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Lesson 1

Background of Ephesians

The profound message of Ephesians was originally sent to Christians who had been saved only a few years. Read Acts 19:17-20 for one glimpse of this group before and after their conversion (A.D.55). Little did the Christians know then that the bonfire of their heathen books, worth more than ten thousand dollars, would bring forth out of its ashes a spiritual gold mine—one short book of Ephesians—just six years later.

In this lesson we will want to study the background of Paul's letter to the Ephesians to help us better appreciate and understand the message of the Bible text. This follows the usual order of study, which is: (1) viewing the background, (2) surveying the whole book, (3) analyzing the parts.

I. AUTHOR

Twice in the text of Ephesians, Paul is identified as the author. Read 1:1 and 3:1. Internal evidences of style and context, as well as the external witness of tradition, support this observation.

Paul was around sixty-five years of age when he wrote the letter. He referred to himself as an "aged man" when he wrote to Philemon at this same time.

If you have not recently studied the life and ministry of this great apostle, you may want to refer to a brief treatment of Paul's biography in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.

II. DESTINATION

A. Main Views

There are two views as to the original destination of Paul's letter:

1. *The church of Ephesus.* This view is supported by the reading of 1:1 and by the traditional title assigned the epistle by the early church Fathers: “To Ephesians” (Greek, *pros Ephesious*). Also, such verses as 4:17 and 6:21-22 point to a *specific* church as being addressed, whatever that church was.

2. *A circuit of various unspecified churches.* This view is based mainly on the fact that some important ancient manuscripts omit the phrase “at Ephesus” (Greek, *en epheso*) in 1:1.¹ Also, the epistle as a whole lacks the usual Pauline personal greetings and so appears to be a circular letter.²

Each of the above views has its strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps the answer is found in combining the two views. In the words of one writer, “The epistle was written to the Ephesians and addressed to them, but . . . the Apostle intentionally cast it into a form which would make it suitable to the Christians in the neighboring churches and intended that it should be communicated to them.”³

See Chart A (“Geography of Ephesians”) for the location of churches in the vicinity of Ephesus who would have read Paul’s letter sooner or later. Compare these with the locations of the churches to whom John sent Revelation (Rev. 1:11). Read Acts 19:8-10; 20:31 for reference to Paul’s three-year ministry to people living in Ephesus and the regions round about.

B. The City of Ephesus

The Christians living in and around Ephesus to whom Paul wrote this sublime epistle were cosmopolitan-oriented and well informed about world affairs. This was because of the city’s strategic location. Ephesus was recognized as the “first” city of the province of Asia, even though Pergamum, ninety miles to the north, was its capital. Try to imagine some of the native characteristics of the congregation at Ephesus from these brief notes about the city:

1. *Commerce.* Ephesus was one of the three leaders of international trade, the other two being Alexandria of Egypt and Antioch of Syria. Note on Chart A the city’s trade-oriented location.

2. *Arts and sciences.* The city was a haven for philosophers, poets, artists, and orators. Corinth, across the Aegean Sea, was one of its rivals in those disciplines.

1. Main examples are the two primary uncials, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (4th century), and the Chester Beatty papyrus (3d century)

2. An exception is 6:21.

3. D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, p. 266.

3. *Religion*. The worship of Diana (Artemis) was the dominant religion of this area. The Temple of Diana was world famous. Read Acts 19:23-34, noting among other things that Demetrius boasted that “all Asia and the world” worshiped Diana (19:27). Many of the Ephesians also identified with the imperial cult of Augustus and with various forms of magic (cf. Acts 19:13-19; Eph. 6:12). When you study Ephesians, try to recall from time to time that its original readers were converts from the darkness of these idolatries.

C. The Church of Ephesus

Read the following passages for what they reveal concerning the Ephesian church. Look for such things as first converts, leaders, and organizational growth. Record your findings.

