

The New Testament, Book 10

The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians

The book of Ephesians is Paul's apostolic letter to the church at Ephesus. It is one of the four "prison epistles," written about the same time during his two-year imprisonment in his final home at Rome; the other three are Philippians, Colossians and Philemon¹. Tychicus and Onesimus are believed to have been the delivery team for all four of these epistles although, in the Book of Philemon, only Onesimus is mentioned².

Whereas in Romans Paul presents the position of the believer in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, in Ephesians he presents the position of the believer as seated with Christ in heavenly places. Both the late scholar Merrill Unger and the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge used the word "sublimest" in describing Ephesians. This book has been called "the Alps of the epistles"; it is definitely written from a heavenly vantage point.

Because of the brilliance of Paul's mind, the vastness of his knowledge, and the depth of his understanding, his epistles can at times be, as Peter put it, "hard to be understood³." His writings are rich in spiritual revelation; but at times we must read them slowly and carefully; Ephesians is a classic example of this "Pauline" writing.

Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, the region that we call western Asia Minor today. Names and borders have changed (and are changing still); but most of Asia Minor (including the Roman province of Asia) is today's Turkey. At the mouth of the Cayster River, Ephesus was one of the major ports in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It was at Ephesus that Paul, in addition to his other difficulties, had "fought with wild beasts⁴." Paul had ministered there for approximately three years, much longer than at any other church founded by him⁵. It is probable that for this reason, i.e.

¹ Although II Tim was written during Paul's second and final imprisonment in Rome, it is not included in the "Prison Epistles," because it is a very personal letter, with advice for Timothy, with the same purpose as I Tim.

² This should not be surprising, since in this small book the only subject is Onesimus, and his need of reconciliation with his master, Philemon, from whom he had run away.

³ II Peter 3:16.

⁴ There is no other reference in scripture to Paul's having fought with wild animals. Perhaps this was a reference to the crazed mob that wanted to kill him there, after which he left the city and went into Macedonia. See the study guide to I Corinthians 15:32.

⁵ See in this regard Acts 20:31.

that the Ephesians were so well taught in the fundamentals of the faith, he could write to them (and thus to us) about the deep truths of the position of the believer in heavenly places. John the beloved apostle is believed to have moved to Ephesus upon the Martyrdom of Paul and Peter, and lived out the last 30 years of his long life there, as bishop of the region (with the exception of one year in exile under Domitian, on the island of Patmos). The long ministry of Paul, followed by the much longer ministry of John, may be the reason that the church at Ephesus is thought of by many as the model church of 1st Century Asia Minor.

Ephesus Today

In 262 AD Ephesus was sacked and destroyed by the Goths, and it never regained its former glory. Today the once-thriving harbor is a marsh, filled with silt, and the site of the city is littered with ruins; the glory has truly departed. The site of the once magnificent Temple of Diana is a rocky, dusty, vacant field of weeds, littered with segments of its columns and other pieces of its once-beautiful buildings. The ruined amphitheater, where the crazed mob once shouted praises to Diana for two hours before the town clerk calmed them down, is visible, although its marble seats were long ago scavenged for other uses⁶. The stadium is gone; but its outline is clearly seen. There, athletes trained and competed, and it may well be that watching them there inspired Paul to compare Christian life to the races run by athletes. Where the magnificent city of Ephesus once stood, and where a model church once thrived, there is today only “a miserable Turkish village without a [single] Christian, fulfilling Revelation 2:5⁷.”

Was Ephesians a Generic Letter to All Churches in Asia Minor?

Some believe that this epistle was intended by Paul as a generic letter to all the churches in Asia Minor--not just to the church at Ephesus--for the following reasons:

- a. It lacks the personal greetings so typical of his other letters, although verses 15-18 of Chapter 1 suggest a specific church.
- b. It doesn't deal with specific, internal church problems, as do the others; it is definitely more generic in its treatment of doctrinal matters.
- c. Some ancient Greek manuscripts have a blank space where the words, “at Ephesus” appear in the opening verse, suggesting that copies were

⁶ Acts 19:21-41.

⁷ Dake, Finis Jennings: “The Dake Annotated Reference Bible,” NT, p 364.

carried to Asia Minor, where the names of specific churches could then be filled in. It was already a common practice to copy and circulate Paul's letters addressed to specific churches.

Arguing for the Ephesians as recipients of the letter are the following:

- a. The words, "at Ephesus" do appear in most ancient manuscripts of Ephesians.
- b. In 6:21 Paul states that the letter will be delivered by Tychicus, and in II Timothy 4:12 he states that he had sent Tychicus to Ephesus. It is doubtful that Tychicus would have been tasked to carry this letter to all churches in Asia Minor.
- c. Jerome, in his Latin Vulgate Bible includes the words, *qui sunt Ephesi* ("which is at Ephesus"). And this is particularly interesting because his Bible was written in the late 4th Century, about 60 years after Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (both of which were written ca 325 AD), and was based upon much earlier manuscripts (1st, 2nd and 3rd Centuries AD) than either Vaticanus or Sinaiticus. Jerome may never have seen these two incomplete codices; but, if he was aware of them (and Vaticanus was found in the Vatican Library in 1481), he did not respect them enough to follow them⁸.
- d. All of Paul's letters were intended to be circulated to all of the churches. In light of all this, the letter to the Ephesian church may have been intended by Paul for the church at Ephesus; or it may have been written for general distribution among the gentile churches in Asia Minor. I am inclined to believe the former; and, because of the excellent doctrinal content of the letter, why could not the answer be both?

