

Ephesians: Paul's Time Capsule

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Bible scholars are often certain that they have a total grasp on “the truth” – however, the simple fact that they are often at odds with one another betrays the reality that too often these scholars have used only their unrenewed intellect (mind – Rom. 12:2) to arrive at “doctrines,” “creeds” and “theologies” they then falsely claim encapsulates “the truth.” Paul’s letter to Ephesus presents such a case. Some scholars, because many ancient and important manuscripts omit “at Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1) and because the letter addresses no controversy and confronts no specific local issue, insist that the letter is a general letter to be circulated to all believers and was not meant for Ephesus (or even Asia Minor) alone. Some have even used the differences in content and style to question and challenge Paul’s authorship of the letter! One scholar saw it as “an attempt [by a later disciple] to sum up and to recommend to a later generation the apostle’s teaching.” (M. Barth, *Anchor Bible*, p. 57, as quoted in *New Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale, 1962, p. 336) This quote provides an insight into the usual work of Bible scholars – they are often *half* right! If we look more carefully at the whole of the New Testament, we find that the letter to the Ephesians is **Paul’s** attempt to sum up and recommend to a later generation his teaching. When we discover the real truth behind this letter, which is considered by almost all to be “the highest mountain peak” of the New Testament, we may well be surprised at the depth of Paul’s concern for those who lived in the later generation(s) he was writing for.

Consider the overall structure and theme of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. The book divides neatly into two parts: the first three chapters (the chapter and verse divisions were not part of the original letter but are a much later addition) deal with the believer’s *position* in Christ and the last three chapters deal with the believer’s *responsibilities* or *practice* in Christ. The first three chapters reverberate with the phrase “in Christ” (or some equivalent): we are “blessed...with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places *in Christ*,” chosen “*in Him* before the foundation of the world,” adopted “as sons *by Jesus Christ*,” “accepted *in the Beloved*,” redeemed “*in Him*...through His blood” (Eph. 1:3-7), given an inheritance *in Him*, sealed *in Him* “with the Holy Spirit of promise,” (Eph. 1:11-13), made “alive together *with Christ*,” raised up together and made to “sit together in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*,” (Eph. 2:5-6), created *in Christ Jesus*, (Eph. 2:10), brought near to God *in Christ* by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13), fitted and built together *in Christ* as a holy temple and dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:21-22), made fellow heirs and partakers of God’s promise *in Christ* (Eph. 3:6) and given boldness and access to God with confidence *in Christ*. (Eph. 3:12) Paul uses this phrase and idea more in these first three chapters than it is used in any other New Testament book. Why? What is driving Paul to hammer away at this theme?

It helps to know the circumstances under which Paul wrote this letter. The most reliable scholars have concluded that Paul wrote this letter while under house arrest in Rome for two years, a segment of Paul’s life that is recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. (Acts 28:30-31) As such, Paul is under no illusion that he is guaranteed to survive this trial and takes this opportunity to say what still burns in his heart and spirit to the beloved Ephesians. The letter to the Ephesians, then, is an expanded form of his farewell address to the *Ephesian* elders delivered at Miletus some three years earlier – an insight confirmed by comparing the overall message of Paul’s letter with his farewell address. (see especially Acts 20:32)

Paul as Prophet

Let us keep in mind that this man is also Saul, the master over the execution of Stephen (Acts 7:58) whose miraculous conversion (Acts 9:3) and subsequent transformation enabled him to immediately confound “the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ (Messiah).” (Acts 9:22) About seven years after his conversion, Saul had a miraculous vision that he probably shared with the Jerusalem “pillars” who were of “reputation” (see Gal. 2:2, 9) but never boasted of until pressured to do so (some fourteen years later) by the reluctance of some Corinthians to believe that he was as much, perhaps even more, of an apostle of Christ Jesus (to the Corinthians, at the least) than were “the most eminent apostles.” (2 Cor. 11:5) Paul was “caught up to the third heaven” – whether in or apart from the body he could not say (a question the carnal, immature Corinthians would consider important – see 1 Cor. 15:35-36) and “heard inexpressible words, which is not lawful for a man to utter” and considered what he heard to be an “abundance of revelations.” (2 Cor. 12:4, 7) We do not have a concise, complete description of these revelations but let us consider a few of Paul’s prophetic insights:

- “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” (1 Tim. 4:1-3)

- “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

- “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

- “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:51-52)

- “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” (1 Ths. 4:15-17)

- “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling way comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” (2 Ths. 2:3-4)

- Peter, after relating that all things would one day be dissolved and replaced with new heavens and a new earth, exhorts his readers: “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:11-13)

With this often under-emphasized aspect of Paul’s prophetic abilities in view, it is understandable that carnal “theologians” might question the authenticity of Paul’s authorship of the letter to the Ephesians. Paul’s usual inclusion of what Bible scholars like to call eschatology (the study of prophesied end-times events) is absent from Ephesians. Or is it? Let us consider one more prophetic word given by Paul and recognize that it is extremely pertinent to this question precisely because it was spoken to the *Ephesian* elders at Miletus.