1. *Pentecost converts from Asia*

A.D. 30—Acts 2:9

2. Before Paul’s extended campaign at Ephesus

A.D. 52—Acts 18:18-21

18:24-26

3. *During the extended campaign*

A.D. 52-56—Acts 19

Acts 20:17-27 (Paul recalling the past)

4. *Charge to the Ephesian elders*

A.D. 55-56—Acts 20:28-38

5. *Charge to Timothy*

A.D. 64—1 Timothy 1:3

Most of the Ephesian congregation were Gentile converts, though the number of Jewish Christians was not small. Note the two references to “Jews and Greeks” in Acts 19:10, 17. Since their conversion took place in A.D. 55, and Ephesians was written in A.D. 61, the congregation was relatively young in the Lord when they read Paul’s letter for the first time. The church itself served as a

“mother church” to the others of the province. By the time the apostle John became a spiritual shepherd of the Asian Christians toward the end of the first century, the Ephesian church was regarded as the headquarters of Christian missions, succeeding Antioch of Syria (which had succeeded Jerusalem). Observe in Revelation 1:11 the location of the name *Ephesus* in the list of the seven churches. Does this suggest something to you?

III. DATE AND PLACE WRITTEN

A date assigned to the writing of Ephesians is A.D. 61. This is based on Paul’s writing the epistle during his first imprisonment in Rome, which lasted at least two years (A.D. 61-62). At this time he also wrote Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. The four are generally referred to as the prison epistles. Read Acts 28:30-31. Were circumstances favorable to Paul to meditate, study, and write

CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF THE PAULINE EPISTLES

Chart B

MISSIONARY TOURS	FIRST IMPRISONMENT	RELEASE	FINAL IMPRISONMENT
A.D. 48-56	61-62	62-67	67
GALATIANS between tours 1 and 2	COLOSSIANS PHILEMON EPHESIANS	1 TIMOTHY	2 TIMOTHY
1 THESSALONIANS 2 THESSALONIANS tour 2			
1 CORINTHIANS 2 CORINTHIANS ROMANS tour 3	PHILIPPIANS	TITUS	
6 EPISTLES	4 EPISTLES	2 EPISTLES	1 EPISTLE

during this imprisonment? John Bunyan wrote the classic *Pilgrim's Progress* while in prison. Have you read of other "prison masterpieces"? How do you account for such a phenomenon?

Chart B shows the four periods of Paul's public ministry during which he wrote epistles. Each list of books is shown in the chronological order of writing.⁴ Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon are grouped together, since these were written and dispatched at the same time by the same messengers (read Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-9; Philem. 12).

For Paul's references in the prison epistles to his imprisonment, read the following passages in the four epistles: Colossians 4:3, 18; Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Philemon 10, 13, (23); and Philipians 1:7, 13.

Also read the following verses, which indicate Paul was expecting release from his first imprisonment in Rome: Philipians 1:19-26 and Philemon 22.

IV. OCCASION AND PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE

Ephesians does not give a clue to any specific problem in the Ephesian church to which the epistle may have been directed. By "specific problem" is meant such things as heresy (e.g., Colossians); internal strife (1 Corinthians); false accusations (2 Corinthians); false doctrine (Galatians). But when Paul wrote Ephesians he must have still been thinking of such evils as doctrinal heresy threatening the neighboring church at Colosse, which he specifically referred to in his letter to the Colossians. No church is ever immune to doctrinal defilement, so it could be that the apostle's positive teachings in Ephesus on the pure knowledge of Christ were directed to the same kinds of problems vexing the Colossian church. Also, the Christians at Colosse would eventually be reading Ephesians, as it made the rounds of the churches of Asia. Hiebert writes on this:

Judging from its close relation to Colossians, it appears that the conflict which caused the writing of Colossians likewise called forth this epistle. The Colossian conflict revealed to Paul the need for a fuller statement of God's program for the universe as it centers in Christ in His relationship to the church⁵

No doubt there were individual problems in the Ephesian church. But the basic need of the young Christians there was to

4 Authorities differ in assigning dates to some of Paul's epistles. Hebrews, an anonymous letter, is not included in this list.

