

Ephesians
God's New Community
Introduction to the letter
Ephesians chapter 1
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It does not take many weeks attending MPC before you realise that roughly half of Sunday morning's worship is taken up with a sermon from the Bible. Why's that? Why don't we comment on a poem by say Carol Ann Duffy or give a talk about Afghanistan or global warming? Why a Bible talk? Because we believe that this book is unique among all books and because we believe that God's Word is powerful—"Like a double edged sword" one Bible writer puts it (Hebrews 4:12).

Through the preaching of God's Word we are kept, converted, encouraged, taught, strengthened, comforted, rebuked, and equipped for all of life!

The power of preaching does not lie in the speaking skills of the preacher—but in the Word itself which the Holy Spirit who always works through the Word is pleased to use.

From a human perspective, preaching may appear such a weak activity—just a man speaking! But that's because God's word often works in a gentle and quiet way, line upon line, week by week, year by year.

And not only on human hearts but upon nations too! If you want an example of the quiet power of God's word consider the effect of Luther's preaching on Germany and Europe in the 1500s. Against the Catholic error that the common people don't need to read the Bible for themselves, Martin Luther believed that everyone should be able to read the Bible, so they could be saved. So Luther translated the Hebrew and Greek into German and encouraged people to learn to read—both boys and girls, men and women. The preaching of God's Word from Wittenberg over time affected literacy rates across Europe.

You can even draw a nerdy map of literacy fanning out from Wittenberg, the closer to Wittenberg, the greater the literacy!

God's Word has a quiet power!

I heard a stat this week about the church in the USA: 30% of people who used to go to church pre-pandemic have stopped going post-pandemic. Some of that drop off will be genuine fear, some will be caused by the fact that not everyone who went to church before Covid were true Christians, but my guess is that the rest of the decline was caused by the fact that some believers and their families did not discipline themselves Sunday by Sunday to listen to God's word online. And so week by week they became spiritually weaker and weaker until eventually they drifted away.

If we want strong families and a strong church we have to guard the preaching of God's Word. Let's pray for the preacher and ask the Holy Spirit to soften our hearts so that we may hear God's voice through the preacher's words.

Introduction to Ephesians

So this term we are planning to study one small letter in this Book, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and today we are simply going to introduce it. Now if you or I were given a letter we had never read before, I think we'd want three questions answered.

- Who wrote it?
- Who was it written to?
- Why was it written?

#1 “Who wrote Ephesians?”

The answer is Paul, look at verse 1:

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”

And chapter 3 verse 1,

“For this reason I, Paul the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...”

A man by the name of Paul wrote this letter! Who was Paul?

(a) Paul was an ordinary man

On the one hand Paul was an ordinary human being like you and me acutely aware of his sinfulness:

“I am less than the least of all God’s people” (3:8)

One day, God changed this ordinary man’s heart, transformed his life, and he became a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(b) Paul was an apostle

And then on the road to Damascus, Jesus Christ called him to be an apostle, verse 1 again:

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”

Notice “by the will of God” - Paul did not choose to be an apostle, God made that decision for him.

Apostles, were a very special and small band of men, made up of the twelve disciples of Jesus minus Judas Iscariot the betrayer, plus a few others, such as Paul. The task of the Apostles was to become the founding preachers and writers of the New Testament. They, or their close associates wrote the 27 books of the New Testament.

Jesus did not write a book, but left the task to his apostles.

There are no Apostles in the world anymore, and if someone claims to be one they are an impostor and you are well advised to avoid them like the plague.

(c) Paul was a unique apostle

Thirdly, Paul was a unique apostle. Look again at chapter 3:8

“Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ..”

Gentiles are everyone who is not a Jew—the word Gentile is really code for the whole world! 98.2% of the world's population is Gentile today. I’m a Gentile and so most probably are you. Other apostles also preached to Gentiles, but no-one as much as Paul, who wrote in another letter:

“I am the apostle to the Gentiles “ (Romans 11:7)

He wasn't being proud, he was just acknowledging that he had a unique role to share the Gospel with the whole world. That's why about 1/3rd NT written by Paul 13 out of the 27 books.

Some people don't like Paul, because as an apostle to the pagan world, he had to write things that apostles writing to Jews did not have to include. For example Jews knew that homosexual practice was sinful. Jews knew that there was an order between men and women which should be maintained in marriage and the church, because they had the OT.

But the pagan world did not know those things, so Paul has to teach those truths in his letters.

For that reason, some people who like courageous Peter and loving John really dislike Paul. But it was Paul's task as apostle to the Gentiles to write these things.

If you find a preacher or church undermining the apostle Paul, again, have nothing to do with them.

#2 Who did he write the letter to?

“To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus”

That word “saint” simply means holy one, and it's a wonderful title given to every Christian. Every Christian is a saint, all of us have been made holy through the obedient life of the Lord Jesus Christ, every believer has had their sins washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ which cleanses us from all sins.

