

## **Introduction to Ephesians.**

### **(Linda Lawson)**

I left home when I was 17 in order to finish high school. Before that I had only been away from home (and my Mother) twice. I had been in a city once; seen the sea – once (both on the same visit); I had been to a large country town more than 5 hours from home just the once – for a weekend. So, to leave completely and live in a hostel with strangers; to go to a High School where the Commerce Dept. had more teachers than the entire staff of the small Secondary Dept. I had attended was, to put it mildly, a shock.

It was awful for the first 6 weeks - and more than once I was tempted to get on the train and go home. Alas, I didn't have the money for the fare. There were two things that sustained me through this time – the letters that my mother faithfully wrote once a week – and the overnight stop she made on a train trip to the city for medical treatment just to see me. For the rest of her life, whenever we lived apart, my mother's weekly letters were a constant source of joy and encouragement.

Since the advent of email and Facebook and Twitter – and the other various means of digital communication, letters have largely fallen out of favour. But for thousands of years they were largely the only 'long-distance' communication that people had. So when the apostle Paul needed to encourage the early Christians it was a matter of either being able to visit or send a letter. When he could, he did both, as was the case with the infant church at Ephesus.

He made his first short visit on his way from Corinth to his home base at Antioch. He shared the Gospel in the synagogue (always his first port of call) and people were interested enough to ask him to stay. Although he declined, he did tell them that, if God should so will, he would come back. And he did. But this time he stayed for two years, having set up a school in a local hall in order to more effectively teach the Gospel. From here, his students carried the message of salvation all though that area we now call Turkey.

What kind of city was Ephesus? It was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia. In fact, it was one of the most important in the then known

world of the Roman Empire – and was the equal of Rome, Corinth, Antioch and Alexandria. It boasted a stadium, theatre, gymnasium, baths, a town hall and a busy commercial centre. But the jewel in its crown was the Temple of Artemis (called Diana by the Romans) – one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. So great was this cult worship that many silversmiths made a profitable living from selling shrines and images of the goddess to the tourists who regularly visited the city. Other cult followers were noted for their commitment to the practice of magic. Today it would be regarded as a great centre of religious teaching and practice.

As Paul faithfully preached and taught the Gospel, many hearts were changed and those who practised magic repented and burnt a large number of valuable scrolls and documents. The silversmiths however had a very different response. Their sales were falling and they didn't like it. Led by a man called Demetrius, who obviously objected to Paul's teaching that there is only one God, they demonstrated against Paul and his teaching. For two hours all that could be heard resounding through the city was their cry, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Although the riot was quelled by the town clerk, Paul decided not to stay longer and set off for Macedonia. Apart from a meeting with the Ephesian elders at Miletus, a port on the coast not far from Ephesus, when he was on his way to Jerusalem some time later, there is no record that he ever returned to the city.

However, this did not mean that he had forgotten them. In his farewell to the elders, knowing he would probably not see them again, he mentioned his concern that this church could succumb to false teaching. He was concerned that there were false teachers (whom he called savage wolves) who would come in and destroy the flock. He also feared that, even from their own leaders, some might arise who would twist the truth and draw people away to follow them personally. He encouraged the elders to ensure that they held on to all he had taught them and not give way to false teachings. No doubt these same concerns were in his mind when he wrote his letter.

When we think of these earliest of Christian churches we are wrong to think of them as gathering in the way we do today. They did not meet in great numbers or in specially set aside buildings. Rather, they met in small groups in each other's homes. We know this is so because Paul reminded the elders

when he farewelled them that he had taught both publicly, i.e. in the lecture hall of Tyrannaus, and also 'house to house' as they met for worship. This was the pattern in other large cities as well. When Paul wrote to the Romans he sent special greetings to the church which met in the home of Priscilla and Aquilla.

The letter would have been written on a scroll, probably papyrus, tightly rolled and then bound in leather and tied equally tightly for protection. When it was delivered it would have been read in one home gathering and then passed on to all the others. After that, it may well have been sent to similar house churches in the cities and towns further inland. For example when he wrote to the Colossians, he encouraged them to send the letter on to Laodicea and to make sure they read the letter he had sent there.