Conclusion

At any rate, we will not resolve this controversy in these humble pages. We will leave such esoteric musings and disputes to the theologians, and will refuse to be distracted by them.

For our purposes, what matters is not so much the history of Ephesians, but rather its content, and its lessons for us; and its content is extremely rich in such lessons. By the 3rd verse he already has us in heavenly places! Other things to which we are introduced in Ephesians include: salvation by faith in the grace of God and not by works, lest any man should boast; access to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit; the five-fold ministry;

⁸ Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, two incomplete codices dating from about 325 AD, do not have the words "at Ephesus" in the salutation (v 1:1). All modern versions of the Bible except for the New King James are based on versions of the Westcott-Hort NT, which is based primarily on these two codices.

divine order in the Christian family; spiritual warfare; and the whole armor of God.

The writings of Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Tertullian and other ante-Nicene fathers testify to the early and continued acceptance and use of Ephesians in the churches.

Of its six chapters, the first three are doctrinal and the last three are practical.

A. Author. The human author of Ephesians is Paul; he says so twice: in 1:1 and 3:1. Matters dealt with in Ephesians are also found in his other epistles, especially Colossians. Eusebius (263-339 AD), in his "Ecclesiastical History," attributed to Paul all 13 of the epistles that bear his name, plus Hebrews. Ephesians was unanimously received as Paul's epistle by the early Church, and is quoted by Polycarp, Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Valentinus⁹.

B. Place and Date. The letter was written from Rome, during Paul's two-year (first) imprisonment there, about 61 AD.

C. Occasion. While a prisoner of Nero in Rome, during two years of what seems to have been house arrest, Paul received many visitors who brought news to him of the churches he had founded, and carried messages from Paul back to the churches. On this occasion he sent Tychicus and Onesimus to carry a doctrinal letter to the church at Ephesus, and they probably delivered Colossians and Philemon on the same trip.

D. Theme. The theme of Ephesians is the spiritual position of the believer, seated with Jesus the Christ in heavenly places.

E. Highlights. Highlights in Ephesians include the following:

1. The Process of Redemption (1:14)

Paul's opening salutation flows, without a break, into our position "in heavenly places," and into God's will for us, i.e. those of us who would be redeemed, known to Him before Creation--"before the foundation of the World."

The will of Christ is that we be redeemed, through the riches of God's abundant grace. Having made known to us the mystery of his will, He has determined, ultimately, to bring together all things of his, both in Heaven and on Earth. God has predestined that we should be redeemed according to his own will, and Paul briefly outlines the process of our redemption. First we heard the gospel message; then we believed; and then we were

⁹ Conybeare, W.J. and Howson, J.S.: "The Life and Epistles of St. Paul," P 706.

sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, “the earnest” of our spiritual inheritance as children of God¹⁰.

***NOTE:** Chapter 1 contains a heavy dose of the principle of predestination. For a refresher on the meaning of predestination, see Rom 8:28-30.*

2. The Position of the Church in the Cosmos. (1:15-23)

Paul prays that the Father will give the saints at Ephesus the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, that their understanding be enlightened; and Paul prays that they may realize their position with Christ in the cosmic order. And the position of Christ, he says, is far above all principalities, powers, might and dominion and every name that is named, both now and in the world to come. All things have been placed under the feet of Christ, who is the Head of the Church, which is his spiritual body. And this is true, not in just one locale; He and his Body are the fullness of Him (God) who fills all that there is. Although the final cleansing of the evil in the World is not yet accomplished, there is no dark corner of the Universe that is not filled and ruled by the presence of God. And--just think--we, the redeemed, will forever be with Him, in his presence. I don't think anyone knows just what that will mean in practical terms; but it can only be wonderful, beyond our ability to imagine or express.

3. We Can't Work Our Way to Heaven. (2:1-10)

In the past, before we were redeemed and made to be children of God in Christ Jesus, we lived according to the values of this world, greatly influenced by Satan and his kingdom of darkness, fulfilling the desires of our flesh and of our minds¹¹. Yet God, in his mercy and love, has saved us from the self-destruction of sin, and has graciously seated us in heavenly places with Christ. And, someday, his plan of redemption and restoration of what was lost in the sin of Adam, will be completely fulfilled and plainly revealed to the entire World, in the ages to come. When that heavenly kingdom is finally completed, it will be built on the cornerstone of the grace and love of God; for it is by his grace and our faith, our complete dependence on him, that we are redeemed. It is not by our own goodness in what we do or think; otherwise we would probably be proud of our own goodness rather than glorying in the goodness of God. If we could be good

¹⁰ See also 4:30. For an explanation of the gift of the Holy Spirit as the earnest of our redemption, see the study guide to II Corinthians, Highlight 4.

¹¹ Notice the two arenas of our sinful nature: the flesh (the body and our fleshly nature) and mind (our thinking). We can be living in apparent righteousness in our bodies, yet living in the vilest of sin in our minds, and Satan's power to deceive and enslave is just as effective in our minds as in our bodies--perhaps even more so.

enough to deserve salvation we would not need a Savior, and the suffering and death of Jesus would not be a triumph over evil--it would be a tragedy.

