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First Baptist Arlington
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FBCA: TOGETHER

2024

BIBLICAL CONTEXT: Ephesians

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

-Ephesians 4:11-16

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Here is an assessment from Professor Klyne Snodgrass about the importance of Ephesians:

“Pound for Pound” Ephesians may well be the most influential document ever written. Within the history of Christianity, only the Psalms, the Gospel of John, and Romans have been so instrumental in shaping the life and thought of Christians, but all three of these works are much longer than the few pages of this letter. Ephesians has justly been described as the “Switzerland of the New Testament,” “the crown and climax of Paul’s theology,” and “one of the divinest compositions of man.” The explanation of the gospel and of life with Christ provided here is powerful and direct. If read receptively, it is a bombshell.

-Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, Zondervan, 1996, p. 17

The scholarly consensus among conservative New Testament experts is that the Apostle Paul wrote Ephesians during his first imprisonment in Rome (AD 60-62). There are some scholars who point to his imprisonment in Caesarea as the occasion for this letter, but there doesn't seem to be an indication that Paul was allowed visitors during this imprisonment. A handful of scholars (N. T. Wright among them) believe Paul was imprisoned earlier in Ephesus and wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon from there. However, the bulk of New Testament scholarship has concluded that Rome is the best option. I would concur with this conclusion. With that said, there are several interesting distinctions about this particular letter from Paul.

First, this letter is the least "occasional" letter from the Apostle Paul. In other words, his other epistles are written to congregations or people to address a particular problem, a set of problems, or to answer questions he had received. For example, the letter to the Galatian churches is clearly a defense of the theology of salvation particular to Christianity as opposed to Judaism. The letter we know as 1 Corinthians is filled with specific information in response to situational issues in the Corinthian church. These letters are all referred to as "occasional" letters ----- they are indicative of a certain "occasion" in the life of churches or individuals. Paul's letter to the Ephesians does not reference a particular issue or challenge. It has a more general feel to it. Here is Eugene Peterson's take on this:

These churches were a mess, and Paul wrote his letters to them to try to clean up the mess. But the dominant concern in this Ephesian letter is not to deal with the human problems that inevitably develop in church—no church is exempt—but to explore God's glory that gives the church its unique identity . . . It is as if Paul takes time out from his responsibilities for straightening out the problems of belief and behavior that have cropped up in the various churches and writes out, as clearly and completely as he can, what makes church *church*. And what comes clear is that church is not what we do; it is what God does, although we participate in it.

-Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A conversation about growing up in Christ*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010, pp. 16-17

Another interesting feature about this letter is that the oldest Greek manuscripts we have of Ephesians do not have the words "in Ephesus" in the opening verse. That is interesting! It has caused quite a bit of scholarly stir!

The best explanation seems to be that this letter was probably originally sent to the church at Ephesus, but it was intended to serve as a circular letter for that entire region. It was generic enough to allow several churches to "fill in their name" in the opening salutation. That is a fascinating reality as we begin to explore the meaning of this powerful for letter and make application to our day.

Consequently, New Testament scholars view Ephesians as the most “general” epistle we have from the Apostle Paul. Further, many of those same scholars view Ephesians as a companion to Paul’s letter to the Romans as the most influential of all of Paul’s writings. This is the take given by Constantine Campbell, Associate Research Director at Sydney College of Divinity and renowned expert on Ephesians:

So, as one of Paul’s two most influential letters, Ephesians is rightly regarded as one of the most significant letters of human history . . . As grandiose as they may sound, adulation for the letter to the Ephesians can hardly be overstated. It is, in its own way, majestic, profound, exhilarating, and—if its message is taken seriously—nothing short of earth-shattering. Its scope is cosmic, addressing the whole of creation—including physical and spiritual realms—and eternal, addressing the mission of God before the foundation of the world through to its ultimate fulfillment in the age to come. It presents a cosmic Christ who is the central figure of the universe and the One through whom God is bringing all things together. He is supreme over all competing powers and yet operates intimately in the hearts and lives of human beings. God has caused a people to be raised from the dead with Christ and to be seated with him in the heavens, making him the reconciling centerpiece of God’s plans for humanity and everything else. He is the head of his body, the church, which is now to live out its noble calling by the power of God in Christ. The presence of Christ pervades the full sweep of existence from the lofty reaches of the universe through to domestic household relationships. He dwells in and with his people, transforming them into a new creation and a new humanity, all to the praise and glory of God.

-Constantine R. Campbell, *The Letter to the Ephesians (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023, p. 1.

