

### **Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)**

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### **Ephesians**

Paul is taken up with the overwhelming goodness that God in Christ has showered on believers, and with his amazing plan to unite Gentiles with Jews in a new community—the church, the body of Christ. Here, Paul provides one of the finest descriptions of the Christian life in the entire New Testament. Though written from prison, this letter is full of joy, praise, and thanksgiving. It is a fitting reply to the wonder of God's amazing grace in Christ, poured out in abundance on those chosen to know his love—Gentiles as well as Jews.

## Setting

Paul's third missionary journey (AD 53–57) centered on Ephesus, capital and port city of the Roman province of Asia on the western coast of what we now call Turkey. In Paul's time, Ephesus was the fourth-largest city in the Roman empire, with a population of perhaps 500,000. Many people visited the city to see the famous temple of Artemis.

After an initial brief visit (see [Acts 18:19–21](#)), Paul returned to spend between two and three years in this large and flourishing city (see [Acts 19:1–20:1](#)). It was a difficult time for him: He encountered much opposition and suffered much abuse (see [Acts 19:21–41](#); [1 Cor 15:32](#); [2 Cor 1:8–9](#); [11:23–27](#)). But during this time, people all over the province heard the Good News of Christ for the first time, and many small groups of believers sprang up, meeting together in homes, in villages and towns across the province (the seven churches addressed in Revelation probably originated during this time). Some of these churches (at Colosse, for example) were begun by Paul's converts and had no firsthand acquaintance with Paul.

It is not clear how accurate these churches' understanding of the gospel was, but we know from Paul's letter to the Colossians that some of them had encountered false teaching and distorted perceptions. In Ephesians, Paul is concerned with a perception that Gentile Christians were inferior to or distinct from Jewish Christians, and not fully part of God's "new Israel." What gave rise to this misunderstanding is not clear—discrimination by Jewish Christians? Gentile aversion to Jewish Christians?—but it reflects traditional ethnic tensions between Jews and Gentiles throughout the Roman world. Paul was also concerned with a lack of awareness that God's people are to live in a distinctly different way from the surrounding world.

Paul writes a letter from prison that seems to be intended for several of these churches full of new converts. As their spiritual father, and as one commissioned by God to carry the Good News to the Gentiles, Paul was deeply concerned that these new believers have a correct understanding of all that God had given them in Christ and of the kind of life God wanted them to live in response.

## Summary

with some personal words and a benediction ([6:21-24](#)).

With a heart full of praise for all that God has done, Paul beautifully summarizes the Good News of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ—emphasizing that it is for Gentiles as well as for Jews ([chs 1-3](#)). He also gives practical instructions on how believers are to live in response, turning away from their former lives to become truly good and like Christ ([chs 4-6](#)).

Following a brief introduction ([1:1-2](#)), Paul praises God for the amazing grace that believers have received in Christ ([1:3-14](#)). In his sovereign love, God has chosen them, forgiven them, brought them into his family, made them his children, and promised them eternal blessings. In giving them his Spirit, he has marked them as his own so that they might praise his grace forever. Paul then prays that God will give them spiritual understanding to grasp the full depth of all that he has done for them ([1:15-23](#)). Though fully deserving of God's wrath, they have been saved by God's grace, not by anything they have done, but simply by being joined to Christ ([2:1-10](#)). As Gentiles, they were utterly alienated from God and his blessings, but in God's mercy, through the reconciling work of Christ, they have now been made members of God's family, fully equal to Jewish Christians. They are no longer outsiders ([2:11-22](#)).

Paul was the one commissioned by God to bring this wonderful Good News to them ([3:1-13](#)). His second prayer for them ([3:14-21](#)) is that God will give them spiritual power, strengthen them in their faith and love, enable them to understand Christ's saving love fully, and fill them with the life and power of God himself.

In response, they are to live a life of humility, grace, and love—a life worthy of their calling, as they use their God-given gifts to build up the body of Christ ([4:1-16](#)). They are to turn from the darkness of their former sinful ways and live as children of light. Filled with kindness and love in the Holy Spirit, and following the example of Christ, their lives are to please God in all things ([4:17-5:20](#)).

All their relationships at home—between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves—are to be characterized by respect and love, as they live for Christ ([5:21-6:9](#)). Finally, they are warned to take on God's armor to protect themselves from the devil ([6:10-20](#)). Paul closes

## Author

Ephesians is traditionally ascribed to Paul, as are the other Prison Letters (Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). However, on the basis of vocabulary, style, form, setting, purpose, and theological emphases, some have thought that Ephesians was written instead by a later disciple of Paul. Others see it as an original letter from Paul that has been reworked by a later editor.