“For I know this, that after my departure [after I leave you and after my death] savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse [corrupted, misleading] things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (Acts 20:29-32)

Prophecy Fulfilled

Even before Paul’s death, this prophecy was beginning to come to pass. Some five years after Paul says this to the Ephesian elders, he writes to Timothy (in *Ephesus!*), “...some have rejected faith and a good conscience and...suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan, so that they may learn not to blaspheme.” (1 Tim. 1:19-20) In another five years, Paul would write to Timothy (who is still

or again in Ephesus), “But shun profane and vain [empty] babblings [chatter], for they will increase [lead] to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some. ...Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm... You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words.” (2 Tim. 2:16-18, 4:14-15) Three “savage wolves” named Hymenaeus, Alexander and Philetus had already come into Ephesus and were causing damage to the flock there.

Let us note carefully how the New Testament adheres to God’s standards for prophets. The Lord said to Moses, “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.” (Dt. 18:22) Because the first part of Paul’s prophesy (the “savage wolves” who “come in” from somewhere else – Acts 20:29) is recorded as fulfilled in the New Testament, we can be assured that the second part (the men who rise up “from among yourselves” – Acts 20:30) was also fulfilled, even though its fulfillment is not recorded in the New Testament. The New Testament does not even record the death of Paul, let alone events that occurred after his death – as his own prophecy foretold it would be. (Acts 20:29) But this prophecy was stunningly fulfilled with precision.

From among the elders (Greek, *presbuteros* [4245]), men who took the term “bishop” or “overseer” (Greek, *episkopon* [1985]) and turned it into a position of clerical lordship, spoke of their right to stand in the place of Christ and God in relation to the local assembly (Ignatius of Antioch – died c. 110 A.D.), and drew followers after themselves. Early church history is thus dotted with groups that called themselves Marcionites, Montanists, Novatians, Catholics, Spirituals, etc. after the man or idea (whether error or truth) they followed. (See 1 Cor. 1:12 for the earliest recorded instance of this tendency.) One reason the bishops arose was to combat the influence of the “savage wolves”! But the “cure” was worse than the disease as men stepped in to do a work the Lord Himself could and would do better if the men were not standing in the way!

Jesus said to the ekklesia of *Ephesus* through the apostle John, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars, and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” (Rev. 2:2-6)

The connections between this letter and Paul’s prophecy are substantial. Paul’s warnings – three years of diligent, tearful exhortation (Acts 20:31) – had prepared the Ephesians to labor patiently (Tit. 3:8, etc.), to expel wicked people from their midst (1 Cor. 5:12-13) and to test and expose false apostles. (2 Cor. 11:13, 20, etc.) But even though the Ephesians hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, they failed to see that when the bishop arose from the ranks of the elders and took on roles and functions of headship reserved for Christ alone, in spite of the intent to combat schismatic error and preserve visible unity of the Christians, he was still a Nicolaitan drawing disciples away from their first love – Christ Himself – and after himself and/or his own peculiar doctrine or practice. It was “while men slept,” Jesus said, that the enemy, the devil sowed his sons, the tares, among the wheat, the sons of the kingdom. (Mt. 13:25, 38-39) And it is the personal Lordship of Christ that both Peter and Jude prophesied that the end-time apostates

would deny. (2 Pet. 2:1, Jude 4 – note the use of *despotes* [1203] rather than the usual *kurios* [2962] for “Lord” in these prophecies.) This is the main root of the apostasy, the falling away from the faith that occurs before Christ’s return!

Apostasy

Paul’s usual inclusion of eschatology is not absent from his letter to the Ephesians – it is the driving force and motivation that girds up this towering, highest mountain peak of the New Testament. But Paul is not using his usual, straight-forward prophetic method because he is not addressing a current, local error – he is addressing, even undermining, a future, world-wide error, the great apostasy, the falling away from the faith that occurs before the great and dreadful day of Christ and God (2 Ths. 2:3), an error that he knows he only foresees in part. (1 Cor. 13:9) Walking what may have been thin lines between speaking from genuine revelation and avoiding ignorance or presumption and not going too far and speaking things not lawful for him to divulge, Paul is inspired to present his highest and most glorious presentation of the truth because it is these parallel truths – the believer’s genuine *position* in Christ and the believer’s *responsibility* to obediently “walk worthy of the calling with which we are called.” (Eph. 4:1) – that are the remedy, the prescription, the cure to overcome the poisonous effects of the apostasy. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is God’s “time capsule” for the people of the end times who have ears to hear what God is saying.

