**Ephesus—A Bible place that shaped the Scripture**

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, September 28, 2016

Most preachers will localize their sermon to the audience. In Ephesians it seems that the Apostle Paul was aware of local attitudes when he delivered his inspired message. Reading Ephesians through the eyes of the original readers adds richness to the text. In this study I want to examine the biblical text and the physical aspects of Ephesus. As my first example, consider how Paul uses the local fixation with wealth and financial blessing as a springboard for his teaching.

Paul began his Epistle praising God for the blessings that God bestows in the heavenly realm. This is neither just an idle statement nor is it how he begins his other Epistles. Ephesians has several expressions that speak of blessings, riches, and the lavishness of God’s treatment. This is a key theme in Ephesians and one which I think is uniquely designed to speak to the people of Ephesus. In 1:3 Jesus “blessed us in the heavenly realms.” Also in verse 3 we have “every spiritual blessing in Christ.” In verse 6 Jesus “freely” supplies his grace. Our forgiveness is based upon the “riches of God’s grace.” This grace he “lavished”[[1]](#footnote-1) on his church. Every definition of this word speaks of abundance and excessive supply. Paul used these words because they are true and because they communicated to that particular audience. We thank God for the bountiful way in which he treats us. What is especially worth noting is that Paul rarely uses this kind of language in his other Epistles.

To the Corinthians, who also had the cult of Diana, he speaks of being “enriched”[[2]](#footnote-2) in wisdom. To Corinth he adds, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Even though there are limited references elsewhere, in Ephesians he uses so many prosperity words he almost could be mistaken for a prosperity preacher. The question is why does Paul use this kind of language mainly here, and not as much in his other Epistles? Like a good preacher, Paul is relating to his audience.

Ephesus was a rich city that enjoyed a worldwide reputation for wealth. People went there from all over the world to have a good time enjoying prosperity. The buildings of the city had so much marble the people got tired of it and started painting over it just to vary the look. Aristides, a rhetorician of the second half of the second century, gives us a flavor of the blessings and pleasures to be enjoyed in Ephesus: “*I am of the opinion that all men…know Ephesus well because of its internationality, its traffic, and the stay that one may enjoy there. They all go there as if to their own homeland and no one can deny the facts, that is that Ephesus is the general bank of Asia and the place one hurries to, to find credit*.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

We like to think we invented all these great economic and business ideas in the modern era. In actual fact, people have been charging each other way too much interest for a long time.

*The empire had its worldwide banks with bills of exchange that were good in any world market. Interest rates for reliable customers in Rome ran about 8% in New Testament times but were much higher in many other cities.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

The wealth of the city was only part of the story. The religion of Diana was a prosperity gospel. In addition, the temple itself was used as a kind of banking function. People believed that Diana held the key to blessings and prosperity of every kind. Ephesus was a prosperous city located at the heart of a prosperity religion.

Paul does not ignore this background of the Church in Ephesus. Instead, he uses their language and life experience to tell them who Jesus is. These Ephesians understood lavishness. They understood blessing. They understood that things could be freely given. However, Jesus is not Diana. His blessings are not necessarily of a material type. We have been blessed in “heavenly realms” and with “spiritual blessings”. Ephesus may have its wealth and glory, but it does not compare to the wealth and blessings we have in Christ. The Church is not some second class operation compared to Diana of the Ephesians. We have the “riches of his glorious inheritance.”[[6]](#footnote-6) “Because of his great love for us”, God “is rich in mercy.”[[7]](#footnote-7) These riches are realized in the heavenly realms so that in the ages to come people will see “the incomparable riches of his grace.” It is the same language they were used to but with a spiritual application.

Paul’s letters to Timothy as he was pastoring in Ephesus similarly used the language of material wealth to address spiritual issues. The references to spiritual blessings and riches are absolutely true in every way. However, they had special meaning and application to the materialistically inclined Ephesians.

A second area where the culture of Ephesus should be taken into consideration is in Paul’s discussion of the temple. Probably the best known fact about Ephesus was its temple to Diana. At the time it was the largest building that had ever been built. There was nothing comparable in the entire world. Even by today’s standards it was big. If Ephesus would have had a professional football team, they could have played inside the temple and still had room for spectators. They didn’t have a retractable roof, but the interior of the building was open to the sky. It was huge and beautiful, built completely out of marble. Their temple was among the seven wonders of the ancient world. They regarded it as magnificent just as we do to this day.

Paul does not allow Diana’s temple to stand alone or unchallenged in its physical glory. There is also a magnificent temple in Jerusalem[[8]](#footnote-8) but Christians are not really welcome there either. However, God has a temple that is even better than either of those. God’s temple covers more than the area of a football field. His temple is more grand than that of Jerusalem. It covers the world through the Gospel. Furthermore, the believers are not strangers looking in. They are the temple, having been “brought near through the blood of Christ.”

