



EPHESIANS



Paul Gardner







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Grace and Joy in Christ



Paul Gardner

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



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Introduction

The epistle to the Ephesians is surely one of the most powerful in the New Testament. It is profoundly Trinitarian in its emphases. The letter speaks of God's sovereign plan and purposes to call into being a people who would exist for his praise and glory and who would be holy and blameless before him. It speaks of the grace and love of Christ in drawing a people to himself through his sacrificial death on the cross and his subsequent exaltation. Then the letter also speaks of the Spirit's work in guaranteeing the promised blessings for God's people, and of his empowering and infilling of them so they can live the holy lives to which they are called and work in unity as the church of God.

Commentators have often debated two key issues in this letter. The first concerns the main theme or purpose of the letter and the second concerns the authorship. While we cannot possibly do justice to all that has been said on these important matters, they deserve a few comments here.

Purpose of Ephesians: Encouragement and joy in Christ

Ephesians contains deep descriptions of God's purposes for his church. It describes the joy and encouragement to be found 'in Christ'. It provides instructions for living as Christians in a pagan environment, and it even portrays the writer's prayers for the people he addresses. The letter also addresses the matter of unity in the church and the need for mutual submission, for prayer, and for a bold proclamation of the gospel. So wide is the compass of what is addressed in these few pages that it is not possible to see one particular issue or problem giving rise to its being sent. Equally, although some have attempted to put all its teaching under one heading and one overarching theme, this may seem too restrictive.



However, in the last few verses we see that the writer has sent the letter with Tychicus so that Tychicus may encourage these Christians who have been concerned to hear of Paul's imprisonment. If we look back through this letter, we can see how the whole letter in fact seems to be concerned with providing this sense of encouragement. Therefore, a summary statement that we might keep in mind in reading the book, if one is needed, is simply this: *Encouragement and joy in Christ*.

The letter starts with a listing of the extraordinary privileges, the inheritance, that God's people have 'in Christ'. The phrase is repeated again and again in the first chapter. This provides the background against which life must be lived, for God has already 'seated us [Christians] with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (2:6). This should be a deep source of encouragement in many ways to all Christians, but not least to those who are concerned for the apostle who is languishing in prison. One of the reasons he is in prison is precisely because it has been part of his calling to bring the gospel to Gentiles. In the gospel we find they too, if they receive it in faith, are 'in Christ' and receive all the blessings that have been promised to God's people. Thus the church finds its unity in Christ and must be encouraged to seek and develop that unity. Likewise, those who are in Christ are to be distinguished by the way they live. They 'are light in the Lord' (5:8) and their behaviour should reflect the fact that they are 'created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (4:24). The strength to live as they should, to stand for the gospel, and to proclaim the gospel boldly is to be found 'in the Lord and in the strength of his might' (6:10).

For the writer there is extraordinary joy and encouragement to be found, even while in prison, in knowing that God's people are 'in Christ'. There we find where our true treasure is, there we find we belong while in an alien world, there we find strength to live for him, there we find unity among believers as we enjoy God's church. Certainly as we read this letter, we should be encouraged. Many wonderful theological truths are addressed, many challenges are laid before God's people but, in the end, one truth shines out for which we are

to praise God: 'he has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ' (1:3).

Authorship

This commentary takes the position that the apostle Paul wrote this letter. However, the debates over authorship are very extensive indeed.¹ Those who speak against authorship by the apostle Paul give many different reasons for their position. Several reasons stand out. For example, it is said that some of the doctrine presented in Ephesians is not found elsewhere in Paul, especially some of the teaching about the church. It is also suggested that the Greek style seems different from other letters by Paul, for example, sentence length is greater in Ephesians and some vocabulary is used here that is not found in others of Paul's letters. Others make certain assumptions based on the similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. They say that the same writer would hardly have written both letters around the same time, and so Ephesians is probably later and that the writer uses some of Paul's theological ideas and words from Colossians. Some argue that the letter is too impersonal for Paul to have written it to a city which he had known well.

The defence of apostolic authorship is only needed when it is challenged. The book claims to be by the apostle Paul and it is almost certainly attested to earlier than any other New Testament book. It seems very likely that Clement of Rome, writing at the turn of the first century in his first epistle to the Corinthians, alludes to it in several places. Other very early leaders of the church, such as Ignatius, refer to verses from this epistle, and Polycarp (69–135), bishop of Smyrna, actually quotes Ephesians 4:26 and refers to it as Scripture. Irenaeus talks of Ephesians as being written by Paul. In fact there are numerous early sources (within the first 100–125 years of its writing) that state Ephesians was written by Paul.

