

The Message of Ephesians

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The Epistle of Ephesians is often one of the most appreciated letters of the Apostolic Scriptures for today's Messianic community, even though there are probably various themes and issues seen within Ephesians which have not been explored thoroughly enough. Whether one is a part of a Messianic Jewish or some kind of independent Messianic congregation, you have heard references to the Commonwealth of Israel (2:11-12) and Jewish and non-Jewish Believers being fellow heirs and citizens with one another (3:6). You have heard about some kind of "one new man" (2:15) that God is supposed to create from the Jews and the nations. What you have likely not heard that much about is what the letter of Ephesians meant to the First Century people who originally received it.

One of the most frequently unknown issues, among standard Bible readers, regarding Ephesians, appears in its opening verse. While the Apostle Paul extends opening greetings to be sure—"Paul, an apostle of Messiah Yeshua by the will of God...Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Yeshua the Messiah" (1:1a, 2)—there is sufficient manuscript evidence to support the view that the Ephesians did not originally receive this letter. The Revised Standard Version notably rendered Ephesians 1:1 with, "To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus," as the designation "in Ephesus" does not appear in the oldest textual witnesses.¹ And there is certainly good cause for us to consider why the Ephesians are not specifically addressed in this letter: for one who spent a total of three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31), the tenor of this letter does not seem to be written by someone who was that personally familiar with its recipients. What does this mean to readers of "Ephesians"?

There is excellent cause for us to think that instead of originally being written to the Ephesians, that this epistle was actually a circular letter written by Paul for Tychicus (6:21) to take to a group of assemblies in Asia Minor. In all likelihood, the rather ambiguous letter that Paul claimed to have written to the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16) is the circular epistle we now call "Ephesians." In some ancient witnesses of Ephesians there is actually a blank space where one would expect an audience to be named. When this circular letter eventually made its way to Ephesus, the third most important city for the early Believers after Jerusalem and Antioch, the reference *en Ephesō* was likely transcribed. For readers of the Epistle of Ephesians, what this means is that unlike some other Pauline letters that were written for a specific audience—and where we might have a visit recorded in Acts—a general knowledge of Asia Minor and the relationship of Greco-Roman religion in general to Judaism, is only really necessary as background material. In describing the audience of "Ephesians," it is best to classify them as a group of Believers in Asia Minor. "Ephesians" would surely affect the Ephesians, but also notable groups like the Laodiceans or the Colossians, in the broad geographical area.

There is no doubting that when one reads through Ephesians, it is written in a very upbeat and positive tone, almost as though it is composed as a homily. The Lord is praised, and the salvation available to all in Messiah Yeshua is exclaimed. God the Father "has blessed us in the heavenly realm with every spiritual blessing in Messiah. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (1:3-4). In so being adopted (1:5-6), it is in Yeshua that "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished upon us with all wisdom and understanding" (1:7-8). Not only has eternal salvation and great blessing been granted to Believers, but Paul also tells his audience "he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Messiah, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment" (1:9-10a). The Father's plan is that all of Creation be ruled by His Son (1:10b), something which is to be most especially understood by those who have experienced the power of the gospel.

Paul expresses the great honor it is to be a part of the first generation of Messiah followers (1:11-12), and how his audience in Asia Minor too has been able to be "included in Messiah when you heard the word of truth...Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 601.

Holy Spirit” (1:13). The Holy Spirit has been granted to Believers as “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (1:14), giving them the confirmation every day that more is to occur in God’s most awesome plan of salvation history (cf. Romans 8:23; Hebrews 9:28).

The Apostle Paul is most diligent in the prayers he offers for his audience (1:15-16), especially in that they be granted more of the power of the Holy Spirit “so that you may know him better” (1:17). He prays most importantly “that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (1:18)—an indication that God strongly values His redeemed people! If Believers wish to be truly mature, **they will value their fellow brothers and sisters** who have been saved by the Lord Yeshua. The power which raised Yeshua from the dead is currently at work in His exaltation in Heaven (1:19-20), where the Messiah sits “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (1:21). Yeshua has been placed by His Father as Supreme Ruler, under which are all things (1:22). Yeshua’s body on Earth is the *ekklēsia*, filled by Him (1:23), and is to serve as a tangible representative of what is to occur in the cosmos one day when He truly returns to take up His throne from Jerusalem!