*“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Ephesians did not need to feel they have been deprived of anything. They no longer attended social and religious events in the temple of Diana, but nothing was truly lost. They still have a temple! They are part of the glorious temple along with all the great ones of God. They didn’t need to feel inferior or think of themselves as people without a temple. “*Hence, perhaps, have arisen his images in this Epistle drawn from a beautiful temple: the Church being in true inner beauty that which the temple of the idol tried to realize in outward show*.”[[10]](#footnote-10) What they had was even greater than a leading wonder of the world. The Christian temple was supernatural, beyond this world and full of wonder.

A third local issue that Paul used was the cultural identity of the Ephesians. How they thought about themselves needed to change. Chapter three reveals the mystery of Gentiles being made heirs with Israel and members of the same body. Paul explained that he was to make plain the administration of the details of this mystery. By creating the church, the body of Christ, a lesson would be taught to all those heavenly rulers and authorities that inhabit the universe.

*His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*[[11]](#footnote-11)

This idea flips Diana on her head. She is no longer “*Apaturos,* guardian of secrets.” Instead of the dispenser of blessings and controller of fate she is reduced to a simple student. She no longer decides who gets to have children, she must learn of God’s eternal plan as a child. She does not control the church, the church teaches her God’s salvation. She is not in charge, she is charged to listen and learn. An earthly church will teach rulers in the heavenly realms the wisdom of God.

One of the big struggles that Paul had with the Ephesian people was to change their sense of who they were. The cultural self-identity of the Ephesians was built mainly upon the religion of Diana and its relationship to the major events in their history. For example, Alexander the Great and his Greek culture shaped the lands surrounding Israel. Alexander had come to Ephesus as well. Two unique factors impacted Alexander and Diana of the Ephesians. Those factors had to do with the destruction and rebuilding of the temple.

A nutty guy named Herostratus decided the best way to go down in history was to set fire to the temple of Diana. His plan worked on both accounts. He burned down the temple and his name is right there for you to look at. Put his name next to Lee Harvey Oswald, Booth, Hinkley, Nero and others who are known for their crazy deeds.

That fire was said to have taken place on the night that Alexander the Great was born. Alexander, having defeated the Persians, arrived at Ephesus in 334 BC. He re-established democracy in the city in hopes of winning their loyalty. He offered to rebuild the temple. They declined under the pretext “it does not befit a god to construct a dwelling for a goddess.” His second offer was to make a great sacrifice to Diana and to put on a military parade in her honor.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The impact of this story in Ephesian history was for them to believe that their goddess and her temple were even more important than the greatest conqueror of that time. He may have come to Ephesus a conqueror, but Diana emerged the victor. Powerful rulers will come and go, but Diana is forever.

In a thousand personal and corporate ways, Diana was seen as inextricably tied to their self-identity. In the same way, their city name derived from Diana and the Amazons. One of their civic legends was that the city was named after Ephesia, Queen of the Amazons. It was under her rule that the first statue of Diana supposedly came down from heaven. To say the name Ephesus was to speak of their dominant religion and the tradition of the Amazons. They were named after Ephesia as I am named after my grandfathers Joseph and Benjamin. I grew up respecting my family name and wanting to carry it on with honor. This is the nature of cultural or personal identity.

Consider the problem that Ephesian self-identity raised for Paul. He wanted them to be Christians and to see themselves as Christians. After centuries of worshiping the gods and goddesses, and particularly Diana, it was hard to think of themselves in any other light. They grew up celebrating birthdays and important events in her temple. They were named after a notable founder of the religion. How could they ever shift from all that glory and history into something else? Paul’s answer was to give them a new identity and the origins of a new name.

Even though Paul was suffering, he was not defeated. He was linked to the creator of the universe and bore his name.

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,*[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Christians might live in a city named after Ephesia, Queen of the Amazons, but they were children of the Heavenly Father. His family was not limited to a city on the coast of Anatolia. All the saints in heaven above and in the whole earth beneath derive their name from the Father. We are children of Father God, not mother Diana. We are named after our Father, not some wannabe woman, Ephesia. Paul wanted them to think of themselves in the new light. In 64 AD, the church could not compete with Diana in buildings and external trappings. But in heavenly resources and inner strength, Diana could not compete. So Paul linked them in prayer to something better. Out of the glorious riches (of his heavenly temple) he will strengthen you (in your inner being).

A fourth area where I see a local emphasis is in Paul’s statements about unity. Within this area there are at least four sub-themes.

