

# Ephesians 1

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Eph 1/ Rev 2<sup>1-7</sup>

Who are we dealing with when we look at the Ephesian Church? This is a good question and one which should help us understand why Paul wrote what he wrote.

Paul first visits Ephesus on what is known as his second missionary journey. There he follows his usual practice of visiting the local synagogue and getting into a debate over the Messiah. The local Jews are very interested and when he goes to leave they beg him to stay. Clearly he has other things on his mind but he does promise to come back to them if it be God's will. And so it seems it is because on his third missionary journey he ends up back in Ephesus speaking with the same Jews and for three months they entertain this interesting man until they decide simply to reject his teaching. At this Paul retreats to the local town hall. This turns out to be a good move because here he is allowed to address the local people every day for two years and his influence extends far beyond the Jewish community to the Greeks who receive his teaching enthusiastically so much so that they begin to give up their adherence to witchcraft and to the pagan cult of Artemis. They even hold a public burning of their very valuable books of spells. All goes well until representatives of one of the major industries, that of the silversmiths who make the cult figurines of the central god of the cult of Artemis, decide that Paul is bad for business. And so they set out to do him harm. Paul decides to leave after this. But a strong church has been established built on the teaching and practice of Paul over a two and a half year period. Why Ephesus?

Ephesus in Paul's time was still an important city, indeed the 4<sup>th</sup> most important city in the Roman Empire after Rome itself, Alexandria and Antioch of Syria. It was home to about 225,000 people and a huge centre of trade.

Situated on the Aegean Sea at the mouth of the Cayster River, the city had boasted one of the greatest seaports of the ancient world. This little tributary of the river allowed safe access to the Aegean for many years but by Paul's time heavy silting because of literally hundreds of years of deforestation around the city had made the harbour unusable.

Three major roads led from the seaport: one road went east towards Babylon via Laodicea, another to the north via Smyrna and a third south to the Meander Valley. Each brought trade from a different corner of the Roman Empire.

It was the fourth most important city in the Empire after Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch of Syria. It was so because of its history as a capital of the area, its continuing trade and its easy access by road to trade routes. So trade was vital and here we have the remnants of the huge market place. This market area is known as the "Square Agora" because of its dimensions 360 ft square. It arose in the Hellenistic period and was surrounded on all sides by arched shops about 40 ft deep. It is located next to the harbour and was the city's main commercial centre. It is quite possible that Paul worked here with Priscilla and Aquila in their tent-making business.

A further reason for the importance of the city in Roman times was the cult of the goddess Diana. Also known as Artemis this goddess was worshipped throughout Asia Minor. It was here that the silver idols attached to that cult were made and, of course, sold and they brought in considerable wealth to the area.

Considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, Ephesus' Temple of Artemis was dedicated to the goddess of the hunt. Only the foundation and one column remains of this temple which once measured 425 ft long, 220 ft wide and 60 ft high. This temple brought both devotees and tourists during Paul's time. Paul's successful ministry in this city was considered a threat to this very temple (Acts 19:27).

Generally speaking, the Greek Artemis was a goddess of virginity, women's concerns, the hunt and the underworld. She presided over the transition of a woman from virgin (*parthenos*) to married woman (*gyne*) and protected the virginity of those who were unmarried or wished to remain virgins. Artemis also oversaw marriage, childbirth and assisted with child-rearing. In addition to these feminine concerns, Artemis was strongly associated with the wilderness and wild animals and thus also with hunting and the rites of transition to manhood.

Further features of the city include its huge library able to hold about 15,000 scrolls, its impressive theatre still standing today able to hold 24,000 people and the wealth evident in the houses decorated with beautiful frescoes and mosaics. The houses had luxurious bedrooms, bathrooms, triclinium (formal dining room), and kitchens.

