

Brief Notes for Preachers on Ephesians for Stellar Sermons

Understanding the context of any document that is to be quoted is critical, especially one that is considered to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. The city of Ephesus and its people is rich in political, economic and religious history. This document will primarily focus on the religious implications that may prove beneficial to the church audience.

Author and Setting

Although there is some debate, it is generally accepted that Paul wrote Ephesians while imprisoned in Rome. Hoehener suggests the letter was written in late 61 or early 62. Ephesians is categorized as one of the Prison Epistles.

Ephesus was a major city of the ancient world. Many scholars, such as Witherington, believe the letter was a circular homily meant to be read in many places throughout Asia. He argues the letter may have originally stopped in Ephesus and copied there for other audiences.

While churches in other cities would certainly benefit from reading the Epistle to the Ephesians, the background of the city and region make sense for it to be a primary audience of the author.

Purposes

This author sees at least three major themes in the letter to the Ephesians.

First, Paul emphasizes the power of God over every other entity. Disciples must trust the Lord in the face of the other powers that desire their allegiance.

Second, after understanding the power of God, a certain lifestyle is expected from disciples. Christians live above the fray spiritually and morally because they are the body of Christ.

Third, a strong argument concerning the importance of unity among Christians is emphasized. God has included them in His kingdom, both Jew and Gentile, and they should do everything possible to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Clinton Arnold has proposed a fourth purpose for the letter to the Ephesians worth considering. He wrote, “It is a response to the felt needs of the common people within the churches of western Asia Minor, who perceived themselves as oppressed by the demonic realm.”

Artemis of the Ephesians and Other Religious Entities

Artemis of the Ephesians was the most prominent religious entity in Ephesus. The goddess Artemis took various forms in different regions of the ancient world and distinct features were specifically associated with the version in Ephesus.

The Roman Artemis, known as Diana, was typically featured with a bow in a short skirt and considered a huntress. While Artemis of Ephesus had some of these attributes with her relation to nature, she was covered with bulbous objects.

For many centuries Christians assumed the breasts must have had something to do with fertility and even cult prostitution. Recent research by scholars such as Richard Oster have concluded Artemis of Ephesus was far from a fertility goddess.

Instead, many current researchers maintain Artemis of Ephesus was a virgin in the strictest sense and uninterested in marriage. She was unique from the myths of regional Artemis goddesses in that she was supposed to protect women during childbirth. (Women in Ephesus would have been surprised to hear in 1 Timothy 2:15 the God saves them rather than Artemis in childbirth.

Childbirth was only the beginning of the areas of importance held by Artemis. She was known as "Protector," "Savior," "Queen of the Cosmos," and "venerated for her supreme power over fate and supernatural powers."

Church audiences are familiar with Artemis of the Ephesians based on Paul's encounter with her followers in Acts 19. The silversmiths that made their living from selling statues of the goddess were worried Paul's proclamation of Jesus would cut into their sales.

The cult of Artemis was widespread in Ephesus. Her temple was known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. According to Trebilco, it had 127 columns and was four times the size of the Parthenon. The temple served as a place of worship, bank, refuge and tourist attraction. Passages like Ephesians 2:10; 2:19-20; 3:17-19 seem to be Paul's comparisons of the Christian life to the temple of Artemis of Ephesus.

Statues of Artemis included a zodiac necklace around her neck. According to many scholars, it was a sign that the goddess of Ephesus controlled their fate and was above the heavens.

Leaving the cult of Artemis of Ephesus took great faith. To leave the one who claimed to hold the future in her hands in order to follow a crucified savior from a place far away was an extreme leap. It is easy to understand why people would need to be reminded often that Yahweh is above all.

Dionysius (Bacchus)

Worship of Dionysius was also common among Ephesus' citizens. Much of the worship consisted of wild dancing, instruments such as tambourines, cymbals and flutes, the eating of raw animal flesh and intoxication. Adherents would parade through the streets carrying a "phallus" and sing the "Phallus Song." According to Cleon Rogers, Jr. the people would ask Dionysius for the gift of fertility, prophesied in his name and gained wisdom from him for writing poems and doing other forms of art. He suggests this cult forms the backdrop for Paul's argument in Ephesians 5:18.

Jews

Josephus wrote about the existence of a Jewish community in Ephesus. Although no synagogue has been uncovered, scholars are confident they existed in the First Century. According to Acts 19:8, Paul visited a synagogue in the city.

Magic in Ephesus

Magic played a major role in the Hellenistic world, especially Ephesus and its surrounding cities. Strategically, Ephesus was a major city commercially, politically and religiously. Magical powers of the underworld were connected to Artemis, Hekate and other gods worshipped in the region. Bruce Metzger wrote, "Of all ancient Graeco-Roman cities, Ephesus, the third largest city in the Empire, was by far the most hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all sorts." It is recorded in Acts 19:19 that many sorcerers burned their scrolls in response to the message about Jesus. The emphasis on Jesus as the power would have resonated with those who were afraid or tried to tame demonic forces.