However, the letter is not at all incompatible with Paul's thought and style. The supposed differences with the undisputed letters of Paul can be explained by taking account of (1) variations in Paul's own vocabulary and style; (2) the different content of this letter (for example, [Eph 1-3](#) include extensive sections of blessing, praise, and prayer); (3) developments in Paul's own thinking; (4) Paul's use of secretaries (see [Rom 16:22](#)), who may have exercised some degree of freedom in putting his thoughts into their own words; and (5) the nature of Ephesians as a general letter sent to several churches, not just one. There is no compelling reason to deny that Paul authored it.

## Recipients

Though traditionally understood to have been written to the church at Ephesus, this letter may have been written as a general letter to be circulated to a number of different churches in the Roman province of Asia. This opinion is based on (1) the omission of the introductory words *in Ephesus* ([Eph 1:1](#)) in many of the earliest manuscripts, and (2) the lack of personal greetings or references in Ephesians—a surprising omission if the letter was intended for the church in Ephesus, given Paul's extended stay in the city and personal acquaintance with the church there (see [Acts 19:10](#); [20:31](#)).

## **Date and Place of Writing**

Ephesians is one of the Prison Letters (along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon), traditionally understood to have been written from Rome in AD 60–62 or shortly before Paul was executed around AD 64~65. This would place the Prison Letters among the last of Paul's writings. However, they might better be understood as having been written from prison in Ephesus. In 2 Corinthians, written shortly after Paul left Ephesus, he refers to the strong opposition he encountered in the area and mentions having been in prison many times; see [2 Cor 11:23–27](#). If the Prison Letters were written from Ephesus, it would place them earlier in Paul's life, around AD 53~56.

## Meaning and Message

Praise for God's Grace. Perhaps more than any other book in the New Testament, Ephesians is filled with gratitude for the saving grace God has shown to those who believe in Jesus Christ. Solely by God's grace, believers have been chosen, forgiven, called into his family, made his children, promised his eternal blessings, and given the gift of his Holy Spirit to mark them as belonging to him forever ([Eph 1:3-14](#)). Salvation can never be viewed as something that is earned; it is a sheer gift ([Eph 2:8-9](#)). As a result, believers know they are called to praise God forever for his amazing grace ([Eph 1:6, 12, 14](#)). They can do nothing less, for they owe him everything.

The Condemned State of Human Beings. The awareness of grace that pervades the first three chapters of Ephesians is heightened by Paul's contrasting emphasis on sin and God's judgment upon it. What is true of his readers is true of everyone, since all stand under God's judgment (see [Eph 2:1-3, 12](#)). Every human being stands guilty and condemned before the eternal judgment of God, who cannot tolerate sin. This concept seems troublingly harsh to modern ways of thinking; behind it stands a much stronger view of human sin and of the utter holiness of God than most Westerners today are used to. Apart from Christ, human beings are driven by sin and subject to the devil. Evangelism is therefore urgent (see [Mark 16:15-16](#); cp. [Rom 9:1-3; 10:1](#)).

The Unity of the Church. God's amazing plan is to include Gentiles in his family (see [Eph 2:11-3:6](#)). Ethnic distinctions mean nothing to God and they should mean nothing to God's people (cp. [Gal 3:28](#)). Because God has joined people from all ethnic backgrounds together in his church (see [Eph 2:14-17; 3:6](#)), believers should respond by warmly welcoming one another in humility, grace, and love, without consideration of ethnic differences (see [Eph 4:1-6; Rom 15:5-7](#)). In the church, one's identity is defined only by one's faith in Christ.

Living Like Christ. In [Eph 4-6](#), Paul gives us a beautiful picture of the Christian life as it ought to be lived. Believers are to turn away from the darkness of their former lives and, filled with the Holy Spirit, to live as new people of light, seeking only what is "good and right and true" ([Eph 5:9](#)). They are to express gentleness, integrity, respect, kindness, and love to others. In relation to God, their lives are to be filled with purity, praise, and

thanksgiving (see [Eph 4:17-5:20](#)). Believers are to become like Christ and to reflect him in all they do and say (see [Eph 4:13, 15; Rom 8:29](#)). In Christ, they have been created anew to be like God (see [Eph 4:24; 5:1-2](#)).

Respect and Love at Home. In [Eph 5:21-6:9](#), Paul emphasizes the importance of showing respect and love to those with whom one lives. He maintains and honors the traditional cultural relationships (including those between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves), while stressing that, in all relationships, believers' attitudes are to be those of Christ.

Spiritual War. [Ephesians 6:10-20](#) gives the fullest New Testament account of how believers are to protect themselves in their war against the devil. In this spiritual battle, believers cannot rely on their own resources, but must use the weapons the Lord supplies. Significantly, all of the weapons described—except the short-bladed sword—are defensive weapons. There is no picture here of Christians attacking the devil. Though the devil's opposition is to be taken seriously, Paul's view of the Christian life does not center on spiritual warfare in an aggressive or offensive sense.