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Introduction to "Ephesians"

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Ephesians

Ephesians is one of the apostle Paul's most loved letters. Some commentators have even called it the "crown" or "queen" of Paul's writings since it presents a glorious picture of Christ and all the blessings Christians possess in Him. The letter also paints a beautiful picture of the church as the "body of Christ."

AUTHOR

After Paul identifies himself as the author of the epistle to the Ephesians (1:1), he speaks about his own ministry (3:1-13) and asks his readers to pray for him (6:19, 20), which gives the letter a personal touch. Many church fathers regarded Ephesians as a Pauline letter, as some Nag Hammadi documents did as well.

DATE

In two passages Paul informs his readers that he is in prison (3:1; 6:19, 20), suggesting that he may have written Ephesians during his first imprisonment in Rome, sometime between AD 60 and 62, about the same time the apostle also wrote his letters to Philemon and the Colossians. Tychicus then delivered the letter to Ephesus (6:21) along with news of the apostle.

AUDIENCE

Paul addressed the epistle to the Ephesian believers (1:1), most likely a majority of Gentile Christians (2:11-13). Paul had spent about three years in Ephesus during his third missionary journey (possibly AD 54-57; cf. Acts 20:31). During his time there, he preached first in the local synagogue (Acts 19:1-9), then in a lecture hall (19:11-20). His encounters with exorcists and magicians reflected the many pagan mystery rites and magic associated with Ephesus. The cult of the goddess Artemis was the most prominent. The largest building in the Greek world, her temple was made entirely of marble. The apostle faced considerable hostility from her followers (19:23-41). Most likely, the city had a network of house churches spread throughout it and nearby villages, and Paul intended the epistle to circulate among them.

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

Ephesians does not reflect a specific crisis or problem that local members were facing. Instead, it addresses several needs in the church. As a growing community, the new believers would benefit from positive reinforcement from Paul. Thus, he writes to guide them in their new lifestyle and to encourage them to abandon pagan practices. "In Christ" is the key phrase of the book. Scarcely a verse does not present in one form



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Date of writing
ca. early AD 60s

or another this underlying theme. Election, forgiveness, predestination, home relationships—all are “in Christ.”

The epistle is also known for its hymns of praise. It proclaims the greatness of God and of Christ and praises them for what they have done (1:3-14; 3:20, 21). The apostle especially focuses on Christ’s resurrection and exaltation, and what it means for the present life of believers (1:3, 4, 9, 10, 20-23; 4:8-10), as opposed to an emphasis on future eschatology. A particular theme is also the mystery revealed in the gospel (1:9; 3:3, 4; 5:32; 6:19), that of the inclusion of the Gentiles who are now reconciled through Jesus’ death (3:3-6; 2:11-22).

STRUCTURE

On account of the close literary relationship Ephesians share with Colossians, it appears that after addressing specific problems in Colossians, Paul took the opportunity to write a more general letter to the believers in nearby Ephesians. Since some years had gone by since the apostle had last been in Ephesus, he writes to them about the role of the church in salvation, though in a more general manner than in his letter to the Colossians. He does this by focusing first on the blessing believers have now in Christ (1:3–3:21). Then in the second half of his epistle (4:1–6:20), he spells out the way in which believers are called to live in light of what God has done for them.

OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction (1:1-2)
- II. Praise for God’s Blessings in Christ (1:3–3:21)
 - A. A Hymn of Praise (1:3-10)
 - B. Sealed with His Spirit (1:11-14)
 - C. Thanksgiving and Intercession (1:15-23)
 - D. Jew and Gentile Now One in Christ (2:1-22)
 - E. The Revelation of the Mystery of Grace (3:1-21)
- III. The New Life in Christ (4:1–6:20)
 - A. Unity through the Gifts of the Spirit (4:1-16)
 - B. Living as Children of Light (4:17–5:21)
 - C. Family Relationships (5:22–6:9)
 - D. The Christian’s Spiritual Armor (6:10-20)
- IV. Conclusion (6:21-24)
 - A. Final Remarks (6:21-23)
 - B. Benediction (6:24)

ARCHAEOLOGY

The household was the basic unit of Greco-Roman society. An average household included the immediate family, as well as slaves, servants, and laborers. The father (the “lord”) had full authority over it, but also obligations and legal responsibilities to

the household members. Loyalty to one another held a household together. Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Philo of Alexandria discussed so-called "household codes" because such responsible and well-functioning households provided the basis for society as a whole as well as the structure and stability of higher political institutions. Terminology belonging to the sphere of the household also appears in political and social language.

The early churches met for worship in such households. But Paul went beyond this and adopted household concepts to illustrate the relationships between church members and God. First Timothy 3:15 refers to the Ephesus church as "the house of God." A church consists of various members with different functions and responsibilities. The church members should answer to God, the householder, and relate to one another with unity and loyalty. As a social unit, the church should provide its members with a sense of refuge, identity, and belonging. The exhortations found in the second half of Ephesians reflect this concept (4:1–6:20; especially 5:15–6:9).

Philippians

Paul composed the Epistle to the Philippians with spiritual counsel and gratitude for the generous financial support of the Philippians for his ministry. Although he was imprisoned at the time, Paul rejoices about the progress of the gospel in Rome and talks about the inner peace and joy that has sustained him during his difficulties.

AUTHOR

The names of both Paul and Timothy introduce the letter to the Philippians as its authors (1:1). However, the epistle only mentions Timothy once more (2:19), and the personal tone of the letter suggests that Paul had a more significant role in its composition. Singular personal pronouns such as “me” and “my” appear 51 times throughout the epistle, which, considering it only has four chapters, is noteworthy. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement, among other Church Fathers, accepted the apostle’s claim of authorship.

