

Introduction to Ephesians

Acts 18:1-12

Acts 18:13-28

Responsive Psalm 134-135:6

This morning we are going to be starting a study in the letter Paul wrote to the Ephesians, but before we begin diving into this little letter I want to spend this week as a sort of introduction talking about the historical and key points of interest around this letter. First off as there always seems to be, there is a bit of contention between scholars on who really was the intended recipient of this letter. As we look at our bibles today, we see right in verse 1 it says, "To the Saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ." So it seems it is quite obvious and a no brainer but apparently there are some ancient manuscripts that do not have that latter half of verse 1, which creates this little bit of controversy and discussion as to who this letter was written to. Some believe that this letter was not directly written to the Ephesians, but rather it would have been a circular letter, that is, a general letter addressed to and sent out to many different churches in Asia. They argue that this letter was sent out with an intent of a more general use, one of the main evidences that would seem to give weight to this idea is the fact that Paul has no instruction in this book dealing with any controversy or issues in the church he writes to. Giving it a feel of a more general letter to churches in the region as opposed to a specific letter to one church.

It also lacks the personal greetings in closing as we see in many other of Paul's writings, in fact I believe the only names listed in this letter are Tychicus, and Onesimus who were the ones who delivered it. The other idea, is that this letter was directly written to the Ephesians, but was intended to be distributed to other churches as well. But again as is with most of these things that scholars chose to debate, whether the letter was addressed to one specific body of believers, or more of a circular letter meant for multiple churches has no real weight or bearing on the content of the letter itself. Such a discussion is not without its merit or value though, for making such determinations is what brings legitimacy and verification of the validity of this letter. I am sure just like it is today, there were scammers, false teachers, and posers sending out letters with claims of authority, even likely claiming to be some of the apostles themselves which were fraudulent, so there is value in these discussions of the legitimacy and purpose of these books of the bible and the authenticity of their authorship.

It seems to me the most likely thing, and where most people seem to fall into is that this letter was written to multiple churches in the area in and around Ephesians, which would explain the lack of personal greetings, or dealing with specific issues in a gathering of believers. Paul in this letter focus' heavily upon a few themes, such as God's purpose and plan for the church, the believers relationship with God, and the supremacy of God's eternal plan working through the sovereign grace in the lives of his people.

Paul had visited Ephesus twice, once in AD 52 during his second missionary outreach where he ministered there with Pricilla and Aquila as recorded in Acts chapter 18. On his Third journey which spanned from AD 53 to 58 he stopped again in Ephesus but this time he spent about 3 years there, again ministering with Priscila and Aquila this time ministering to Apollos who became a mighty witness from Christ to the Jews as we read this morning.

After Paul departed Ephesus he sent Timothy to continue the work there of ministering the gospel. In the letter to Timothy is where we read about Onesimus and Tychicus who were also key members in Paul's fellow ministers of the gospel, and who delivered the letters to the Colossian, Ephesian, and Philemon churches that were written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome.

Paul had established the church at Ephesus on his second missionary journey, he had met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth on his way to Jerusalem and they journeyed with him into Ephesus where they ended up staying as Paul continued on to Jerusalem. It would seem that the people of Ephesus were quite receptive of Paul and the gospel message of faith, by the grace of God through Jesus that Paul spent quite some time focusing on the ministry there. It became central to his outreach in that area, but as we see if we were to read through the letter that Paul sent to Timothy, the church there at Ephesus was not without its own problems, 1 Timothy 1 Paul writes, "As I urged you when I went to Macedonia- remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in the faith. Now the purpose of the commandments is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm."

It would seem that the churches in Ephesus much like the churches in Galatia suffered from teachers wanting to bring in the old law, which had been fulfilled in Christ already and is counter to the gospel of grace. This was not only an issue across the early church, but also an issue we see still in churches today, a temptation to look to the law as a Christian guideline, when as Paul instructs Timothy, and others in his letter to the Galatians, it is Christ through the Holy Spirit that is the guideline of the new testament believer who rests in Christ.

The church at Ephesus was also one of the first of the 7 churches mentioned in the book of Revelation, which received both praise, and warning found in chapter 2 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, These things, says he who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands; I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars. And you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for my names sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamp-stand from its place- unless you repent."

It would seem that though the church in Ephesus was doctrinally sound, and did well guarding itself against false teachers and beliefs, it had left off its first love, Matthew 22 records the teaching of Jesus about this very thing, where Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment, and the second like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And likewise in the closing of the letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians he gives this warning, chapter 16, verse 22. "If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed." The church in Ephesus though doctrinally sound, and committed to the truth of the gospel ministry of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ Jesus alone...had gone cold, and forgotten its first love.

This is a warning here that stands yet even today, There are many churches who strive to seek and live by the truths of the bible, but have gone cold, stuffy, and have lost their first love. Being found right in doctrine, has replaced the love for the brotherhood, the love for their neighbors, and their love of Jesus for in the end he has taken second place to a concern for correct doctrine. The opposite is also just as bad, the concept or idea of love and acceptance at the expense of doctrine creates an empty and meaningless belief, and we see this in many churches today as well. The challenge that is set before us is to love Jesus, and believe his word, to seek him in both love, and truth, being wary that our focus never sway to far in either direction that we end up worshipping the concept of love in an ungrounded belief, or that we become cold and bitter worshipping our doctrines.