***NOTE:** In v 2 there is revealed one of the titles of Satan: "the prince of the power of the air." It is difficult to know exactly what this means, but clearly Satan has some degree of power to deceive and control men, operating in the lowest part of the heavenly realm, i.e. the air, the atmosphere, above and around us. See in this regard Rom 8:38-39 and Eph 3:10-12, in context.*

4. Access to Our Heavenly Father. (2:11-18)

Before we heard the good news of Christ Jesus, we were aliens, separated from God and at enmity with Him. We were without a covenant, without hope, trying to live in the sin-sick world without God. What a formula for misery! We had: no covenant of promise; no hope; no God; and we were surrounded by ungodliness. Yet God, in his infinite love, provided a way, through the sacrifice of his only begotten Son, for us to be reconciled to God, and He (Jesus, the Prince of Peace) is the source of our peace.

And now, with our reconciliation and redemption, we not only have a covenant and hope, but we have access to God, and a loving relationship with Him¹². We can, and should, speak with Him, thank and praise Him all the time. And this access to Him is through Christ Jesus, by the working of the Holy Spirit, into the presence of the Father.

Simplified, it is: **through** (Jesus, our Mediator); **by** (the Spirit); **to** (the Father). It should become so natural for us that we don't think of it as a process--we should just communicate with God, freely, as a child would communicate with a loving earthly Father. We are habit-prone creatures, so why not use this fact of life to help us, rather than to harm us? A good way to establish this holy habit is to thank Him throughout the day for everything that goes right (and for some things that go wrong).

NOTES:

a. In v 11 the words "uncircumcision" and "circumcision" are used metaphorically (as they are used elsewhere in the New Testament) to mean "Gentiles" and "Jews" collectively.

b. There is an interesting thing concerning v 17, and it is easily overlooked. In the 17 words of v 17, Paul refers to the redemption of "you that were afar off" and of "them that were nigh." The Gentiles at Ephesus are the ones who had been "afar off." Their background of paganism gave them no basis for understanding and accepting redemption by faith in Christ Jesus; this was, to them, a completely new and bizarre concept.

¹² Concerning our access to the Father, see also Chapt 3, v 12.

By contrast, the Jews (“them that were nigh”) had the Old Covenant, the Law and the prophets. Paul will write to Timothy that in the Old Testament Scriptures there is sufficient revelation to introduce him to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus¹³. The Jews knew the prophecies, were looking for the Messiah to come, and they were only one tiny step from entering into the Messiah’s gift of salvation; but many were too blinded by their legalism and pride to recognize Him and take that step.

5. Did Jesus Descend into Hell? (4:8-10)

Verses 8-10 of Chapter 4 are extremely rich in clues as to what Jesus was doing during the three days and nights between his triumph over the curse of sin in the crucifixion, and his triumph over death in the resurrection.

The meaning of these three verses has also been hotly contested by theologians, from ancient times until now. Verse 8 tells us that He “ascended up on high, led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men¹⁴.” Verse 9 observes that, in order to ascend, as stated in verse 8, He first descended, into “the lower parts of the Earth.” Verse 10 tells us that He who descended into the lower parts of the Earth, is the same one who “led captivity captive [nullified the captivity of prisoners, leading them out of captivity]” and “gave gifts unto men (verse 8).”

And this is where the controversy lies.

These three verses seem to say that, during the three days and nights when our Redeemer’s body lay in the tomb, He was very active in the Spirit. The widely held, traditional, interpretation is that Jesus, having triumphed on the cross over sin and completed God’s plan of redemption for sinful mankind, descended into Hell (Greek, *hades*, Hebrew, *sheol*), the abode of the waiting spirits of the dead. There He declared Himself as the Messiah, and offered redemption to those waiting there. He then led those who chose to receive his gift of redemption in a triumphal procession up to Heaven, where they were presented to the Father. Not proving this interpretation, but definitely in harmony with it, is the statement, about 35 years later, of the glorified Christ that He holds in his hand “the keys of Hell (*hades*) and death¹⁵.” Others reject this interpretation of verses 8-10 and have varying beliefs concerning them¹⁶.

And this brings us to the Apostles’ Creed.

¹³ II Timothy 3:15. Remember that, when Timothy was a child, there were no New Testament Scriptures.

¹⁴ Here Paul is quoting from Ps 68:18; see also Judg 5:12.

¹⁵ Revelation 1:18.

¹⁶ See also in this regard I Pet 3:19-22 and 4:6.

Some denominations exclude the words “He descended into Hell” from the Apostles’ Creed, while others include these words, depending on how they interpret verses 8 through 10. Still others reject the recitation of this creed, or any other creed; and it has no place in their worship services.

Traditional denominations who revere and recite the Apostles’ Creed believe that there is value in summarizing the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith, and reading or reciting them regularly, reminding us of the vital, bed rock, components of our faith. For a summary of what is known about the creed and its origins, including the inclusion or exclusion of the words, “He descended into hell,” see “The Apostles’ Creed” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

NOTES:

*a. The place to which Christ descended was **not** the fiery place of everlasting torment (in Greek, gehenna); rather, it was to the resting/waiting place (in Hebrew, Sheol) of those who had died, from murdered Abel until the triumph of Christ on the cross. Here, again, there are varying interpretations. Some believe that only the righteous dead of the Old Testament period were in Sheol; others believe that Sheol had two compartments: one, a place of comfort for the righteous dead; and one, a place of torment, for the wicked dead, with the two compartments separated by an un-crossable barrier. This latter interpretation is clearly suggested in the parable Jesus taught, concerning Lazarus, the beggar, and the rich man¹⁷. In this interpretation, the place of the righteous dead was called “Abraham’s bosom.”*

There are also varying beliefs concerning the triumphant procession up to Heaven. Some believe that it occurred at the time of Christ’s ascension (Acts 1:9), and not during the three days and nights that his body lay in the tomb. This belief is suggested by the statement of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene, outside the empty tomb, “Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father¹⁸”; and yet in the glorious Ascension, Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives, and not from “the lower parts of the Earth¹⁹.” It is also suggested by Matthew’s mysterious account of the graves being opened as Jesus gave up the ghost on the cross, and the dead arising from their tombs and going into Jerusalem²⁰. And yet, those risen

¹⁷ Luke 16:19-31.

