

THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS

ORIENTING DATA FOR EPHESIANS

- **Content:** a letter of encouragement and exhortation, set against the backdrop of “the powers” (6:12), portraying Christ’s bringing Jew and Gentile together into the one people of God as his ultimate triumph and glory
- **Author:** the apostle Paul (although many have doubts)
- **Date:** A.D. 61–62, probably from Rome
- **Recipients:** uncertain; perhaps a circular letter to many churches in the province of Asia, of which Ephesus is the capital (no city is given in the earliest manuscripts; Paul assumes the readers do not know him personally, 1:15; 3:2)
- **Occasion:** Tychicus, who is carrying this letter (6:21–22), is also carrying two letters to Colosse (Colossians and Philemon [Col 4:7–9]); perhaps after reflecting further on the Colossian situation and on the glory of Christ, and knowing the Asian fear of “the powers of this dark world,” Paul writes a general pastoral letter for the churches of that area
- **Emphases:** the cosmic scope of the work of Christ; Christ’s reconciliation of Jew and Gentile through the cross; Christ’s supremacy over “the powers” for the sake of the church; Christian behavior that reflects the unity of the Spirit

OVERVIEW OF EPHESIANS

Writer and poet Eugene Peterson tells the story of his four-year-old grandson hopping up into his lap to hear a troll story. “Tell me a story, Grandpa,” he begged, “and put me in it!” That is what Paul is doing in Ephesians, telling the ultimate story—God’s story—and putting some Gentile believers—and us—in it (1:13–14; 2:13).

The churches of Asia Minor are in a period of difficulty. Some outside influences are putting pressure on Gentile believers to conform to Jewish identity markers (circumcision, food laws, religious calendar; see “Specific Advice for Reading Colossians,” pp. 360–61). Others are discouraged, distressed by magic and the power of the demonic (“the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,” Paul calls them, Eph 6:12), which had held them in their grip for so many years. As Paul is in prison thinking about these things and reflecting on the grandeur of Christ as expressed in his letter to the Colossians, his heart soars, and what he sees he writes down as encouragement for these churches.

You will hardly be able to miss the note of affirmation and encouragement in this letter. It begins with praise to God (in the form of a Jewish berakah: “Blessed be God”) for the abundant blessings he has given in Christ (1:3–14); it carries on through the thanksgiving and prayer (vv. 15–23), into the narrative of Jew and Gentile reconciliation (2:1–22)—plus Paul’s role in it (3:1–13)—and concludes with yet another prayer and doxology (3:14–21). The rest of the letter urges them to maintain the unity God has provided through Christ’s death and resurrection and the Spirit’s empowering (4:1–5:20), especially in Christian households (5:21–6:9), and concludes (6:10–20) by urging them to stand boldly in Christ and the Spirit and so to withstand the powers that are still arrayed against them (and us), while they (we) live in the present age.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING EPHESIANS

As you read you will want to be on constant alert for the three concerns that dominate the letter. The first is the passion of Paul’s life—the Gentile mission, but not just the salvation of individual Gentiles. Rather, he asserts that by reconciling both Jew and Gentile to himself, God thereby created out of the two a new humanity—the ultimate expression of his redeeming work in Christ (2:14–16). This theme first emerges at the end of the opening blessing (1:11–14); it is developed in a thoroughgoing way in 2:11–22 and picked up again in 3:1–13. It is also this “unity of the Spirit” (between Jew and Gentile) that chapters 4–6 are all about by way of exhortation. Thus the whole letter is held together by this theme.

The second theme is Christ’s victory over “the powers” for the sake of the church, with the Spirit playing the key role in our participation in that victory. You will see how Paul brings these first two concerns together early on in the letter—(1) in the “blessing” in 1:3–14, where Christ’s redemptive, reconciling work embraces all things, both those in heaven (the “heavenly realms” are now his) and those on earth (Jew and Gentile as the one people of God), and (2) in telling them about his own role in the gospel (3:1–13), where the reality of Jew and Gentile together as the one people of God is on display before the powers so that they become aware of their present—and ultimate—defeat in Christ (vv. 10–12).

The first theme in turn lies behind the third concern as well, which makes up the second major part of the letter (chs. 4–6)—that they “walk” (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15, usually translated “live” in the TNIV) so as to maintain the “unity of the Spirit” (4:1–16). This includes living out the life of Christ in their relationships (4:17–5:17), their worship (5:18–20), and in their Christian households (5:21–6:9)—those places where the worship would have taken place.

All three concerns are brought into final focus in 6:10–20, where, through the weapons and armor provided by Christ and the Spirit, Paul’s readers are urged to

stand as one people in their ongoing conflict with the powers.

As you read you will also want to note how Paul's Trinitarian experience of God lies behind everything. This comes out in the structure of the opening praise rendered to God: Father (1:3-6), Son (vv. 7-12), and Holy Spirit (vv. 13-14); note that each of these concludes with "to the praise of his glorious grace"; "for/to the praise of his glory." It is picked up again in the thanksgiving and prayer that follow (1:17), as well as in the narrative of reconciliation in 2:11-22, and serves as the basis for maintaining unity in chapters 4-6 (see 4:6-8; one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father).