Thus the first half of Paul’s letter focuses on the believer’s heavenly possessions – adoption, redemption, inheritance, power, life, grace, citizenship, love – all *in Christ* – and has no imperative commands. The focus is on what God has divinely given us. But the second half includes at least thirty-five imperative commands (roughly equal to the number of times Paul uses the phrase or idea of *in Christ* in this letter) that speak of our responsibility to live up to our individual calling in Christ.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” (Jn. 10:27-28) Here we see the same divisions as is present in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians – Jesus promises great and powerful things to those who obey the responsibility He places on them. In this central, essential great and precious promise, He knows His sheep, He gives them eternal life so they will never perish and no one will be able to snatch them out of His hand. But this is only the “heads” side of the coin – the “tails” side is that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him. The “church,” the apostasy, reduces this promise to a doctrine that if one believes *it* (the piece of information) to be true, then one has eternal life – even though the notion that anyone can hear the Shepherd for themselves is ridiculed and the idea that Christ personally leads His sheep apart from the “church” is called heresy and error of the worst kind – these who know this “truth” are “saved.” The devil knows that the “heads” side of this coin is a finished work (Jn. 19:30) and that he cannot touch or change that – so he focuses his work on the “tails” side, deceiving the sheep away from listening to and following Christ the Shepherd. The devil knows that he cannot snatch anyone from Christ’s hand so he uses exalted “bishops” (“pastors,” “apostles,” “prophets,” talking heads under all kinds of labels) to speak misleading “doctrines” (that truly come from demonic spirits – 1 Tim. 4:1) that lure the believer away from his or her first love, Christ Himself, and after the “truths” or “unity” of following the “bishop” who scratches his followers’ ears “just right.” (2 Tim. 4:3-4) A more clever and subtle deception is very difficult to imagine.

Given the depth of Paul's thirty-five instructions in his letter to the Ephesians, it is impossible here to list out Paul's complete strategy for overcoming the apostasy he foresaw. But we can certainly list some of the larger ones and leave the diligent, astutely "noble Berean" (Acts 17:11) to scour the letter for the ones more applicable to his or her own life.

- First and foremost, we need a more accurate knowledge of all that God has given us in Christ Jesus. Or as Paul prayed for the Ephesians: "That God would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:16-19) The one who has Christ living in his or her heart who carefully listens to and follows Him will not be deceived by the slick hucksters and talking heads of the apostasy. (Eph. 4:14)

- We need *all* leadership of Christ's ekklesia to be an outflow of and from the grace (power) of God that flows from our unity and union with God in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 4:4-7) Each gracing or gifting must be willing to submit one to another or, as even many scholars have noted, the governing (leading) of the people of Christ is local and collegiate – not hierarchical and certainly not delegated nor authoritarian (Nicolaitan)! (Eph. 4:11-16)

- We must no longer live in any darkness but live as children of light. (Eph. 4:17, 5:8)

- We must recognize that Christ intends to present us – His body and bride, His ekklesia, temple and house – to Himself "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that we should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:27) We must also recognize that while the provision and power for such a transformation is all His, the wife of the Lamb has the responsibility to clothe herself in righteous acts. (Rev. 19:7-8)

- We must bring all our relationships under His headship. (Eph. 5:21, etc.)

- We must "be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might [and] put on the whole armor of God [Christ Jesus Himself – Rom. 13:14], that we may be able to stand against the wiles (schemings) of the devil." (Eph. 6:10-11)

These are the main strategies by which we may escape the great falling away from the faith, the apostasy, the "church," and be the spotless bride of Christ ready for Him at His return. (Eph. 5:27, see also 2 Pet. 3:14-16, Phlp. 2:15, Col. 1:21-23)

Footnotes

As we close out this study, let us note two other unusual facets regarding Ephesus in the New Testament. First, it was at Ephesus that "God worked unusual miracles by the hands of

Paul.” (Acts 19:11) God placed an asterisk, as it were, on Ephesus as a clue for later generations to ponder and seek Him as to why He showed His special approval on the work Paul was doing in Ephesus, a special approval continued on in the New Testament as the letter to the Ephesians stands higher, taller, grander and brighter than any other writing of the New Testament.

