter to the churches throughout all Asia Minor.

To these saints and faithful in Christ Jesus, he says “Grace be to you, and peace.” He’s reminding them that they have already received grace and peace from God, and he’s praying that those gifts would continue to be poured out on them by the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. These themes of grace and peace will be developed throughout the letter. As a reminder, “grace” is the unmerited favor of God towards people who deserve the exact opposite of His favor. “Peace” is being reconciled with God, the result of being right with God. By saying that these gifts come from both God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, he’s showing that these two are on equal footing and that they are unified in giving these gifts. One final note is that God isn’t just “the Father,” He is “OUR Father.” He is our personal Father, not just someone else’s Father. We, who are by nature children of wrath, have now been adopted as His own children. When we’re in Christ, we get to participate in being sons of God. This is yet another theme that we’ll find as we go through Ephesians.

Lord willing, next time I would like to go over Ephesians 1:3-14, which is a most precious and beloved part of scripture.

Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen. (Ephesians 6:24)