Paul informs his audience how great a transformation they have received in coming to faith in Yeshua: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world” (2:1-2a), and they knew nothing but the power of the Devil (2:2b). This is a sorry state that all people have once had to suffer from, including Paul himself, his Jewish brethren, and all who are without the Messiah (2:3). Paul can only declare, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Messiah even when we were dead in transgressions” (2:4-5a). Paul is quite insistent to assert “**it is by grace you have been saved**” (2:5b), a significant result of which is being “seated with [Messiah] in the heavenly realms “ (2:6). In the future or “coming ages” those redeemed by Yeshua will be fully shown “the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness” (2:7). Even though individuals today might have a strong feeling as to what this involves—just try to imagine the revelation of being able to *completely* see how God’s hand has worked throughout history guiding people toward Himself.

In the meantime, Believers are to know that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith” (2:8a), as salvation is not a human action via works (2:8b-9). It is only because of the sheer grace of the Creator that any one of us can possess redemption. Yet every Believer has a great responsibility in being saved by the Lord, because “we are God’s workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us” (2:10). It is only by a life which faithfully demonstrates actions becoming of those who have been saved, that we can truly be readied for all of what is to come in eternity. *Salvation does not come to Believers by works or human effort, but Believers do come to salvation and as a result are to manifest good works.* Such works begin by manifesting a diligent love of God and neighbor!²

The significant majority of Paul’s audience in Asia Minor was not Jewish, and they were regularly criticized by many Jews for being “uncircumcised,” something which Paul observed could lead to significant and ungodly pride (2:11). No matter, he says, because “formerly you who are Gentiles by birth...were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world” (2:11a, 12). Without the Messiah and without the One True God, these non-Jews had no hope of salvation. They were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” (2:12, RSV). Yet such a status has now been reversed! “[N]ow in Messiah Yeshua you who once were far way have been brought near through the blood of Messiah” (2:13). Yeshua’s sacrifice on behalf of all of humanity has brought redeemed, non-Jewish people “near” and into the Commonwealth of Israel (cf. Deuteronomy 4:7; Isaiah 56:3; Psalm 148:14). They possess a citizenship which their trespasses and sins once barred them from having.

² Cf. Matthew 19:19; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

Yeshua's accomplishment of bringing Jewish and non-Jewish Believers together as one in Him, being "our peace," is most serious to the Apostle Paul (2:14a). The way the Lord has done this is that He "has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (2:14b). In Second Temple times, there was actually a barrier wall erected that prohibited anyone who was not a Jew or proselyte from entering into the inner sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.417; *Jewish War* 5.194). Those persons who were prohibited from crossing the barrier faced immediate death if they did. Spiritually, it symbolized how most of the Jewish people of the First Century had hemmed themselves in from the nations—hardly the purpose that God's Temple was to have, being a House to which all of the world could come and worship (1 Kings 8:41-43; Isaiah 56:6-7). This wall was not specified in the Scriptures of Israel, and was most contrary to the mission of Israel being a light to the nations (Exodus 19:5-6; Isaiah 42:6). **Yeshua rendered what such a wall represented, completely inoperative by His sacrifice on the cross.**

The challenge that Bible readers should have is that Yeshua has specifically, as the NIV renders it, abolished "the law with its commandments and regulations" (2:15b). If the Messiah actually abolished the Torah of Moses, would this not contradict His own perspective on the matter (Matthew 5:17-19)? Likewise, why would Paul appeal to the Fifth Commandment later in this letter (6:2) if he considered the Law abolished? Throughout much of historic Reformed/Calvinist interpretation, Ephesians 2:15 is often interpreted to only be the "ceremonial law" of the Torah, but not at the "moral law" of the Torah.³ More specifically though, the Greek *ton nomon tōn entolōn en dogmasin* should clue us in to something else actually being abolished by the work of the Messiah.