¹⁸ John 20:17.

¹⁹ Luke 24:50; Eph 4:9.

²⁰ Matthew 27:50-53.

dead went “into the holy city, and appeared unto many,” not up, “far above all heavens.”

b. In interpreting these three verses, the word “first” in v 9 becomes important. It tells us that what happens in vv 8 and 10 (the ascent into Heaven) was necessarily preceded by the events in v 9²¹.

c. The events described here in only three verses (8-10) are of such magnitude that an entire book could be written about what they declare and what they suggest. In these three short verses we are given a significant but vastly incomplete glimpse into one vital aspect of the redemptive work of Jesus, our Messiah.

d. The clause, “and gave gifts unto men,” in v 8 connects the events of vv 8-10 with v 11 and the gift of the five-fold ministries to the Church.

6. The Five-Fold Ministries. (4:11-14)

Among the gifts given to men, referred to in verses 8 through 10 above, are the five ministries listed in verse 11. These ministries, often referred to as the “five-fold ministries,” are the ministries of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. It is interesting to note that two of these five ministries in the Church, those of apostles and prophets, involve the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit; the operation of such gifts is expected in the ministry of an apostle, and is essential in the ministry of a prophet. This is not necessarily true of the other three, but it is always possible for the Holy Spirit to manifest Himself supernaturally, in the most ordinary of ministerial functions. It is He, after all, who decides when and where the supernatural gifts will be manifested, dividing them to every man severally as He will²². The operation of supernatural gifts of the Spirit is not essential to the ministries of evangelists, pastors and teachers, but it certainly can be part of them.

It is also interesting to note the purpose of the Lord in bestowing these gifts on the Church. According to verses 12 and 13, the purpose is to perfect (complete) the saints (that seems to include you and me), for the work of the ministry, and the edifying (strengthening, building up) of the Body of Christ (the Church and its many members). And it is his purpose to do this until we all come, in the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, unto perfect completeness--“the measure of the stature of Christ.”

²¹ Regrettably, most modern versions omit this key word “first.”

²² I Corinthians 12:11.

Now, I can't speak for you, but for me this is a mind-boggling statement! I am very much aware of my own sinful imperfection; I know that I am a very long way from "a perfect man," and from "the stature of the fullness of Christ." I can readily identify with Peter who, after hearing Jesus teach, and after the miracle of the catch of so many fish that they threatened to sink the fishing boats, cried out to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man...²³!" And yet, we must take the Bible at its word, whether or not we understand it²⁴.

It is also interesting to note that the gift of these ministries is to the Church, and that they are to be available until this perfection is complete. These ministries are to be operable in the Church so that we mature in the faith, and mature until we are stable and sure of the fundamental doctrines of the Church. We are to be so solidly rooted and grounded in the true faith that we are not carried away with appealing-but-false teachings; we are to be stable, established, and difficult to deceive.

NOTES:

a. There is an interesting progression in vv 11-14:

(1) Verse 11 identifies the One who endowed the Church with these gifts: it is ("He") Jesus.

(2) Verse 12 reveals the purpose of the gifts ("For"): it is for the perfecting (completion, maturing) of the saints, to enable us to perform the work of the ministry, that the Church may be built up and made complete and strong.

(3) Verse 13 tells us how long this process will last ("Till"): until we come to unity in the faith, have a full knowledge of Christ, and are complete Christians, measured by the standard of the Messiah.

(4) Verse 14 summarizes God's plan for this process ("That"): it is in order that we mature to the point where we are so solidly rooted in the Truth that we will not be carried away with false doctrines, and that even the most cunning of false teachers cannot deceive us.

b. The Greek word rendered "apostle," throughout the NT is "apostolos," and its meaning is "one who is sent [to proclaim the gospel and establish new churches]." Since the ministry of apostle is a gracious gift to the Church, it would be illogical to assume that this ministry would be withdrawn from the Church until the end of the Church Age, or until the Church is brought to perfection (which, of course hasn't happened yet).

²³ Luke 5:1-8.

²⁴ The great, ongoing vexation of God, by the Israelite people in the Exodus, was that they **did not believe** his promises; see Nu 14:11.

*Many missionaries, it seems to me, would be rightly called “apostles,” although most would probably shrink from that title. After all, most missionaries operate under the authority and guidance of a **sending** agency (a church, denomination, religious order, etc.*

Many Christians think (wrongly) that there have been only 12 apostles in the entire history of the Church, and that there will never be any more, although we are clearly told of the election of Matthias as the 13th apostle, to take the place of Judas (Acts 1:20-26). And there are many others identified in the NT as apostles, such as Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and James, half-brother of Jesus (Gal 1:18-19). As late as 177 AD, Clement of Rome was called an apostle by the Ante-Nicene Father Athenagoras²⁵. I find no Scripture, or logic, to support the position that there are not apostles among us today, for both I and the Church are still far from perfect.

