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# The Central Importance of Apostolic Letters

## Ephesians 1:1

*Pastor Russ Kennedy*

I love books. I have repented of book idolatry. I used to just sit and admire my library of over a thousand books... even though a great many of them I had read, had not referred to and had not used. They simply sat in their beautiful, elegant bindings on my shelves. It was the owning of books and the wow factor that drove a lot of book buying. I even have quite a few useless books – and a few that I keep in the “lower shelf”. Then there have been books that I have that were surprisingly useful. I have an official copy of... the Koran. It has proved quite useful when people argue with me about the nature, purpose and teachings of Islam. I have, quite literally, chapter and verse (surahs, for so informed).

Then there are the Great Books. For many years I was home alone during the summers in the morning. My parents taught summer school. So, using all four family library cards, Dad let me check out the max on each card. My dad paid me a dollar a volume... of the encyclopedias I read. And yes, I was truly, embarrassingly, a book worm and a geek. I was an English Grammar and Literature major in college. I was both required and made it a project to read the Great Classics. To this day, when people ask me what my hobbies are, it is soccer and reading and music thrown in for balancing measure.

We live by a book. This book, the Bible, the Word of God is the greatest book. It is a Book of books. Many of them were written as histories. Some were written a Law. One is a song and prayer book. A couple of them are plays (Job and Canticles). Most of the New Testament are letters to churches and to people. We call them “books” and that is a good thing as long as we recognize that they were actually letters and follow the letter format.

### **The History behind the Book**

We are taking up the book of Ephesians. This is one of the great doctrinal and practical books of the New Covenant. It is rich with meaty truth in content and God exalting holiness in conduct. While Galatians is *polemical* in that it is arguing against error invading the church, Ephesians is *declarative* that it teaches the position and practice of the church in Christ.

Since this book is actually a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church he was instrumental in planting and training, it is important to know its background. Luke, in his writing of the book of Acts, gives us history and insight into the founding of the church in the city of Ephesus.

### **The Record in the Scripture (Acts 19:1–20 )**

**19** And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” <sup>4</sup> And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in

the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.<sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.<sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all.

<sup>8</sup> And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.<sup>10</sup> This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

<sup>11</sup> And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,<sup>12</sup> so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.<sup>13</sup> Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.”<sup>14</sup> Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.<sup>15</sup> But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?”<sup>16</sup> And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.<sup>17</sup> And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.<sup>18</sup> Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.<sup>19</sup> And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.<sup>20</sup> So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

### **The Culture as a City**

Ephesus was a cultural and trading center. She was known for her Temple to Diana. She was wealthy, pluralistic, multi-ethnic and degenerate. She was a place where great power and prestige existed alongside of grinding poverty. She was bright with the wealth of her trade; but it just covered the inner rot of her deep degradations and enslavement to gross sin.

### **The Initial Introduction of the Gospel**

Into this city came Aquila and Priscilla with their great skill in making tents, their deep love for Christ and their effective efforts in spreading the gospel. Though we do not know to what extent God's grace had blessed their efforts, they were making their first efforts among the Jews in the synagogue. When Apollos, the Egyptian from Alexandria, came with his powerful and scripturally persuasive preaching, they were aware and concerned about its short-comings in doctrine. This godly couple took him aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately." (Acts 18:26). These discipling efforts on their part equipped him for effective and life-changing ministry in Achaia.

### **The Planting of the Church**

Paul came to this city (Acts 19:1-20:1), bringing some believers into a greater knowledge of their responsibilities in Christ. His efforts at preaching in the synagogue eventually led to his taking the gospel out into the marketplace and into the school of Tyrannus. As a result of his ministry, a church was established in great strength whose

evangelism and godliness spread the gospel throughout Asia to all the people groups. In God's providence, the Apostolic grace to do miracles brought Paul into direct and public conflict with the witchcraft and idolatry that gripped the city. As is true with most grace-enabled and Jesus glorifying ministry (Acts 19:17), God turned the hearts of many who repented of their evil and destroyed their idols and magic arts. But it also brought about the great ire and wrath of those whose means of living were being threatened. Led by Demetrius, they raised a public outcry against the believers carrying it all the way to the city officials. They were denied their plea. Afterward, Paul gathered the church, exhorted them to continued faith and holiness and moved on in ministry.

### **The Life of the Church**

As the church matured, Timothy came to Ephesus as a part of the eldership. Here, his youth, shyness and struggles in ministry brought forth the letters from Paul addressed to him. The Apostle John also served in the eldership here, training Polycarp for a long and fruitful ministry. It is possibly in this church that Diotrophes rose to power and personal prominence while the church needed the humble ministry of Gaius, to whom John referred in 3 John. Revelation 2:1-7 is the epistle from Jesus to this church. The people had left their white-hot passion for Christ for passing pleasures and passive tolerance.