Nowhere does the Law of Moses ever say anything about erecting a dividing wall in the Holy Place to keep people out of God's presence. Is it at all important that *dogma* can mean "something that is taught as an established tenet or statement of belief, doctrine, dogma" (BDAG)?⁴ Consider how *dogma* is not used at all in the Septuagint translation of the Pentateuchal books to describe any category of commandments. It principally appears in the Book of Daniel to describe the decrees of the Babylonians and the Persians (Daniel 2:13; 3:10, 12; 4:6; 6:9ff, 13f, 16, 27; cf. Acts 17:7), as it can certainly be referring to "an imperial declaration" (BDAG).⁵ Such declarations could follow with a prescription of death penalty.

Rather than Paul and Yeshua being at odds with one another in Ephesians 2:15, it seems proper to recognize *ton nomon tōn entolōn en dogmasin* as not the Torah of Moses—which specified no barrier wall—but rather man-made decrees which frequently passed themselves off as "law," a "religious Law of commandments in dogmas" (my translation). Only in the Messiah's example can we find a true meaning of the Torah in action (cf. Matthew chs. 5-7); those who follow a "barrier wall" ideology will at best skew the Torah's original purpose in guiding God's people in holiness. A law of human dogma will be more prone to keep people out of God's presence than welcome people into it. While Yeshua emphasized loving one's enemies as quite important (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35), sectarian instructions such as those of the Qumran community actually emphasized hating one's enemies (1QS 1.9-11).⁶ To a strong degree, the barrier wall in the Second Temple was a manifestation of Jewish hatred for the nations—not at all a manifestation of love and of spiritual concern. By His sacrifice, Yeshua tore down this wall and with it whatever human regulations placed unnecessary barriers between people and the Father. In so doing, Yeshua would be able to bring Jewish people and those from the nations together as *kainon anthrōpon*⁷ or "one new humanity" (2:15c, NRSV/CJB/TNIV) in Him.

³ Cf. Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 228.

⁴ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 254.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ He is to teach them both to love all the Children of Light—each commensurate with his rightful place in the council of God—and to hate all the Children of Darkness, each commensurate with his guilt and the vengeance due him from God" (Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996], 127).

⁷ Note how the term *anēr* or "male" is not employed here, but the more general term for humankind.

It is only at the foot of Yeshua's cross where redemption for all people can be found, and reconciliation between all people can be enacted (2:16). Paul asserts, "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (2:18), as the true unity that God desires among the redeemed can only be found in the work of His Son. A significant effect of this, which Paul explains to the non-Jewish Believers of Asia Minor, is "you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (2:19). **They are a part of Israel the same as any natural born Jew**, as a direct result of their faith in Israel's Messiah. The assembly that the Messiah has established has been built up by the faithful work of both apostles and prophets, made to be like the Jerusalem Temple—but one composed of people filled with the Holy Spirit (2:20-22).

Paul is very serious about his God-given mission to see that in the Messiah Yeshua both Jews and those from the nations can be one. He is after all, "the prisoner of Messiah Yeshua for the sake of you Gentiles" (3:1). Suffering in Rome for Believers (3:3), he expresses how what he strives to see present in the *ekklēsia* is something that is a mystery which was revealed to him by God (3:2). He desires those in Asia Minor to "understand my insight into the mystery of Messiah, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (3:4-5). While this mystery surely involves the salvation accessible in Yeshua, what was not shown to those who came before Paul is most serious: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Messiah Yeshua" (3:6). Because of their faith in Israel's Messiah, the nations are *sugklēronomos* or "fellow heirs" (NASU, RSV) with the Jewish people. *They are to be considered an equal part of Israel as any Jew.*

Paul can only describe how grand such a purpose is, as the reconciliation of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in the Body of Messiah depicts a **much grander redemption** to come in eternity (3:7-13). Realizing how significant his calling is as a steward of such a mystery, Paul can only kneel before the Father and pray with intensity (3:14-21). Paul's position as a prisoner should elicit an appropriate response from his audience, as he says, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (4:1-2). Paul is physically suffering for the Divine call upon his ministry, which the Believers hearing his message need to seriously respect.

