

“Household of Faith:
An Introduction to the Letter to the Ephesians”
Sermon Series on the Book of Ephesians #1
(Acts 18:18-19:10; Eph. 1:1,2)
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Introduction.

Back in 1991, it was announced that the Defense Department was going to close many of the military bases around the country. The resulting protests from senators and congressmen at times were laughable. Representatives stood in line to make their best case as to why little Fort Story in Virginia Beach was absolutely essential to national security.

However, the human face of the story helped you understand it was no laughing matter. In many instances the military bases that were mentioned for closing were the primary reason for the existence of small towns that had grown up around them. To close one of these bases was in effect to shut down a town, or at least force its non-military inhabitants to find a new way to make a living.

What do you do when your economic security is threatened? How do you cope when your way of life is challenged? Think of the questions you would ask if news came that Wake Forest University or one of the two hospitals in our community was closing its doors, or that your own company was filing for Chapter 11. Everything would change, and your sense of security would be pretty fragile.

That was the kind of change which was occurring in the city of Ephesus at the end of the 1st century AD. Ephesus was an important center of trade on the Aegean Sea, but its influence was fading for one simple reason. Its harbor which was the heart of its commerce was beginning to silt up, and eventually this would threaten the very existence of the city as a seaport. In fact, if you travel to southwest Turkey today and walk among the ruins of Ephesus, you will find yourself 7 miles from the coast! Not exactly beachfront property! ¹

It is into this setting that the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in Ephesus, and I believe there is a great deal we can learn from our study of this remarkable book of the Bible. I also think you’ll discover that Ephesians is a very relevant and modern book for our times. It talks about how to live for Christ when your voice is in the minority and the culture becomes increasingly hostile to what you believe.

As we begin our study today, there are three matters I want to briefly note by way of introduction: 1) the city of Ephesus; 2) the author of the letter; and 3) the message of the book.

I. The City of Ephesus.

Ephesus was the capital of Asia Minor in what is today southwest Turkey, and it was the political and commercial center of a large and prosperous region. The city was on the Cayster River not far from the Aegean Coast, and it had a large and thriving port. Therefore, it became the chief link for communication and commerce between Rome, the capital of the Empire, and the provinces East. Merchants flocked to it, and it became a melting pot of nations and people groups. Greek and Roman, Jew and Gentile all mingled freely in its streets, and there was a lot of ethnic diversity.

The city of Ephesus had a population of 250,000 people, which is a little larger than Winston-Salem. It was a place of learning and knowledge, just like our city is. It was home to one of the great libraries in the ancient world, and you can still see the ruins of the library of Celsus today. It was one of the largest libraries in antiquity, and it housed between 12,000 and 15,000 scrolls, which was considered enormous for the time.

Ephesus was also known for its pagan worship. One of the 7 wonders of the ancient world was located there – the temple of the goddess Diana, who is also sometimes called Artemis in the Bible. She was at the center of an ancient fertility cult that enjoyed a great deal of popularity throughout the ancient near-east. The temple measured 425 feet by 220 feet by 60 feet, which is about 4 times the size of the Parthenon in Greece.

Inside the temple stood the statue of Diana, which was believed to have come down from heaven. The temple was served by hundreds of priestesses, who were actually temple prostitutes, and it became a significant tourist attraction and a destination for pilgrims from all over the world. In Paul's day, the temple was also a Roman depository for a large treasury, so it was, in effect, the bank of Asia.

In addition to all of this, Ephesus boasted the largest of all the Greek open-air theaters, and it could hold up to 25,000 people! That's bigger than the Joel Coliseum. There was also a concert hall, called an Odeum, which could seat 1,400 people. Music was performed there, and lectures were presented. Art and culture played a major role in the city.

Ephesus was one of the great cities of the ancient world, and it ranked only behind Rome, Athens and Alexandria in importance. It was a center of commerce and culture for the entire region of Asia Minor. Therefore, it's not surprising to discover that God had a heart for the city, and He wanted to plant a church there.

II. The Author of the Letter.

In the passage, we've read together this morning in Acts 18, we note that the apostle Paul went to Ephesus during his 2nd missionary journey, and for a brief time he preached the gospel to the people there. In chapter 19 we also read that Paul returned to Ephesus during his 3rd missionary journey, and he stayed there for over 2 years. This was the longest time the apostle stayed anywhere during all his missionary travels.

Over the course of Paul's time in Ephesus, God did some amazing things through his ministry, and many people came to know the Lord. He helped bring a corrective to their understanding of the gospel, which included a renewed emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. He was a gifted teacher and an able defender of the faith, and he presented the claims of Christ in convincing and compelling ways to both Jews and Greeks. And God did miracles through him, so that when handkerchiefs and work aprons he used in his trade of tentmaking were taken to the sick their illnesses were cured and they were delivered of demonic spirits (19:11,12).