¹ The format of this commentary series precludes such detailed examination of these preliminary issues. Two more recent extensive commentaries which have argued for Pauline authorship may be of interest. Both interact in detail with those who would take an alternative position. P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), and H.W. Hoehner, *Ephesians. An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

Linguistic differences are always difficult to assess. The fact of the matter is that Paul is an excellent writer, and can change his style even within those undisputed Pauline epistles. He also used a scribe from time to time, and even then we actually do not have a great deal of literature by him with which to compare styles in the first place!

The lack of personal references in a letter supposedly written to a church where Paul had lived for a lengthy period of time may well be explained by the fact that the letter was probably for a wider circulation among a number of other churches in Asia Minor. The specific designation 'In Ephesus' in verse 1 is not attested to by the earliest manuscripts but, anyway, may have referred to the largest of a number of churches to whom the letter was being carried. Nevertheless, there are many personal additions to this letter which would speak against pseudonymity. For example, the author knows of the 'faith' and the 'love for all the saints' for which this church is noted (1:15). He asks for prayers for himself (6:19). He knows these people have a very special concern for him as he sits in prison, which also suggests that he had a special relationship with them, even to the extent that he sends a friend to reassure them about his welfare (6:21ff).

Many of the great theological themes so obvious in the undisputed epistles of Paul are in fact present here very clearly. For example, the centrality of grace, the description of justification by faith, the work of Christ in reconciliation and the drawing together of Jew and Gentile, the description of those who are not Christ's and those who are, and even the use of the phrase we talked of earlier, 'in Christ', which is so much part of Paul's theology in, say, Romans, 1 Corinthians and Galatians.

From our point of view, we may also add that Scripture must be allowed to be Scripture. Arguments that suggest it is possible both to hold to the trustworthiness of God's Word and believe in pseudonymity are novel but, in the end, unpersuasive. All manuscripts attest to Paul's authorship in verse 1, very early writers all seem to accept his authorship and here we proceed on this basis.

Date of Ephesians

It is most likely that this letter was written from Rome, sometime in the period of AD 60–62. We know Paul was in prison when he wrote (3:1, 4:1, 6:20). While he had been imprisoned in Caesarea two or three years earlier, it seems that the Roman imprisonment, described in Acts 28, fits the facts better. The imprisonment in Rome was something akin to ‘house arrest’, and visitors like Tychicus or Timothy could come and go with reports for the churches of how Paul was coping, taking his epistles to the churches, and returning with news of how they were progressing. Acts 28:20 tells us that Paul was chained during this imprisonment, a detail also mentioned by Paul in 6:20. If this view is correct, and it is certainly held by the majority of commentators, then we may trace Paul’s journey to this point as recorded in Acts 21ff.

Paul travelled from Caesarea, where he met up with Philip and his daughters (Acts 21:8-14) and was warned not to go to Jerusalem. However, Paul did travel to Jerusalem where he was received ‘gladly’ and met up with James and the elders (v. 17 ff). After the crowds were organised against the apostle, he was arrested. He was allowed to address the crowds and gave his testimony (Acts 22). It was at the point of mentioning his call to the Gentiles (22:21) that the crowd rioted and Paul’s arrest was confirmed. The Jews planned to kill him (23:12), but the plot was discovered and Paul was taken to Felix. He was then taken to Rome (Acts 27) where he was imprisoned and from there it seems most likely he wrote this epistle, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians.

The Church at Ephesus

We read of the Church at Ephesus in Acts 18. The apostle Paul had been working in Corinth for some time and then moved on to Ephesus where he left Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:19). As was Paul’s habit on entering a new town, he went into the synagogue to talk to the Jews first. It appears that he was warmly received, at least for a while. However, he needed to get back to Antioch and so refused a request to stay on at Ephesus (18:20-22). In 18:24-28, there is an interesting aside about the development of the church in this city. Apollos, who

was a great teacher and well taught in the Scriptures, came to speak to the Jews. He clearly knew something of the Lord, but was taken aside by Priscilla and Aquila and taught the Christian faith more deeply. He was renowned for refuting the Jews in public debate and 'proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ' (v. 28). In Acts 19 Paul returned to Ephesus where he baptized some disciples 'into the name of the Lord Jesus'. These disciples appear to have been faithful Jews who were awaiting the coming of Christ, having been baptized under John the Baptist's ministry. Paul once again entered the synagogue where he spoke 'boldly for three months'. As so often happened, Paul was eventually forced out of the synagogue by some who refused to believe and so he moved to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. There he preached the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike. Specifically we are told in 19:10 that Paul was able to address people from the whole 'province of Asia'. Paul performed great miracles in the city and a great many people came to faith.