Since the good Apostle is quite concerned about bringing fellow Believers together, it is no surprise why his letter includes a major emphasis on "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (4:3). He specifies how there are broad areas of agreement that the mixed community of Messiah followers are to share: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (4:4-6). In spite of some differences that may exist, Believers have more in things in common which unite them together—**as all have sought the same salvation in Yeshua**—than what should separate them. What all Messiah followers need to learn to appreciate is the fact that "to each one of us grace has been given" (4:7), because after Yeshua's ascension into Heaven He saw fit to see that specific spiritual gifts were granted to Believers (4:8-11). All of these important gifts are to cause us "all [to] reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Messiah" (4:12-13). With such spiritual maturity and wholeness, then the Body of Messiah will not be able to be taken in by false teachings and can properly work together (4:14-16).

Writing to a broad, largely non-Jewish audience in Asia Minor, Paul admonishes, "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking" (4:17). Paul lists a number of inappropriate sinful activities, how "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God" (4:18a), but these could also be just as relevant for unredeemed Jews as well. Paul desires that his hearers do not have hardened hearts, giving themselves over to lust and base human desires (4:18b-19). The way that these Believers came to know the Messiah was to put aside their old selves (4:20-22), and "to be made

new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:23-24). Sins such as lying, anger, and stealing have absolutely no place in the life of a mature man or woman of God (4:25-28). Those who have been transformed by the Spirit are also to speak properly, as words of malice or bitterness are to be replaced by edifying words of kindness and compassion (4:29-32).

It is not difficult to discern how many of the Believers who would have received Paul's letter were still rather young in their faith, and wrestling with foundational ethical issues. While Paul encourages them, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us..." (5:1-2)—he speaks strongly against sexual immorality and foul talk about such things (5:3-4). Those who are sexually immoral or idolatrous have no place in the Kingdom of God (5:5-6), and Believers are to separate themselves from such sins and sinners (5:7). As Paul says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light...and find out what pleases the Lord" (5:8, 10). The deeds of darkness are to be exposed, even given the fact that they should not really even be discussed (5:11-12). The light of God's truth exposes the futility of sin (5:13-14), requiring that Messiah followers be careful with how they live (5:15-17). Born again Believers are to be "filled with the Spirit" (5:18), and always have praises to God spoken and exclaimed from their lips (5:19-20).

Perhaps the most vigorously discussed area of Ephesians among evangelical Christians today is 5:21-6:9, a piece of instruction that regards ancient household codes. It is unfortunate that many Messianic readers do not make the strong effort to read these instructions in light of the cultural norms of the First Century Mediterranean. A proper view of 5:21-33 is most especially important for those of us who are egalitarian, and who believe that in the Messiah Yeshua husbands and wives are to be reckoned as fully equal and as co-leaders of the home.

The concept of Biblical submission for the Body of Messiah begins with the main admonition, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Messiah" (5:21). From this mutual submission to one another, the wife is to submit to her husband (5:22, 24). She is to respect her husband because he is her *kephalē* ("head"), correctly meaning her origin as Eve came from Adam (5:23; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:3, Grk.). Husbands demonstrate a submission to their wives via a manifestation of the love Yeshua Himself demonstrated, by dying for His followers (5:25-27). Most significant and subversive for the ancient period, is how "husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies" (5:28), a testament to how woman came from man as her head/source. Jewish and classical history are both replete with examples of how women were commonly treated as either the significant inferiors of men, or sub-human to some degree.⁸ Here, Paul expresses how "no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Messiah does the [assembly]" (5:29). A husband is to treat his wife the same way he would *treat himself*. The relationship and oneness that husband and wife are to have together is to teach Believers important things about the relationship that the Messiah has to the *ekklēsia* (5:30-32).

