

The Plan All Along

Ephesians 1:1-2 April 5, 2023

In some ways, being a Christian in Ephesus was a little like being a crewman on the *USS Dallas* in *The Hunt For Red October*. A diverse group of individuals, you live life together, sailing in difficult and sometimes hostile waters. It's a demanding life, but you're all in. One day a mysterious but authoritative man drops in to stay awhile and give you a new course, a new mission, and a new way of thinking about things. You don't have that much visibility ahead, but you continue on. Occasionally, after long periods of waiting, the dot-matrix printer brings a message from topside: Here's what you need to know, here's your heading, now carry out your mission together.

The city of Ephesus was centuries old, but Christianity had been in town fewer than 10 years. It's between 60 and 62 AD.¹ About five years earlier, Paul left the city after founding and leading the church there for 2 or 3 years. The crucifixion itself had only happened about 30 years before the Ephesians read their epistle. This was a harbor city on the western coast of modern Türkiye.² It sat over 600 miles from Jerusalem, more than 800 miles from Rome, 500 miles from Antioch. It boasted a population of 250,000,³ making it the third largest city in the Roman Empire.⁴

Its strategic location made Ephesus an ideal connector between East and West. Commerce flowed through her ports, bringing a variety of peoples, cultures, religions, and wealth. In the first century, the city constructed a marble road that led from the great theater where the Biblical riot took place to the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.⁵ This temple was four times the size of the Greek Parthenon, making it the largest structure on earth at the time.⁶

Ephesus was one of the world's first tourist destinations and boasted many luxuries. The city streets were lit by oil lamps at night. The homes of the wealthy even featured running water and plumbing for their private bathrooms.⁷ If you weren't rich enough for your own, you would use the newly constructed public bathroom which had its own plumbing system with running water. You can still visit it today and (I'm told) even sit on one of the seats.

The city was full of wealth and wonders and amenities, but we know it was also full of paganism, racism, demonic activity, and unrest. Walking from home to work you would pass by brothels and occult shops, fortunetellers, demon possessed people and exorcists doing their best to help them.

Five or ten percent of the city's population was Jewish.⁸ And a few of them had left the synagogue and formed a new community called a church. They followed "the way," and some Gentiles had

¹ Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

² In 2022, the Turkish government requested that the United Nations adopt the new version of the country's name.

³ Gary Gromacki *The Spiritual War For Ephesus*

⁴ B. M. Metzger, *St. Paul and the Magicians*

⁵ <https://ephesus.us/ancient-ephesus/marble-road/>

⁶ Darrell Bock *Ephesians*

⁷ Adrian Brijbassi *Even in Ruins, Ephesus and Its Achievements Remain a Wonder*

⁸ Bock

joined up, too. In fact, over the last 5 or 7 years, more Gentiles had been born again and were now Christian instead of worshippers of Diana or the Emperor cult or one of the Hero cults in town.

But what did it really *mean* to be a Christian in Ephesus? To come out of one of the Gentile religions would mean you were turning away from many things that defined your life: The style of worship. The accepted morals. The habits and pastimes. The social calendar. This was a whole new life, a whole new mentality, a whole new *everything*. But what *new* would be replacing the *old*?

We can't imagine a world without Christianity. The Bible has been the best-selling book since 1522!⁹ But in first-century Ephesus, there was no New Testament. Jews in town would be familiar with the Hebrew Bible, but it's not like Gentiles would have a copy in their home. In fact, the believers in Ephesus hadn't even *known* about the existence of the Holy Spirit until Paul came and explained it to them a few years earlier! There are no Christian schools or publishing houses. There are no weekend seminars or retreats. Most of the Christians around you have *also* only been saved a few years. Paul got the church started and on a great track, but he's been gone for 5 years and many of the Gentile church members had never met him, never heard him speak. In fact, they only knew the apostles' doctrine *secondhand*. Meanwhile, as an Ephesian, you are *inundated* with philosophies and religions and claims about what is true and what the meaning of life is and what morality is and what is right and wrong. On top of that, there were powerful groups in your city who were convinced that the *Christians* were ruining the economy and destroying the fabric of society. And, quite honestly, you don't actually know *that much* about what it means to be a Christian! You know you were blind and now you see - you know that you were a slave to sin and now you're free in Christ, but beyond that, you have a lot of questions.