I could not agree more with Campbell’s assessment. This is one of the most influential pieces of ancient literature in all of history. Ephesians has shaped the theological understandings of: the church, the role of Christ in salvation, the work of the Holy Spirit, the nature of household relationships, the role of gifted people within the Body of Christ, the nature of relationships within the church, and the everyday life of believers as we engage the forces of darkness as children of light.

Sources for Ephesians

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READING PLAN FOR AUGUST

Each week we will have a focal passage for the week that will serve as our *Together in Word* reading. However, I will encourage our church to read the entire letter to the Ephesians each week. This will keep the grand sweep of the letter in our minds as we make our way through the month. We will refer to this as the *Big Picture Reading* each week.

August 4, 2024: *Together . . . in Partnership with Christ!*
Ephesians 1:1-2

In this message, I will present an overview of the entire letter of Ephesians. In this impactful letter, Paul paints a portrait of a flourishing church, living fully into its mission, and bearing the fruit of God's blessings. It is a grand vision indeed. In our day, we are often guilty of "poor-mouthing" the Church of Jesus Christ. This letter serves as a corrective for our low-horizon perspective and pessimistic outlook. In Christ, and through His church, God will fill the earth with His glory!

Big Picture Reading: Ephesians 1-6
Together in Word: Ephesians 1:3-14

This majestic text is one long sentence in the original Greek New Testament. It is densely packed with incredible insight. As you read through it this week, take time to reflect on the truth that you and I have been called to live in community with one another in and through the church. God is at work in His world through the church! This text challenges us to lift our view of the church to match God's plan for us. Our identity as the people of God is set forth in this powerful passage. Take some time this week as you read and reflect to pray for the church to live fully into its mission in this world.

August 11, 2024: *Together . . . in Praise and Prayer!*
Ephesians 1:3-23

Paul begins this letter with a beautiful expression of praise. He follows this majestic introduction with a comprehensive prayer. In connecting these two sections, we can better comprehend the plan God has for the church. God is going to bring forth the unity of heaven and earth in Christ. The church is at the heart of this grand plan. As N. T. Wright likes to say, "The church is a small, working model of the new creation."

Big Picture Reading: Ephesians 1-6

Together in Word: Ephesians 1:15-23

This week's focal passage is the beautiful prayer that follows the introductory doxology. In this prayer, Paul prays through the various themes associated with God's plan for the church. Paul did not want the church to fall short in its vision of God's will for it. He prayed for wisdom, revelation, knowledge, and vision. The church of every age needs this prayer!

August 18, 2024: *Together . . . in Practice!*
Ephesians 4:17-24
Connor Torrealba, Guest Preacher

(This is the first Sunday for many of our new college students – so, Connor will be preaching today.)

As the church lives into its mission in the world, it distinguishes itself through the practice of the Christian life. This text highlights the difference between the pagan way of life and Christian way of life. Christians have the advantage of the transformative work of Christ through His Spirit in our lives. We can "put on the new self" and be "made new" in our minds so that we can turn away from our old way of living. The Christian faith is not just a new way of believing (it is that), but it is also a new way of living!

Big Picture Reading: Ephesians 1-6

Together in Word: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

In this text we are reminded that our walk with the Lord must be translated into how we walk with everyone else. We live among people who are not “in Christ” so their lives are very different than ours. We are to demonstrate to our world what it truly means to know Christ and to be “in Christ.” Every area of our lives is affected by our relationship to Jesus and our calling to live in community with fellow believers. This passage challenges us to evaluate our everyday lives to see if they truly reflect the glory of God.

**August 25, 2024: *Together . . . in Power!*
Ephesians 5:18-6:20**

One of God’s greatest gifts to us is His presence in our lives through His Holy Spirit. Paul recognized the significant role played by God’s Spirit in the life and ministry of the church. In this message today, we will learn about the implications of being filled with God’s Spirit. On the one hand, God’s Spirit empowers us and guides us in the basic relationships we have in our homes. On the other hand, God’s Spirit empowers us to do battle with the forces of darkness and spiritual forces in the heavenly realms.

Big Picture Reading: Ephesians 1-6

Together in Word: Ephesians 6:10-17

Our modern world often seeks to force us into its mold. This is particularly true regarding the acknowledgment of evil. Our world no longer believes in the forces of darkness. The presence of evil is undeniable, but most moderns do not believe in the forces that lie behind evil. As Christians, we know that the spiritual realm is real, and we are to live as spiritual people. The good news is that God has equipped us to do just that! He has provided the spiritual weapons that actualize His power in our lives each day. How are you using the spiritual equipment God has graciously given to you?