The City of Ephesus was the main city in the Roman province of Asia Minor, which would be western Turkey today. It was the 4th largest city in the Roman Empire, only eclipsed by Rome itself, Alexandria and Antioch, with a population of about 250,000 people. It was a port city on the Cayster River which flowed into the Aegean Sea which came under Roman control in 133 BC. IT was a major trade center and was a major intersection of 3 different trade routes making it one of the more important commercial centers, if not the most important in Asia Minor.

Ephesus was the center of what is known as the Emperor Cult, which is the worship and devotion to the Roman Emperors. This was a wide spread phenomenon in the Roman Empire, where emperors were deified and worshiped as living gods. In Ephesus this cult was closely tied to the existing cult of Artemis Ephesia, also known as the goddess Diana, the cities patron Goddess. In this city was the largest greek structure, even 4 times greater then the famous Greek Parthenon in Athens. The temple to Artimus was 425 feet long, 250 feet wide and had 127 marble columns that were 60 feet high supporting this temple. It was ranked as one of the seven wonders of the world. It not only was a place of worship of this false god, it also served as the Bank of Asia, holding deposits from all over the world. This was not only a trade central hub, it was also the center of cult worship of the Emperors, and the goddess Artemus. In 1870 the remains of this temple was discovered at the foot of Mount Ayasuluk where silver coins from all across the Roman empire were found confirming the validity of the claim that the goddess of Ephesus was worshiped and revered all over the world.

The culture in Ephesus, being such a large trade town was very diverse. There were many different ethnic groups who called Ephesus home, and with that brought with them their various religions and beliefs, and there was a large constituents of Jews there as well also having their own synagogue. The idea of polytheism was the prodominate view, there was a wide ranging social acceptance of different religions and viewpoints through syncretism which is the blending of various religions to form cultural or philosophical traditions. We see this in other places in scripture as well, as the Gnostics are mentioned who were a religious system that incorporated Oriental religions, Judiasm, Christianity, and greek philosophical concepts. We still have some of this today, a notable one is Rastafarianism which was found in the 20th centery as a syncretistic moving combining elements of Chrsitianity, African traditions, and Jamaican Culture.

It was in this city that Paul ministered with Aquila and Pricilla and established a church there of whom when Paul left Timothy came to watch over. It is here, to these churches that were founded in and around this major city that Paul wrote this letter while being imprisoned in a Roman prison around AD 60.

During this time while Paul was imprisoned, he was able to receive in a steady stream of visitors who would come and care for his needs, take and deliver his letters, and many would here him share the gospel. The main point of this letter to the Ephesians was to show our status in Christ as it relates to our daily lives. The overarching theme of this letter is our legal position before God in Christ. As Paul wrote to the Roman Churches, all of mankind, through the fall and subsequent curse are in a covenant, a marriage, bound to, our sin, bound to Satan. For such a marriage covenant to be broken so one may marry another, as Paul argues there must be death. So Christ died, to break us from that bondage, so that in him we have died to sin and Satan, and can be made alive in a covenantal relationship with him. This was the eternal legal transaction that took place, both in the garden with the fall of mankind, and in the death of Christ, the one who has brought redemption from that fall. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." There was a real, and necessary legal transaction that had been made to pay the price of sin on our behalf, it required blood, it required death, and it required the Son of God, the perfect and holy one, to come in the likeness of man, and lay down his life so that we may live in him.

Now that transaction as occurred, Paul argues in this letter to the Ephesians, that now our position before God is not one of judgment and punishment, but of adopted children, brothers and sisters of Christ, therefore our position before God, is the same as Jesus' status before God. We are found holy, and without blame because our identity is in Jesus. So throughout this letter Paul employs his readers to live as those who are in this position. That is, live as holy ones, live as the redeemed ones, live in excitement and hope for that coming day that we can see him face to face. Until that day while yet in this flesh we will struggle, we will never meet that ideal nature of perfection, but we are not to be morose, and depressed over our failures, for God said he is faithful to forgive them if we repent...and his children always repent. So there is a sense in which, eternally, we are already justified, we are already holy...its just not yet. The outcome is guaranteed, but we must live through our lives first, before we can shed this sin stain flesh and live as intended, just and holy in the presence of our God.

That's about it, for the introduction this morning, I wanted to take some time to ground this letter written by Paul to the churches of Ephesus in historical truth, this bible, these letters that have been preserved for us today is not just some mere collection of stories, or lists of instruction, and wisdom.. though it is each of those things, the implications are far more reaching than a simple collection of literature. This bible, is the written word of God, given so that we may know him, it is intrinsically bound in history, and truth, confirmed by the testimony of many witnesses. That is why each time we enter into a new book I like to take the first session to go through the history behind it, I think it helps to bring a sort of reality into the words, reminding us this was an actual letter, written to actual people and by God's wisdom....and grace he wants us to know something, it has been preserved through all these generations, and will continue just as God has promised, as his living word, given as a revelation of him to the world.