DATE

Philippians has several clues about its dating. Paul is imprisoned (1:7, 13, 16) and awaiting trial (1:19, 20). His mentions of the praetorium, or palace guard (1:13) and believers from Caesar’s household (4:22) indicates that he wrote the epistle while in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30), probably around AD 60 to 62 and about the same time he also wrote his letters to Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Early church tradition also accepts this date, as seen in the Marcionite prologue. Some scholars suggest Paul’s imprisonment in Caesarea as a more likely choice, which would mean he composed it between 58 and 60 AD, but their explanations of passages such as 4:22 are unconvincing.

AUDIENCE

Paul himself founded the church in Philippi (1:1) during his second missionary journey. The book of Acts relates that he went straight to Philippi when he arrived in Macedonia and did not stop at the larger port city of Neapolis (Acts 16:10-12). It was his first time preaching in Europe. Both Lydia and the Roman soldier, whose conversions are related in Acts (16:14, 15, 25-34), showed great kindness to Paul. The epistle reflects the friendly relationship between Paul and the Philippians. In fact, he shows deep affection for them (1:7; 4:16) and does not need to defend his authority. The names mentioned in the epistle indicate that the church consisted mainly of Greeks (2:25; 4:2, 3). It also seems that women played significant leadership and missionary roles in the church (4:3).



PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

The term “letter of friendship,” a common literary type in the first century, seems to apply well to Philippians. The epistle reflects a warm relationship between Paul and the church: he sends them an update on his situation (1:12-26) and appreciates them for their support (4:10-20). Especially central is his informing them that Epaphroditus, the Philippians’ messenger to Paul, is well and has recovered from a dangerous illness (2:25-30). Furthermore, the apostle gently reminds them to live in peace with one another, possibly reflecting some divisions in the church (1:27-30; 2:2-4, 14; 4:2).

The beautiful hymn in 2:6-11 is a poetic summary of Paul’s teaching about the nature of Jesus Christ and of God and serves as the theological basis for his ethical appeal to a humble and generous life (2:1-5). Another important theme is that the life of a Christian always has room for spiritual growth (3:8-16; 4:8, 9). Part of this is the extensive idea of joy as a peaceful attitude to life. Whether we are full of thanksgiving or facing burdens and trials, we can rest assured in our faith in Christ, the sovereign Lord.

STRUCTURE

Like Paul’s other letters, he begins his letter by first identifying himself as the author, naming his recipients, and then extending his distinctive greeting of grace and peace (1:1-2). After a word of thanksgiving and prayers for the Philippians (1:3-11), the body of the letter begins with a description of the circumstances regarding Paul’s imprisonment and anticipated release (1:12-26). The apostle then encourages the believers to be united in “one spirit” (1:27-30), following the example of Christ (2:1-11).

In contrast to the positive examples of excellent leaders like Timothy and Epaphroditus, Paul then warns the Philippians of the danger of legalism (3:2-16) and materialism (3:17-21). After a final appeal for unity (4:1-3), the letter concludes with a word of thanks for the support of the Philippians for his ministry (4:10-19), greetings from all those with him (vv. 21-22), and a closing benediction (v. 23).

OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction (1:1-11)
 - A. Greetings (1:1-2)
 - B. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)
 - C. Prayer for Their Continued Growth (1:9-11)
- II. Paul’s Circumstances and Feelings (1:12-26)
 - A. His Imprisonment and Its Effect on the Progress of the Gospel (1:12-17)
 - B. His Attitude toward His Imprisonment (1:18-26)
- III. Exhortation to Unity and Self-denial (1:27-2:18)
 - A. Need for Steadfast Fearlessness (1:27, 28)
 - B. Endurance of Suffering (1:29, 30)
 - C. Appeal for Christian Unity and Humility (2:1-4)
 - D. Christ, the Supreme Pattern of Humility (2:5-11)

- E. Practical Application of the Divine Pattern (2:12-18)
- IV. Paul's Plans for the Future (2:19-30)
 - A. His Plan to Send Timothy to Them (2:19-23)
 - B. His Hope of Being Soon Released (2:24)
 - C. His Immediate Intention to Send Epaphroditus to Them (2:25-30)
- V. Further Exhortations (3:1-4:9)
 - A. Rejoicing in the Lord (3:1)
 - B. Warning against Legalism and Materialism (3:2-21)
 - C. Renewed Appeal for Steadfastness and Unity (4:1-3)
 - D. Exhortations (4:4-9)
- VI. Conclusion (4:10-23)
 - A. Acknowledgment of the Gifts (4:10-19)
 - B. Greetings (4:20-22)
 - C. Benediction (4:23)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Philip of Macedon originally founded the city of Philippi, and Emperor Octavian rebuilt it. Initially, war veterans populated it. The emperor granted the *ius italicum* to the city. The highest privilege cities outside of Italy could receive, it granted them relative autonomy, exemption from certain taxes, the right to buy and sell property, and the privilege of Roman citizenship to all born there. Philippi was, therefore, an important city in the region, even though smaller than others. Several Latin inscriptions found in the city indicate its prosperity. The Philippians were very proud to be Roman citizens. As a form of gratitude to the Roman Empire, the imperial cult flourished there, as shown in inscriptions that mention priests of the deified Julius, Augustus, and Claudius. Paul draws on the notion of citizenship and exhorts his readers to live a life (literally "to live as a citizen") worthy of the gospel (1:27). As responsible citizens of heaven (3:20), our actions and words should reflect Christ's principles and values.