

Ephesians 1:15-23

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Background of Ephesians

While Paul usually writes to churches about some specific crisis or conflict, Ephesians is a more general letter, resembling a sort of sermon or treatise. The best early manuscripts don't address the letter specifically to Ephesus, so it seems more likely that it was written to a wider group of Christians, probably in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Many scholars argue that Paul is not the actual author of Ephesians, but that it was instead written after Paul's death, perhaps by one of his disciples. Regardless of how one wants to settle that question, below we'll refer to the author as Paul.

Christ, the Cosmos, and the Church

Ephesians serves in part as an appeal to Gentile believers to appreciate the magnitude of what Christ has accomplished. Through Christ the entirety of humanity—Jews and Gentiles—are being reconciled to one another and to God (2:15). This is an event that Ephesians presents on a grand cosmic stage, planned “before the foundation of the world” (1:4) in order to “gather up all things in him” (1:10). What is more, this great work is mediated to the world through the church, which Paul also presents as having “cosmic” significance. Jesus is now enthroned over heaven and earth, both from the present and the future (1:20-21), and the church is his *fullness*: every goodness and grace that Jesus has to offer has been poured out into his church, the mystical body of whom he is head (1:22-23). The church is the place where God enacted his mysterious plan that was hidden through the ages (3:9-10). This role of the church, as central to the destiny of all creation, is all the more striking when we remember that Ephesians was not written to the worldwide church of today, but to small ancient communities trying to survive in a world with many competing powers.

“Thanksgiving” at start of the Letter

Paul usually starts his letters with a section of thanksgiving (see, e.g., Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; Phil 1:3), and Ephesians 1:15-23 follows the same pattern. As in many of Paul's letters, this thanksgiving section in Ephesians sets up themes repeated later in the book: Paul wants his readers to grasp the glory of God's work through the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, and he wants them to see the importance of the church in that work.

Faith, Hope, and Love

Paul likes to write of *faith*, *hope*, and *love* in conjunction with one another. In 1 Corinthians 13 the focus is on love. In 1 Thessalonians 1:3, it is hope that is listed last of the three terms and seems most important for that book. Similarly, here in Ephesians, Paul writes in 1:15 that he has heard of the believers' faith and love, but it is the hope of “inheritance among the saints” that he especially wants them to grasp. While this inheritance is for the future, Ephesians also stresses the salvation that believers already have: they have already been raised with Christ, and have already been enthroned with Christ on high (2:5-7).

Prayer for Insight

One cannot emphasize enough just how magnificent Paul considers all this to be. He writes of a mystery so great that we cannot even see it unless our eyes are enlightened by the “spirit of wisdom and revelation” from God (1:17-18). In 3:18-19 Paul offers a similar prayer, in which he does not bother praying that Christ would love the church—which is taken for granted—but instead prays that his readers might somehow understand that love.

Sources:

- V.P. Furnish, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* vol. 2 (1992).
- J.M. Gundry-Volf, “Ephesians,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (2000).
- Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (1990).