### **The Farewell to the Leadership**

When Paul knew that his trip to Jerusalem would be the end of his missionary travels, it was the elders of this church that he gathered and left that stirring account of faithful ministry. His challenging warning was to all who have been summoned by the Spirit of Christ into the ministry of shepherding and overseeing God's flock (Acts 20:17-38). Then from prison in Rome, he wrote this great letter. It is filled with the grand scope of truth learned from the hand of Christ. These great truths had been preached over a long ministry and deeply reflected on over many a weary mile of missionary travel and prison solitude.

## **The Approach to Preaching the Book**

Just some notes about our approach to and method for our study.

### **A Good Way**

There is a good and common way that takes each phrase and sometimes each word and expands on them. It seeks to explain each small unit of thought. This book is a treasure chest of truth and it is tempting to open each item and explore it for all its worth. Many good expositors and commentators do this and it is profitable in its own way.

I am much more interested in seeing how Paul has put this together and how the river of truth and logic of this book flows from the spring of this text.

### **A Better Way**

The Holy Spirit's intentionality and truth is carried along in a text through words, sentences and paragraphs that are connected together through grammar and logic. There really is no mystery to this. Someone who has a good grasp of English grammar and logic can comprehend the ideas in a text. Spiritual understanding of the truth perceived

by the mind is the work of the Holy Spirit. But it is neither immediate nor subjective. Beloved, the Spirit will help you believe and obey what you are learning.

## **The Greeting opening the Book**

Today we write emails and texts. I wonder if the art of writing letters will be lost. It used to be that people wrote long letters to one another. No phones. No email. No messaging. We have a treasure trove of personal history growing up in Africa of the correspondence between my mother and her family. The New Testament is largely comprised of correspondence, of letters written by the Apostles to churches and to individuals.

As a letter, our book opens with the standard form of greeting. It incorporates Paul's normal way of addressing himself to the congregation. We can see three elements in this salutation:

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **The Letter's Author**

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter. A lot of modern so-called scholarship questions whether this is actually true. There are all kinds of historical and internal evidence that is linked together to question this simple opening statement. I am taking a moment to pause and address this.

When a book of the Bible, written by a human author under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, asserts an authorship, it is wrong to assert anything else. There are times where an author will use external materials. Those may even be quotes, tables, information from outside the Bible. But that does not undermine either the doctrine of inspiration. Paul claims to be the author. This is a part of our Bibles. If you believe the Bible then, frankly, you have to accept that Paul is the author.

If you deny that Paul wrote this letter which is now a book in the canon, then you have opened the door to deny the accuracy, authority, and applicability of the text itself. Whole sections can simply be discarded as not being the Word of God because we as humans or we in our culture don't agree with it. I am convinced that attacks on authorship of books of the Bible have a fundamental agenda to undermine the truths that are taught and asserted in that book.

We know then who the author is. Paul makes another important assertion in the opening of the letter. He holds the apostolic office held by the will and word of God.

He is one who is sent by God. This is the basic meaning of an "apostle". God had chosen him and had personally sent him on his ministry mission to carry the gospel to the Gentiles.

This term also referred to an office of the church held by 12 men who were invested with the authority to establish the New Covenant church and churches. Like the other apostles, Paul had all the credentials that qualified him to serve in this office. He identified himself as one of the Apostles. He was recognized by Peter as being an Apostle. The churches across the world submitted to his authority as an apostle. Now, the office itself ceased to exist with closing of the canon and the death of John, the last living apostle of the New Testament age. No one today is qualified to fulfill that very special and limited office.

Paul being an Apostle was by God's doing. He had been placed into the office by the sovereign will and headship authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. This letter then bears the authorship of an Apostle. His authority is not only over the church at Ephesus, but over us as well. He does not exercise that authority directly over us. We submit to Paul's authority when we read, believe, understand and obey the Word of God that is this letter to the Ephesians.

### **The Letter's Writing**

Often our own correspondence has a date on it. Paul's letter itself does bear a date. However, from details in the letter, from the book of Acts and some external sources, we have a fairly good idea that this book was written around 61-62 AD. At the time of its writing, Matthew and Mark had been written, but not Luke, Acts and certainly not the Gospel of John. Paul had also written his letters to the church at Thessalonica, Galatia, Corinth, and Rome. Around this same time, Paul wrote his short letter to Philemon and to the church at Colossae and Philippi. Remember that the order of the books in our English Bibles is not chronological. They are in the order they are by category. It usually surprises people to find out that, chronologically on time of writing, James is the first book written. By the time Matthew and Mark are writing their gospels, at least 6 of Paul's letters are written and in circulation. All of John's writings are after Apostle Paul has died.

