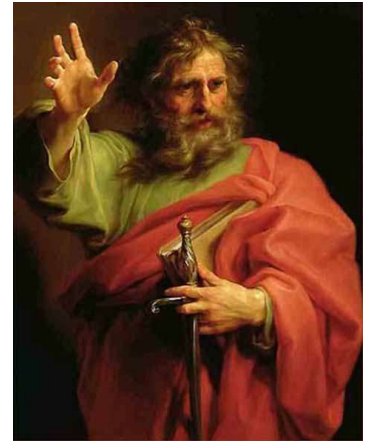


EPHESIANS

Date of composition: between A.D. 60-63.

Newly baptized Gentile Christians in first century Ephesus (a small city in western Turkey today) face daily decisions as they withdraw from their former pagan ways. Throughout the two thousand cities and towns across the Roman Empire, the people worship the goddess Artemis and burn incense before the imperial cult of the Emperor Nero. Ephesus is in fact the home of the temple of Artemis, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. Her image graces many of the city's coins and her name is invoked in numerous official documents.

Regarding homage to the Emperor, this imperial cult began with Octavian Caesar Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome. Every household within the empire honors the Emperor. Such pagan devotions are meant to reinforce Roman superiority in every way, including over the people's spiritual lives. Confronting this, Paul has the enormously difficult task of reassuring the new converts from paganism to Christianity that Jesus is the one Lord.



Chapter 1

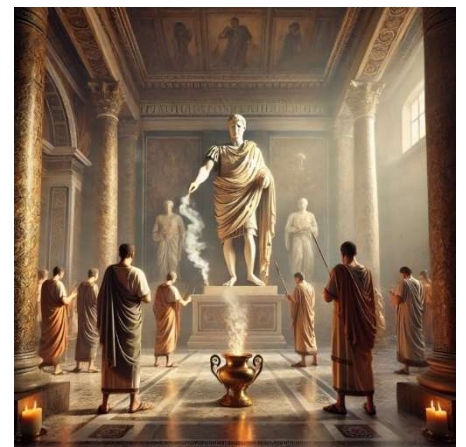
Paul begins his letter to the Ephesian Christians in the typical fashion of identifying himself as the sender. This is the normal pattern for ancient letters, which is then followed by a greeting.

Paul writes that God is Father of all and that believers are his children. Here Paul uses the rare term, “adoption,” that is, adoption through Jesus Christ. While the adoption of adult sons is common among Gentiles, it is rare among Jews; and Paul uses the term to say that a believer is not simply “saved,” but becomes a member of God's family.

Paul also uses the term *charis* (“gift” or “grace”) at the beginning or ending of his letters. In ancient Greece and Rome, relationships are generally strengthened through reciprocal gift-giving. However gifts are not given randomly. Benefactors are careful when distributing their gifts. One gives generously to those who will reciprocate so that when you are in need, they will help you. To give indiscriminately is seen as foolish, arrogant, or an example of showing off before others. In turn, the recipient—honored by the gift—responds with an even greater gift. If that is not possible, he gives public praise to the gift-giver. The ancients believed that the value in creating and maintaining relationships was lost in an unanswered gift.

Paul is praising God's grace which is not parceled out reluctantly or miserly, but is poured out with lavish abundance in Christ's blood for the forgiveness of sins. Paul wants this picture of God's unrestrained generosity to give confidence to the Ephesians. For God's power to accomplish his purpose through the forgiveness of sins is not a simple washing away of evil, but is preparation for a unity to be enjoyed by all of creation in Christ.

Then, having praised God for the plan to restore creation and reconcile believers, Paul gives thanks for the Ephesians and prays for them. For Paul has heard two things about the Ephesians: their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for the saints. In all, Paul stresses the Church is one body, made one in Christ who is their peace.



Chapters 2, 3

As pagans the Ephesians were far from God and alienated from God's Chosen People, the Jews. But now they share in Christ's victory over the evil powers that kept them from the true God and his love. Thus Paul highlights the fulfillment of God's promises to unite his people into a new household, a new "temple." As the ancient world has built numerous temples for the gods, Paul declares that the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—dwells in the midst of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that he is now "**a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles**" (3:1). Indeed, the physical violence that Paul endures as a prisoner, as well as the social shame that can discredit him and his message, might lead some within the community to distance themselves from him (Galatians 2:4).

Paul is imprisoned due to charges that he brought Gentiles into the Temple's inner courtyards that are reserved for Jews and circumcised proselytes (Acts 21:33). As the Jews guarded the sanctity and purity of the Temple, their leaders were given extraordinary authority by the Romans to put to death any Gentile who violated such boundaries.

However, Paul's imprisonment is also the Gentiles' glory; for their great faith and Paul's imprisonment are living proof of God grace. Since the Romans would hardly imprison Paul for preaching a Jewish messiah to Jews, faith in the Passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus on behalf of *all* people strikes at the heart of the pagan Empire.

Chapters 4, 5, 6

While under house arrest Paul waits for an audience with the Emperor who will determine his fate. Since Paul can no longer preach in the marketplace, he asks the Ephesians to pray that he will be bold and fearless.

Paul insists that unity is achieved by submitting to each other as to Christ, and standing firm in the armor of God against evil forces. Yet within this unity there are distinctions based on responsibilities within the church, and in recognition of the wider social and legal orders. Always humility and love are the guiding virtues for the community.

Paul focuses on unity because he knows from his prior experience with the Corinthians that internal forces can tear a community apart; that the devil looks for opportunities to defeat believers in their attempts to build unity and foster love.

When Paul says that one must "**not grieve the Holy Spirit of God**" (4:30), he is speaking of believers who, sealed with the Spirit, choose to fall back into old pagan ways because they are deceived into tolerating sinful behavior.

Paul refers to the well-known Gentile custom of the banquet, a meal that involves much alcohol and sexual immorality. Paul writes that rather than being drunk with wine, believers should be filled with the Spirit.

With regard to slavery, Paul insists on the inherent worth of each individual who—empowered by the Holy Spirit—is called to love. While the early Christians do not challenge the Roman legal system, they do act counter-culturally by treating slaves as full members of the Church. Thus Paul addresses slaves as full members of Christ's body who await the same inheritance. As such Paul honors slaves as children of God.

Husbands must love their wives as Christ loves the Church, and for which he gave himself up to death on the Cross. This *agape* or sacrificial love is how Paul describes a husband's love for his wife, and Christ's love for the church.

Paul writes that children also are promised life in Christ as members of His body, the Church, and are co-heirs in Christ. Of course Paul commands children to obey their parents, but also warns fathers against exasperating or provoking their children.

Note: while Ephesian parents certainly loved their children, the ancient world saw the child as a miniature adult in need of strict discipline. Roman society believed character was set at birth, and that circumstances merely revealed what was already true about the person. Sadly, most children worked in fields or shops by the age of seven, and only about half lived beyond age ten.

In closing, Paul's charge is to put on God's armor, that is, the Church and her powers; for the unity of mankind in Christ foreshadows the ultimate unity of all creation under the love of God.

And as Paul concludes he admits again that he sits in chains under house arrest. Shifting the language from "prisoner" to "ambassador," Paul reinforces the claim that his message is from God.

Final greeting: Paul praises his co-worker, Tychicus, whom Paul considers a dear brother and a faithful servant of the Lord. According to custom, Tychicus reads the letter aloud to the congregation, fielding questions and offering explanations. Paul closes with wishes for peace and love with faith for all believers through God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.



**Roman goddess
Artemis**



Temple of Artemis