It would've been hard to not feel isolated or wonder what Christian life was supposed to be. There was so much to have to figure out and navigate and, comparatively, so little to go on.

Into *that* setting, Paul sent his letter to the Ephesians. And, we'll see that it is particularly directed to those *Gentile* Christians who he did not know. Paul knew a lot of the Christians in Ephesus - he had spent 3 years there, doing ministry every single day. But this letter is primarily targeted toward those Gentile Christians who were new to the faith. And, there's lots of good evidence that it wasn't just for them, but was meant to be read in a bunch of churches throughout the region.¹⁰

The letter Paul sent was a doozy. Here's how scholars describe it: "*Pound for pound, Ephesians may well be the most influential document ever written.*"¹¹ It's called, "*The crown and climax of Pauline theology...the sublimest communication ever made to men.*"¹²

At the same time, we will find that it is the most *general* Epistle written by Paul.¹³ It has no personal greetings. It speaks to no locally specific problems, like his letters to Corinth or Thessalonica did.

⁹ <https://textandcanon.org/the-day-the-bible-became-a-bestseller/>

¹⁰ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

¹¹ Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

¹² John Mackay *God's Order: The Ephesian Letter And This Present Time*

¹³ Thielman

But the fact that Ephesians is a general letter to a general audience shouldn't make us focus *less* on it. The opposite is true.

When we're reading the letter to the Corinthians, we don't really identify with some of the problems they had. When reading Galatians, we listen to the principles about not drifting into legalism, but, as a church, we're not really in danger of taking on the Jewish rituals. But Ephesians speaks to us from start to finish about base level Christianity. What does it mean to be a Christian? What is the Christian life about? Whether you're Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, ancient or modern, young or old, *this* is Christianity. It's direct and specific and definitive.

Of course, a book this important will be dogged by controversy. Starting in the late 1800's, there have been some who suggest that Ephesians wasn't written by Paul and it wasn't written to the Ephesians.¹⁴ They say it was someone else using Paul's name. If you read commentaries or blogs about Ephesians, you're going to come across this argument.

We can dispatch this idea very quickly. First, the text says it's from Paul. There *were* writings that circulated claiming to be written by apostles but were, in fact, forgeries. Paul did not condone this practice, and the early church rejected these "pseudepigraphal" documents.¹⁵ "The witness of the early church for...Ephesians [being] a letter from Paul is extensive." We don't need to worry that the book is lying to us about who the author is.¹⁶

Verse 1 of chapter 1 opens this way:

Ephesians 1:1a - Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will:

Paul wrote this letter while imprisoned and in chains. He was locked up a lot, so we can't be sure which imprisonment it was, but the clues seem to indicate it was during his first Roman imprisonment when he was under house arrest for two years.¹⁷

He opens the letter speaking not as the guy who founded their church or their spiritual father or even as their old friend, but as a specially chosen messenger from God Himself. That's what the term "apostle" means - a messenger sent on a mission.¹⁸ In chapter two he's going to explain that the Church, universal, is being built on the foundation of the Apostles' teaching because they had been specially commissioned by Jesus Christ to do this work.

God's will for Paul was for him to reveal the plan for the church. What Paul would explain would be mind-blowing, world-changing. Some of it mysterious, some of it demanding, some of it downright radical, but *this* is the plan the Lord has had all along. From before the formation of the cosmos, God has been accomplishing His plan. And Paul was going to explain to the Ephesians and to us

¹⁴ Stephen Fowl *Ephesians: A Commentary*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ For detailed refutation of authorship challenges, see Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*, Darrell Bock *Ephesians*

¹⁷ Bock

¹⁸ *NASB Dictionaries*

what it means for us and what our part to play in that plan is. God's will is that we discover it and join with Him in it.

