



UNIT 3 NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 7

EPHESIANS

Ephesians has been called 'the Queen of the Epistles'. John Calvin called it his favourite Epistle. There are many who would hold that it is indeed the highest reach of New Testament thought.

This letter, in its form, less restricted by particular controversial or pastoral needs than other New Testament letters, stands as a wonderful declaration of the eternal purpose of God in Christ wrought out in His church (chapters 1-3) and of the practical consequences for the Christian of that purpose (chapters 4-6).

Readers

Was Ephesians really addressed (as the title suggests) to the Christians at Ephesus? The title goes back to the second century. Yet the best early Greek manuscripts omit 'at Ephesus' in 1:1. This small but very weighty evidence is supported by the evidence of the contents of the letter. It is difficult to explain such verses as 1:15; 3:2; 4:21 and the complete absence of personal greetings if this were a letter addressed by Paul to Christians among whom he laboured for three years (Acts 19 and 20:31).

Many see the solution in regarding Ephesians as a 'circular letter' sent to the Gentile churches in the province of Asia.

Occasion and Purpose

The Epistle to the Ephesians (together with Colossians, Philippians and Philemon) is known as one of the 'Captivity Epistles' because it was written by Paul from prison (3:1; 4:1 and 6:20).

Since Paul was in prison he has clearly had time to reflect and this would well account for the more contemplative mood of the Epistle, together with the absence of any tension connected with a specific situation (contrast Galatians) with which he was dealing. His mind dwells on the theme of Christ and the Church resulting in an exalted Christology and a high appraisal of the privileges of believers in Christ.

The close connection between this Epistle and Colossians has a direct bearing on its purpose. There are many resemblances between the two letters; many phrases are the same and the structure of the letters is similar, one half of each being doctrinal, the other half ethical.

It would seem that Paul had written to the Colossians to deal with a definite situation and a definite outbreak of heresy. Then, with all the Gentile Christians of Asia in mind, Paul sets down for his readers in this letter to the Ephesians, some of his profoundest and maturest thoughts including much of the material used in Colossians but removing the local and temporary and controversial aspects of it.



Theme

The key thought of Ephesians is the gathering together of all things in Jesus Christ. Christ is the centre in whom all things unite and the bond who unites all things (1:10).

There is disunity in nature, disunity in man, disunity between God and man. It is here that we discover that this disunity can become unity in Christ.

Plan

In the first three chapters of the letter, Paul speaks of the unity that is possible in Christ. In the second three chapters he has much to say of the place of the Church in God's plan to bring about that unity.

There is a double thesis in Ephesians. First, Christ is God's instrument of reconciliation. Second, the Church is Christ's instrument of reconciliation.

The Epistle is divided into two broad sections:

1. Salutation 1:1, 2
 - Doctrine 1:3-3:21
 - a) Doxology 1:3-14
 - b) Prayer for Readers' Enlightenment 1:15-2:10
 - c) Reconciliation for Jew and Gentile in Christ 2:11-22
 - d) Paul's Commission to the Gentiles 3:1-13
 - e) Paul's Prayer for Gentiles' Strengthening 3:14-21
 2. Ethics 4:1-6:20
 - a) First Charge: to Promote Church's Unity 4:1-16
 - b) Second Charge: to Break with Pagan Ways 4:17-5:20
 - c) Third Charge: to Build Christian Homes 5:21-6:9
 - d) Fourth Charge: to Put on the Armour of God 6:10-20
- Conclusion 6:21-24



PHILIPPIANS

"Philippians", said Meyer, "is an Epistle of the heart." It has been said that Philippians gives us the truest, loveliest and most complete picture we have of Paul the Christian. Part of the explanation is in the intimacy of the letter. A friend is writing to friends. His opening salutation dispenses with the title 'apostle' and with perfect confidence of his place in the hearts of his readers, he calls himself simply 'a servant'. The whole letter is cast almost in conversational tones. Only once or twice (3:2, 3; 3:18-19) does he, so to speak, 'raise his voice', for the rest of this letter exhibits the gentler side of Paul's nature, tenderness predominating over sternness. The letter has a mellowness of one who has fought his battles and now, nearing the end of his course, finds his life filled with peace and confidence.

Readers

The notable thing about Philippi is that it was Paul's first conquest in Europe on Paul's second journey and hence 'the birthplace of European Christianity'.

The story of the founding of the Church is related in Acts 16. The membership of the Christian congregation was mainly Greek, with possibly a few Jews and Roman citizens. Women had an honourable place (Acts 16:13, 14).