7. Speaking the Truth in Love. (4:15-16)

As we mature, under the leadership of the five-fold ministries, we are to learn the proper way to communicate with others: we are to be truthful always, but we must also be loving. Truth can be hard--in fact, it can be devastating. If truth is spoken harshly, without caring for the effect of the truth on the one to whom we speak, it can be destructive. By the same token if, in order to avoid causing distress or grief to someone, we withhold the truth, then that also can be harmful and destructive. This principle is sometimes expressed in this way: “truth without love is too hard; and love without truth is too soft.” To put it in the inspired words of Paul, the right way to communicate with others is, “speaking the truth in love.” This is especially important when correcting another Christian who is in error; but the rule is valid for all communication.

In living this way we can grow up as mature Christians, finding and fulfilling our roles in the Body of Christ, with Him, the Head of the Church, as our example; and, as we do, the Church is edified, built up and strengthened in love. Jesus always spoke the truth; but He never spoke it in such a way as to shatter someone’s hope.

NOTE: *We should always tell the truth. In a spiritual sense, we are habit-prone creatures, and habitual liars will have their place in the Lake of Fire (Rev 21:8); what could be more serious? In a practical sense, when we tell the truth, we don't have to remember what we said.*

8. The Vanity of the Un-Redeemed Mind. (4:17-19)

²⁵ ANF, Vol 2, The Stromata, Book 4, p 428.

Paul continues, expanding on the vanity and sinfulness of the un-redeemed mind, whose ungodly desires drive the behavior of “other Gentiles” (the pagans at Ephesus). He also includes, as the source of all this wrong behavior, the “blindness of their hearts”--the lack of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who enlightens the understanding of the redeemed. The un-redeemed pagans are, he says, walking in such spiritual and intellectual darkness that they are alienated--completely separated--from a life in loving fellowship with God their creator. Because of their spiritual blindness the pagans have allowed themselves to be driven by unbridled sexual behavior, which is selfish and greedy, seeking only its own pleasure, caring nothing for others.

9. Abandon the Old Sinful Life, and Renew the Mind. (4:20-24)

Believers, he says, have definitely not learned such sinful behavior from our Redeemer. Rather, he says, the Ephesian Christians are to abandon the old, sinful way of life, with its deceitful lusts, and be renewed in their minds, their values and desires, caring for one another and speaking the truth to one another, for they are all inter-related members of the Body of Christ.

***NOTE:** In vv 19 and 22, there are important revelations concerning lust, whether it is sexual lust, or the lust for wealth, fame, power, or any other ungodly desire:*

a. Lust is selfish. It is not concerned with the pleasure, needs, or welfare of others; instead, it is driven by the desire to please itself.

b. Lust is greedy. It always wants more and, if necessary, at the expense of others; it is never satisfied with what it has.

*c. Lust deceives. It **never** delivers what it promises; therefore, it drives the sinner to seek more and more of what is desired, but there is never enough--never fulfillment. Its end is emptiness and, at best, the misery of regret; and, at worst, a reprobate mind--hardened beyond conviction and redemption.*

10. Admonitions to the Model Church. (4:25-5:2)

Although the church at Ephesus is generally thought of as the best of the gentile churches in Asia Minor, there are still some serious problems. They were lying to one another. There was strife in the church, and they were giving way to ungodly anger. They were stealing; and, not only that, it seems that some of them were professional thieves! These are pretty serious problems to be found in a “model church”²⁶! Paul is saying to them, “Stop it! Don’t do these things!” There are angry conflicts that are not

²⁶ Revelation 2:1-3, 6.

dealt with; he tells them that anger can become sinful if we allow it to go on and on. They are never to “let the sun go down” on our wrath--they are to clear up such conflicts and be reconciled before the end of the day. They are to speak to one another in ways that are helpful--not destructive. Internal strife, anger and conflict grieve the Holy Spirit, and that must not be allowed. Instead, the rule is to be kind to one another, compassionate and tender-hearted with one another, forgiving one another, even as God the Father, through the mediation of their blessed Redeemer, has forgiven them for their errors and sins. If they do this, they will be followers of God as his dear, beloved children, rightly and happily related to Him and to others.

NOTES:

a. Anger is not necessarily a sin. Remember that Jesus, in apparent fury, overturned the tables of the money-changers and livestock vendors who were desecrating the sacred precincts of the Temple, making it “a den of thieves.” He drove them out of the Temple with a whip. But anger can become sinful if we allow it to go on too long, or if the motivation is wrong. I don’t think Paul’s eloquent-but-simple admonition can be improved upon: “Be ye angry, and [but] sin not; neither give place to the devil.” If we allow our anger to become something that is not pleasing to God, we may give Satan a legal right to have a place in our minds, our thinking, and our lives.

b. Can a church be perfect? Probably not--because a church is composed of a group of imperfect people. It has been observed that if we should find a perfect church, we should not join it, for then it would no longer be perfect. In the “model church” at Ephesus there were some very serious problems; but there were solutions. No church will be perfect, it seems; but we should continue to strive for perfection, in ourselves and in our church.

11. Things Not Permitted in the Kingdom of Christ and God. (5:3-5)

Having described the way that the Ephesians should live (and, in the process, how we should live), Paul then describes behavior that is completely unacceptable. In fact, he says, those who practice such sins and allow them to become a way of life cannot enter and be a part of “the Kingdom of God and Christ.” In other words, to choose to live this way, unrepentant, will doom the sinner to the fate of eternal damnation. What could be more serious?