Verse 1 continues:

Ephesians 1:1b - To the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus.

There are those who say the letter was not *really* to the Ephesians because there are three very old manuscripts that do not contain the words "at Ephesus." Ok, that is true, but *even those manuscripts* have superscriptions identifying the letter as "to the Ephesians."¹⁹

Paul calls them "faithful saints." For me, terms like these are easy to run by, but let's pause on them.

In the Bible, *every* Christian is a saint. We don't really use the word that way today because it's one of those words that has been taken hostage. One commentator said, "*Saints...[has been] restricted for centuries to men whose holiness has been of a very technical and artificial type.*"²⁰

The term "saints" just means "holy ones." You're not holy because of religious things you do. You're holy because of God's work in your life. To be holy means you are *separated*, you are *given a special, spiritual purpose*, and you are *clean*. *That's* holiness. And that's the ongoing work of sanctification in a Christian life. We are continually separated from the pursuits and ruin of the world around us. We are given a spiritual purpose, much of which is described in this letter, and then we are continually made clean by the blood of the Lamb and the washing of the Word. That's what it means to be a saint. If you're a Christian, that's you!

Paul also calls them "faithful." Does that mean I am full of faith or that I have a fidelity toward God? Yes! It means to be a person who is *exercising* your faith.²¹ It means the Ephesians believed in what they believed. What did they believe? That God revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, Who came and lived and died and rose again so that men could be saved from sin and given everlasting life. They believed that "the present age may end very soon, so one should be prepared for it."²² They believed that the world around them was something to separate from and save others out of. They believed the Christian life was to be lived on purpose in the power of the Spirit.

One source describes faithful sainthood during the first century this way: "*Christians stood out for their chastity, their hatred of cruelty, their civil obedience, good citizenship and payment of taxes (despite the severe suspicion they incurred on this count because they refused to perform the customary civil formality of praying to the emperor and the state gods). They did not expose infants; they did not swear. They refused to have anything to do with idolatry and its by-products.*"²³

¹⁹ Fowl

²⁰ R.W. Dale *The Epistle To The Ephesians*

²¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones *God's Ultimate Purpose: Ephesians 1*

²² Fowl

²³ Michael Green *Evangelism In The Early Church*

Faithful saints. Such a simple descriptor, but incredibly important. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, “*We find ourselves confronted here, by what the New Testament teaches is the basic irreducible minimum of what constitutes a Christian.*”²⁴ Faithful saints. Holy people exercising their beliefs.

Of course, the Ephesians weren’t perfect. We know that from Revelation 2. They would struggle and misstep - they would need adjustment and correction. But they were faithful saints. Of course, it’s obvious that *they* couldn’t say, “Well, we’re saved, so we know everything we need to know, now we just ride life out until we get to heaven.” The whole point of this letter is that Paul needed to explain truth to them and deepen their understanding. They *needed* this epistle. So do we.

Lloyd-Jones continues: “*This is not a letter addressed to some unusual and exceptional Christians people...it is not a letter addressed to so-called scholars...it is not a letter to specialists, but a letter to ordinary church members...[It] is an epistle that is addressed to people like ourselves.*”

Ephesians 1:2 - ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What was God offering? The religions and philosophies of the culture around them offered all sorts of things. Earthly pleasures. The promise of bumper crops and fertility. Position in the empire. What did the Lord offer His people? Grace and peace.

Of course, what God was extending is going to be detailed in fantastic depth in the coming verses. But overall it was grace and peace. Scholars point out that Paul Christianized versions of the Greek and Hebrew salutations here.²⁵ It’s fitting because one of the great themes of Ephesians is going to be the unity of the Church - how God brings together Jews and Gentiles into one, growing unit.

