

Ephesians

Authorship

The author names himself as Paul twice (1:1; 3:1) though there are some who dispute it as the apostle's. It has close affinities with Colossians and was clearly acknowledged by the early church to be Paul's writing.¹

Date²

According to internal reference the author was a prisoner at the time of writing (cf. 3:1; 4:1; 6:20). It is debated as to whether this was during his detainment at Caesarea (Acts 24) or Rome (Acts 28). The Roman imprisonment, which occurred in A.D. 60-62, is more likely. Since there is no indication of his expected release, as there seems to be in Philippians (cf. Phil. 2:23-24), it may be assumed that it was written early in Paul's incarceration, perhaps in A.D. 60-61.³

Original Readers

The destination of this letter has been questioned on the basis of the absence of the phrase "in Ephesus" in the introductory greeting, the seeming lack of familiarity with the readership, and the absence of any reference to specific individuals.⁴ It has also been hypothesized that Ephesians was a circular letter. The strength of textual evidence and the lack of a viable alternative favor an Ephesian destination. Paul, then, was writing to the church that he had visited on several separate occasions and had spent over three years shepherding (Acts 19).

Occasion

There is no overt reference to a specific situation that may have given rise to Paul's desire to address this church. There was always a need to warn against false teaching and to encourage believers to remain faithful. It has been suggested that Paul may have been concerned over "the

¹ For a discussion of the arguments for and against Pauline authorship see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 496-528.

² See Appendix: Dating of the Captivity Epistles.

³ See Guthrie, *Introduction*, 536 and Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 301; see also the Supplement: Dating of the Captivity Epistles.

⁴ Cf. Guthrie, *Introduction*, 528-33.

vibrancy of [the church's] first love for Christ” as perhaps reflected in Revelation 2:4 and Paul's words to Timothy about the goal of his instruction (1 Tim. 1:5).⁵

Theme Statement

Believers are called to and equipped for an earthly walk for Christ that is reflective of their heavenly spiritual wealth in Christ.

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⁵ Cf. Harold W. Hoehner, "Ephesians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament edition* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 614.

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Theme Statement

Believers are called to and equipped for an earthly walk for Christ that is reflective of their heavenly spiritual wealth in Christ.

Theme Development

The Book of Ephesians concerns the exalted position of the believer, especially the Gentile believer. The Christian’s identity is completely and inextricably bound up with Christ in his exalted state, and with his body, the church. There are heavenly realities to this relationship (chapters 1-3) as well as earthly ramifications (chapters 4-6).⁶ The heavenly realities span eternity past and eternity future and concern things that we cannot begin to fully understand in time. The earthly ramifications, while shrouded in mystery until Christ, have now been clearly set forth and are to be vitally engaged. This is only possible, however, through a deep abiding in the truths of our position in Christ in the heavenly places. This is the message of Ephesians.

⁶ This distinction should **never** be thought of as theoretical vs. practical or theological vs applicational. There is nothing more profoundly practical than a knowledge of my position and destiny in Jesus Christ. Ephesians should **never** be preached beginning with chapter 4.

I. Introductory Greeting: Paul the apostle writes to the faithful saints in Ephesus (1:1-2).

With the authority of an apostle, Paul writes to the faithful at Ephesus concerning their great privilege in Christ.

II. Exposition of the believer's wealth in Christ (1:3–3:21).

The first half of the letter focuses on the great benefits belonging to the Christian by virtue of his or her union with Jesus Christ. These will include both individual and corporate aspects.

A. The believer has been spiritually blessed in Christ in the heavenly places (1:3-23).

Paul is effusive in his praise to God for the blessings enjoyed by believers by virtue of their union with Christ (1:3). By the three occurrences of the phrase “to the praise of the/his glory. . .” (1:6, 12, 14), Paul is summarizing three great areas of blessing. First, every believer has been chosen by God for the privilege of sonship, that is, to enjoy the full rights of being a member of the family of God (1:4-6). Second, through Christ's redemption the believer has been selected to receive an inheritance (1:7-12). Finally, Paul assures believers of their security by virtue of the sealing of the Holy Spirit (1:13-14). All of this not only greatly benefits the believer, it also brings praise to the glory of God, all by grace (cf. 1:6).

Having propounded the believers' great spiritual blessings and privileges, Paul prays that they might become truly cognizant of such benefits since this will increase their appreciation of the ultimate source, Jesus Christ (1:15-23).

