

p7 WEEK 1: OVERVIEW: THE CHURCH IN GOD'S PLAN

Getting Acquainted

The audience of Ephesians was well-known to the apostle Paul (Acts 19). For two years the disciples in Ephesus observed Paul daily reasoning about the kingdom of God and teaching the Scriptures (Acts 19:8–10). This ministry resulted in a gospel witness spreading throughout the Roman province of Asia. The message of Christ reached those practicing dark arts and worshiping Artemis in this great ancient city, where demonic influence was strong.

Paul explains these believers' formation into a church as the work of Christ alone. The decree of God always included the formation of the beautiful bride of Christ—the body of Christ, of which Christ is the head.

Ephesians concerns the mystery of the church in the plan of God. The letter calls believers to walk in love, holiness, and wisdom within their local church congregation and in the world. Paul reveals that this mystery concerns earthly, present matters, as well as matters in the invisible realm, both in the present world and in the world to come. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2257–2261; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

p8 Placing It in the Larger Story

The Lord revealed the inclusion of Gentiles in his plan of salvation when he called Abram and made promises to bless all nations through him (Gen. 12:1–3). From the beginnings of the Lord's dealings with Israel, Gentiles came to the God of Israel—as when Rahab and Ruth left their gods to follow him.

Even though Israel as a whole rejected their Messiah, Jesus told his initial Jewish followers that he would build the church and that they would have a significant role in its growth (Matt. 16:18). In doing so, he indicated that something new had dawned in the messianic age—an assembly, “my church,” distinguished from greater Israel. The book of Acts shows that soon after the church's formation, Gentiles joined the assembly without converting to Judaism or following the Mosaic law. The inclusion of the Gentiles into the largely Jewish church raised strong feelings among both believing and unbelieving Jews (Acts 11:1–3; 21:20–25).

Ephesians explains the theology of the inclusion of those formerly outside the covenant with Israel. Believing Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus are part of a larger design. The church will transform the marriages, work, parenting, and morality of her members. She will become the true temple of God.

Key Verse

“We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

Date and Historical Background

Paul wrote Ephesians during his first imprisonment (3:1; 4:1; 6:20). He is therefore writing in AD 62, about five years after his final meeting with the elders of this assembly (Acts 20:17–35). Christianity is still in its infancy, being only a thirty-year-old movement. Unlike other New Testament letters, one does not discern any error, conflict, or misunderstanding that prompts the writing of this letter. Paul writes simply to advance Christian insight and maturity.

Outline

- I. **Believers’ Spiritual Blessings in Christ in God’s Plan (1:1–14)**
- II. **Prayer for Revelation about the Blessings in Christ the Head (1:15–23)**
- III. **Mercy Making the Dead Alive by Grace (2:1–10)**
- p 9 IV. **Breaking a Wall to Make One New Man (2:11–22)**
- V. **Interlude on the Stewardship of the Mystery of Gentile Inclusion (3:1–13)**
- VI. **Prayer for Love to Shape the Church, to the Glory of Christ (3:14–21)**
- VII. **Christian Maturity as Trinitarian Unity within Gifted Diversity (4:1–16)**
- VIII. **Call to Live (Walk in) a New Life (4:17–32)**
- IX. **Walking in Love (5:1–14)**
- X. **Walking in the Spirit in Marriage, Parenting, and Work (5:15–6:9)**
- XI. **Standing Firm in the Real War (6:10–20)**
- XII. **Final Greetings (6:21–24)**

As You Get Started

Read the book of Ephesians as if it were a letter from the apostle Paul written to your own church. What stands out as unique or significant as you read? Write down your initial thoughts.

Two prayers and one request for prayer in Ephesians each revolves around revelation and mystery (1:15–22; 3:14–21; 6:18–20). What might this tell you about Paul’s hope for believers who read Ephesians?

p 10 In reading Ephesians, what words and ideas are repeated? How might you group some of these words and ideas together under larger headings that point to Paul’s main idea in Ephesians?

As You Finish This Unit ...

Using the prayer of Ephesians 1:17-23, take a few minutes to ask the Lord to reveal to you and your church more and more of his will for his glory as you begin this study of Ephesians.