



The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians

When and Who?

Around the year A. D. 62, a group of people in the ancient city of Ephesus gathered to hear a letter read aloud. Ten years earlier, the author of the letter—a Jewish scholar named Paul—had spent two years in their city, teaching an unusual message. Jesus of Nazareth, he insisted, was the true King of the world, the fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecies. Although Jesus had been executed, he came back alive. Through his Spirit, Jesus could now bring people to peace with God and integrate them into a brand new society. As improbable as it sounded to many, this teaching took root and began to spread, not only in Ephesus, but in many cities throughout the Roman Empire.

The people who accepted this message in Ephesus quickly formed a community—a church—which despite intense opposition continued to grow. It was this church that gathered eagerly to hear this letter from Paul.

If the original manuscript of this letter were discovered tomorrow, it would capture global headlines. Yet, except to the believers in Ephesus, the original letter attracted little attention. Their founding pastor wrote it from a Roman prison, and the group held no official standing in Ephesus. They were a ragtag mix of Jews and non-Jews, slaves and free individuals, men, women, and children. Little did they know that the letter they held in their hands would become one of the most important letters in the history of the world.

Structure and Theme

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is short but vast. From beginning to end, it stretches the scope of our vision in every direction: back to eternity past, downward to our deathly spiritual condition, upward to the heights of God's love for us, and forward into the ages to come.

The structure of Ephesians is simple and clear: the first section (chapters 1-3) deals primarily with *what is true*, the second section with *what we should do* (chapters 4-6).

Students of Ephesians have tried to summarize its main theme. Harold Hoehner, whose excellent commentary runs nearly 900 pages, suggests that "the purpose of Ephesians is to promote a love for one another that has the love of God and Christ as its basis" (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 106). John Stott, in his commentary on Ephesians, writes, "If we want a concise summary of the good news which the whole letter announces, we could not find a better one than the three monosyllables 'peace through grace'" (*The Message of Ephesians*).

No single summary can do justice to the far-reaching scope of Ephesians. Still, it is worthwhile to identify unifying themes, including: grace, peace, love, unity, prayer, worship, church, union with Christ, a new humanity, and spiritual warfare.

Grace and Peace

Our first sermon on this book seeks to unfold and apply the opening greeting: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:1-2).

From the outset of this letter, Paul clearly wants his readers to grow in their understanding of who they are and of their relationship to Jesus. From this greeting, therefore, we learn at least three things:

I. Who Christians Are

- A. Saints - The word “saint” does not refer to spiritually elite people, nor those who are exceptionally sacrificial. Rather, it refers to those who belong in a special way to God, for God’s purposes.
- B. Faithful - This word refers to those who have believed and continue to be loyal to King Jesus. It further describes how someone becomes a saint. A saint is simply one who believes in Jesus.

II. What Christians Need

- A. Grace is God’s undeserved favor provided through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross.
- B. Peace is the multidimensional flourishing that this grace brings about—reconciliation with God, with others, and even with oneself. In saying, “Grace and peace to you,” Paul implies both that they already have grace and peace, and that they continue to need it (see 2:8, 14).

III. Where Christians Get What They Need

The source of grace and peace is God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit is not absent from this, since he is implied in the word Christ, which means “[Spirit-] Anointed One”). Believers have grace and peace because God the Father sent God the Son who sends God the Holy Spirit.

Discussion

1. In what ways does Ephesians challenge how you think of yourself as a Christian?
2. How does the concept of grace as undeserved favor affect your relationship with God and others?
3. How does the word “saint” as used in the Bible differ from the way you normally think of it? Do you have a hard time thinking of yourself as a saint? Why is this important to change?
4. How does the message of grace in Ephesians influence the way you view your own shortcomings and failures?
5. Discuss the significance of being “in Christ” as a central theme in Ephesians and its implications for believers.
6. How can believers extend grace and peace to others in practical ways, both inside and outside the church?