

## Lesson 1: God's Glory through the Church

**Introduction:** Blueprints matter. When a building goes up, you can be sure that a lot of people have spent a lot of time looking over computer screens and blue paper so that they know where things go and where they shouldn't. A building will only be as good as its construction plans. If the measurements are off, if the design is flawed, or if the instructions aren't followed to the centimeter the building is in trouble, because a building is only as good as its plan.

Ephesians gives us God's blueprint for our age. It shows us what God is doing, and what he desires to do, and perhaps most importantly, what our role in that plan is. Many Christians become frustrated and confused by what God is doing, because they don't understand what his plan is. Many Christians miss out on God's plan for their life because they have no idea what God's plan is.

So take a minute and fill out on your sheet why God chose to allow the sun to come up this morning. What is his plan for the ages, and what part do you play in that plan?

### Recipients

Some debate whether the book of Ephesians was intended solely for the Ephesians, or if it was a circular letter to several churches, the most prominent of which was Ephesus. This possibility is included as a footnote in the ESV, NIV, and NASB. There are several reasons for this:

1. A few very old copies of the New Testament lack "in Ephesus" in 1:1.
2. One early heretic (Marcion) referred to this letter as the letter to the Laodiceans.<sup>1</sup>
3. Paul doesn't greet anyone from Ephesus at the end of the letter, which is unusual for him.
4. Paul doesn't seem to be addressing one specific issue as he often does in his letters. Normally Paul is seeking to correct heresy (Galatians, Colossians), say thank you (Philippians), introduce himself (Romans), or answer questions (1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians). But in Ephesians Paul does none of that. This letter appears to be a broad picture of what the Christian life is all about.

But in the end, there are good reasons for maintaining that this letter was meant for Ephesus.

1. The vast, vast majority of manuscripts have the phrase in it.
2. The sentence becomes awkward if there is no destination put there "to the saints who are and are faithful"?
3. Some suggest that a space was intentionally left for other cities, but no other city names were included, and the manuscripts that don't have the city name still have "To Ephesus" written at the top.
4. Even the old manuscripts that don't include "At Ephesus" in Ephesians 1:1 still have as the title on the top of the page "To Ephesus."

For these reasons, it is best to view this letter as written to the church at Ephesus. We will now briefly discuss Paul's dealings with that church and when it was that Paul wrote the letter.

### Historical Situation

---

<sup>1</sup> Some speculate on this basis that the "Letter to the Laodiceans" Paul referred to in Colossians 4:16.

Paul first visited the city of Ephesus on his second missionary journey, which took place around A.D. 49-51 (Acts 18:18-20). On his third missionary journey, he spent almost three years there (Acts 19), and then after visiting Greece made one final stop on his (A.D. 52-57) way back to Jerusalem and gave a very impassioned speech to the elders of the Ephesian church at the city of Miletus (Acts 20:17-38). After delivering that speech, Paul travels to Jerusalem and is arrested, eventually traveling to Rome to appeal his case. This is the end of Acts' description of Paul's travels.

At several places in Ephesians, Paul reminds us that he is writing from a prison (Ephesians 3:1; 6:20). Although Paul was in prison on several occasions, the most likely candidate for this imprisonment is his imprisonment in Rome. Paul was in prison long enough to have written this letter, and had enough freedom to send it out. Much of this letter parallels his thinking in Colossians, and for this reason many people think they were written about the same time – during Paul's Roman imprisonment. This would make the letter of Ephesians one of, if not the last letter Paul wrote to a church. (Paul would later write 1, 2 Timothy and Titus, but they were written to individuals and not churches).

From Acts 19 we learn that the city of Ephesus was deeply idolatrous and deeply superstitious. The making of idols was big business, so much so that the idol makers feared that they would lose too much business from the spread of Christianity (at this time called "the Way"). We learn that there was a lot of witchcraft

### **Structure**

Ephesians breaks evenly into two halves, Ephesians 1-3 and Ephesians 4-6. The first half of the book has one single imperative (command), and that is to remember something (2:11). The first half of Ephesians focuses on doctrinal truths Christians should know and remember. The second half of the letter begins with the a strong call to action, a call to action this is supported by 40 commands in three chapters. 4:1 sets up this interplay well when it says:

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,"

These two words sum up well the first and second halves of the book: the call of the believer (what God has made him in Christ) and the walk of the believer (how that call should change the way he lives). Paul always unites doctrine and application. For him, truth will affect the way you live, and he's not going to tell you how to live unless there is some doctrinal reason behind it (Titus 1:1).

### **1-3 The Call of the Believer**

- 1:3-14**      **A hymn of praise for God's blessings**
- 1:15-23**    **A prayer for spiritual understanding**
- 2:1-10**      **A spiritual history lesson**
- 2:11-22**    **Spiritual unity in the church**
- 3:1-13**      **Paul's mission to the Gentiles**
- 3:14-21**    **A prayer for spiritual strength**

### **4-6 The Walk of the Believer**

- 4:1-16**      **Live out your calling in the church**
- 4:17-32**    **Live out your calling in your conduct**
- 5:1-14**      **Live out your calling in purity**
- 5:15-22**    **Live out your calling in your attitude**
- 5:23-6:9**    **Live out your calling in your relationships**
- 6:10-24**    **Live out your calling in spiritual warfare**

**Theme:** So what is Ephesians about? In Paul's opening benediction he mentions three times "the purpose of God's will" (1:5, 9, 11). In the third chapter, Paul describes his function as an apostle by three times using the word "mystery" (3:1-5, 8-10). Ephesians is the blueprint God has given to show us what God is doing in the world and how we ought to live in light of that.

So what is this mystery that Paul has been tasked to preach?

*9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

*This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (3:6)*

God's desire is to unite all things in Christ. This will ultimately happen when he is given his kingdom and the whole world becomes reconciled back to him. But this happens now as a taste of that future glory in the church. Former bitter enemies, Jew and Gentile, are now made one through their changed status of being "in Christ."

Why would God do all of this?

*so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (3:10)*

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (3:20-21)*

But what does this mean for us? How do we as a church bring God glory? Ephesians 4:1-3 shows us that we do this by living together in community together as we help each other grow and develop 4:15-16. Paul realizes that God has so designed it that growth in Christ is impossible apart from a community of believers. Paul then takes the rest of the book to outline what that change should look like.

Why did the sun come up this morning? The sun came up this morning so that God could bring himself glory through the church. Sometimes this is hard to believe. It's hard to believe that a small congregation of 35 people meeting on a Sunday morning is more important in God's eyes than a presidential briefing in the pentagon. But what God

Your mission (and you had better accept it) is to be a part of what God is doing in the world through the church. You do this by joining a church, being united with that church, growing in that church, and serving in that church to the glory of God.

### **10:10-10:25 Discussion**

#### **Discussion Questions**

*How clear a picture do most people have of God's plan for their lives? What do they understand? What do they not understand? Why is this?*

*In what ways does having a clear understanding of God's plan for your life make it easier to live for Christ?*

*How does walking worthy of our calling protect from the extremes of legalism (relating to God as though following a list of rules is everything) and license (not caring about God's commands)?*

*"Paul always unites doctrine and application." Why don't we? What happens if we don't?*

*"Growth in Christ is impossible apart from a community of believers." Why is this difficult to accept? What does it mean practically?*

*"It's hard to believe that a small congregation of 35 people meeting on a Sunday morning is more important in God's eyes than a presidential briefing in the pentagon." Would you agree or disagree with this statement? Why is this the case?*