One of the great scenes in the NT occurs later in Acts 19 which gives us an insight into the personality of Paul. It takes place when the silversmith Demetrius stirred up the craftsmen of the city and rallied the people against Paul and his preaching of the gospel. When Demetrius suggested that the apostle was causing people to turn away from the temple of Artemis, the patron goddess of city. The people were furious and began to shout, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" They seized Gaius and Aristarchus, two of Paul's traveling companions, and they rushed into the theater. There they carried on their vocal protest and demonstrated for 2 hours!

Paul wanted to appear before the angry crowd, but the other disciples wouldn't let him. I can just imagine Paul saying, "Let me at 'em! There's a huge crowd in there. This is a Billy Graham Crusade waiting to happen!" But his friends said, "No." (Thanks be to God for wise laypeople who know when to tell a pastor his idea isn't a good one!) Eventually, a city official had to come and quiet the crowd down and disperse the mob before things really got out of control.

Most scholars believe that Paul wrote this letter during his imprisonment in Rome around 60 AD toward the end of his life. Paul could have begun the letter with a list of his many accomplishments or even a reminder of what he had personally endured to bring the gospel to Asia in the first place. But Paul doesn't do this. Instead, he simply introduces himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."

One of the most tender scenes in all the Bible is when Paul says farewell on the shore of Miletus to the elders from Ephesus who had come to see him off in Acts 20. They all shed tears and exchanged many long embraces. It's a picture of the

bond of fellowship and love that God establishes when He knits the heart of a church's leaders together. I wish we could experience that here in our church.

III. The Message of the Book.

Put yourself into the context of this letter. Imagine yourself in this setting. You're a new Christian who has embraced the Good News of Jesus Christ, and recently you've become a part of this new little Christian community. You live in a city that is uncertain about its economic future because of the problems with the silt in the port. Your way of life may be in jeopardy, and your economic security is threatened. On top of that, you've become a part of this new fringe religious group which some of the people in town don't like. You wonder where you really belong now, and you wonder if you even have a future there. Just what does it mean to call yourself a follower of Christ in a difficult context like this?

It is questions like these to which the apostle Paul addresses himself in this letter. The message of the epistle focuses on what God did through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and what He continues to do now through His Holy Spirit to build a new spiritual community. It's a household of faith in the midst of a secular world. That sounds a lot like the context we live in today.

Paul explains how we're supposed to demonstrate by the way we live our lives the reality of this new thing God has done in us, and he does it in 4 different ways. First, he says that as Christians we do it by the unity and diversity of our common life together. Second, we do it by the purity of our lives and the way we love people every day. Third, we do it by the mutual submissiveness and care in our relationships both at home and at work. And finally, we do it by the way we engage in spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness which are opposed to God.

John Stott once wrote, "The whole letter is a magnificent combination of Christian doctrine and Christian duty, Christian faith and Christian life, what God has done through Christ and what we must be and do as a result. And its central theme is 'God's new society'"²

Conclusion.

Dr. John Mackay was a former missionary to South America, and later he served as the president of Princeton Seminary. He once wrote, "To this book [of Ephesians] I owe my life." Mackay went on to explain how in July 1903 when he was 14 years old his life was changed forever as a result of reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and he had a deeply spiritual experience in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Here is his own account of what happened to him: "I saw a new world [when I read Ephesians] Everything was new.... I had a new outlook, new experiences,

new attitudes toward other people. Jesus Christ became the center of everything. . . . I had been quickened; I was really alive [for the first time in my life].”³ All this happened when he simply read the book of Ephesians. It was a Holy Spirit moment.

Dr. Mackay never got over his fascination for this epistle. When he was invited to deliver the Croall Lectures at Edinburgh University in January 1948, he chose Ephesians as his topic. In his lectures, he referred to the book as the greatest, maturest, and the most relevant and modern of all of Paul’s letters. He said that here the apostle explains God’s order of things in the kingdom of God to people who lived in the Roman Empire at a time that was marked by social disintegration. And he showed how the message of the Gospel promises community in a world of disunity, reconciliation in place of alienation, and peace instead of war.⁴

I don’t know if you and I will be as profoundly affected by studying Ephesians as John Mackay was, but on this Pentecost Sunday I pray that all of us will come away changed as a result of our time in this letter from the pen of Paul as we study it over the course of this summer. I look forward to studying this great book of the Bible with you in the weeks ahead. May it help us become a household of faith. Amen.

¹ Adapted from a sermon Allan Poole preached at Blacknall Presbyterian Church in Durham, NC in 1991. Unpublished.

² John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p. 25,26.

³ John Mackay, *God’s Order: The Ephesian Letter and this Present Time*, p. 21.

⁴ Adapted from John R.W. Stott, *Op. cit.*, pp. 15,16.