

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND **THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:** **A STUDY OF EPHESIANS**

(PART ONE)

AN INTRODUCTION

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians has been called "the quintessence of Paulinism" by the biblical scholar **F.F. Bruce**; **John Mackay**, the Presbyterian theologian and missionary, referred to it as "the crown and climax of Pauline Theology;" Scottish theologian and author **William Barclay** called it "the queen of the epistles" and **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** the English poet, literary critic, philosopher and theologian hailed it as "the divinest composition of man." In his "*New Testament Commentary on Ephesians*," **William Hendriksen** observed that the epistle to the Ephesians has been called "the most authoritative and most consummate compendium of the Christian faith, the distilled essence of the Christian religion, full to the brim with thoughts and doctrines sublime and momentous."

It is important to note that the oldest and best Greek manuscripts do not have the word "*at Ephesus*" in the first verse. The reason for the lack of the name of a specific place in the first verse seems to be that it was a circular letter, intended to be read at many of the early churches. No particular church was named in the original letter in order that the names of the various churches to which it was sent could be written in the blank space. In **Colossians 4:15-16** Paul writes, "*Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.*" Paul instructed the Colossian saints to share the letter he had written to them with the church at Laodicea. He also told them to read the letter that he had written to the Laodiceans. Some Bible expositors are of the view that this letter was the one which came to be associated with Ephesus.

An excellent exercise to help us better understand the book and to apply it to ourselves, is to replace the word "*Ephesus*" with the name of our church so that it reads: "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at the Grace Workshop Ministries, who are faithful in Christ Jesus.*"

According to **Acts 18:18-21**, Paul first visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey: "*Paul stayed in Corinth for some time after that, then said good-bye to the brothers and sisters and went to nearby Cenchrea. There he shaved his head according to Jewish custom, marking the end of a vow. Then he set sail for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him. They stopped first at the port of Ephesus, where Paul left the others behind. While he was there, he went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews. They asked him to stay longer, but he declined. As he left, however, he said, 'I will come back later, God willing.' Then he set sail from Ephesus*" (**New Living Translation**).

On his third missionary journey he again visited Ephesus. On this occasion, he stayed for approximately three years in the city. In **Acts 19:1-20:1**, we have an account of his ministry there:

1 *While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions until he reached Ephesus, on the coast, where he found several believers.*

2 *"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" he asked them. "No," they replied, "we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."*

3 *"Then what baptism did you experience?" he asked. And they replied, "The baptism of John."*

4 *Paul said, "John's baptism called for repentance from sin. But John himself told the people to believe in the one who would come later, meaning Jesus."*

5 *As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*

6 *Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied.*

7 There were about twelve men in all.

8 Then Paul went to the synagogue and preached boldly for the next three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God.

9 But some became stubborn, rejecting his message and publicly speaking against the Way. So Paul left the synagogue and took the believers with him. Then he held daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

10 This went on for the next two years, so that people throughout the province of Asia — both Jews and Greeks — heard the word of the Lord.

11 God gave Paul the power to perform unusual miracles.

12 When handkerchiefs or aprons that had merely touched his skin were placed on sick people, they were healed of their diseases, and evil spirits were expelled.

13 A group of Jews was traveling from town to town casting out evil spirits. They tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus in their incantation, saying, “I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, to come out!”

14 Seven sons of Sceva, a leading priest, were doing this.

15 But one time when they tried it, the evil spirit replied, “I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?”

16 Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, overpowered them, and attacked them with such violence that they fled from the house, naked and battered.

17 The story of what happened spread quickly all through Ephesus, to Jews and Greeks alike. A solemn fear descended on the city, and the name of the Lord Jesus was greatly honored.

18 Many who became believers confessed their sinful practices.

19 A number of them who had been practicing sorcery brought their incantation books and burned them at a public bonfire. The value of the books was several million dollars.

20 So the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect.

21 Afterward Paul felt compelled by the Spirit to go over to Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. “And after that,” he said, “I must go on to Rome!”

22 He sent his two assistants, Timothy and Erastus, ahead to Macedonia while he stayed awhile longer in the province of Asia.

23 About that time, serious trouble developed in Ephesus concerning the Way.

24 It began with Demetrius, a silversmith who had a large business manufacturing silver shrines of the Greek goddess Artemis.^[e] He kept many craftsmen busy.

25 He called them together, along with others employed in similar trades, and addressed them as follows: “Gentlemen, you know that our wealth comes from this business.

26 But as you have seen and heard, this man Paul has persuaded many people that handmade gods aren’t really gods at all. And he’s done this not only here in Ephesus but throughout the entire province!

27 Of course, I’m not just talking about the loss of public respect for our business. I’m also concerned that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will lose its influence and that Artemis — this magnificent goddess worshiped throughout the province of Asia and all around the world — will be robbed of her great prestige!”

28 At this their anger boiled, and they began shouting, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

29 Soon the whole city was filled with confusion. Everyone rushed to the amphitheater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, who were Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia.

30 Paul wanted to go in, too, but the believers wouldn’t let him.

31 Some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, also sent a message to him, begging him not to risk his life by entering the amphitheater.

