

In 1908, there was a huge shift in the country of Turkey. A political party made up of exiles, students, and civil servants led a successful rebellion against the ruler of the Ottoman Empire: They will long be remembered for bravely ushering in a time of radical change in the modern-day country of Turkey. They were called the Young Turks.

In New Testament times, I helped usher in a radical change in the part of that country known in my time as the province of Asia.<sup>1</sup> Ephesus was the capital of the province. I knew well the people of Ephesus and the entire province of Asia. I was the original Young Turk.

I first met Paul when he lived in Ephesus for a couple years during his Third Missionary Journey. I was one of the young men he trained to share the Gospel in Ephesus and nearby cities. Later, I accompanied Paul when he took a relief fund to Jerusalem at the end of the Third Missionary Journey. I watched the elders of Ephesus cry when Paul said he would never see them again. It broke my heart, many of those elders were my close friends.

I was with Paul in Rome during his imprisonment. I was with him when he wrote his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, and to Philemon. When it came time to have someone carry those letters, Paul chose me. I think he chose me because he believed me to be an encourager, and because I knew everything about Paul's circumstances.<sup>2</sup> That would become important because of the other letter I was taking to Philemon. Onesimus talks about it.

Paul lived in Ephesus for nearly three years. He was old friends with the Christians there. They knew each other well, and Paul saw no need to be timid or deferential when he wrote to them. He wrote frankly, like good friends do.

Paul quickly reminds the Ephesians of their huge privilege of belonging to Jesus. Listen to his encouraging words: "For God chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love...in love (wistful sigh) he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ." The Ephesians will quickly recognize that God must love them very much to voluntarily choose to adopt them. In their world, adoption is a huge privilege.

Paul tells them that he has not stopped praying for them from the first time he heard about their faith, which was before he personally knew them. He wants them to understand that God

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:4

<sup>2</sup> Col. 4:7-8

had ordered the world and everything in it so that he will be glorified. The Ephesians learn from Paul that the world is an orderly place because of God, not a chaotic and unpredictable world resulting from control of the old Greek gods.

Paul never tires of saying how God loves them, so much that he gave his only Son so that they could be saved. My most favorite words that Paul ever wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”<sup>3</sup>

Saved by grace, through faith. This is a theme that Paul repeats over and over throughout his teachings. Salvation is a gift, and it cannot be earned through works. What a joyous message for the Ephesians to hear. God is not like the pagan gods. He doesn’t demand unreasonable works to get his favor. He gives his favor because he loves those who are his children.

Yet, in an almost paradoxical way, his children are created to do good works. It is in their very nature, their DNA, to do good works. God’s people cannot help doing good works, especially when it glorifies God whom they love. What a message of hope that Paul shares with them. Sometimes, I wish he had just ended the letter right there. It is almost more than any person can comprehend.

Instead, Paul goes ahead to remind them that they were once separated from God, but now they are brought back to him through the sacrifice of the life of Jesus. This sacrifice changes them from being strangers and foreigners to God, to being members of his household.

I need to pause here and talk to those of you who read the Bible in English. You have one significant disadvantage when it comes to the Bible that will become apparent in just a moment. A disadvantage that has led many people to misunderstand portions of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

In English, it is often difficult to discern whether the writer is talking to one person or to a group of people. The word “you” is used both ways, and statements are made in such a way that you cannot always tell. As an example, later in *Ephesians*, Paul will write, “Put on the full armor of God.” Does Paul mean that I personally, should put on my armor, or that my group of people should put on our armor, or both?

In English, that answer is usually apparent by looking at the context of the statement. But that causes other problems. Sometimes it is hard to tell the context, the context changes but the change isn’t clear, or the audience forgets the context.

Returning to the first verse of *Ephesians*, you see that Paul wrote the letter to all the Christians living in Ephesus. A careful reading of the letter, especially in some other languages, reveals

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10 NIV

that Paul does not move away from that audience in the letter. From the start to the finish, he is talking to all the Christians in Ephesus!

This is obvious when you read Chapter 4, but many people today lose that idea as Chapters 5 and 6 unfold.

In Chapter 4, Paul urges the Christians in Ephesus to be united in the church. Ever since Paul wrote to the Corinthians, some ten years before, Paul understood and preached the importance of unity in the church body. He points out that Jesus equips his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. When those in the body reach unity in the knowledge and faith of Jesus, they become mature and reach the fullness of Christ. In doing so, the body grows and builds itself up in love.

