

Ephesians: Context

In this lecture we will look at Ephesians, and particularly at what we believe concerning the unity of the church. As those of you reading or hearing this lecture represent all kinds of denominations, theological histories, and theological convictions, it is fitting that we would discuss the question of the unity of the church. As we look at Ephesians, unity will be something that will concern us and take our interest; it is one of the main emphases in Ephesians. There is some debate over where and when Paul wrote Ephesians. I think there are two major viable options. One is that Paul wrote Ephesians from Caesarea as he awaited trial under Felix and then Festus, prior to his deportation as a prisoner to Rome—in 57-59 A.D. It is also possible that he wrote this letter from Rome while awaiting his trial before Caesar. We can be rather certain that it was written from either Caesarea or Rome because in Ephesians Paul refers to being imprisoned. I do not believe that Paul says, “I am in bondage,” to speak figuratively of being constrained and not having the opportunity to witness freely, or experiencing some opposition. That could be what he means, but I think it is more plausible to see that the references in Ephesians speak of imprisonment. Two of these references are in Ephesians 3:1 and 4:1: “For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...” This sounds fairly general, as does 4:1. There again, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Thus 3:1 and 4:1 are general references to imprisonment.

Please also notice that whatever Paul’s circumstance, he does not consider his external circumstance and situation to be determining his welfare in Christ. He can say, judging from 4:1, that he can live a life worthy of his calling as a prisoner. The contrast is that he is in chains and he says to those who are not in chains, “Live a life worthy of your calling; do not live in bondage, do not live imprisoned lives out there in your freedom. Live free lives.” And he says it with his hands bound. There is this contrast of him being dedicated to witnessing wherever and in whatever circumstance and situation he is in. He has seen that God’s ways of guiding him are not determined by his success externally, by being able to live free from opposition, or by living a comfortable and decent life, etc. Rather, God guides him when he is succumbing and surrendering to what God allows in his life. Therefore, at all times he seeks to be a witness. Perhaps we need to return briefly to the time in Acts when Jesus appears to Paul. In Acts 23:11 Jesus says this to Paul: “Take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” There is a clear commission; this is the apostolic commission of Paul to be a witness. Therefore, he can instruct the recipients of his letter in Ephesus to be free as he is free. They should be free to live for Christ, to be a witness, to be that which God has designed them to be, rather than be busy with their sin.

The last and the clearest reference Paul makes to his imprisonment, however, is in Ephesians 6:19-20. He says, “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” He does not say, “Pray that my chains would go away,” or “Pray that my circumstances would get better so that I could live in ease.” Rather he says, “Pray that I may be a worthy witness, that I may declare the Gospel fearlessly. Pray that I may not be looking out for my own good but that I might show my love to my master by being able to declare what He has done, even though I know it is a stumbling block of offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. They will ridicule me, they will think ill of me; they will look down on me. But pray for me that I would be courageous.” That is easier said than done. Maybe you have been in situations where you would have liked to be more courageous and bold, where you have perhaps just been silent. In academic circles that can be a very tempting thing. When you are among important people who may make important decisions about your life, you may become a little quieter. Now, I am not advocating that we should be foolish and offend people and make everyone as miserable as possible so that we are hated by everyone

and then think, “Look, I am suffering for Christ. This is wonderful. I am following the Gospel!” And all you are doing is suffering from your own foolishness. I am not advocating that. I think we need to be skillful, sensitive, and caring; we need to know how to speak to people. But we must have courage and not be looking out for ourselves, which is very difficult. Paul here is praying for this in 6:20 in part so that his recipients will understand that.

Because of these three passages we can say that Paul was either in Caesarea or Rome when he wrote Ephesians. I would personally tend to say that Rome is the more likely place. The reason for that will come out as I go on a little. I think there must be some time between his stay in Ephesus and when he wrote this letter to them. We think Paul was in Ephesus from about A.D. 52 to 55. Paul arrived in Rome in A.D. 60 or 61—it is a little hard to say. If these dates are right, and if Paul wrote this letter from Rome, then five years have gone by since his time in Ephesus. That will be interesting as we look at the content of Ephesians.

