

What is the significance of Ephesus in the Bible?

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Ephesus was the capital city of a Roman province in Asia. Ephesus was a significant center of trade, located near a harbor at the mouth of the Cayster River in western Asia Minor. The city lay in a long, fertile valley. Major roads connected Ephesus to all the other significant cities in Asia Minor.

Ephesus was known for its amphitheater, the largest in the world, designed to hold up to 50,000 spectators. Ephesus was also the location of the great temple of Artemis, or Diana, built in 550 BC. This temple, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was “425 ft. long and 220 ft. wide; each of its 127 pillars which supported the roof of its colonnade was 60 ft. high” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia). Much Ephesian industry was related to this temple. Craftsmen sold shrines and household images of the goddess that worshipers could take with them on long journeys. The Ephesians were proud of their religious heritage and its accompanying legends (Acts 19:35).

Ephesus is mentioned often in Scripture. Paul journeyed to Ephesus during his third missionary trip and stayed there for more than 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). Ephesus was a prime site for evangelizing the whole province, due to the city’s accessibility and prominence in the region. It was in Ephesus that Paul’s companions were taken into the massive amphitheater where for two hours the mob shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:23–41). Despite the strong objections to the gospel, many Ephesians came to faith in Christ through the faithful ministry of Paul and his companions. A church began there, and a few years later, Paul wrote to them a letter

that we now call the book of Ephesians. Four hundred years later, Ephesus was the site of a major church meeting known as the Council of Ephesus.

Ephesus was the setting for many New Testament events:

- God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, such that even handkerchiefs and aprons touched by him healed sickness and cast out demons (Acts 19:11).
- Paul wrote the epistle of 1 Corinthians.
- The seven sons of Sceva, Jewish exorcists, attempted to imitate Paul's power and were attacked by demons because the demons did not recognize their spiritual authority (Acts 19:13-16).
- Many new believers "who had practiced magic arts brought their books and burned them in front of everyone" (Acts 19:19, BSB). The total value of the sorcery books they destroyed was 50,000 silver pieces.
- Priscilla and Aquilla discipled Apollos (Acts 18:24-26).
- Timothy had his first pastorate (1 Timothy 1:3).
- It's thought that the apostle John and Jesus' mother, Mary, lived in Ephesus after Jesus returned to heaven (see John 19:26-27).
- Paul may have faced wild beasts in the amphitheater (1 Corinthians 15:32).
- Jesus directed to Ephesus one of His seven letters in the book of Revelation (Revelation 2:1-7).

Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus contains Jesus' famous rebuke: "You have left your first love" (Revelation 2:4). The believers at Ephesus, struggling beneath the weight of a godless and immoral culture, had maintained the letter of the law but had lost the Spirit of the law (see Romans 2:29). Jesus commended them for their hard work,

perseverance, rejection of false teaching, and hatred of sin. But He was grieved that they had become routine in their service for Him rather than serve Him with the passion they once had. Their actions were there, but their hearts were not.

Jesus' words to the believers in Ephesus should challenge all servants of the Lord. It is easy to get caught up in the busyness of ministry, church work, or volunteering and not realize our passion for the Lord has cooled. We are no longer propelled into service by love, but by some other selfish or worldly motivation. We may think God doesn't mind, as long as we are outwardly obeying, but He does mind. It hurts Him, and it violates the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" (Mark 12:30).

Jesus gave the church at Ephesus time to repent, and He gives us time as well. Every moment we resist His call to humble ourselves and return to our first love is one more moment that we forfeit the love, joy, and peace He offers (1 Peter 5:6; Galatians 5:22-23). Jesus was so concerned about the church at Ephesus that He dictated a letter through the apostle John (Revelation 1:1-2). And He is so concerned about the church of today that He made certain that letter was preserved for us (Revelation 1:3; 22:18-19).