The First Century setting of Paul's instruction is quite obvious, not necessarily in his instruction that children obey their parents (6:1-3; cf. Deuteronomy 5:16) or that fathers not "exasperate your children" (6:4), but in what he says about slaves. Slavery was an economic reality of the time, and although there is no reference in the Pauline letters that the good Apostle ever approved of the practice, he nonetheless adjoins slaves to act responsibly toward their masters as a kind of service unto the Lord (6:5-9).

The closing vignette of Paul's letter to the Believers in Asia Minor is one which has given great encouragement to many generations since: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" (6:10-11). Each man or woman of God is to wear a kind of spiritual armor, emulating the Lord Himself who fights as a warrior (Isaiah 11:1-5; 59:14-18; cf. Wisdom 5:17-20). The necessity to be ready to fight a spiritual battle is most evident: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the

⁸ Cf. summary in Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton, *Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 2000), pp 71-92, 101-109.

spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (6:12). Believers are to “put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground...” (6:13). The armor is described in terms of the common elements of a soldier: a belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, feet shod with the gospel, a shield of faith, and a helmet of salvation (6:14-17). As Believers prepare to take on the Adversary, they are to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (6:18). Paul himself asks his audience to pray for him, as he is an ambassador for the gospel in chains (6:19-20).

The Epistle of Ephesians ends with a salutation from Paul as his dear friend, and likely scribe Tychicus, will be able to convey much more about his condition in prison to those who receive it (6:21-22). He issues peace and grace to the congregations and fellowships in Asia Minor who will hear his letter (6:23-24), which we know eventually made its way to Ephesus (cf. 1:1).

Today’s broad Messianic movement should be commended for having an appreciation for the Epistle of Ephesians, yet we are admittedly struggling with what it means to truly implement much of what the Apostle Paul emphasizes as “the mystery” (3:3, 9). There are divergent views as to what the Commonwealth of Israel is to be (2:11-12), whether it is a singular entity of which all Believers are a part, or a bilateral broad entity made up of separate branches in the ethnic Jewish people and “the Church.” Are non-Jewish Believers still strangers and sojourners, or not (2:19)? What does it mean for them to be fellow heirs (3:6)? Is what the Messiah has created to be understood in terms of a “one new man” *or* a “one new humanity” (2:15)? What does mutual submission entail in both the home and wider assembly (5:21)? And, most in today’s Messianic community—regardless of which slice of the pie you cut it—have not even heard the discussion regarding *kephalē*/head meaning “source” (5:23, 28), and how it regards woman coming from man and not some kind of patriarchal authority.

I do not believe I am alone in recognizing that as the Messianic movement grows, with more Jewish people coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua and more evangelical Christians embracing their Hebraic Roots—that our engagement level with Ephesians is bound to improve and become more serious. Ephesians’ message of grand unity among all Messiah followers, born again Believers actually representing God’s “inheritance” (1:18), and Jewish and non-Jewish Believers depicting a greater redemption to come to the universe (2:6-7; 3:10-11)—are all themes that we need to consider more closely. Also extremely important is how we need to learn to focus on the common elements of faith which are to unite us with other Messiah followers (4:3-6), and which bind us all together—which could do wonders to stop much of the current Messianic culture of internal and external rivalry, resultant in much division and controversy.

How will we learn to really plow into Ephesians for the spiritual richness that it possesses? This will only occur by making sure that each of us has truly put on the new self (4:23), and that we strive to be kind and courteous to one another (4:32). When today’s Messianic movement is truly most concerned with issuing words of edification for the community of Believers (4:29), *then* we will be able to truly let Ephesians serve its purpose of unifying us as one people in Messiah Yeshua: mutually submitted and positioned to be an example of the greater redemption to come in eternity!

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