What was the occasion and purpose of the letter to the Ephesians? The purpose was to speak to the Ephesian church about unity in Christ. We will reflect primarily on that question in this lesson. The way Paul addresses this issue is perhaps not so much in the literary genre of a letter as it is in the literary genre of an epistle. Thus he pursues his purpose by means of an epistle. I am using these words in a literary sense. An epistle would be a little less personalized, a little less particular to the recipient church and a little more general than a letter. Some people would say that Romans is also more an epistle than a letter. Philemon is certainly a letter very specifically addressing the situation between Onesimus and Philemon. Colossians, I would say, is clearly a letter. 1 and 2 Corinthians, I believe, are letters in the sense that they address specific issues in Corinth. Ephesians, on the other hand, is a little broader. You do not get the sense that there is a particular issue or concern in Ephesus that Paul has heard about and needs to address. In some ways you get the feeling from reading Ephesians that things are in fairly good shape and Paul is encouraging them and an audience beyond Ephesus to continue to grow in their unity. It is comparable to Philippians, as I see it. There is a sense that Paul can breathe and take joy. He can say, “Good, well done. Let us keep on going.” You do not get the same feeling as in Galatians or 1 Corinthians. The literary structure of Ephesians is that of an epistle. There is a greeting, an introduction, but it is faint—certainly less than even what you find in Romans. Therefore, I would suggest that we have a statement on unity to the Ephesian church in the literary format of an epistle.

I believe that Tychicus and Onesimus are sent with this letter, and most likely also the letters to Philemon and the Colossians. Perhaps all three are taken as Tychicus is sent by Paul from Rome, most likely, to Ephesus. In Ephesians 6:21 we read, “Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.” So that is on Tychicus. If we look in Colossians 4:7 we find that these two passages are similar. Paul says to the Colossians, “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.” If we put these passages together and go with the theory that Ephesians is most likely written from Rome, we can say that Paul wrote a more general epistle to the Ephesians and other churches, a particular letter to the Colossians in the hinterland of Ephesus (Colossae), and a very particular small letter of appeal to Philemon. Understanding these things to be true, we could say that these three letters are sent with Onesimus and Tychicus as human emissaries of Paul to the Ephesians and to the Colossians.

Now let us look briefly at the author of Ephesians. I do need to make you aware, at least briefly, that there has been some debate over whether Paul actually wrote Ephesians. Some say that Ephesians was written in a post-apostolic time looking back to the apostolic time. These are some of the arguments that have been put forward. I will not go into much detail here; I will just enumerate them. First of all, critical scholars who question the authorship of Paul have noted that the Greek of Ephesians is a different style than the other letters of Paul. That is an unfair accusation because this is actually true of most of Paul's letters. There are some stylistic particulars in Romans that you do not find elsewhere. There are particular stylistic references in Philippians, which no one questions to be authentically from Paul. If you write a letter to your grandmother or to a group of friends, and then a love letter, you will use different styles. The subject matter dictates a certain style and use of vocabulary. Thus it is unfair to say that Ephesians does not sound like Paul. We have to be very careful with these literary critiques. It has also been said that the content of the letter, discussing the structure and offices in the church, seems to indicate that the church had been established. The volcanic eruption of the charismatic young church has settled down and now the church is at a point of organizing and establishing structure. That is a false reconstruction of the early church. I believe that the early church had structure from the beginning, but also a living relationship with Christ, a dependency on His word and His Spirit. Again, I find that to be a questionable argument against Ephesians fitting into the time of Paul's life. Another argument is that Ephesians is too similar to Colossians—and there have been questions addressed to the apostolic authority and authorship of Colossians as well. But if we read Colossians and Ephesians, we can identify clearly distinct major themes: unity in Ephesians and in three problems which are connected with the heresy in Colossians. It is true and valid to observe that there are some points of connection between Ephesians and Colossians. In some ways, you can read Colossians and then read Ephesians as a commentary on Colossians. There is a sense in which Ephesians goes beyond and explains a little more of the order in the family and in the household. These things are more clearly explained and more developed in detail in Ephesians. These connections would be explainable if Paul was writing a more general epistle to the Ephesians and then a more specific letter, addressing specific problems—with some connections to these issues—to the Colossians, who lived in the area of Ephesus.

Let us look now at the addressees of this letter, and continue to uphold that Paul actually did write Ephesians. There is a clear reference to the addressees in Ephesians 1:1: "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus." Some people have argued, however—and this seems to be a stinging observation—that Paul did not know these people intimately. Chapter 1 verse 15 says, "For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." Some people suspect that this does not sound like somebody who has just five years prior spent three years with that church. One thing I can reject immediately is that this is just kind of a formula that is used by Paul: "When I hear about you I pray for you." Paul does use formula, he uses the formula of letter writing, but he always fills it with the pastoral heart that you see beating. While there is repetition of formulation, I think that, in the general performance of what Paul does, this is not just a repetition of some words—it is from the heart.