B. The believer is built into Christ for a habitation in the world (2:1–3:21).

The focus shifts from heavenly blessings of the individual to more present and corporate ramifications (not that heaven ever completely disappears—cf. 2:6).

1. Paul propounds the believer's new earthly association (2:1–3:13). As Gentile believers (cf. 2:11; 31) theirs had been the lot of death under sin (2:1-3) and exclusion from the covenants of promise (2:12). As a result of Christ's work on the cross, they have been saved from judgment and seated in a new realm, the heavenly places, and suited for works appropriate to their new station (2:1-10). Not only that, they have become associated with the God of covenant through his Son by virtue of his sacrificial death (2:11-13). This means that they are now part of a new entity, the new man or body of Christ (2:14-18). Estranged and desperate humanity is now able to be united by the Spirit on the basis of the peace of reconciliation provided by Jesus Christ. The purpose for this new creation lies in God's desire to dwell upon the earth in a building uniquely suited to display his holiness (2:19-22).

2. Paul prays for the believer's practical realization of Christ in His supernatural presence (3:1-21). Following the pattern set in the first chapter, Paul prays that believers might fully realize God's strategy of making them his earthly dwelling (cp. 2:22 with 3:17). However, before he can actually disclose his prayer (3:14-19) he finds himself compelled to expound upon the mystery of the church (3:1-13).

Paul has received, for the primary benefit of the Gentiles, a stewardship of grace, according to which he is to make known the previously unrevealed strategy by which God is going to manifest himself to all of creation during the time of Israel's removal from covenant privilege (3:1-12). This has been eternally predetermined and is now being realized through Jesus Christ who has provided confident access to the Father (3:11-12). Such an exalted privilege utterly transforms any associated hardship (3:13).

On this basis Paul petitions God for supernatural enablement in experiencing the effectual presence of Christ, the motivation and goal of which is love (3:14-19). In this way God will be manifested. In a kind of doxology, Paul praises God for his ability to accomplish in the church far more than is humanly conceivable (3:20-21).

III. Exhortation regarding the believer's walk in Christ (4:1-6:20).

Now that the heavenly realities of Christ's work have been set forth as the basis for the believers' identity, resource, and purpose, Paul may exhort them with respect to specific ministry and behavior. This makes up the rest of the book. The repetition of the command to "walk," which has the idea of the practical conduct of life, provides the structure marker for dividing this section.

A. They are to walk worthy of their calling (4:1-16).

The calling of the church is to be a united witness to the glory of God. This exalted responsibility and privilege requires attention to the body's make-up and function. Unity is of the utmost importance, based not on human convention but upon divinely wrought realities (4:1-6). This is possible only because of the grace extended in the person of Christ, who has descended from heaven to procure mankind's salvation, before ascending back to his Father's realm.⁷

⁷ This cannot refer to a *decensus ad inferos*. For a detailed analysis of the history of the interpretation of this passage see H. Hall Harris III, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7-11 and traditional Hebrew imagery* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

Christ's gifting work will be evident in his providing the church with grace enabled individuals, given for the equipping of every believer to carry on the building up of the body in love (4:11-16). This is the only way that true unity (4:13) and stability (4:14) may be achieved. Truth spoken in love will be the mighty demonstration of the life of Christ working in the proper functioning of every individual part of the body (4:15-16).

B. The are to walk as a new man (4:17-32).

Life in Christ, as a contributing member of his body, the church, is entirely different from the way Gentiles live by nature (4:17-19). The Ephesian believers had put off the old man when they learned about Christ and had put on the new (4:20-22). This had made possible their present experience of continually renewing of the inner person (4:23-24). Therefore, they can now be involved in wholesome and edifying interaction with each other instead of the old, negative, destructive behavior that had so characterized them outside of Christ (4:25-32).

C. They are to walk in love (5:1-7).

With respect to their relationship with the Father, love is to be the governing factor that will motivate them to live lives as pleasing offerings to the Lord rather than to live lives of defilement and covetousness, so characteristic of those who can only look forward to eternal judgment. Why should they cast away their inheritance by living like those who do not even belong to the kingdom!

D. The are to walk as children of light (5:8-14).

Rather than participate in the things of darkness, in which they formerly lived, believers have the distinct privilege of manifesting the light of Christ. In this way others will have opportunity to come under its saving influence as well.