The years went by and Paul once again revisited Philippi (Acts 20:1-6; 2 Cor. 2:12-18; 7:5-7) and the Church there, though it did not escape persecution (1:27-30), prospered.

When the Philippians heard of Paul's imprisonment (in Rome? Caesarea? Ephesus?) they sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, with a gift of money for the apostle. Epaphroditus also offered to Paul his own personal services.

Occasion and Purpose

Unfortunately, while serving Paul, Epaphroditus had fallen seriously ill (2:25-27). When he was better, Paul resolved to send him back to Philippi with a letter of thanks for the gift.

Paul's primary purpose when he wrote this letter was to say "thank you" to his old friends for their generosity to himself (4:10-20). Information concerning Paul's own affairs is also provided. Account is given of the ministry of Epaphroditus: the Philippians, though hearing of his illness, had apparently not taken it seriously and had expressed disappointment at his inadequate service on their behalf. Paul wishes to put the record straight by revealing the gravity of Epaphroditus' illness and commends him to the Philippians as worthy of honour.

Paul also used the occasion to persuade the Philippians to mend certain little rifts that had appeared in their fellowship (2:1-4; 4:2, 3). Epaphroditus had, it is clear, brought news of the outbreak of various troubles at Philippi, especially that of disunity. Paul gently tells them that they must remain united in the face of opposition and misrepresentation (1:27-30). All party spirit must go (2:3) and Christ's example of humility must be followed by all (2:5-11). Individual differences should be resolved (4:2) lest they divide the Church.



Features of the Letter

1. This letter will always remain as a tribute to the apostle's attitude to his sufferings. By the Grace of God, he is able to rejoice under the most trying circumstances of his captivity and impending fate. "I rejoice and you must rejoice too" is the theme of many of his appeals. The noun 'joy' and the verb 'to rejoice' are found no less than sixteen times in this short Epistle.
2. We have already spoken of the warm intimacy of this letter.
3. The letter contains a number of great passages:
 - a) 1:19~26 where Paul surveys his prospects of living or dying.
 - b) 2:6-11 where he speaks of the self-emptying and exaltation of Jesus Christ.
 - c) 3:4-16 where he tells us how he gladly gave up all his proud Jewish privileges for the knowledge of Christ.
 - d) 4:4-13 where a call to rejoice is followed by another to think noble thoughts, and where he lets us into a secret of 'independence', which is dependence upon Another.

Plan

Of plan, arrangement and development there is even less than in Paul's letters generally. There is no substitute for a personal acquaintance with the contents themselves. The following will only serve as a guide:

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| a) | Address and Greetings | 1:1-2 |
| b) | Paul's Thanksgiving and Confidence | 1:3-7 |
| c) | An Apostolic Prayer | 1:8-11 |
| d) | Paul's Great Ambition and Joy | 1:12-26 |
| e) | Exhortation and Example | 1:27-2:18 |
| | (i) Steadfastness | 1:27-30 |
| | (ii) Unity | 2:1-2 |
| | (iii) Humility | 2:3-11 |
| | (iv) Obedience and Purity | 2:12-18 |
| f) | Future Plans | 2:19-30 |
| g) | The Great Digression | 3:1-21 |
| h) | Encouragement, Appreciation and Greetings | 4:1-23 |



COLOSSIANS

If this Epistle has less of the attractive personal element, it still contains the nucleus of the Gospel.

Readers

Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians, to people he had never seen (2:1). How then, did he first establish Christian contact with the Lycus Valley?

The answer is that he made such contact during his third missionary journey (AD 53-56), when he evangelised Ephesus and its surrounding regions (see Acts 18 and 19). During his long stay of three years in Ephesus, Paul founded a group of churches. Doubtless it was during his Ephesian ministry, that men from the Lycus Valley, visiting Ephesus, heard the Gospel for the first time, accepted it, and on returning home founded the three Churches in Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae. one such was Epaphras (1:7; 4:12). Converted, perhaps by Paul in Ephesus, he had gone back to his native Colossae and founded the church there.

Though Paul had not directly founded the Church, it seems to have come somewhat under the Apostle's jurisdiction, for he assumes a position of authority when he writes, in spite of the lack of personal contact with them. He had no doubt that the Church had been well instructed in the Christian faith (2:6) and has every confidence in Epaphras, whom he describes as a 'faithful minister of Christ' (1:7).

Occasion and Purpose

Another of the 'Captivity Epistles', Colossians was written during one of Paul's imprisonments.