Perhaps I can give you a little anecdote that will help us understand how Paul could have ministered for an extensive time in Ephesus and still write this distant type of a reference to the Ephesians as he writes now. My former pastor from the church that I was involved with in Germany and I, we labored together for years shoulder to shoulder. We knew every single member of that church as they came in and out, even the visitors. We were intimately acquainted with that church. I have been gone from that church for five years. My pastor friend has been gone from the church for a year or a year-and-a-half. He said, "I recently went back and I did not recognize half of the people in that church." The mobility today is high and we do not know exactly how the situation looked in Ephesus, except that it was economically strong and a place where people came and went all the time. The lecture hall of Tyrannus was a place where

people would have come to listen to someone before they went back to the hinterland—to Colossae, Herapolis, Laodicea, etc. So there was mobility in Ephesus, and the movement at the time of the Roman Empire in particular was high. If I would go back to this church, the church that I was intimately acquainted with five years ago, perhaps I would recognize 20% of the people. When my friend told me about various people, there was always this question of, “Do you still know them?” No. There are two elders now of four in that church that I have never even met—and this is just five years later. There is enormous change. And certainly if I were to write a letter to this church now, the current pastor of which I have never met, I would probably say, “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” And this is a church I was intimately acquainted with. But Paul still knows about the situation, and he sends Tychicus and Onesimus, Tacitus in particular for the Ephesians, to re-establish those ties. Through the visit of my former pastor, I know more about what is going on with that church right now. Some of the problems that confront the church now have been problems for a long time and some of the things have actually changed.

The basic structure of the letter to the Ephesians is an indicative/imperative structure; I do not get tired of mentioning that. This sounds very grammatical, uninteresting, and boring: indicative/imperative. One interesting question is, “Why does Paul always begin with the indicative?” I always want to start with the imperative. Somehow we are conditioned in our natural, unregenerate disposition to say, “Tell me what to do and I will be okay. Tell me how to behave.” But you see, we are created for relationship. We are created for fellowship with God and our behavior is to emanate from that. The purpose, the design, for man is not to have a code of behavior and to follow that. The purpose and the design for man is to be related to God. Therefore, Paul does not tire of saying, “Think of who you are in Christ. Know what Christ has done for you. Know that you are acceptable to Him on the basis of His work and then let your action come out of that.” He says this even in the face of stoic pressures and other pressures in the first century A.D. To us that may sound like a deviation; “Do not waste all that time talking about all these wonderful truths about the Christian faith. I need to know how to live, how to act, and how I should conduct myself. Do not waste this time.” Paul says we are not wasting time at all because, if you go for the imperative first, you will not reach the goal that God has for you, which is to live a godly life.

If you try to do things on your own, you will lose out. We are coming back to the Gospel message that we have seen in Philemon, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans. We need to have a Christ-centeredness; we need to know our identity in Christ. And it is amazing to me how many people speak about the covenantal love of God and His faithfulness, but do not believe they are accepted creatures. They do not believe they are loveable; they do not believe that they are pleasing in God's eyes. Those two do not come together. The truth that we are acceptable to God—not on the basis of our merit, but on the basis of God's deeds—and that He is reaching out His hand and saying, “Come, I will take you on. I love you as a son and as a daughter and I will work with you.” That is the greatest joy that a person can receive. But we recoil and do not respond to that. We say, “Tell me how to act, behave, and conduct myself so that I will be acceptable, so that I will conform to whatever societal constraints I am under.” What a loss. Therefore, Paul starts with the indicative; he tells you, “This is what Christ has done; this is the truth of God's work.”

The beginning of Ephesians is particularly rich in embracing and filling you and overwhelming you with the table that God has set for you. Ephesians 1:3-21 does nothing else but present to you how God has filled your table. You can sit there salivating, looking, and receiving; you are supposed to soak it in. You are not supposed to get up and act at all at this point. We, however, cannot sit down and let that sink in, and that is our problem. We need a lot of care, instruction, and prayer so that we would actually accept the Gospel of grace.

Look at 1:3-14—what an enormous panorama that is being presented to you here! This is the broadening perspective we need when we are focused on our little lives with another broken down car or other issues. We are so narrowed because there are such obnoxious problems in our lives. The more problems that come, the more narrow we get. That is what life does to us. Ephesians 1:3-14 broadens that scope. Listen to what is being said here in verses four and five, looking back to the design of God before all time: “For he chose us [the Ephesians, Paul, the Christians in Rome, and you] in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.” Remember, this is not a cold-hearted decree of God. Paul says, “In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will.” There is will, design, election, and call, but there is also heart moving out toward mankind, and obviously it is in Christ. We already see the cross in this description of God’s purpose for us to be holy and blameless in His sight—how can we be unless Christ is sacrificed in our stead? So here we look back to the design before all creation—how God sees our lives with him.