The sins he uses to illustrate his point are: fornication; all forms of unclean behavior; covetousness; filthiness, indecency, ungodly behavior; foolishness, coarse jesting (what would be called today, constantly telling and enjoying crude or smutty jokes): and, consorting with prostitutes. All such behavior

should be abandoned, he says. Instead of practicing such sinful behavior, he says, the Ephesians should make a habit of thanking God for all that He does for us.

NOTES:

a. The only sin that is repeated in this litany of unacceptable behavior is covetousness; it is named twice (in verses 3 and 5). And, the second time that it is mentioned, Paul states plainly that a covetous person is an idolater--one who worships false gods--an habitual violator of the 1st Commandment! This point is important enough that he repeats it in his letter to the Colossians²⁷. How, we might wonder, can coveting things that others possess be idol worship? It is because, if we allow ourselves to be overcome by the desire to possess things that belong to others, those things that we desire take the place of God in our hearts. That is what Jesus was trying to explain in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said that we are not to set as our goal the possession of material things; rather, He said, we are to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness²⁸. Then, with God and his righteousness in the center of our lives and affections, we can obtain material things (unless they are things displeasing to God, for such things will harm us).

b. Like examples of ministries in the Church, listed in I Cor 12-14, and Eph 4:11 here, this list is not intended to be exhaustive and complete; any one of these sins, practiced as a way of life, is sufficient to keep a person out of the Kingdom of God (thus, out of Heaven). See, by way of comparison, Rev 21:5-8.

12. The Rule for Relating to Sinners. (5:6-12)

Having made it plain that those who live sinfully, and are unrepentant, can have no part in God's Kingdom, Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians of this once more, and then states the simple rule for relating to such people. The rule is **not** to stay as far away from them as possible, never having any contact--physical or verbal--with sinful people. That idea is completely unrealistic; as Paul expressed this to the Corinthian Christians, in order to have absolutely no contact with sinners, we would have to go entirely away from the Earth--as he put it, "out of the World²⁹." What, then, are we to do? Reminding the Ephesians that they were once such sinners themselves, Paul tells them to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful **works** of darkness"; instead, they are to reprove them. They will necessarily have contact with

²⁷ Colossians 3:5.

²⁸ Matthew 6:33.

²⁹ I Corinthians 5:9-10.

sinners; if they didn't, who would share the good news of Jesus with them? But they are not to join them in their sin. We are not told to stay completely away from sinners; but we are told to have no fellowship with their unfruitful works of darkness. Jesus spent a great deal of time with sinners; but He did not join them in their sin.

But what do we make of the second part of the injunction, "but rather reprove them"? The key to this clause is the meaning of the verb, "reprove." The underlying Greek verb is *elencho*, meaning to expose, to make noticeable or conspicuous. And how do we do this? Do we do it by telling them how sinful they are? Not necessarily, although at times it may be necessary to explain the vanity and destructive nature of sin. Actually, we do this automatically, by what we **do not** do. We make their sin conspicuous by not joining them in it. I assure you that the lost sinner will immediately notice the difference in the way we live; in fact, they are usually sensitive to the fact that we are different. Simply because we speak and behave differently, we present to them a living alternative to their self-destructive, sinful living.

13. The Holy Spirit's Alternative to Drunkenness. (5:13-21)

The following passage speaks of darkness and light, and the way in which light reproves and exposes the works of darkness. There are many contemporary analogies for this, and a vivid one is what happens, in a dark room with roaches, when the light is turned on: the nasty things scurry to get out of sight--to escape the light. Much evil is done in darkness, to avoid being seen; sinful people love darkness because their deeds are evil³⁰.

Paul then cautions the Ephesians to walk through each day circumspectly, being thoughtful and careful, avoiding the works of darkness; and he reminds them that they are living in evil times³¹. He specifically admonishes the Ephesians to avoid becoming drunk with wine, "wherein is excess." And, as a godly alternative, he encourages being freshly filled with the Holy Spirit, "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Being freshly filled with joy in the Holy Spirit is much more pleasant than being drunk; and the manifestations of this filling are all positive, pleasant and pleasing to the Lord. And in ending this passage he reminds us to be

³⁰ See in this regard John 3:19-21.

³¹ How much more is this warning appropriate for us, today, for we are living in the most evil times in our nation's history.

selfless and deferential in our daily dealings with one another, not seeking to have our own way, remembering always that God is the master of us all³².

NOTES:

a. Some modern versions of the Bible have rendered v 18 as “Don’t be drunk with too much wine.” This statement, on its face, is a silly redundancy, for being drunk means having consumed too much wine (or alcohol in any form). Anyway, this is not what the verse says. The verse says that we are to “Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess” (emphasis mine). The excess spoken of here is not the amount of wine consumed; it speaks rather of the resulting excesses of behavior: excess eating; excess anger, excess violence, foolish or vulgar talking, debauchery, rioting and the lack of all kinds of restraint³³. In this statement the underlying Greek word rendered “excess” is unusually interesting and revealing; it is “asotia.” This word is a combination of “a,” which makes negative, and “sozo,” meaning “to save.” Therefore, the word translated “excess” means things that are the opposites of what results from salvation. Put another way, it means to behave in the opposite way to the manner in which a Christian should behave. The richness of meaning in this small word excites me! And I hope it excites you. It vastly expands our understanding of what Paul is saying here!

b. The alternative to drunkenness that Paul recommends, the joy of being Spirit-filled, is entirely positive, is interesting, and deserves careful reading. The expression, “speaking to yourselves” suggests speaking in unknown tongues (see I Cor 14:28). The case for this interpretation is greatly strengthened by the phrase, “spiritual songs,” which follows, for the Greek word rendered “spiritual” here is “pneumatikos,” which means “supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit³⁴.” Thus Paul recommends the singing of psalms and hymns and, it seems, the singing of praises to the Lord in miraculous words and melody inspired entirely by the Holy Spirit. For a refresher concerning the important and extremely interesting Greek word, “pneumatikos,” and its meaning, see the study guide to I Corinthians 12:1-7, “Concerning Spiritual Gifts,” and explanatory Note a. following.