Two matters brought the Church in Colossae especially before Paul and occasioned the writing of this letter:

- a) First, he was writing and sending a messenger to Philemon in Colossae in connection with his runaway, but now converted, slave Onesimus (4:7-9) (see also Philemon). The letters belong together. In both alike, Paul refers to his imprisonment (Col. 4:3, 18; Philemon 9, 13), Onesimus and Archippus figure, and greetings are sent from the same group of friends.
- b) Secondly, Paul had received a report. One of the reasons for Epaphras' journey to Paul and his willingness to share for a time the Apostle's imprisonment (in Philemon 23 he is described as a 'fellow prisoner'), was his desire to acquaint Paul with the progress of the Gospel in the Lycus Valley and so encourage the great Apostle's heart (1:4-8). But the main reason was undoubtedly to solicit advice about a dangerous heresy which had arisen in Colossae and was threatening the security of the Church.

Most of the Christians there were Gentiles (1:27; 2:13), but from the time of Antiochus the Great there had been considerable and influential Jewish settlements within the neighbourhood. The mixture of Jewish, Greek and Phrygian elements in the population of the city was probably found also



in the Church; it would have been fertile ground for the type of heresy which Paul's letter was designed to counter.

It is not easy to know the precise nature of the heresy. One possible error was that Christ in nature was between God and man. Another was that there was a mysterious secret knowledge, the key to the meaning of the universe, and that this knowledge was given only to an inner circle of special people. Also this false teaching attempted to make the Christians believe a lot of Jewish taboos and Jewish observances of new moons and holy days.

The Colossian church, it seems, was being subjected to a propaganda line which said: "All religions have their contribution to make, and so you can combine belief in Jesus Christ with the beliefs and practices of other cults. If you want the maximum insurance cover against the forces that control and endanger our existence, it is best to have a 'comprehensive policy' including what other religions can offer."

Paul's chief purpose in writing the letter was to counter the Colossian heresy whose fundamental error was its insufficient appreciation of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. The question is relevant for every generation.

If Jesus Christ is but one among the many who have sensed and sought after truth, then we must certainly study His teaching and attempt to discover what He can contribute to the onward trending of human thought; but He will have no higher claim upon us than Moses, Isaiah, Socrates, Confucius, Mohammed and many others, all of whom are to be considered, but none of whom represent final authority. If, on the other hand, Jesus Christ is in some special and unique sense the revelation of God to man, is indeed in some way God, as well as man, then He is the central figure in all history (A R Vine).

Theme

The immeasurable superiority and all-sufficiency of Christ, is Paul's dominant theme in his counter-attack and as a result, he desires his Christian readers to know that "you have come to fullness of life in Him - for in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (2:9, 10)

The death of Christ was certainly for our salvation, but it was surely much more; the whole creation was affected. The death and resurrection of Christ was a cosmic work, a new creation (1:15-20).

Furthermore (on the practical level) the way of holiness is not an asceticism that promotes only spiritual pride, nor self-centred efforts to control the passions, but putting on Christ, setting one's affections on Him (2:20-23; 3:1ff).

What has the letter to say to us today? To all who would 'improve' Christianity by mixing it with spiritualism or Sabbatarianism or occultism or any such extra, it utters its warning: "What Christ is and has done for us is enough for salvation. We need no extra mediators, or taboos, or ascetics. To piece out the Gospel with the rags and tatters of alien cults is not to enrich but to corrupt it."

**Plan** (half doctrinal - half practical)

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| 1. | Salutation | 1:1, 2 |
| 2. | Person and Word of Christ | 1:3-2:7 |
| 3. | False Teaching and Its Antidote | 2:8-3:4 |
| 4. | The Christian Life | 3:5-4:6 |
| 5. | Personal Notes | 4:7-17 |
| 6. | Final Greeting and Blessing | 4:18 |

(F F Bruce)

Question 1

Read Ephesians 3:1-13. What is the "secret" or "mystery" that God has revealed? What is Paul's commission?

Question 2.

What is Paul's attitude to dying in Philippians 1:19-26?

Question 3

For what is Paul so thankful in Philippians 4:10-20?

Question 4

How was the church to which the letter of Colossians was sent, started? Look up and quote the references given.

Question 5

What is the dominant theme of Colossians? (see Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9,10,20-23; 3:1ff) Why?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

Prayerfully read Ephesians 5:21-6:9. List the points you think are most important for building a Christian home? Which ones are most relevant for your home?