So in general you have a population that is hard working, cultured, they consider themselves to be 'good' and reasoned people perhaps, not unlike the citizens of Dunedin! Paul clearly finds a ready audience and a welcome amongst them. They appreciate his willingness to teach and, I suspect, to work for his living. And we find this warmth reflected in the opening passages of the letter. [Read]

We find, however, the rest of the chapter devoted, largely, to one thing... the blessings of the **grace** of God. Look at how Paul lists these...

- blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.(v3)
- For he chose us in him before the creation of the world (v4)
- In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship (5)
- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us (v6)
- In him we have redemption through his blood, (v7a)

- the forgiveness of sins, (v7b)
- (together)With all wisdom and understanding, (v8)
- he made known to us the mystery of his will (v9)
- In him we were also chosen, having been predestined (v11)
- When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, (v13)
- who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance (v14)

And as if this isn't enough in the second part of the chapter Paul prays that they will receive more!

**<sup>17</sup>I keep asking 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. <sup>18</sup>I pray 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 his people, <sup>19</sup>and his incomparably great power for us who believe.**

And then, just for good measure Paul goes back to Jesus and emphasises His importance shown by the fact that God demonstrates His power in raising Jesus from the dead. And this means that Jesus isn't just to be appreciated for what He can give us now but because He guarantees an eternal future for He is... **'far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.'** He is the Ruler now and for all eternity.

If you read this through a few times it really does strike you how determined Paul is to ram home the uniqueness and importance of Christ **above all else**. The question is why? Don't they know? Isn't it precisely they who have put their faith in Christ? Are they not aware of the centrality of Christ and the riches of His rule? What's going on here?

Let me make one stab at this for you. There may be other reasons why Paul does this but I'm guessing that this is a major one. You see what we have with the Ephesians is a city full of pretty capable people. These people are industrious, they're 'doers', they get out there and make it happen. They know how to get stuff done. And they've grown rich doing it. They've even understood the logic of the gospel quickly and formed a church and managed to keep the Apostle there for the longest time he will spend teaching any church or group of people – two and a half years. So why does Paul seemingly go back to the basics with them?

Precisely because of their innate self-sufficiency. With God change doesn't mean simply pulling our socks up. Redemption isn't about applying our knowledge of what's good and right to more of our life. The words 'in Christ' don't apply because we try harder – they apply because **we come to the end of ourselves...** Perhaps the greatest threat to the Gospel comes not so much from weak humanity but from the strong – those who are already **capable**. The capable may well understand the Gospel quickly, the Gospel seed may well germinate quickly within them but it is the depth of soil that counts after the seed germinates and so often capable people

have hard hearts. Paul hints at this in the next chapter in Ephesians which we'll look at next week but as a teaser have a look quickly at verse 8 of chapter two.

**<sup>8</sup>For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – <sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one may boast. (Eph2)**

The longer we cling to this idea that we somehow contribute to our salvation, that it is our understanding, our sensitivity, our logic, our strength of character, our **good works** which either bring us to God or keep us with God the more tenuous our relationship with God becomes. Christ has brought God's love to us. Our task is to receive that love and begin to abide in it, to live in it.

It's fascinating to me that we still struggle with this idea that God loves us. Yes we may say it and think it but I find many if not most Christians still trying to do deals with God rather than simply give themselves to His Word, simply trust themselves to Him. You see true love undoes sinners. It finds us out. You can't bargain with true love – it's just there but in many ways it can be quite threatening because whatever we can't bargain with we can't control. The great weakness of we who are strong 'doers' is that we exchange that ability for love. We'd rather 'do' than love. Somehow, for us, there is security in achievement and so we stick with achievement. This is what Paul recognised about the Ephesian church. It was full of good people, workers, achievers. But they were always in danger of making this their God. Of making achievement and middle class values their security.

Listen then to the great warning given to the Church again in Revelation – some years after Paul has established it. What do we hear? A church in poverty? A church without power? A church crumbling? No. This is what the prophet points to...

**<sup>2</sup>I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup>You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. <sup>4</sup>Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.**

God loves us not because we've been trying to be good but because... He loves us! Now we need to believe it.