32 Inside, the people were all shouting, some one thing and some another. Everything was in confusion. In fact, most of them didn’t even know why they were there.

33 The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander forward and told him to explain the situation. He motioned for silence and tried to speak.

34 But when the crowd realized he was a Jew, they started shouting again and kept it up for about two hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

35 At last the mayor was able to quiet them down enough to speak. “Citizens of Ephesus,” he said. “Everyone knows that Ephesus is the official guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, whose image fell down to us from heaven.

36 Since this is an undeniable fact, you should stay calm and not do anything rash.

37 You have brought these men here, but they have stolen nothing from the temple and have not spoken against our goddess.

38 “If Demetrius and the craftsmen have a case against them, the courts are in session and the officials can hear the case at once. Let them make formal charges.

39 And if there are complaints about other matters, they can be settled in a legal assembly.

40 I am afraid we are in danger of being charged with rioting by the Roman government, since there is no cause for all this commotion. And if Rome demands an explanation, we won’t know what to say.”

41 Then he dismissed them, and they dispersed.

1 When the uproar was over, Paul sent for the believers and encouraged them. Then he said good-bye and left for Macedonia.

(New Living Translation)

Paul actually wrote this letter to the Ephesians in prison (**Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20**). The date of the writing is mostly accepted to be around AD 60. At the time Paul wrote the epistle, the city of Ephesus was a large and important one, having a population of approximately 350,000 people. The city was centrally located on the western coast of Asia Minor on the coast of Ionia, three kilometers southwest of present-day Selçuk in İzmir Province, Turkey. It was, therefore, positioned midway between the continents of Asia and Europe. Thus, Ephesus was the meeting place of the east and the west. **John Phillips**, in his commentary on Ephesians observes that in Ephesus, eastern richness, excess and sensuality met western industry, discipline and ambition. The sensual religious practices of the east blended with the progressive Greek culture and the firm Roman government of the west.

The city was famous for the great Roman highway that linked it with the world. It was noted for its markets and warehouses, and for its administrative buildings and schools. But above all Ephesus was known for its temple of Diana or Artemis. This temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was the sacred shrine of the image of the “mother goddess” Artemis which was reputed to have descended from the sky. In that temple, those who came to worship participated in the most sexually licentious acts imaginable.

The city of Ephesus served as Paul’s headquarters during his third missionary journey. As we noted earlier, he stayed in the city for approximately three years and established a large and influential church. His coworkers and converts used Ephesus as a base to evangelize the entire region. They established churches in city after city, including Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis. Some of the greatest Christian ministers were associated with the church at Ephesus. Persons of the calibre of Paul, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, Apollos, Timothy, Tychicus and the apostle John all ministered there. In fact, Ephesus enjoyed the prolonged and intense ministry of two apostles, Paul and John and was the only church to receive letters from these two apostles.

One of the distinctive features of this great Epistle is that it is a letter in which the apostle Paul looks at the Christian salvation from the perspective of the “heavenly places.” In Ephesians, Paul seems to be looking down from the vantage point of heaven at the great unfolding drama of redemption. In this letter, we are viewing salvation as God views it and not as human beings do.

As a result of this heavenly perspective, there is very little controversy in this letter. Paul’s burden is to give his readers a heavenly view of God’s wonderful and glorious work of love and grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. The letter of Paul to the Ephesians is decidedly God-centered rather than man-centered. It shifts the focus away from human beings to Almighty God. Paul deliberately and consistently stresses the point that Jesus Christ is the head of the church and that the church is His body.

Brothers and sisters, the Bible is not man's revelation of who God is and who we are. The Bible is God's revelation of who He is and who we are. When we open the pages of our Bible our thinking must always start with God. I am becoming more and more convinced that the greatest problem that the church faces today is the self-centeredness, self-absorption and self-focus of Christians. This fixation with ourselves eventually forces us to start with ourselves when we read the Bible and view the scriptures through the lens of our own littleness instead of through the lens of the grandeur of God. It is this that is at the heart of all false doctrine! We need to come back to the heart of worship where it is all about God. We must not start by examining ourselves and our needs; we must start with God, and forget ourselves. The message of the Bible from beginning to end is designed to bring us back to God, to humble us before God, and to enable us to see our true relationship to Him. And that is the great theme of the Epistle to the Ephesians. This letter forces us to focus on God; who He is and what He has done. Every line emphasizes the glory and the greatness of God, the eternity of God, the love of God, the grace of God and the glory of God.

In this epistle, Paul forces us to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. He addresses it immediately: *"This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus"* (**Ephesians 1:1 New Living Translation**). *"Chosen by the will of God"* he writes. Not his own will, not the will of other men. Paul did not call himself, and the Church did not call him; it was the sovereign God who called him. He is an Apostle by the will of God. In our study of this Epistle we shall find the sovereignty of God emphasized in all its glory on every page. It is God who has chosen everyone who is a Christian in Christ; it is God who has predestinated us. It is a part of God's purpose that we should be saved. There would never have been any salvation if God had not planned it and put it into execution. It is all of God and it is all according to His purpose.