14. God’s Rules for the Family. (5:21-6:4)

³² I Corinthians 13:5 (“...[agape love] seeketh not her own...”).

³³ Proverbs 23:20-21, 29-35; Is 5:22-23; Lk 21:34; Rom 13:13-14.

³⁴ Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, Seventeenth Impression, 1966, “spiritual,” A. Adjective, *pneumatikos*, p 64.

In Ephesians 5 and 6 are found, clearly and succinctly stated, God's rules for the Christian family³⁵. For this passage, it is necessary to back up one verse into the previous passage in order to begin, for verse 21 sets the stage for all that follows here. In verse 21 we are given the fundamental rule for relating to one another: it is to submit ourselves, one to another, in the fear of God. This simply tells us that we are not to attempt to lord it over one another, for God is the Master of the Universe, and Christ is the Head of the Church, which is his body. We are to remember at all times that we are all in submission to the will of God; and we, out of our love of God and awed reverence for Him, should always be thoughtful of the desires and opinions of others³⁶. Within this context, Paul then lays down the basic pattern for family life: within the family the husband has ultimate responsibility for the welfare and guidance of his family, and the wife is to submit to his authority. Put another way, she is not to argue in an adversarial way against his every decision, creating ongoing conflict between them. To make this structure a perfect balance, the husband is commanded to love his wife, even as Christ loves the Church and gave up his life for it. This means that, although the husband has ultimate responsibility and, therefore, he necessarily has authority for carrying out that responsibility, he must love his wife sacrificially, even to sacrificing his life for her. In this way there is no threat to the wife's welfare in her submission. And, for this perfectly balanced relationship to work, the man is to leave the home of, and his submitted relationship to, his own father and mother. From the day of his marriage, he leaves his parents' home and becomes the head of his own home, under the headship of Christ; and he must devote himself completely to loving and caring for his wife. They two are to become as one flesh, joined physically and in every other way; they should become united in every way, a functional unit in planning and carrying out their lives and the life of their family, and in guiding and caring for the children.

Children of the marriage must be obedient and submissive to their parents because it is right; this is the only arrangement that works. In fact, to honor one's father and mother is one of the Ten Commandments; and, as another indication of its importance, it is the very first of God's commandments with a promise. Children are to be obedient to their parents in order that they may live long and that life will go well for them. Experience has shown that if we don't control our children, they will control us; and, as a result, the

³⁵ Similar guidance is found in Col 3 and 4.

³⁶ I Corinthians 13:5 ("...seeketh not her own...").

children will be insecure, resentful, disrespectful, and will grow up emotionally and relationally handicapped.

Here again, as in the matter of the submission of the wife to the authority of the husband, God's rules provide perfect balance. The father is admonished to be gentle with his children, not provoking them to wrath with demands that are unreasonable, or treatment that the children know to be wrong. Instead, the father (with the mother's help) is to bring his children up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." This means caring for them, protecting and teaching them, but always within the limits of proper behavior by the children, correcting them when necessary. It is a well-established, observable fact that children who are not disciplined, and who are not required to treat their parents (and other adults) with respect, become insecure, troubled children. They will have difficulty in relating to others as adults, and will tend to have relational difficulties in life. Parents who allow their children to treat them with disrespect, who give in to their children's demands and do not discipline them, are not loving their children; instead, they are sowing the seeds of difficulty and destruction in their children's lives.

Paul ends this passage by comparing the Christian family to the Church, with God the Father as the head of the Son, the Son as the Head of the Church, which is his Body. This analogy is, as he says, one of the holy mysteries of the Kingdom, and one that we should ponder, often and deeply. *NOTE: These rules for family life cannot be taken alone, as if there were nothing else in the Bible bearing on the subject. The underlying assumption is that both spouses are Christians, and that they are firm, but loving, parents in dealing with their children. For situations where the husband (or wife) is abusive, other rules will apply. Likewise, the assumption concerning children is that they have loving, godly parents. Today the tragic reality is that these assumptions are often not the case. Again, in this unhappy situation, other scriptural rules will definitely apply.*

15. Masters and Servants. (6:5-9)

Immediately following rules for the family, Paul lays down basic rules for masters and servants (in that time, this meant slaves or bond servants). Speaking of a situation where both master and servant are believers, he says that the servant should serve his master faithfully and obediently, just as he must serve Christ faithfully and obediently. As the servant works for his master, he should do his best, not to please men, but to please the Lord. The master is told to treat his servant in the same way, not threatening or being overbearing, but with kindness. Then Paul reminds the master that he has a

Master also--One who is in Heaven, who will hold him accountable for the way he treats his servant. Here again is the relational balance that we see in the rules for the family. And, as is the case in the family, not all masters are God-fearing believers; so other rules will apply.