What kind of people were in the church at Ephesus? It likely consisted of people from that city, some Romans, some Greeks, some Jews, and a mix of others from different backgrounds. Paul needs to be very detailed with them about the proper way for people to live. After all, these Christians represent Jesus to the rest of the world. Faults in the way they live will reflect on Jesus and his church.

He cautions the Ephesians to live with righteousness and holiness, not with impurity and greed. Knowing that their different backgrounds will lead them to different thoughts about what that means, Paul chooses to be very detailed about what he means. Speak truthfully, do not lie. Don't sin while angry. Work and share instead steal.

Don't use unwholesome speech, don't grieve the Holy Spirit. Get rid of bitterness, rage and slander. Instead of having those faulty habits, be kind and compassionate, forgiving each other as Christ forgave. No sexual immorality or greed. On and on and on. Apparently, Paul knows the Ephesians will search for a loophole, and he is not going to give them one.

Instead of loopholes, Paul gives them this overarching command: Be filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Always give thanks to God the Father for everything.

Let me interject another piece of information that you may not know. Perhaps you have been taught that in the time of the New Testament women had very few rights. That they were essentially property of their husbands and had few more rights than the slaves. That was somewhat true during the time of the Roman Republic when legal control of the woman passed from her father to her husband. Her husband had *patria potestas*, absolute power over her, like he did their children, slaves and servants.<sup>4</sup>

With the end of the Republic in 27 BC, that form of marriage began to be replaced by *sine manu*, in which the power over the woman remained with her family of origin. In essence,

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<sup>4</sup> *The Reach of Rome* by Alberto Angela pages 122-126

women began to have economic independence and choice of marriage, which quickly evolved into people freely divorcing and remarrying, and declining birth rates.

By the time *Ephesians* was written, women's rights were mostly a *fait accompli* in the Roman empire. You can see how Paul highly respects women in several places. For instance, he trusts Phoebe to take his letter to the Romans, and Priscilla to start churches. He certainly never treated women as property.

So, as Paul continues his quest to teach about unity in the body of Christ, he talks about unity in the families of Christians. Families at that time often included wives, husbands, children, and slaves. The husbands and wives were the masters of the slaves. Paul begins with this directive, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Paul knows that the people of the church will not have a servant's heart at church if they don't have a servant's heart at home. Assuming that everyone has a servant's attitude, and a Christian love for one another, it makes sense to Paul to lay out the orderly way for them to run their households. Wives, submit to husbands as they submit to Christ. Husbands, love wives as they love their own bodies and as Christ loved the church. Children, obey parents. Fathers, don't exasperate children but bring them up in the Lord. Slaves, obey masters as they obey Christ. Masters, treat slaves as a fellow Christian.

All of that sounds very strange to your modern day ears, but it makes perfect sense to the Ephesians, and everybody will be thrilled to live in that kind of an orderly, loving household.

Paul ends his letter with his famous passage about spiritual warfare. It is so well-known that I won't comment on it except to say this. Paul spent two years in the jail at Caesarea watching soldiers drill in formation. He knows the Roman armies are powerful because they fight in formations, in unity. Although the passage on spiritual warfare is applicable to individuals, it is written to the church in Ephesus. From Roman history, they know the importance of fighting as a unit. It is almost tantamount to suicide for a Roman soldier to fight on his own. Try reading the passage with that in mind.

I was with Paul when he wrote some of his letters. I must confess that this letter to the *Ephesians* is my favorite. It is so powerful and practical that it is unimaginable to me that the church at Ephesus won't flourish for centuries. Unfortunately, the beneficial effects of the letter will not last many decades. How can you know that? Read another letter from Jesus to the Ephesians...it is found in the book of *Revelation*.

I remained a faithful companion to Paul. Many years after he sent me to deliver *Ephesians*, he sent me to relieve Titus in Cyprus, and another time I was sent to relieve Timothy in Ephesus.<sup>5</sup> Kinda funny when I think about it. I was an energetic, revolutionary Young Turk when I first

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<sup>5</sup> Titus 3:12, 2 Timothy 4:12

worked with Paul. A dozen years later...he sent me to be just a substitute pastor. May not seem like a promotion to you, but it was to me.