This Epistle consistently causes us to think about our salvation in this way. We must not start with ourselves and then proceed upwards to God. No! We must start with the sovereignty of God and then proceed downwards to ourselves. As we examine the Epistle we shall discover that salvation is entirely of God, both in general and also as it relates to each individual in particular. It is God who is in control of everything. The sovereignty of God is emphasized in the introduction to this Epistle and repeated throughout, because it is a fundamental doctrine without which we cannot understand our Christian faith.

Another distinctive feature of this epistle is the "mystery of God." The word *"mystery"* is used six times in this Epistle to the Ephesians, more frequently than in Paul's other Epistles. The first mention is in the first chapter: *"God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ — which is to fulfill his own good plan"* **Ephesians 1:9 (New Living Translation)**.

Brothers and sisters, we should never approach these great truths and doctrines in a proud manner. If we think that we can ever understand the mind and will of God absolutely and completely we are being very arrogant and very foolish. We must always remember Paul's song of praise in **Romans 11:33-34**: *"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?"*

Whenever we endeavor to grapple with the *"mystery of his will,"* we must do so with a sense of awe and in an attitude of humility. We must bear in mind that we are on a fascinating journey that will end only when we see Him face to face. One of the most wonderful aspects of our walk with God is that it is a walk with **God**! We are always learning and therefore always growing. There are moments when we may think we have God figured out and then He suddenly blows our minds with a new revelation of Himself and of His will, causing us to realize that there is far more that we do not know than what we do know! As we study this letter we hope to better understand "the mystery" of His ways in order that we may be led firstly, to confess our ignorance and littleness and weakness, and then to worship Him, and thank Him for allowing us to understand even a small fraction of the *"mystery of His will."*

The greatest theme that is dealt with in this epistle concerns the grace of God. The word “grace” is used thirteen times in this Epistle. The first mention of it is in the second verse of the first chapter: *“Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Throughout the epistle, Paul keeps highlighting God’s amazing grace to sinful human beings in providing for their salvation and redemption. In this Epistle we are given a glimpse into the super-abundance of God’s grace towards us. And if the grace of God is not the greatest theme of our individual lives, then, it is uncertain that we are Christians at all, for the only way one can become a Christian and remain a Christian is by the grace of God alone. Ephesians more than any other book in the Bible celebrates the grace of God because the main objective of the epistle is to help us to understand and appreciate the super-abundant riches of the grace of God.

Of course, Paul, in this epistle as in all his epistles, is desirous of magnifying and glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ. As we read the letter, we will, no doubt, notice how often the name of Jesus Christ is mentioned. Let us consider the first five verses:

1 *Paul, an apostle of **Jesus Christ** by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in **Christ Jesus**:*

2 *Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord **Jesus Christ**.*

3 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord **Jesus Christ**, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in **Christ**:*

4 *According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:*

5 *Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by **Jesus Christ** to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.*

Jesus Christ is mentioned six times in the first five verses!

Brothers and sisters, without Jesus Christ there is no gospel. The gospel is especially about Him. There is no salvation apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. All God’s gracious purposes are carried out by Christ; they are carried out in Christ; they are carried out through Christ and all this is so from the beginning to the very end. Everything that God in His sovereign will, and by His infinite grace has purposed and carried out for our salvation has been purposed and carried out in Christ. Everything from the very beginning to the very end is in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. We are called and chosen *“in Christ before the foundation of the world,”* we are reconciled to God by *“the blood of Christ.”* In Christ we have *“redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.”*

Another major theme in the letter is the Church. It is critical for us to understand and appreciate that God’s purpose is seen most plainly and clearly in and through His Church. It is in the church that we find evidence of His great purpose of bringing together all nations in Christ. In the Church we find different people, from different nationalities, with different experiences. They are different in every conceivable respect. And yet they are all one *“in Christ Jesus.”* It is because of this that Christians must live the Christian life. In the latter half of the letter, Paul emphasizes the importance, privilege and responsibility of being a member of the Church. He addresses the ethical behaviour which is expected of Christians because they are what they are, and because that is the plan of God, and they must manifest His grace in their daily life.

Brothers and sisters, it is of critical importance that we know these truths. The apostle Paul earnestly desired for the Ephesian saints to know them. Listen to what he wrote in verses **15-20** of the first chapter:

15 *Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints,*

16 *Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers;*

17 *That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him:*

18 *The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints,*

19 *And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power,*

20 *Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places.*

The Lord Jesus desires that His people who live in the present time, know these truths and embrace them. He is acutely aware of the difference they will make in their lives. Are you a miserable, unhappy Christian, feeling that the fight is too much for you? and are you on the point of giving up and giving in? Then the truths contained in this epistle will make all the difference in your life! What we need, primarily, is not an experience, but knowledge. We need to realize what we are, and who we are, and what God has done in Christ for us. Until we know these things, we will fail to realize our potential. That is why our prayer for ourselves should be the prayer of Paul for the Ephesian saints that *“the eyes of (our) understanding may be enlightened.”* It is my prayer that as we apply ourselves to investigate this sublime epistle, this prayer will be fully answered.