The Letter to the Ephesians

Now we come to Paul’s letter to the Ephesian churches. There is some question, because of a textual variant issue in chapter 1, verse 1, as to whether this was intended as a letter to one church or to many churches throughout Asia. If you remember our discussion of the book of Acts, I talked about Paul’s ministry in Ephesus as the center of witness moved out from Jerusalem through Antioch, out to Ephesus, and then on to Rome. Ephesus was a major city on the world stage. It ranked up with Alexandria and Rome. The population during the time of Caesar Augustus was about 250,000. People such as Strabo and Aristides spoke of Ephesus as one of the most powerful and prosperous cities of the time. That puts it into perspective in its overall influence. It was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. It was a port city, located at the mouth of the Cayster River on the Aegean Sea on the western coast of Asia. It was also the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the worship site of the goddess Artemis. By the year 54 AD, especially in these important centers, the emperor cult was also becoming quite influential in the provinces. You may remember some of the detail that I described in the lesson on the Corinthian correspondence. The emperor cult integrated local regional religions into a system of political, economic, and social power with the emperor, or Caesar, at the top and his key influence peddlers benefitting from him. Under them were clients of these benefactors who were all benefactors of the Great Benefactor, Great Father, Great “Savior” Caesar. So Ephesus was an influential and important center for all of Asia.

In chapter 1, verse 1, some of the important manuscripts omit “in Ephesus.” The New International Version renders Ephesians 1:1 as “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.” Some early manuscripts leave off “in Ephesus.” These are important manuscripts like Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and P46. What is important to understand is that even if this letter was specifically addressed to Ephesus, because of the way Ephesus functioned as a regional magnet and the way it functioned influentially throughout the whole province of Asia, it was probably intended for a wider audience. That will be important as we continue.

Magic, Principalities and Powers in Ephesus

Not only was the temple of Artemis there, but also the Prytaneion, or town hall, has been excavated. We can see from the Prytaneion that not only did it serve official government functions, but it also had strong religious functions as well. Remember that in the ancient world these aspects of economic, social, religious, and political life were integrated and woven together. There were inscriptions to Artemis and Hestia in the City Hall. Another thing we know about this metropolis of Asia is that magic was an important practice. There were magic formulas, known as the “Ephesian Letters,” that were inscribed on images of Artemis and other gods. These magical incantations and inscriptions are important for our understanding, as is borne out in Acts 19. The root idea of magic then was that by employing the proper means of addressing the correct gods or demons, and in using the correct words, especially their names, they could be forced to do something for you. When they wanted a desired effect in the area of personal health, interpersonal conflict, or the harvest cycle, they would try to obligate the gods, or the powers, or these elemental forces, to have some sense of control over their lives. We see that Hecate was the favorite of the magicians and was often depicted with three faces on different sides. Hecate had influence in three realms—the realm of the earth, the realm of the sea, and the realm of the heavens. Threats or curses would be invoked along with the names of these gods in these Ephesian Letters. These magical powers and magical formulas are also important for understanding how Paul talked about power, rule, authority, and the principalities and powers in the letter to the Ephesian church. While Ephesians has a general tone that is intended for a wider audience, at the same time these specific echoes that are quite pertinent to Ephesus itself are discernable in this letter.
Pauline Authorship
I mentioned Paul as the author, but this is one of the disputed Pauline letters. It was not disputed until the eighteenth century and the influence of F. C. Baur. Baur positioned various letters and various books of the New Testament in relation to his scheme of the development of early Christian history. He had the notion, based on Hegelian philosophy, that Jewish Christianity was the *thesis*, the beginning. Then we see in Paul an *antithesis*, a contrast, and the influence of Gentile Christianity coming in. Then after that was a *synthesis* in which Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity came together. He put together the Ephesian letter, the Colossian letter, and the disputed Catholic letters as part of what he called early Catholicism, in which the structure of the church was more established. So it was really the influence of F. C. Baur that caused Paul’s authorship to be questioned. Even though it has been critiqued, and Baur’s overall description of the development of early Christianity has been rejected, his influence continues in some of these discussions about whether Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians.

Another thing that is mentioned is that the book of Acts tells us that Paul was in Ephesus for quite some time. Some people point to what they call an impersonal tone in the letter to the Ephesians. Consider chapter 1, verses 15-16, for example, “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” This sort of language about hearing about their faith causes people to ask, “Did Paul not know about their faith since he was there from the beginning?” If we then consider chapter 3, verse 2, “Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you,” this notion of what seems like new information is what many are referring to when they mention an impersonal tone. How does this fit with Acts 19 through 20, which seems like such a personal interaction? There is another example I could mention from chapter 4, verses 21-22, which say, “Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.” These sorts of references to a so-called impersonal tone are well-suited to the notion that this is a broader circular letter. Some of the people whom Paul is talking to are people whom he has never met. They are people who are being influenced by his ministry in Ephesus but went out from there into the wider province of Asia. That is a clear explanation for this so-called general tone of the letter. At the same time, there are quite specific notions that come from the cultural context of Ephesus itself that are important to see as well.