(a) to one church

So this letter was written to the church in Ephesus, a large Roman city in modern-day Turkey. Paul had spent three years there, preaching the Gospel! Two of those years he lectured every day at the hall of Tyrannus—you can read the exciting story in Acts chapters 19 and 20. My did Paul have trouble in those three years! From seven sons of Sceva, from a riot in the city because the idol makers because their sales plummeted when Paul preached the true living God and from a plot against Paul.

But God kept Paul safe and the glorious Gospel converted many people to Jesus Christ!

(b) to many churches

But this letter was written to more than just the church at Ephesus, it was written to many churches, because Paul had a strategy! On his great missionary journeys he prayerfully hit the big cities of the Roman Empire, knowing that the Gospel would fan out in all directions to the smaller towns and villages around the big city.

“Paul took his disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Ephesus). This went on for two years so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” (Acts 19:10)

Someone has calculated that during those two years Paul would have had given some 3000 hours worth of talks! No wonder the whole province heard the Gospel! This letter was written to many churches!

Proof: everyone who reads this letter can't help noticing that unlike Paul's other letters this one has nothing specific in it. Normally Paul greets individuals in the church he is writing to or talks about a problem they are facing, but none of that in Ephesians? Why? Most probably because he is writing to all the little churches that

were formed in Asia, not just the Christians in Ephesus. Churches like the seven churches we read about in the book of Revelation, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, and so on.

(c) to all churches

But wider, still, this letter, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is for all churches. It's in the Bible, it's for you and I.... and it's for MPC in the autumn and winter months of 2021!

#3 Why was it written?

Why did Paul write it? What are we going to learn, how are we going to be helped this Autumn?

(a) Paul wrote this letter to encourage

Paul wrote to encourage Christians! How God's people need encouraging! It's hard to be a Christian in our homes—that most testing of all environments, in our schools, in our places of work and in the wider world. Is it not? There are so many discouragements out there! We are often discouraged by ourselves, are we not? Our weaknesses and our failures!

And then we who live in the west can easily be discouraged as our national leaders dismantle the framework established by the Gospel in our land over many centuries (every downward step hailed of course, as “progress” by a blind world.)

What was it this week? The British Medical Association decided it will remain neutral on the issue of assisted suicide! Doctors, who once did everything in their power to sustain the lives of their patients, now say it's OK to kill them.

We are surrounded by discouragements!

How does Paul encourage us? He tells us what God has done for us! Paul takes us on a tour of spiritual treasures and tells us “that one belongs to you”, “and that one”, “and that one too.”

Buckingham Palace—yep that's yours
Taj Mahal—it's in your name
Empire State—belongs to you
Burj Kah-lifa— all yours

A Christian is a spiritual billionaire who spends his life discovering what he already owns!

READ verses 1: 3-10, then 1: 19-21.

When I am feeling discouraged about myself, or the world, or my family, or whatever, the best pick me up is to hear all over again the wonderful things God has done for me!

*Tell me the old, old story,
Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
Of Jesus and His love;
Tell me the story simply,
As to a little child,
For I am weak and weary,
And helpless and defiled.*

*Tell me the old, old story,
Tell me the old, old story,
Tell me the old, old story,
Of Jesus and His love.*

*Tell me the story softly,
With earnest tones and grave;
Remember I'm the sinner
Whom Jesus came to save;
Tell me the story always,
If you would really be,
In any time of trouble,
A comforter to me.*

(b) Paul wrote this letter to instruct us how to live

In the second place Paul wrote this letter to instruct us how to live. If the first 3 chapters are all about what God has done for us, the last three are all about how we are to respond to God's grace in the whole of our lives: in the church, in the world, in our marriages, our families and work places. Paul will show us what that looks like, perhaps best summed up in chapter 5:1-2!

(c) Paul wrote this letter to reveal a mystery!

Finally, Paul writes to reveal a great mystery to us. Someone asked me a while ago a rather big and deep question! Bigger even than "What is the meaning of life?" What is God's great universal plan? If you were to summarise God's great project from the beginning of time right through to the end of time, what would it be? Could you even say it in a sentence or two?

Paul answers that very question in Ephesians and calls it a mystery.

"to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."(1:10)

And God's earthly visible manifestation of this uniting all things together project is the church, where polar opposites such as Jew and Gentile who in those days hated one another, are brought together, "His purpose is to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.." (2:14)

Look around you! In front, behind you! What do you see? People that are very different from you? That's the way it should be in the church! Out in the world people so different have nothing to do with each other! Their paths never cross. But in the Gospel, God unites East and West, black and white, male and female, middle class and working class!

And this uniting together in the church under Christ, creating A NEW COMMUNITY reveals God's cosmic plan for the whole of the universe.