E. They are to walk in wisdom (5:15–6:9).

The final exhortation regarding daily living includes a basic admonition to live life wisely—that is, according to the design and direction given by the Lord (5:15-17). In order to implement such living, it is crucial that the believer's spirit be overflowing with the fullness that is sourced in God rather than with the self-absorption produced by physical intoxication (5:18).⁸ A full (or filled) spirit will overflow with worship, edification and thanksgiving (5:19-20). It will also result in proper deference to one another out of respect for the Lord (5:21).

⁸ The common teaching on the filling of the Holy Spirit seems to go quite beyond the information derivable from this passage. However the phrase is to be understood, it is clear that there are two opposite, and competing, powers of influence available to the believer. One results in dissipation (lack of self-control and focused action), the other results in an appropriate spiritual response to others and to God.

Wise conduct is spelled out for specific relationship contexts, including wives and husbands, children and parents, and servants and masters (5:22–6:9). In these relationship pairings the motivation for conduct, and in some cases the pattern for conduct, is traced back to God.

F. They are to stand in spiritual warfare (6:10-20).

One last exhortation is needful, namely, the importance of standing firm against the devices of the devil (6:10-11). Paul knows that the unseen forces of spiritual wickedness are the greatest foes of consistent Christian living (6:12). Fortunately the believer has been provided with all the weapons necessary to counter successfully the unseen enemy (6:14-17), not least of which is perseverance in prayer (6:18-20).

IV. Concluding Greeting: Paul commends his messenger and blesses them (6:21-24).

In typical pastoral fashion, Paul concludes with a statement of his concern for the Ephesian believers' comfort, for which purpose he is sending his companion (6:21-22), wishing them peace, love with faith, and grace.

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Appendix

Dating of the Captivity Epistles

The reason that Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon are called prison, or captivity, epistles is because of the explicit references to the author's bonds (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil 1:7, 13, 14; Col 4:18; and Phlm 1, 9). Since the author had relative freedom to receive visitors and carry on extensive correspondence "captivity" rather than "prison" may be the best descriptive term for grouping these works. Furthermore, three of these may be grouped as coming from the same time and place, namely Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. This is due to the mention of Tychicus as being the bearer of two of the letters (cf. Col 4:7 and Eph 6:21) and the mention of Onesimus as being Tychicus' companion (cp. Col 4:9 with Phlm 10–12). In addition Archippus is greeted in the salutation of Philemon (v. 2) and addressed in the epilogue of Colossians (4:17). On the basis of this internal evidence Harrison summarizes: "These three epistles, then, emanated from the apostle at the same time and must have originated at one place."⁹ Besides the lack of such links with Philippians, that letter is also set off from the other three by its much more positive tone with respect to Paul's expectation of imminent release (Phil 1:25).

The dating of Ephesians has been complicated in modern times by questions about its authenticity and its destination. Guthrie summarizes the traditional arguments for Pauline authorship as being (1) its self-claims (Paul's naming of himself and the many first person references) (2) its external attestation (its general acceptance as a work of Paul and wide circulation by the middle of the second century) (3) its Pauline structure (4) its language and literary affinities (5) its theological affinities and (6) its historical data.¹⁰ With respect to the last evidence, Guthrie notes that the lack of reference to the fall of Jerusalem (which would be *apropos* to the Jew and Gentile discussion) and "the absence of a developed ecclesiastical organization" point to an early rather than latter date.¹¹ After examining the arguments against Pauline authorship,

⁹ Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 293.

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 496-99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 499.

Guthrie concludes, “that the weight of evidence is inadequate to overthrow the overwhelming external attestation to Pauline authorship, and the epistle’s own claims.”¹²

However, Pauline authorship notwithstanding, there are still difficulties in identifying the destination of Ephesians. This is due to the lack of the words ἐν Εφῆσῳ (*en Epheso*) in the salutation of some manuscripts, the seeming lack of familiarity with the readership (cf. 1:15; 3:2; 4:21) and the absence of reference to specific individuals in the concluding section (6:21–24).¹³ Two possibilities for the textual variant are either that the destination reference was dropped, particularly in Egypt, for liturgical reasons or that it was originally intended as a circular letter.¹⁴ Whatever the exact destination, the close connection with Colossians argues for a Roman captivity origin. Harrison puts the three connected letters (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon) around the middle of the Roman detention¹⁵, which would be, according to the chronology worked out above, the winter of A.D. 60/61.