It is true that he covered the subject of unity in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12. Conflict is a fairly common human situation to which the Church is not immune. Unity is pretty much always a necessary preaching theme. On the other hand, it may well have been exacerbated in Ephesus. To the Ephesians he wrote: “*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. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 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*.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

There are several references in the chapter that suggests this lack of unity might be related to how people talked to one another or to gender relations. We suspect there were conflicts relating to gender roles. They were told not to live any longer as the “Gentiles do.” They had given themselves over to sensuality and lived in a continual lust for more. They were to put off their old way and begin to speak to each other truthfully without anger. These kinds of references speak of anger between the genders. This would certainly have been an issue in the city and so we presume it would have also been so in the Church.

The answer that Paul proposes follows the same line of reasoning that he used in his Epistles to the churches in Rome and Corinth. That is, each party needed to recall that all gifts come from the Holy Spirit. No one is better than anyone else is. Whatever our role in the church, it was the Holy Spirit who was at work. No men or women should think of themselves as better. The goal was unity and maturity.

Other passages suggest certain sub-themes to the gender conflict. Two passages in close proximity to each other contrast the old sexual lifestyle with what God is calling them to. The old Gentile way was not how they came to Christ. Sexual intercourse as a way of worshipping the goddess promoted sin masked as religion.

*Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The old ways of sensuality must go away. Paul lays down a very high standard in sharp contrast to the old ways. His instructions cover the two great temptations of Ephesus, sex and money. “*But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

We think of the three temptations as money, sex, and power. All these would have been in prominent display in Ephesus. Such temptations bring out the worst in people. Inevitably the competition will spill over into lying, cheating, anger, stealing, and nasty talk. I suppose we could say that anywhere there are people these sins will be present. The only difference with Ephesus was the degree. These things overwhelmed all other values.

“*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*[[17]](#footnote-17)

The theme of wifely submission appears twice in the writings of Paul. He wrote it to the people at Ephesus and Colossi. The two cities were less than a hundred miles apart and undoubtedly shared many common values. To the Colossians it is a single sentence without commentary. “*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”[[18]](#footnote-18) To the Ephesians he wrote extensively on the subject*.[[19]](#footnote-19)

We are pointing out the unique context of Ephesus. There must have been something in Ephesus that caused Paul to write extensively to them on this subject, while to people less than a hundred miles away he writes only one sentence. In his other Epistles he does not even mention the topic.

Throughout the entire region the Amazons were admired but Ephesus was the epicenter. Much of the Roman world admired the Amazons but the Ephesians adored them. We have spoken earlier of the sexual and cultural legacy left to Ephesus by this admiration. The Amazonian double-headed axe cut gender relations to the quick.

As Paul pastored Ephesus, it soon became clear that gender roles needed to be adjusted. What he is looking for is mutual love and respect. What begins in verse 22 as submission ends in verse 32 with respect. I suspect in Paul’s mind they are the same things. He is recapping the specific obligations. Wives must show respect, a serious problem in Ephesus. Husbands must love their wives.

It is clear that this is a mutual obligation. He says as much in verse 21. “Submit to one another.” Husbandly love and wifely respect are the two aspects of mutual submission. Each is to follow the example of Jesus. Those who demand their partner perform as required in this passage are almost certainly violating their responsibilities in the same passage.

The gender problem of Ephesus is a mirror of modern feminism and the “angry white male” reaction. Two thousand years have passed and we have moved an inch. Actually we have moved a mile and come all the way back to the pagan legacy of the past.

If we are to build a decent Christian society, there has to be a mutual submission, “out of reverence for Christ.”

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. perisseuo (per-is-syoo'-o); to superabound (in quantity or quality), be in excess, be superfluous; excel. This word speaks of abundance, being more abundant, be the better, enough and to spare, exceed, excel, increase, be left, redound, remain (over and above). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ploutizo (ploo-tid'-zo); to make wealthy or rich. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2 Cor 8:9. Paul also said in 2 Cor 9:11 “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in Onen, Ibid, page 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kelso, James A. An Archaeologist follows the Apostle Paul (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1970) pages 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ephesians 1:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ephesians 2:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul writes this around 64 AD. The Jerusalem temple will survive only another six years. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ephesians 2:19-22 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jamison, Fausett, Brown. *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* by Fausett. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ephesians 3:10-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Onen, Ibid, p. 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ephesians 3:14-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ephesians 4:1-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ephesians 4:19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ephesians 5:3-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ephesians 4:26-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Colossians 3:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Peter also writes on this subject in 1 Peter 3:1-8. Peter’s passage is in the general context of submission to governmental authority by all citizens, and slaves to their masters. When Peter addresses wives, they are to submit in the same way that everyone submits to the government. He uses the expression “in the same way” for both women to their husbands and men to their wives. In each case, they are to submit to the others in their lives. Peter wrote, “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ephesians 5:21-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)