5. Hiebert, p. 266.

grow spiritually in the Lord, by (1) an increasing awareness of their relationship to Him and His ministry to them through the Spirit and (2) the day-to-day experience of walking in that light. Paul was inspired to address this epistle to that basic need. And it can be said without qualification that now almost two thousand years later the letter still serves the same function for the children of God.

V. CONTENTS

Much of our survey study of Lesson 2 will concentrate on the contents of Ephesians, especially *main* contents. A preview of some of those things is given below.

A. Doctrine

1. Salvation: as a deliverance *from* and deliverance *unto*
2. Union with Christ: an inscrutable yet real relationship
3. The church universal: as the Body of Christ, who is its Head
4. Holy Spirit: the source of every blessing and power in the Christian life
5. Will and work of God: for man's benefit and God's glory

B. Prayer and Praise

Two notable prayers appear at 1:15-23 and 3:14-21. The opening passage 1:3-14 has been called a "Hymn of Grace." The epistle has been well described as one of "instruction passing into prayer, a creed soaring into an impassioned psalm."

C. Practice

At least half the epistle is devoted to the practical walk of the believer in Christ. The Christian's *walking* (4:1) and *standing* (6:11) are based on his *sitting* (2:6). His life in Christ (chaps. 4-6) is drawn from his heritage in Christ (chaps. 1-3). The armor passage of 6:10-17 is a classic Scripture portion describing the weaponry of the Christian's spiritual warfare.

D. General Characteristics

Ephesians is a book of superlatives. It is the sublimest of all of Paul's epistles, for which it has been called "The Grand Canyon of Scripture." There are very few personal notes and biographical references, and, as noted earlier, controversies and problems are

not discussed here. Paul is not ignoring the practical mundane issues, as though they were unimportant. (It has already been noted that at least half of the epistle is practical in purpose.) Rather, the apostle has a vision of the heavenly realm, and in the quiet and calm of his imprisonment he is inspired by the Spirit to share this with his readers.⁶ Philip Schaff describes this aspect of the epistle:

It certainly is the most spiritual and devout, composed in an exalted and transcendent state of mind, where theology rises into worship and meditation into oration. It is the Epistle of the Heavens. . . The aged apostle soared high above all earthly things to the invisible and eternal realities in heaven. From his gloomy confinement he ascended for a season to the mount of transfiguration. The prisoner of Christ, chained to a pagan soldier, was transformed into a conqueror, clad in the panoply of God, and singing a paean of victory.⁷

The distinctive language and style of Ephesians reflects the richness and depth of its message. Someone has observed that the letter contains forty-two words (e.g., “obtained an inheritance,” 1:11) not found in any other New Testament book, and forty-three not used by Paul in his other writings. One of the prominent features of Paul’s style in Ephesians is its long sentences, described thus by one writer: “The sentences flow on as it were in the full strong tide, wave after wave, of an immense and impetuous sea, swayed by a powerful wind, and brightened and sparkling with the golden rays of a rising sun.” This suggests something of the excitement and inspiration in store for you as you move into the analytical studies of the Bible text. As one Bible student has well said, “If we persevere with our study of Paul, we shall soon discover that we are sitting at the feet of one who, more than any other human being, has got ‘far ben [within]’ into the wonders and the glories of that ‘open secret of God’ which is ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’ (Col. ii. 2 and i. 27).”⁸

VI. RELATION TO OTHER NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

A. Prison Epistles

We have already seen that the four prison epistles—Ephe-

6 The word *heaven(s)* appears four times, and *heavenly places* (or *heavens*) four times, in Ephesians.

7. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner, 1910), 1:780

8. Alexander Ross, “The Pauline Epistles,” in *The New Bible Commentary*, p. 69.

sians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon—were written about the same time. This would account for at least some of the similarities of these books. Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians were written to local churches of those cities; Philemon, although written particularly to a personal friend of Paul, was also addressed to the church meeting in Philemon's house (Philem. 2; cf. Col. 4:15).

B. Ephesians and Colossians

Ephesians and Colossians have been called twin epistles because of their many likenesses. Phrases of 78 of the 155 verses in Ephesians are very similar to phrases in Colossians. This is explained by the fact that both epistles were written with the same general purpose: to show the relationship between Christ and His church as assurance and correction to young Christians growing in the Lord.