In verse 11 of this big panorama presentation, Paul focuses on the present. He seems to be repeating himself, but he is not. He says in verse 11, “In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.” Why have we been predestined? Why have we been called and chosen? “In order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory.” That is a present description of why God has purposed, before all ages, that now there would be some people in this world of all nations, races, and tongues, that would live, think, act, work, scheme, relate, and do everything to His glory. Everything is bringing about that design of God. That is God’s choice. That is God’s predestination. Having looked back to the eternal counsel of God and at His present purposes, Paul now looks forward. He says in verses 13 and 14, “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until [future anticipation] the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of His glory.” We now possess the Spirit, and we will in the future have full redemption. We are being bought free; yes, we are bought free now. There is this tension of “the already and the not yet” in these verses that is echoed over and over in Paul: present reality and future culmination. Present truth, present down payment, present beginning—leading to a future culmination. So as Paul spans out this panorama of God’s design with mankind before all ages, presently and in the future, there is one line: He does this in love to have a people unto Himself. This was His purpose before all eternity began, and will still be when all is culminated and found in full fruition. Within that passage there is rich language, such as when He speaks about the adoption of His sons, which we could dwell on for a long time. It is fascinating how that all relates. So we see that in this passage Paul begins to remind the Ephesians about the panorama of what God has done in a much greater way than you would find even in his other letters.

After this introduction, there is more reference to prayer and thanksgiving in verses 15 and following. In 2:1-10, Paul still speaks about this contrast between then and now. He likes that contrast because it gives you a mirror of where you have been and where you are now. It is wholesome for you to think about that sometimes and ask, “Where would I be, what would I be doing, who would I be related to right now if God had not made true this wonderfully glorious design that we have just read about? What would I be occupied by right now?” Then we are reminded that things are different now and God has transferred you out of that into a new circumstance and a new setting. There is great cause for gratitude.

In 2:11 Paul begins to speak about unity in Christ, and that is what we need to focus on now. Ephesians 2:11-22 speaks of the unity of the church; chapter 3, verses 1-13 speaks of its apostolic foundation. We will look at this in more depth in the next lecture.

Ephesians 4:1 to 6:22 deals with the imperative. Do you realize how much we have studied and how much we have reflected on the indicative, the truths and realities of God's work? You see, we need to have God's perspective; we need to understand God's work on behalf of His people so that we do not get discouraged. Understanding these indicatives, these truths about ourselves and God, keeps us from becoming so absorbed with ourselves that we are just overwhelmed in our commission to live out the Christian life. We see ourselves kept by the powerful hand of God and we can trust that, especially when things seem to be completely chaotic. When we can see and know that God is still the sovereign God who holds us when our lives seem to be dissipating, we do not know what is going to happen, and we see there will be a major collapse. When we experience these things and know the indicative of God's enduring hand, we are not immediately saved from depression. We are not necessarily saved from throwing up our arms and saying, "Where is our God?" But there is a foundation established of knowing that God has carried this world through these great histories and He has been faithful—He will see you through.

There is enormous amount of truth established in the indicative before we come to the imperative. We come now to the single most important imperative: unity in the body of Christ. Paul dwells on the theme of unity, the gifts of gifted people, and a leadership of facilitators in 4:1-16. Paul uses more then and now contrasts in verses 17 to 24. Then he gives a commission and a call to life in community and walking in the light in 4:25 to 5:21. But then it seems to kind of break off. Paul, in 5:22, begins to speak about what is called the "household order" as one section among the imperatives. But actually, in focusing on household order, Paul is just consistently thinking about how unity in Christ affects a church, a workplace, and the individual family. This is consistent with his understanding of the elective purpose of God to have a people unto Himself and to have unity in the body that also shows itself in the family and in the workplace. Ephesians 6:10-20 does not, at first glance, seem to be connected either. This is the well-known passage about the armor of God. But here it seems that Paul is attaching to the imperative the instrument by which we grow. Having given us the foundation upon which to live and how we ought to live, he is now instructing us on the means by which to accomplish this. How do we fight? How do we appropriate the indicative, the reality of Christ? What tools has He given us? This passage of the armor of God, in 6:10-20, explains those so that we may grow in the imperative: in the instruction of unity in the church, in the workplace, and in the family.