Magic and the gods at Ephesus

As in all the cities of the Roman Empire, many gods were worshipped in Ephesus, including Caesar himself. However, it was the goddess Artemis who dominated the city's religious affairs. People would travel from different parts of the empire to worship at her temple. So great was the cult of Artemis that local tradesmen made their living from selling silver shrines and images of her. It was this that, in the end, forced Paul to have to leave the city. The tradesmen rioted against him and his message. In 19:26 we see that it is Paul's attack on 'man-made gods' that incurs the anger of the townspeople. It is one thing for Christ to be preached as one of many choices of gods, but it is altogether another thing when the apostle preaches the truth that there is only one God.

Ephesus was also noted for its commitment to the practice of magic. One of the evidences of changed lives in the hearts of the new believers was that they came and 'openly confessed their evil deeds' (v. 18). Those who practised magic brought numerous, very valuable scrolls to be burned. The result of this was that 'the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power'.

Given this background, it is not surprising that the Apostle Paul emphasises, as he writes this letter to the Ephesians, that Christians have left the world of darkness and are now to be found 'in Christ'. He takes time to stress that, while the spiritual forces of evil are powerful, nevertheless Christians are safe 'in Christ' and are 'seated in the heavenly places' (Eph. 2:6). Lest the Ephesians feel that the cult of Artemis, or the practice of magic, or the power of other gods is overwhelming, Paul also emphasises the power that Christians have in the Lord (specially see 1:19-23; also 3:16; 3:18, 20; 6:10).

The Ephesian Elders

One further section of the account in Acts of Paul's work at Ephesus is worth mentioning here. In Acts 20:17 ff we read of Paul travelling via Miletus on his way to Jerusalem. From Miletus he sends word to the Ephesian elders asking them to come and see him. In his exhortation to the elders we learn something more about his ministry in the city. For example, he visited 'house to house'. He also mentions that he did not hesitate to preach anything that was necessary for the development of the Christian faith. In his exhortation the apostle urged the Ephesian elders to 'keep watch over' themselves and over the flock of which they were overseers (20:28). Paul was clearly afraid that this church will succumb to false teaching and to the 'savage wolves' who would seek to destroy the flock. He was concerned that, even from among the leaders, men would arise who would distort the truth and seek to draw people to follow them. Paul knew that he would not see these elders again (v. 25) and so he was urgent in his desire to ensure that they would uphold the truth and not succumb to any false teaching. No doubt, as he wrote his letter, he was concerned with similar matters. His emphasis on how they should live (Eph. 3-6), and on the power of God, and the need to follow the truth, all indicate his continuing concern for them.

Two Further Chapters In The Story

Sometime after Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, he wrote his first epistle to Timothy. This is of interest because

he asks Timothy to stay in Ephesus for a while and stop those leaders, who were already promoting 'false doctrines', from teaching. It seems that the apostle's early fears for the church, as expressed in Acts, had in some measure been realised.

Years after the letter to the Ephesians has been written and the apostle Paul had been martyred in Rome, the Apostle John was given a letter in a vision from the Lord Jesus Christ to this church at Ephesus. It is recorded for us in Revelation 2:1-7. It is interesting to reflect back on the epistle and on the account in Acts and see what has happened in a period of some 25 years or so. Jesus begins in Revelation 2:1-3 by encouraging the church. As Paul expected, they have endured many hardships, yet in spite of this, they have not grown weary. No doubt, following Paul's early concern for them and Timothy's later admonitions, Christ is able to comment favourably in this letter that they 'cannot tolerate wicked men'. They have 'tested' people as leaders and have found out those who were false. Not only that, but the Ephesian Christians continued to hate evil practices (v. 6). This suggests that they were continuing to confront the battle with magic and with the cult of Artemis. Certainly there is much in this letter to encourage this church that has survived its first quarter century reasonably well. However, Jesus does pick up on a problem. They have lost their 'first love' (2:4). What appears to have happened is that, in their constant battle against those who were attacking the faith and those who were seeking to lead them astray, their initial enthusiasm and desire to be missionaries to the world around them had dissipated. Jesus warns them that they should repent and go back to doing things in the way they did at the beginning of their church's life (v. 5). The church was clearly in danger of dying out simply because, though theologically orthodox, it had lost its missionary purpose. Christ's warning at the end of this letter is serious enough, but he also makes a promise to them that if they persevere they will indeed enjoy 'the paradise of God'.