Others point to a notion of a cosmic Christology and a universal ecclesiology instead of what they refer to as a local view of the church in letters like the Corinthian correspondence. Even in the Corinthian correspondence, in a section like 1 Corinthians 15, and even in the way Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthians—to a church that calls on the Lord in every place—we see the notion that the church is not merely local. Yet what can we say about this notion of being seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus? There is also Paul’s reference to that, which is chosen before the foundations of the world. We see that here in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians but also in his letter to the Colossians. Again, one of the things that we must keep in mind about Paul, as I mentioned in the lesson on Paul’s missionary hermeneutic, is that Paul addressed the Gospel not in the same way but as a word on target to the needs of each particular place. In Ephesus there is this emphasis on powers, principalities, and authorities, and there is the two-story view of the universe that is depicted in the magical connection between the gods and those who oblige the gods, and Paul confronts that directly. He does it in the way that he depicts Christ and the church, with the church revealing the manifold wisdom of God to these principalities and authorities, with Christ seated in the heavenly places with authority over these principalities and powers. So just because Paul articulates something a little bit differently, that is not a basis for rejecting Pauline authorship. It is too thin of a basis, because what we can see is that there are particular pastoral needs...
that can explain why Paul talks about Christ and the church in a little bit different ways but ways that are still consistent with what he would say in 1 Corinthians 15, that Christ will subject all these powers and authorities to Himself. We see the beginnings of that in 1 Corinthians, an undisputed Pauline letter, and then we see it worked out in greater detail in a letter like the one to the Ephesians.

**The Pastoral Purpose of Ephesians**

I should mention that the work of Clinton Arnold on power and magic in first-century Asia and the power language of the Ephesians has been helpful in my thinking and that of many Evangelical New Testament scholars. While we see general aspects that would be consistent with a circular letter throughout Asia, we also see specific notions of the power encounter with magic that are reflected in the letter to the Ephesians. What can we say about the purpose of this letter? Paul writes to the house churches of Ephesus to explain that their supernatural, mysterious union with Christ and with one another is characterized by this resurrection power, such power and love, that it has made them God’s own household that demonstrates God’s manifold wisdom to the rulers, powers, and authorities of this dark world. Not only is this a power encounter that displays God’s wisdom, a different character of power, but it also demonstrates this reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles who are made one in the one man, Jesus Christ. We see two main parts to the letter, framed in by a salutation at the beginning and a postscript at the end. The main part of the letter is praise, prayer, and proclamation of Christ’s love and power in the church, in chapters 1 through 3. Then, in chapters 4 through 6, the emphasis is pastoral exhortation to live in Christ’s power and love as the church. We see a real emphasis in the first part on the proclamation of this mystery of the believer’s union in Christ with one another as Jew and Gentile in Christ and how that should be displayed, particularly in worship. We see Paul’s focus on prayer and praise throughout chapters 1 through 3. Then we begin to read the language of exhortation in chapter 4, with Paul exhorting believers to live in this unity, to live as the followers of Jesus as holy people, to live out in their life together this Spirit-filled worship, with the Spirit inhabiting their praises, their songs, their spiritual songs, and their hymns, and also as they live as the household of God together. The spiritual household that Paul writes about in chapter 3 should not be forgotten when we come to chapters 5 and 6 regarding these exhortations to fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and children, who make up the larger household. They should live in mutual submission to one another and then love out of reverence for Christ.

In the first part—as we look at this emphasis on praise and prayer and what God has accomplished in the person of Christ in relation not only to the powers and authorities but also in the relationships between Jews and Gentiles—we see the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians as one grand doxology in praise of God’s elective and redemptive work of His people. Paul repeats the phrase “in Christ” or “in Him.” Ephesians 1:3-6 says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” In various ways Paul uses this prepositional phrase—“in Christ,” “in Him,” “in the One he loves”—to talk about what God has accomplished in the church. It was accomplished first in Christ. It is the same resurrection power at work in the church through the Spirit that was at work in Christ, whom He has raised from the dead. That empowers and informs Paul’s prayers for them at the end of chapter 1, that they would live out this unity, this wisdom, this power. Paul writes in Ephesians 1:15, “For this reason […] I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 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. I pray also 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. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion.” As he prays in chapter 3, this power, wisdom, and love is displaying to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms the manifold wisdom of God. It is revealing God’s eternal purpose and plan.

We should hold together the mystery of the one household of God that Paul talks about, the mystery of the administration of God’s grace. In Christ He has abolished in His flesh the law and its commandments and regulations and has made in His body one new man, making peace with those who had once been alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and the promises of God. They are now brought together in Christ to form God’s household, His spiritual household, on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles. This mystery—that the Gentiles would be fellow heirs with Israel in one body, the body of Christ—is what Paul has been proclaiming. That union in Christ should then be lived out in the way they treat one another. So in chapter 4 we have that wonderful passage about “one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” We see the gifts that are distributed by the resurrected Christ in a wonderful quote from Psalm 68. He who had ascended and given gifts to men, did He not first descend? These gifts were given to build up this household, this body. That should inform the way we read Paul’s commands to Christian husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters. They live in submission to Christ, and they live out their union with Christ in a Spirit-filled way.

When Paul comes to the full armor of God in chapter 6, he talks about putting on the armor of God that you may stand against these powers, against these principalities. This armor of God reflects the Messiah Himself. We see in the selection of language and the imagery of the soldier’s armor references to Isaiah 11, 49, 52, and 59. Let us consider some examples.

Isaiah 11, for example, talks about the branch of Jesse, and the Spirit of the Lord will be upon Him, a Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, power and knowledge, and He will delight in the fear of the Lord. Then we see that righteousness will be His belt and faithfulness the sash around His waist. Then there are the passages about the Servant of the Lord, which pick up on this Root of Jesse. In Isaiah 49:2 we read about this Servant of the Lord, “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, ‘You are my servant.’” So the Word of the Lord is the sword. We read in Isaiah 52:7, also about this Servant, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” So we see feet shod with the Gospel. Then in Isaiah 59:17 we read, “He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.” So what is Paul saying about this armor of God? He is saying, “Put on Jesus. Put on the Messiah. Live out this union with Christ that has been brought about through the power of the Gospel, through accepting his testimony about the risen Lord.