### **The Letter's Addressee**

The letter was written to two groups of people.

It was written to the saints, that is, the believers at Ephesus. The New Testament universally refers to believers as "saints". With one possible exception, Christians are never addressed or spoken of as sinners. People are sinners before conversion. After conversion, people are saints. Now saints do sin. Paul in particular refers to unbelievers as sinners and even seems to use the term to refer to his pre-conversion life. Paul then is writing this letter to those who are true believers at Ephesus.

It was written to the faithful in all the church. This is the second major way of identifying believers in the New Testament. They are the faithful. They are those whose belief fastens them without wavering or departure to their confession of and allegiance to Christ. Often we think of faithful in terms of dependable. "This person is faithful to..." meaning they are dependably attending, involved in, a part of... Rarely is that actually the Pauline use of the word. Faithful people are those who have a non wavering faith in Jesus Christ and have a total allegiance and loyalty to Him. Secondarily, then, faithful people will be dependable and loyal to God's people and the church.

This may have been intended to be a cyclical letter that was to start at Ephesus. This extends the letter to us as well. A close comparison to the letter to Colossae reveals how similar Ephesians and Colossians are. Colossians is almost a "little Ephesians". However, some subjects addressed in both books, have a different emphasis. Because the two books were intended to be circulated among the same churches, there will be times where will look at a parallel text in Colossians to fill out what Paul is teaching or commanding.

## The Letter's Blessing

From God the Father and our Sovereign Messiah Jesus, enabling grace and calming peace. If you could wish for anything for other believers what would it be?

Grace is both God's poise toward and His power in us. The blessing here is a prayer wish. In a deep and powerful way, it reminds us that God is gracious towards us. That inclination of God's loving heart towards is the source of God's enabling power in us. So part of Paul's blessing for is that we would experience the love of God for us through the powerful enabling by God in us.

Peace is both the union we have with God and the calmness in our hearts from God. We have peace with God through Jesus our Lord. We have the peace of God in our hearts from the Lord Jesus Christ. This wonderful blessing, this prayer wish, reminds us that we are no longer at war with God with the result that we should not be at war among ourselves nor within ourselves.

While often occurring in Paul's letters, these two blessings emerge as important themes in the book. Opening and the closing of the book focus on the grace of God. The middle of the book focus on our peace with God that is the foundation for our relationships with one another. All of this is flow upward and outward from hearts that are full of the calming, steadying, stabilizing, quieting peace of God.

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## Reflect and Respond

The questions for you is quite evident.

Are you experiencing the mighty grace of God towards you and in you? Or is your faithfulness failing and your strength weakened? Do you have the fullness of this blessing of enabling grace for all of life?

Are you responding to all the present crisis by grace? For many of you, from what I hear and observe, the answer is not. Your Facebook posts, your agonized prayer requests, your quick criticism of leadership, your nasty, ungodly speech with and against those who disagree with you over almost any COVID topic all betray that you are controlled by the flesh.

Is your heart not at peace with God? Are you frustrated with His providences for you? Are upset and angry and so don't open your Bible? You don't pray? You know you should accept what He has brought - but you do not want it? You will not have peace with God if you will not bow a humbled, submissive knee to His moment by moment providences. To be a saint and to be faithful we must not affirm but submit the Lordship of Christ. But so many hearts have been exposed during this crisis to simply be rebellious. Ultimately, it is rebellion against God. IT is not wonder then, that your heart is agitated, fearful, angry. Let there be peace...

Is your heart not at peace with others? Who are you angry with now? Who are you bitter against? Who are you arguing with, criticizing, denouncing? Listen brothers and sisters, This may sound like huge, overwrought, explosive application from two words in a greeting. But I know (and most of you do too) where this book is going. So this calming, steadying peace from God in a prayer wish is not merely some kind of emotional, "I'm ok..." It is a real world "maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Is your heart not characterized by peace now? What is agitating your heart? Kids at home? No or little in-person school? Governors orders? Signs on the door of your favorite shop? Hours pouring over data that you think makes you the expert? Face coverings? Even being right in world gone mad?

So at the end of this paragraph opening this letter, as a result of a sweet blessing and prayer wish, I stand here to call you to repentance. I'm serious. What are you going to do when coming to church may get your stuff confiscated, your children taken away, losing your job, or possibly even your life. Get a sense of proportion, beloved. You are all worked up over an article of clothing while brothers and sisters across the world are facing death with calm courage, as saints and faithful, enabled by the grace of God and filled with the peace of God.

This letter, this book, is for you, God's holy people, who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus.

In the midst of COVID, may God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.