16. Strength for the Battle. (6:10)

At the end of his letter to the Ephesian believers, Paul urges them to be ready at all times for spiritual battle. The importance of this is expressed in the way he worded the directive: “Finally, my brethren...”; it is the equivalent of saying, “Now, let me tell you one important thing before I close.” This important thing, a matter always to be kept in mind, is that they (and we) are to live daily in the strength provided by the Lord--not their own strength--and in the spiritual power of **his** might. They should remind themselves daily that they are seated with Him in heavenly places, and they should go on being freshly filled with the Spirit, for this is the source of that power³⁷. This infilling with the Spirit is not to be only a one-time experience, but a way of life. As Dr. Merrill F. Unger put it, “The Spirit-filled believer...through knowledge and faith, translates his position [with Christ in Heavenly places] into an everyday experience.” The power for defeating Satan and his fiery darts is available to every believer; but it is our responsibility to lay hold of it daily and use it.

17. The Whole Armor of God. (6:11-17)

And, continuing from verse 10, being empowered by the Holy Spirit, the believers (and remember that this applies to all believers--including you and me) are told to put on the protective spiritual armor provided to us by God. This is required in order to be victorious in resisting and overcoming Satan’s cunning, deceptive tactics. We are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies; instead, we are fighting against spiritual enemies: principalities, powers, the rulers of darkness, and “spiritual wickedness in high places³⁸.” And, after each victory over Satan’s demonic attacks, we are to stand fast, not allowing the enemy to counter-attack and re-take the ground we have just seized. And we are not just to put on the parts that we choose to wear; rather, we are to put on all of it--the “**whole** armor of God.”

This protective battle equipment consists of:

a. The Sword Belt of Truth. All of our spiritual weapons are dependent upon, and attached to, truth. Jesus declared Himself to be Truth; if his declarations are not true, we have no weapons with which to fight the

³⁷ Acts 1:8.

³⁸ This phrase does not mean corruption in local and state governments, or in Washington, DC; it refers to the heavenly realm--the spiritual rulers of this present darkness.

powers of darkness. All of our battle readiness begins here; all of our weapons are suspended from the girdle (sword belt) of truth.

b. The Breastplate of Righteousness. The heart and other vital organs in the torso are protected by righteousness, including both of its meanings: (1) our right-standing with God as his children by faith in Christ Jesus; and (2) our integrity and righteous behavior.

c. The Combat Boots Made of the Gospel of Peace. Our feet are to be shod with the firm-footed certainty of the good news of peace, i.e. the message that we can have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ³⁹.

d. The Shield of Faith. It is our faith, a gift from God, that is our shield to protect us from the fiery darts (wrong thoughts, temptations, doubt) which the wicked one, our enemy, and his wicked spirits, fire at us, quenching the fire, and making them of no effect against us.

e. The Helmet of Salvation. This helmet protects and preserves the soul: the mind, our emotions and decisions. Without this, we are vulnerable, regardless of the rest of our spiritual armor⁴⁰.

f. The Sword of the Spirit. The sword of the Spirit, our offensive weapon, is the Word of God. When Jesus was put to the test of withstanding Satan's temptations and trials in the wilderness, what did He use to defeat the Prince of Darkness? He defeated him with the Word of God, beginning each counter punch with, "it is written" or "it is said [in the Word]."

NOTES:

a. In I Thes the helmet of salvation is called "the helmet of the hope of salvation." This can be interpreted in different ways, but we must remember that hope is not an unsubstantial, vain thing; hope is one of the three things that will exist when all else fails, along with faith and the love of God⁴¹. Hope is precious--the breath of life. It is hope that fuels our desire, and our will, to continue the fight and achieve the victory⁴². Hopelessness, the absence of hope, points us in the direction of defeat and death, and moves us in that direction. Remember always that the battles in life, the ones that really matter, take place in the mind; it is our choices and decisions that drive our behavior.

³⁹ Isaiah 52:7; Rom 5:1, 10:15.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 59:17; I Thes 5:8.

⁴¹ I Corinthians 13:13.

⁴² Romans 8:24-25.

The little children's song about being "careful, little eyes what you see (and hear)" is profound. It is equally valid (perhaps more so) for adolescents and adults. Victories and defeats in life begin with decisions.

***b.** In referring to God's Word, there are two Greek words used in the Bible: they are "logos" and "rhema." In simplest terms, "logos" means the expression of a **complete** thought or idea, or explanation of a concept. The entire Bible is the "logos" of God, and Jesus the Christ is the embodiment and personification of it⁴³. "Rhema," on the other hand, can be thought of as the **application** of the Word. Here it refers to the appropriate portion of the written Word, i.e. the portion to apply in a given situation in our lives. In verse 17 we are told to wield the "rhema" of God, just as Jesus did in the wilderness. And, in order to be able to fight the works of darkness in this way, a prerequisite is having the Word stored up in our minds, so as to be able to select and apply the correct portion of the Word to each situation. Again, the performance of Jesus in his wilderness trials is our model and example. When challenged by Satan, He didn't say, "Wait a minute while I go to the synagogue and see what is written about this"; rather, He knew the Word, and replied immediately from his vast store of knowledge. Can we ever know as much of the Word as He? Of course not--but we should try; and we trust the Holy Spirit to bring the scripture that we need to our minds.*

18. A Reminder to Pray. (6:18-20)

Paul ends his letter to the Ephesians by directing them to pray always, i. e. to be always in an attitude of prayer and communion with God, praying in the Spirit, and interceding for him⁴⁴.

And, with a statement of his purpose in sending Tychicus to them, and a brief benediction, he ends his letter.

⁴³ John 1:1,14.

⁴⁴ Romans 8:26-27; I Cor 14:15.