Second, it is in the King James (KJV) account of the uprising of Demetrius and the silversmiths at Ephesus (Acts 19:24 and following) that we find the clearest evidence of the confusion regarding the use of the word “church.” Some 90% of the KJV text is taken directly from the work of the brilliantly gifted, even graced, interpreter William Tyndale. Tyndale used either “congregation” or “assembly” to translate *ekklesia* [1577] – but King James himself specifically instructed (in documents still available today) his translators to use “certain of the old words,” and used “church” as his primary meaning of that instruction.

In the Greek text of this account, *ekklesia* is used three times (Acts 19:32, 39, 41) In the KJV text of this account, “churches” is used only once (Acts 19:37) and this is *not* as a translation of *ekklesia* but instead as a translation of *hierosuleo* [2417] (see *hieron* [2411]) *Ekklesia*, in the KJV, is rendered here as the more appropriate “assembly” but *hierosuleo*, rightly associated with “temple,” is rendered “churches.” And this is the *only* place where any other Greek word is rendered “church” in the KJV! One could almost suspect that some of the 1611 scholars, resisting the king’s arbitrary rules yet not daring to resist too overtly, *deliberately* inserted “church” here where “temple” so obviously belongs, knowing that King James would never catch the “error”! Thus they might enjoy a private laugh on the king and might even enjoy at least a small measure of recognition at some future time. Perhaps they had their own little “time capsule” here too – perhaps not, but certainly God did! What we can certainly glean from all this is the duplicity which was involved in rendering *ekklesia* as “church” in the KJV – and it is preserved in connection with Ephesus.

Paul did not know every detail of the coming apostasy and he knew he foresaw and prophesied only in part. (1 Cor. 13:9) He obviously did not know it would be 2,000 years before his insights about the apostasy would be needed. He would certainly have hoped and trusted, but probably did not know with complete certainty, that his letter to the Ephesians would still be in use when it was needed. The symbology given to John for *The Revelation* was entirely unknown to Paul (as a writing but there are obvious spiritual parallels and insights in both Paul’s and John’s prophecies.) But Paul did know some things that have been forgotten or neglected during the period of two thousand years men like to call “church history.” Paul knew that even though *the many* would fall away from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1) and turn away from listening to the Spirit of truth (2 Tim. 4:4), there would still and always be *the few* - that is, those who would, as Matthew wrote, “endure to the end” (Mt. 24:13), or as John was shown, who would stand with the Lamb upon Mount Zion and follow Him wherever He leads them. (Rev. 14:1, 4), or as Paul himself wrote, would “continue in the faith” and be presented to Christ “holy and blameless and above reproach.” (Col. 1:22-23) He knew these few would have to receive the same Spirit as he and would have to use their spiritual ears to hear what God was saying to His people. He knew he could not help the many but maybe he could present an unpolluted, purer picture of the deeper life in Christ, a picture unclouded by the corruptions he had himself forewarned the Ephesian elders of. (Acts 20:30) Maybe, just maybe, he could leave a gift that would help the few.

Whatever else we might glean from this study, surely we should take away a deeper awareness of the characteristics of the war between God and Satan, a war for the soul of each man whom God touches with His Spirit of truth and righteousness. We should also take away a deeper appreciation and understanding of Paul’s purpose and intent in the writing of the letter to

the Ephesians – to counteract the effect of the apostasy that he knew was coming at the end of the age. Let us then review his letter in this new light and use whatever the Lord shows us to help others overcome the darkness and deception that attends the “church” in its final and tragic plunge into death and darkness. Let us freely give our lives to truly being light and truth in this dark and dying world for, as Paul concluded his farewell address and as is always true in the “economy” of the kingdom of God, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35, a quote Paul attributes to Jesus but which is not found in the four gospels recognized in the canon of the New Testament – let the “scholars” make of that what they will – but certainly it indicates that Paul knew things then that we do not know now!) The New Testament remains a spiritual message but the vast majority who read it seem determined to remain intellectual, infantile and even carnal in their understanding. (1 Cor. 3:1, 14:20) Christ is not coming for an immature girl and certainly not a prostitute, but rather for a mature bride who has readied herself in proportion to the respect due her Lord, Master, King and Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is our responsibility *now* to ready ourself or we may be assured that we will be refused entrance into His kingdom when we later discover what we have left undone. (Mt. 25:11-12, Lk. 13:24-27)

Let he who has ears hear.

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