



# THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

## INTRODUCTION THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

The early churches were home based. The first Christians met in homes in small groups (Acts, 1:13, 2:2, 2:46, 5:42, 8:32, Rom. 16:4-5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15 etc). This encouraged informality and ministry to one another. These studies on Ephesians are designed for such a context and for such participation. It is suggested that whoever facilitates the group encourages each member to take a turn in leading a study, but allow that some may not want to do this.

It is important that no one person does all or most of the talking. The leader at the study should always ask what others think is the answer to the question, and pause before saying one more word. Often it is good to ask after one or two replies have been made, "What do you think on this Mary/John/ Fong?" A good leader gets others talking.

Each study has some teaching and lots of questions. The ideal is that everyone read though the study before meeting and fill in or at least jot down something in their answers to the questions. After thirty years of going to home group studies I know not everyone will do this but it still remains the ideal.

Time management is a key factor in home groups working well and keeping members positive and regular. A time should be set to begin and end. Keep to the set times. In the group I am meeting with this year the group has decided that everyone should aim to arrive by 7.45 pm and no later than 8 pm. On arrival there is a cuppa ready and a biscuit. The study begins at 8:15 pm. If you come late there is no cuppa. The study finishes roughly at 9:15 pm. Then there is 20 minute prayer time. The prayer time begins with the leader for the night asking for prayer points to be given succinctly and briefly and then we finish by 9.45 pm. People talk on after that getting away when they must.

One last thing by way of introduction: do not forget that the Bible and this epistle are historical documents. Paul is a first century man and he is addressing first century Christians. Keeping this in mind will help us understand what Paul is saying when he speaks about the Jew Gentile division, no longer known in our churches today, about the plural leaders of the church with titles we no longer use, about male leadership in marriage and slavery. When we have worked out why and what Paul was saying in his historical context we can then ask, how what he said to these early Christians might speak to us in our own contemporary historical context.

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## Paul and the Ephesian Church

The Ephesian church was located in the great Roman city of Ephesus, the Roman capital of Asia. It was a port city, in south western Asia, which is today Turkey. If we have not seen the ruins of one of the many great Roman cities of the first century it is hard to imagine how impressive and large these cities were. Ephesus is one of the largest and best preserved. I found it an amazing experience to go there. I saw dozens of large public sandstone buildings with huge fluted columns four and five metres high, an amphitheatre that seats more than a thousand people, paved roads, numerous temples, magnificent sculptures and lots of substantial homes. This was a city that had running water and a sewerage system. The many temples are a reminder that this was a religious age where everyone worshipped one or more gods. The most important god in Ephesus was Artemis, and the biggest temple was dedicated to her. She was often depicted as a huntress carrying a bow and arrows. About a third of the population were slaves. These were men and women spared after a defeat and then sold as servants and labourers. Some were treated well, some were not, some were educated some were not. Colour did not mark out a slave. Men ran that world. It was a patriarchal age. Fathers arranged the marriage of their daughters, who on marriage came under the authority and virtual ownership of their husband. Wealthy women, most notably wealthy widows often had more freedoms and choices. In this world people had obligations to others but there were generally few moral constraints. People were free to do as they like; the only worry was not to offend someone more powerful.

In Acts 18:18-22, 19:1-20 and 20:17-38 we can read of Paul's contacts and interactions with the people of Ephesus. After his missionary work in Athens and Corinth Paul set off by boat to go back to Jerusalem in about 51 AD. On route he stopped over very briefly in Ephesus, meeting with the Jews in the synagogue, promising to return (Acts 18:18-21). Later, when he returned he found Apollos ministering there and he met up with some disciples of John the Baptist who believed Jesus was the Messiah but did not know that after his resurrection Jesus had poured out the Spirit on all believers. Paul instructed them further and the Spirit fell upon them just as it had on all the believers on the day of Pentecost. Again, as on the day of Pentecost those who received the Spirit spoke in tongues to show objectively that the Spirit had come into their lives (Acts 19:1-7).

Paul returned to the synagogue and for three months taught there until a parting of the ways took place. He then began public lectures in the hall of Tyrannus for two years. Luke tells us that Paul was in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). It seems Paul's ministry made such an impact on the city that people stopped buying the little statues of Artemis that her worshippers treasured. The silversmiths who made these religious artefacts stirred up trouble and a huge crowd gathered in the Amphitheatre, demanding that Paul and his fellow missionaries be cast out of the city. Paul had to leave (Acts 19:21-41).

Standing in that huge stone amphitheatre is an amazing experience. To be there is a powerful reminder that the story Acts tells is not a fairy story

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of long ago in a place far away. It is a story about historical people, with disclosed names, who went to specific places that you can visit today and we know very accurately when they lived and at what time they were at the places they visited.

Despite this dramatic and frightening end to Pauls' ministry at Ephesus the Christian community was firmly established in that huge and important city. This was one of Paul's most successful missionary endeavours.

On his way back to Jerusalem by ship some months later, Paul called into the port of Miletus 48 kilometres south of Ephesus and there he met with the leaders of the Ephesian church, who were all older men (elders) (Acts 20:17-38). Most of them were probably house church leaders.

It is about ten years later (about 61 AD) that Paul, now a prisoner in Rome waiting for his trial before Caesar, writes to the Christians in Ephesus to encourage and instruct them. It is generally thought that this epistle reflects Paul's most profound theology.

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