

“This is a Great Mystery” – A Study of the book of Ephesians

Week 1: Background and Introduction

Context is important. We’ve seen this to be true in our daily lives and in current events. Imagine there’s a headline that says, “Man pushes child onto sidewalk.” That would certainly grab people’s attention, but it likely wouldn’t be the whole story. Yes, perhaps the man just got angry; but more likely would be that he was trying to save the child from oncoming traffic or a falling apparatus.

Context matters. In sermons, it’s always helpful (necessary, even) for the preacher to understand the context in which something is written. For instance, in the Gospels, one must understand to whom Jesus is speaking, where he is in Israel, and what surrounding events motivate his actions.

It is the same way in every book of the Bible; context is important. So, before we dive into the verses of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, it will be helpful to understand things like what kind of people Paul is writing to; where Paul is when he writes his letter; and what would motivate him to say what he says. We find all this information in the book of Acts, chapters 18 to 20.

Information about the city itself

- Ephesus was the most important city in western Asia Minor
 - Had a harbor (very important in those days)
 - Crossroads of a number of trade routes
- First-century population estimates range from 33,000 to 250,000
 - I honestly don’t know how the estimates can be so drastic, especially considering the censuses that took place in the first century
 - Even with the lower estimates, Ephesus was still up there as one of the largest cities in Asia Minor
- Along with Rome, Corinth, and Alexandria, it was known as one of the foremost urban centers of the Roman empire
 - In the United States, we might think of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami of being these types of cities—lots of commercialism, lots of trade, known around the world, etc.
- It was also home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis, who was known as the goddess of fertility

Paul’s Interactions with Ephesus

- **Read Acts 18:19-22** (This is at the end of what’s called Paul’s Second Missionary Journey).
 - As was his custom, Paul went to the synagogue in vs. 19. What was he guaranteed to find there?
 - Already in these verses, what do you see in the relationship between the Ephesians and Paul?

After spending some time there (not sure how long), Paul went back to Jerusalem and then to Antioch, which marks the end of his Second Journey. Verse 23 marks the start of his Third Missionary Journey.

- **Read Act 18:24-28**
 - Notice how Paul’s mode of operations paid off in these verses:
 - Before he left Ephesus, he identified Priscilla and Aquila as faithful leaders.
 - When he left, they remained there as helpers, should any dispute or question arise.
 - Apollos came preaching vigorously from Alexandria (he was a smart cookie).
 - Priscilla and Aquila help Apollos reach a better understanding and he, in turn, becomes a missionary in Achaia (peninsula on which Corinth and Athens are situated).

What questions do you have about Acts 18?

- **Read Acts 19:1-10**

- We get a pretty broad spectrum of responses to Paul's message in Ephesus here:
 - First, what was the response in vs. 1-7?
 - What about in vs. 8-9a?
 - Finally, what happened in vs. 9b-10?
- A reminder that, even though we won't find much admonition in Paul's letter to the Ephesians (like in 1 Corinthians or Galatians), there were still people who opposed him.
- Also note that this is the longest that Paul stayed in any city during his journeys—three months plus two years (verses 8 and 10). Later, we'll hear Paul say that he was with the Ephesians for three years (Acts 20:31). According to ancient Jewish counting, that works out. We'll touch on the implication of this long stay when we discuss chapter 20.

- **Read Acts 19:11-20**

- More responses to God's Word!
- Why might we not expect these kinds of things to happen in our lifetime?

In verses 23-41, Luke tells of a riot that took place because the gospel of Christ was threatening the livelihood of Ephesian silversmiths, who made their money from making silver shrines of Artemis. It shows how commercialism tends to respond to the gospel. The city clerk, of all people, quiets the crowd, reasons with them, and dismisses them. Perhaps the account is meant to show how God can use secular officials to protect Christians from harm.

What questions do you have about Acts 19?

Paul's final interaction with the Ephesians (before writing his letter)

In 20:1-17, Luke recounts the footsteps of Paul between his interactions with the Ephesians. Leading up to our next (and final) section, Paul had sent for the Ephesian elders (men he would have trained and appointed during his three-year stay). He avoided going to Ephesus because he wanted to get to Jerusalem in time for the day of Pentecost. Still, he made a point to speak to these men one more time. In these verses, you will hear the epitome of a pastor's heart. As I read the verses, jot down a few things that make these words so filled with care and love for the Ephesians. Also make note of any questions you have from these verses; we will simply discuss your questions and comments.

- **Read Acts 20:18-38**

- What things that Paul says stand out to you as caring and loving?

What questions do you have about Acts 20?

Paul writes to the Ephesians

- It's likely that Paul wrote Ephesians around the same time as Colossians, around AD 60, while he was on house arrest in Rome (not the imprisonment that led to his death).
 - For reference, Paul's first interaction with the Ephesians could have been as early as AD 51-52; his other recorded touches were probably somewhere around AD 56-57.
- Most of Paul's letters address a particular error or have a very specific purpose; Ephesians is not that way. He simply wanted to reiterate what he had already taught them over and over and over again. He wanted them to be safe from the savage wolves who would come to try to deceive them.

Things to watch for through our study

- Grace – this word is used 12 times
- Peace – this word is used 7 times
- Everything is centered on Christ
 - This might be obvious, but you will see that all of Paul's points have to do with a relation to Christ, whether it's "from Christ," "of Christ," "in Christ," "to Christ," "through Christ," or "with Christ."
 - "In Christ" is the most prevalent of these throughout the letter. We will keep a tally of how many times the phrase shows up.
- Mystery
 - Used somewhat sparingly, but enough to create a thread throughout the letter that is worth tracing (hence the title of this class)

Very basic outline

- There's a very clear line of demarcation where Paul changes gears, in a way. It's marked by a doxology and "Amen" at the end of chapter 3.
 - The first half of the letter (chapters 1-3) is very doctrinal and focuses on justification i.e., what God has done for us.
 - The second half keeps the first half in view but turns the focus to what we now do in our lives in thankful living for what God has done.
 - In this way, you could say that the letter is sermonic.
 - Many sermons will follow the pattern of justification first, sanctification second.

Take-Home Activity

Before we end, I have one more question for you to either answer right now (depending on time) OR think about over the week. Obviously, this would encourage you to read Ephesians at home over this next week (a chapter a day would work great). Pick one of the following:

- What is one verse, section, or doctrine in Ephesians that I have trouble understanding?

OR

- What is one specific verse, section, or doctrine I hope we spend a lot of time discussing during our study of Ephesians?

Closing Prayer (CW 555 – For All Your Saints, O Lord, v. 1-2)

**For all your saints, O Lord, Who strove in you to live,
Who followed you, obeyed, adored, Our grateful hymn receive.**

**For all your saints, O Lord, Who strove in you to die,
Who counted you their great reward, Accept our thankful cry. Amen.**