Unity was such an important thing for the young church. It still is, but again, we should try to think about what it would’ve been like to be a Christian in Ephesus. We live in a time where it’s very easy to be disconnected from the church and still feel like we’re in fellowship with God’s people. In some ways, we’re really not that worried about unity because there *isn’t* such a difference between Christian culture and the world culture around us. But church community was so essential, so crucial, that the believers in a city like Ephesus would carve symbols into the rock on the ground as a sign to other Christians who might be looking for them. Perhaps you’ve heard the term “Ichthus.” Christians would carve IXOYE, an acronym that stood for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior” so that others would know where the church could be found. In Ephesus you can still see some of these carvings. They used the Ichthus Wheel. It was a circle with 8 spokes and with it you can see all the letters of IXOYE.²⁶

I don’t know what sort of vandalism laws were on the books, but imagine church fellowship and unity being so important that you took a hammer and chisel with you out into public so you could carve a special symbol into the concrete so you could gather with Christians you’ve never met!

²⁴ Lloyd-Jones

²⁵ John Stott *The Message Of Ephesians*

²⁶ <https://rcainboys.wordpress.com/2014/08/04/ichthus-wheel-early-christian-symbols/>

The Lord is going to show us so much through Paul's letter. It's not *just* about unity, but also how God's great desire is that you and I be filled full. Filled with the Spirit. Full of strength. Full of understanding. Full of purpose. Full of hope and the riches of God's glory. Filled with all the fullness of God. This has been God's plan and desire all along and His hope is that we would walk with Him in faith and obedience. Along all the days of our lives, His plan is to build us as individuals and as families and as a local church and as part of the universal church. His plan all along is to do this dramatic work in our lives "so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus!"²⁷

Can you imagine that? *You* and *me* on display as the great example of God's grace. Some of you have been to the *Smithsonian*. Think of what is on display there. God says He wants to put *you* on display for all eternity to demonstrate the immeasurable richness of His grace and kindness. The props from *Red October* aren't on display at the *Smithsonian* as far as I know, but the Apollo 11 Command Module is. Why? Because it is a marvel of a great mission. Worthy of exhibit. The real thing.

Ephesians explains the marvelous mission and blessing of Christianity. But, this incredible plan is demanding. One commentator writes, "*This letter requires us to change our inner being and character in a radical way. Life can no longer merely happen, for all our activity must now take place in, to, and for the Lord.*"²⁸ Darrell Bock writes, "*This letter [serves] as an exhortation to...the church about what salvation is and what to do with that salvation as a result. It examines where the church as a community should be headed, with a crucial reminder that God in His grace has already given them all they need to get there.*"

Along the way we'll see that God's truth directly challenges the philosophical systems of the world. It was *Christ* on the throne, not Caesar. *Yahweh* is our Father and God, not Artemis, who was called the "Queen of Heaven and described as the Lady-Lord and Savior."²⁹ Ephesus was proud to have been designed according to the principles of the great, Greek urban planner Hippodamus, but Paul would explain how a life, a home, a church, a society should be built based on the principles of *Christ's* love and truth. While the leaders of Ephesus kept rebuilding and beautifying the great temple of Diana, Paul would explain that *we* are God's Temple. While pagans downtown worshiped in Hero Cults, this letter would reveal to the Ephesian Christians that *they* were the heroes, called to put on armor and join in the triumphant fight against the powers of evil.

This is the plan - this and much more. It's *always* been the plan. The question is: Are we ready to hear what God's plan is and then accept it for our lives? Are we on His course? Are we clinging to some city concern or have we stepped into the cosmic inheritance God has prepared for us? We are *Christian* which means we are going somewhere and we're meant to go *together*. This book leads the way, in every age, through every circumstance, around every turn.

²⁷ Ephesians 2:7

²⁸ Snodgrass

²⁹ Bock