The dating of Colossians is closely tied to the evidence for the dating of Ephesians and Philemon. While the material relating to Onesimus and Philemon fit better against an Ephesian captivity as opposed to a Caesarean imprisonment, there is insufficient reason to overthrow the traditional Roman imprisonment view for either of the alternatives. Guthrie, in accepting a Rome origin, thinks that Colossians would have had to have been written during the middle or later half of Paul’s time there in order to allow for the news of his plight to have spread to the Lycus valley communities and for Epaphrus to have sought Paul out (cf. Col 1:7; 4:12).¹⁶

Philemon is addressed to the owner of the slave Onesimus who had found the way from his native city of Colosse to Rome where Paul was imprisoned. Colossians and Philemon belong to the same period. Guthrie thinks it likely that Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus, was the bearer of both letters to Colosse.¹⁷ The date, then would be the same as that for Colossians, that is winter A.D. 60/61.

¹² Ibid., 527.

¹³ Cf. Ibid., 528-33.

¹⁴ Ibid., 529-30.

¹⁵ Harrison, *Introduction*, 301.

¹⁶ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 580.

¹⁷ Ibid., 664.

Philippians presents a more complex situation with respect to destination and dating. Paul's close association with the church at Philippi, well established through the record of Acts, leaves very little doubt as to the authenticity and destination of the letter. The real question is the origin of the letter given the nature of the church's interaction with the apostle during the period in question. Paul is clearly a prisoner (Phil 1:7, 13, 16). At issue is the identification of the imprisonment. Rome has always been the traditional opinion, however more recently cases have been made for Caesarea and Ephesus.

Robinson has recently argued for the Caesarean context for the prison epistles.¹⁸ However Guthrie concludes that were the Roman hypothesis to prove faulty, the Ephesian alternative would "probably be unchallenged."¹⁹ One of the main reasons for entertaining the Ephesian imprisonment hypothesis as being the context for the Philippian correspondence has to do with the number of back and forth visits reflected in the letter in light of Philippi's relative proximity to Rome versus Ephesus. On the surface there needs to be sufficient time for news of Paul's situation to come to Philippi, Epaphroditus' arrival in Rome with a gift for the apostle, the messenger's falling ill and its news reaching the home church, followed by Paul's receiving a report of the church's concern over their emissary's condition. Guthrie demonstrates the plausibility of such rather extensive travel falling well within Paul's two-year stint in Rome, noting that numerous Roman writers confirmed the contention of Bishop Lightfoot that a month was sufficient time for a journey from Rome to Philippi.²⁰

Another problem is the supposed conflict between Paul's statement that seems to indicate that he viewed his death as imminent, on the one hand, and his expectation of receiving word from Timothy regarding the Philippians' welfare on the other (cp. 2:17 with 2:19). This would be problematic with the greater distance involved between Rome and Macedonia. The answer, of course, is that Paul's true expectation is that he will be released (cf. 1:25), the reference in 2:17 being a hypothetical worst scenario with respect to his service on behalf of the church's faith.

Finally, Paul's anticipated itinerary upon release has raised objections to Rome as the place of writing. The record of Acts, coupled with the Roman correspondence, leaves the very

¹⁸ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 57-85.

¹⁹ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 555.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 547-49.

definite impression that Paul has his sight set inexorably upon Spain as his next field of missionary endeavor. This seems to go against his stated intention to visit Philippi soon (cf. 2:24). However, Paul's plans had changed more than once in his missionary work (e.g. in his intentions regarding visits to Corinth). There is no necessary conflict between a proposed visit to Philippi upon release from Rome (a movement East) before resuming his long held goal of ministry in the far West. At any rate there are no compelling reasons to deny Rome as the site of Paul's imprisonment on account of distances and itinerary.

The references in Philippians to Caesar's household and the praetorium (1:13), the relative freedom to carry on correspondence and receive companions, and the expression of a sense of imminent acquittal all serve to support the traditional view that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome, probably toward the end of his captivity, likely late in A.D. 61. This conclusion, in turn, leads to, at least, the opportunity for a visit to Spain and the necessity of a final imprisonment, which provides the possible backdrop to the Pastoral Epistles.