Sermon Starters from Ephesians

Ephesians 2:1-10 Grace: You Ain't Seen Nothing Like It!

By ourselves we are dead. We lost our eternal lives because of our sin. We followed the world's ways and they led to death because the world is in agreement with the demonic forces.

Sin was like poison ivy. Although we knew it was bad to touch it, we scratched the bumps for a "feel good" moment and it our pain throughout our body...and The Body.

God gives us mercy in verse four because He is motivated by love. His grace resuscitated us to new life. Why? We are reminded we belong to God, we are His creation, His masterpiece. While God certainly loves us, we were not saved merely for our enjoyment. We were saved to do good works and to allow His incomparable grace to be seen.

Ephesians 2:1-10: Let Go My Ego

I hold on to my ego and assume I am the center of the universe. The world now has seven billion people and there are close to seven billion gods walking the earth.

It is true God loved me so much that He sent His Son to save me and the Son loved me so much He died for my sins. I often assume this is the entire story but there is so much more.

I was saved so God's incomparable grace can be seen in me and other believers. According to verse ten, I was also created to do good works that God has had prepared for a long time. I was not saved to just sit on the bench...or the pew. I was saved to live a life that honors God. When people realize God would want to save a sinner like me, they will praise Him and want to know more about Him.

Ephesians 4:17-32 Off With the Old Clothes and On With the New!

Pagans in Paul's day in Ephesus seemed to do it all. While we sometimes talk about Artemis, another deity vying for adoration was Dionysius, or Bacchus. While we don't know for certain these were the specific people Paul was thinking about, they would certainly fit the description. Followers of this god took their sexual festivals full of revelry and drunkenness to the streets and as Paul stated in verse 19, they had lost all sensitivity.

Paul tells his audience of young Christians, "You are different!" I can hear Paul preaching, "You took that life off and now you are clothed with Jesus. You have a new attitude and instead of following the practices of some minor god, you have been created to be like the one true God who calls us to be holy and righteous. You are special because you are like your Father, the Power greater than all other powers! Praise God for what He is allowing me to become.

Ephesians 4:20-5:7 Being My Sunday Self Every Day of the Week

I want to be righteous and holy (v. 24) like God wants but I don't even know where to start. This passage indicates a pure attitude and heart are the keys. I need to be honest with my neighbor, take care of my anger quickly, and I keep my hands to myself unless I am helping other people. I only build others up and I don't tear others down. I don't grieve the Holy Spirit and I purge my heart of all negativity (not through gossip but by prayer).

What does this look like? It looks like God. My daily life is consistent with the life I profess on Sunday. Now, I understand I am not perfect on my own and life isn't always easy. If it were easy I wouldn't have any anger to handle. My power to deal with difficulties comes through the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 5:3-20 How Can I Sing in Times Like These?

Paul tells his audience to "sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." How can I do that when my health is bad, my credit is bad and my conscience is bad? The apostle gave insight in verse 18 when he stated that his listeners should be "filled with the Spirit."

There may not be very I can do for my health. Although I can eat correctly and exercise, I may still face disease. There is typically a lot I can for my credit. However, even if I save money and try to make wise purchases, I can't always control layoffs and downturns in the economy. There is something I can do about my conscience that will allow me to make music in my heart. I can have my conscience cleaned by the Lord himself.

When I participate in sexual immorality, greed and other sins from the dark side, I stay in a constant state of fear and regret. When I focus on the Spirit and His filling, my attitude also changes. I say things to my brothers and sisters that build them up and I go along my way with the Lord's words coming out of my mouth in song. I am I tune with God and thanksgiving pours out of my heart.

Ephesians 6:10-20 Know the Enemy

American veterans of Vietnam often talk about the difficulty they had during the "conflict" of identifying their enemy. Their friends and foes were both of Vietnamese descent and distinguishing them was sometimes nearly impossible.

Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gives the identity of the enemy. The enemy is made up evil spiritual forces in the heavenly realms and the dark powers of the world. The enemy is not a person or a country, it is evil powers of the spirit world.

After knowing the enemy, especially one so difficult for humans to control, it is important to see the battle position. Paul never said to retreat and he never urged his audience to charge after the enemy. Christians were called to stand in place.

Every piece of armor listed was used for defensive purposes. Even the sword carried by the Roman soldiers was a short blade used defensively when the enemy was upon the soldier.

Why doesn't the Christian fight the enemy? No human alone has the power to overcome Satan and his schemes. The Lord, however, does the fighting for His people. The Lord fights for us while he protects us with the shield of faith, helmet of salvation and other pieces of armor. The Lord has given us what we need to deflect the arrows and stay safe, but the Spirit does the hard work.

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