But the two epistles are far from being *identical* twins. Some differences are shown in Chart C.

COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS COMPARED

Chart C

COLOSSIANS	EPHESIANS
CHRIST AND THE COSMOS	CHRIST AND THE CHURCH
Emphasis on Christ Head of the Church	Emphasis on the Church Body of Christ
MORE PERSONAL; LOCAL	LESS PERSONAL; LOFTY
COMBATS ERROR DIRECTLY	COMBATS ERROR INDIRECTLY
TONE: intensity and tumult of a battlefield	TONE: calmness of surveying the field after victory

C. Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians

Chart D shows some comparisons of these Pauline letters.

GALATIANS, EPHESIANS, AND PHILIPPIANS COMPARED

Chart D

	GALATIANS	EPHESIANS	PHILIPPIANS
STYLE	mainly logical and argumentative	doctrinal and hortatory	informative and consoling
A MAIN SUBJECT	SALVATION	CHRIST	LIFE OF JOY
PURPOSE	CORRECTIVE	INSTRUCTIVE	INSPIRATIONAL
TONE	sharp, rebuking	calm, victorious	tender, joyful

VII. A STUDY EXERCISE

Here is a study exercise that will show you things that were especially on Paul's mind when he wrote Colossians and Ephesians. The references below show parallel passages in these two epistles where similar or identical phrases appear. These things that Paul wrote in Colossians and repeated soon thereafter in Ephesians will be clues to us as to what things were prominent in his thinking at that time. Read each set, and record the similar phrases.

VIII. SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How old was Paul when he wrote Ephesians? Where was he when he composed the letter?
2. What are the two main views as to whom Ephesians was originally sent? What are your conclusions?
3. How would you describe the average member of the church at Ephesus in the year A.D. 61?
4. Reconstruct the story of how the Ephesians were first saved and how the local church came to be organized.

Ephesians	Colossians
1:1-2	1:1-2
1:4	1:22
1:7	1:14
1:10	1:20
1:15-17	1:3-4
1:18	1:17
1:21-23	1:16, 18-19
2:1, 2, 12	1:21
2:15	2:14
2:16	1:20, 22
3:1-3	1:24-26
3:7-9	1:23, 25, 27-28
4:1	1:10
4:2-4	3:12-15
4:16	2:19
4:22-24	3:9-10
4:25-26	3:8-9
4:29	3:8, 4:6
4:31	3:8
4:32	3:12-13
5:3-6	3:5-8
5:15	4:5
5:19-22	3:16-18
5:25	3:19
6:1-4	3:20-21
6:5-9	3:22-4:1
6:19-20	4:3-4
6:21-22	4:7-8

5. Do you think the message of Ephesians was too deep for the young converts at Ephesus? Who should be reading and studying Ephesians today?

6. What relationship was there between the church at Ephesus and churches in surrounding cities (e.g., Colosse)?

7. What were some of Paul's reasons for writing this letter to the churches of Asia?

8. What are some of the main doctrines taught in Ephesians?

9. Identify some of the letter's characteristics, such as style and tone.

10. Compare Ephesians and Colossians. How do you account for the many likenesses?

11. From what you have learned thus far in your study of Ephesians, how can this epistle help Christians today?

IX. PREPARE FOR THE NEXT LESSON

Beginning with the next lesson you will be studying the *Bible text itself*. Are you expecting anything from God as a fruit of your studies? Are you willing to devote time and concentration to this challenging project? Reflect on this experience of a teenage youth, John A. Mackay, who became one of the great Scottish-American theologians:

I can never forget that the reading of this Pauline letter, when I was a boy in my teens, exercised a more decisive influence upon my thought and imagination than was ever wrought upon me before or since by the perusal of any piece of literature . . . I have to admit, without shame or reserve, that, as a result of that encounter, I have been unable to think of my own life or the life of mankind or the life of the cosmos apart from Jesus Christ⁹

9. Testimony in part quoted by F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p 16