Ephesians

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MSB49

Title

The letter is addressed to the church in the city of Ephesus, capital of the Roman province of Asia (Asia Minor, modern Turkey). Because the name Ephesus is not mentioned in every early manuscript, some scholars believe the letter was an encyclical, intended to be circulated and read among all the churches in Asia Minor and was simply sent first to believers in Ephesus.

Author and Date

There is no indication that the authorship of Paul should be in question. He is indicated as author in the opening salutation (1:1; 3:1). The letter was written from prison in Rome (Acts 28:16–31) sometime between A.D. 60–62 and is, therefore, often referred to as a prison epistle (along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). It may have been composed almost contemporaneously with Colossians and initially sent with that epistle and Philemon by Tychicus (Eph. 6:21, 22; Col. 4:7, 8). See Introduction to Philippians: Author and Date for a discussion of the city from which Paul wrote.

Background and Setting

It is likely that the gospel was first brought to Ephesus by Priscilla and Aquila, an exceptionally gifted couple (see Acts 18:26) who were left there by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18, 19). Located at the mouth of the Cayster River, on the east side of the Aegean Sea, the city of Ephesus was perhaps best known for its magnificent temple of Artemis, or Diana, one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. It was also an important political, educational, and commercial center, ranking with Alexandria in Egypt, and Antioch of Pisidia, in southern Asia Minor.

The fledgling church begun by Priscilla and Aquila was later firmly established by Paul on his third missionary journey (Acts 19) and was pastored by him for some 3 years. After Paul left, Timothy pastored the congregation for perhaps a year and a half, primarily to counter the false teaching of a few influential men (such as Hymenaeus and Alexander), who were probably elders in the congregation there (1 Tim. 1:3, 20). Because of those men, the church at Ephesus was plagued by “fables and endless genealogies” (1:4) and by such ascetic and unscriptural ideas as the forbidding of marriage and abstaining from certain foods (4:3). Although those false teachers did not rightly understand Scripture, they propounded their ungodly interpretations with confidence (1:7), which produced in the church harmful “disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith” (1:4). Thirty years or so later, Christ gave to the Apostle John a letter for this church indicating its people had left their first love for Him (Rev. 2:1–7).

Historical and Theological Themes

The first 3 chapters are theological, emphasizing NT doctrine, whereas the last 3 chapters are practical and focus on Christian behavior. Perhaps, above all, this is a letter of encouragement and admonition, written to remind believers of their immeasurable blessings in Jesus Christ; and not only to be thankful for those blessings, but also to live in a manner worthy of them. Despite, and partly even because of, a Christian's great blessings in Jesus Christ, he is sure to be tempted by Satan to self-satisfaction and complacency. It was for that reason that, in the last chapter, Paul reminds believers of the full and sufficient spiritual armor supplied to them through God's Word and by His Spirit (6:10–17) and of their need for vigilant and persistent prayer (6:18).

A key theme of the letter is the mystery (meaning a heretofore unrevealed truth) of the church, which is "that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel" (3:6), a truth completely hidden from the OT saints (cf. 3:5, 9). All believers in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, are equal before the Lord as His children and as citizens of His eternal kingdom, a marvelous truth that only believers of this present age possess. Paul also speaks of the mystery of the church as the bride of Christ (5:32; cf. Rev. 21:9).

A major truth emphasized is that of the church as Christ's present spiritual, earthly body, also a distinct and formerly unrevealed truth about God's people. This metaphor depicts the church, not as an organization, but as a living organism composed of mutually related and interdependent parts. Christ is Head of the body and the Holy Spirit is its lifeblood, as it were. The body functions through the faithful use of its members' various spiritual gifts, sovereignly and uniquely bestowed by the Holy Spirit on each believer.

Other major themes include the riches and fullness of blessing to believers. Paul writes of "the riches of His [God's] grace (1:7), "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (3:8), and "the riches of His glory" (3:16). Paul admonishes believers to "be filled with all the fullness of God" (3:19), to "come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (4:13), and to "be filled with the Spirit" (5:18). Their riches in Christ are based on His grace (1:2, 6, 7; 2:7), His peace (1:2), His will (1:5), His pleasure and purpose (1:9), His glory (1:12, 14), His calling and inheritance (1:18), His power and strength (1:19; 6:10), His love (2:4), His workmanship (2:10), His Holy Spirit (3:16), His offering and sacrifice (5:2), and His armor (6:11, 13). The word "riches" is used 5 times in this letter; "grace" is used 12 times; "glory" 8 times; "fullness" or "filled" 6 times; and the key phrase "in Christ" (or "in Him") some 12 times.

Interpretive Challenges

The general theology of Ephesians is direct, unambiguous, and presents no ideas or interpretations whose meanings are seriously contended. There are, however, some texts that require careful thought to rightly interpret, namely: 1) 2:8, in which one must decide if the salvation or the faith is the gift; 2) 4:5, in which the type of baptism must be discerned; and 3) 4:8, in its relationship to Ps. 68:18.

Outline

I. Salutation (1:1, 2)

II. God’s Purpose for the Church (1:3–3:13)

A. Predestination in Christ (1:3–6a)

B. Redemption in Christ (1:6b-10)

C. Inheritance in Christ (1:11–14)

D. Resources in Christ (1:15–23)

E. New Life in Christ (2:1–10)

F. Unity in Christ (2:11–3:13)

III. God’s Fullness for the Church (3:14–21)

IV. God’s Plan for Faithful Living in the Church (4:1–6)

V. God’s Son Endows and Builds the Church (4:7–16)

VI. God’s Pattern and Principles for Members of the Church (4:17–32)

VII. God’s Standards for Faithfulness in the Church (5:1–21)

A. Walking in Love (5:1–7)

B. Living in Light (5:8–14)

C. Walking in Wisdom and Sobriety (5:15–18a)

D. Filled with God’s Spirit (5:18b-21)

VIII. God’s Standards for Authority and Submission in the Church (5:22–6:9)

A. Husbands and Wives (5:22–33)

B. Parents and Children (6:1–4)

C. Employers and Employees (6:5–9)

IX. God’s Provision for His Children’s Spiritual Battles (6:10–17)

A. The Believer’s Warfare (6:10–13)

B. The Believer’s Armor (6:14–17)

X. God’s Appeal for Prayer in the Church (6:18–20)

XI. Benediction (6:21–24)

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