The tone of this letter is both optimistic and encouraging. It's not written to address problems occurring in the church – as was the case with those he wrote to the Corinthians; or to correct wrong teaching – as with the one he wrote to Galatia. What he was doing was broadening and deepening the spiritual understanding of these believers still young in their faith. He wanted them to grasp the dimensions of God's eternal purpose and the grace which he has extended to them in Christ Jesus. He also wanted them to appreciate the high goals God has planned for his church, the Body of his Son, here on earth.

Paul's opening statement, which we read as a series of eleven verses was, in the Greek in which it was written, one long sentence. He begins by praising God for blessing us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus. Then, it's as if he is suddenly filled with an unstoppable urge to share with the Ephesians what those blessings are and what God has done and who he is. Then they, too, can join him in praising God's glory. The words cascade out like a waterfall tumbling over rocks. God has chosen them from before the creation of the world; he's adopted them into his family; he's redeemed them and lavished his grace upon them; he's made known to them the mystery of his will; he's marked them with his Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing their inheritance which will be fully experienced when Jesus returns.

Intermingled with these are some wonderful expressions of God's wisdom, forethought and purpose. He wants them to be holy and blameless in his sight; he adopted them because it pleased him to do so; he is going to bring

unity to all things in heaven and on earth; and all things will be done according to his plan as he works out everything to conform to what he has already willed before the creation of the world.

What does all this do to Paul as he writes? It drives him to pray for the Ephesian church. And what does he pray? He prays for God's gifts of wisdom and knowledge so that they will know all that he has just explained to them – the hope to which they have been called; the riches of God's glorious inheritance in them, his people; and the mighty power which raised Christ from the dead and which is available to all who believe. But notice this. Before he prayed for them he thanked God for them and then he reminded them that they were on his mind. He had not forgotten them and was always pleased to hear of how God had been working in their lives.

And this is what the reminder of all that God has done for us in Christ should do to us. It should drive us to prayer with thanksgiving. And it's good to let people know that we are praying for them and what we are praying for them. Too often we make excuses about not praying for people because we don't have any current news of what is happening in their lives. Let's follow Paul's example – give thanks for them and pray that God will do in their lives all that he has promised in his Word.

Three great themes run through the next two and a half chapters – reconciliation, unity and maturity. These are the steps God has chosen take as he fulfils in them all he has purposed for them as his church. In the first place he reconciled them to himself in an act of grace. 'For it is by grace you have been saved, by faith. (2:8) Then he reconciled these saved individuals to each other, breaking down the wall that had existed between Jew and Gentile. 'He is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier...by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. (2:14-15) And then, in the greatest act of all, he united these reconciled individuals into one body, the church. This is the 'mystery' hidden in ages past but now revealed to Paul. God's intention has always been to build his church so that it would become the means whereby he would display his many-faceted wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. And we (if we are believers) are the church, reconciled to each other and to God by the death of Jesus.

Although the church receives its meaning and significance from heaven where Christ sits exalted at God's right hand, our life in Christ has its beginning here on earth. And it is in the practical daily life of the believer that God continues to work out his purposes. To that end, Paul says, the ascended Christ has given gifts to his church so that they will be able to minister to one another in a way that promotes unity and maturity. The wonder of this is that we will one day attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. However, we will not do this as individuals – but as his body. For he, our head, causes us to grow and be built up in love as each of us does those things he has called and equipped us to do.

But there is a warning. There must be a putting off of our old sinful way of life and a putting on of the new self which has been created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. As we read through these last chapters we might feel a little daunted. But Paul's final instructions show us how we can have victory in the spiritual battle with the evil one. "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." While that may seem a tall order God has given us a suit of armour so that we can stand against all the devil's schemes. He has given us his truth and his righteousness. He has given us the gifts of faith and salvation. He has prepared us to be ready to take the gospel of peace with us wherever we go. And we have his Word, the sword of His Spirit. We also have a weapon that, sadly, we often use too little – prayer. Paul urges, "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."

And prayer is what we all need to use as we come to the study of any part of God's Word. Let us use it faithfully each day and we will find that God will faithfully answer and fill our hearts with the wisdom and knowledge that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.