

A Walk Thru the Book of
EPHESIANS

Real Power for Daily Life

Walk Thru the Bible



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Introduction

There's still a copy of the ticket on the wall of the den. It's framed and a little dusty but prominently displayed. Ken's windfall seven years ago wasn't a huge amount by lottery standards, but it was enough to get him out of a hole—for a time. He keeps another copy of the ticket in his wallet. It reminds him that at least on one beautiful day long ago, he was very lucky. And who knows? Maybe it will bring him luck again.

Lisa looks in the mirror every day and tells herself how beautiful she is. Some days she sounds like she almost believes it. But even when she doesn't, she makes the words come out of her mouth anyway. "People will see you the way you see yourself," someone once told her. She hopes that's true, so she practices seeing herself differently than she ever has.

Matt has been mail ordering an expensive cologne—or, as the ad called it, "a pheromone-enhanced product for men." He might as well, he figures. His looks and personality haven't won him any dates in over a year. Something has to work. Maybe this is it.

Christine is worried about her future. Will she find a job? A nicer apartment? Or, most importantly, a husband? She could

probably wait for the first two to unfold on their own, but the third . . . well, she's desperate to know. And the number for that psychic hotline seems to show up on TV at oddly "coincidental" times—like when she's been thinking about her future and a phone is nearby. She's starting to wonder if it's worth a try.

Alan has been putting a huge prayer request before the Lord for three years. He's been very persistent and, by no choice of his own, very patient. Sometimes he thinks the waiting has been ordained by God, and sometimes he just thinks he must have blown it somewhere along the way. "Maybe," he says to himself, "if I become as holy as a Christian is supposed to be, God will answer." So he vows never to sin again if God will grant his request. And weekly, even daily, he's reminded that he doesn't measure up.

What do all these people have in common? They all want life to be better, and they're convinced—or want to be convinced—that a certain technique will make it so. These people aren't unusual; they represent nearly all of us in one way or another. Some of our techniques are superstitious, others mental, some mostly or partially rooted in Scripture, some thoroughly godly, and others thoroughly pagan. We have rituals, habits, tricks, routines, formulas, and all sorts of other means to influence a situation. That's because we feel out of control, and we're desperate to have some semblance of mastery over our circumstances. Mostly we're just trying to get by in a frustrating world.

Human beings are full of questions: *What does my future hold? Who will protect me and provide for me? How can I find the truth? Does truth even exist?* When we feel confused, we search for answers. And when we feel beaten down—by adverse circumstances, by the forces of fate, or simply by the unpredictable movements of everyday life—we appeal to whatever sources of help we can find. History is littered with such appeals, from

the mundane to the mystical: halfhearted superstitions, good-luck charms, psychological tricks, ritual prayers and sacrifices, magical blessings and curses, mantras, horoscopes, and on and on. Trapped in the confines of a material world, we seek access to whatever's behind it. Something in us craves an alternative to our very inadequate resources. We're frustrated by our limitations, and we hunger for supernatural help.

That was certainly true in cultures of the Roman Empire, and it's just as true today. Times change, but the needs of the human heart don't. We may not appeal to the same range of gods and goddesses once revered in Greco-Roman society, but we have our ways of trying to manipulate cosmic forces too. We like to be in control or at least to have the illusion of control. The urge to take matters into our own hands is almost irresistible. So our world is still full of rituals aimed at achieving a desired result, of offerings made in exchange for divine favor, of sacred plea bargains intended to sway heavenly sympathies. And, more often than we'd like to think, these are empty appeals.

One of the strongest messages in Ephesians is that there's a right way to satisfy our urge for supernatural power to help us in the circumstances of life, and it's more powerful and effective than we might think. We don't have to live in frustration and futility anymore. Though we have long lived in a murky, confused, rebellious environment—a world separated from its Creator by its own counterfeit pursuits—our connection with our Father has been restored through the grace and the exaltation of his Son. We are no longer alienated from God or each other; we can have deep fellowship in his Spirit. We are redeemed for so much more than we've experienced in the past.

If you've ever felt like someone groping in darkness for any hint of light; if you've ever felt powerless to face the assault on your life by the world around you; if you've ever longed for a

deeper connection with your heart's true home; then the book of Ephesians will have life-altering implications for you. Its truths take us out of our own limitations, seat us at the right hand of the ultimate Father, and bestow on us the family name. We've been given an entirely new wardrobe—the clothes of the kingdom of light—and empowered with all we could ever need. Our call for help has been answered.

Ephesus

Ephesus, situated on the western coast of what is now Turkey, was an enormous city—third in population behind Rome and Alexandria—that functioned essentially as the capital of the Roman Empire's Asian provinces, even though it technically was a free city independent of Rome. It was established by Greeks about 1,000 BC and survived a variety of empires—Greek, Persian, and Seleucid—before evolving into a vital Roman financial and cultural hub. As with large cosmopolitan areas today, its philosophies and trends influenced all of Asia Minor. That's one reason Paul may have spent so much time there—nearly three years, according to Acts. He knew that the impact of the gospel in such a cultural epicenter would certainly determine its impact in the region as a whole.

Though the worship of pagan gods and goddesses and the practice of magic were common throughout the empire, Ephesus was widely known as a petri dish for the magical arts and a nerve center for pagan devotion. It had an ample supply of various temples and shrines. The temple of Artemis (or Diana, her Roman name) was the main attraction—it drew devotees from across the empire—but Artemis worship, along with Roman paganism in general, involved a wide range of activities including magic spells, astrology, exorcism, and more. Artemis was

considered the supremely powerful deity over cosmic forces; in order to get along in an environment swirling with spiritual activity, one would need to know how to tap into her authority. And if someone were to challenge her power . . . well, as Paul would find out, that could create quite a stir.

That's the setting for Paul's letter to the churches in and around Ephesus. He wrote to people who had been steeped in a culture that rallied against him, who had been there when he was the center of a citywide protest, and who remembered well how intimidating a dominant culture can be. They were people of light living in a city of darkness, and Paul had lived with them in that darkness for nearly three years.

With that as the background, there would be no need for any Christian to prove the existence of demons or the presence of supernatural power to a citizen of Ephesus or its surrounding areas. In fact, nearly every Gentile Christian there had come to faith in Jesus out of that strange spiritual mix. If any advice to the churches of western Asia Minor were to be relevant, it would have to take into account the rampant occultism of Roman society. An un-supernatural gospel would have no impact there.

The Ephesian church was one of the strongest in the New Testament. Paul once wrote to the Corinthians that "a great door for effective work" had opened to him in Ephesus, even though many opposed him there (1 Cor. 16:9). It was where Timothy pastored and where John the apostle and Mary the mother of Jesus eventually lived. Paul's instructions do not seem to be directed at any particular shortcoming; they come across as encouragement for his readers to continue doing what they've already been doing. His purpose is to inspire them to see the great and deep things of the Spirit of God and to live accordingly.

The Letter to the Ephesians

Paul wrote the Ephesian letter as a prisoner in Rome. The letter greets no one by name and addresses no specific situation—even the city name is left out of the earliest manuscripts—so many believe it was a circular letter to be passed around from church to church or likely even a sermon to be preached in various communities. Since Paul spent more than two years there, he had plenty of opportunity to establish or visit a network of churches. In fact, that seemed to be his strategy; he and his co-laborers would target influential population centers and promote the spread of the gospel from those centers. It only makes sense that he would write to several congregations rather than one, even if he had not personally been to every house church that would read it.

Paul was imprisoned in Rome between AD 60 and 62—after he had left Ephesus for the last time, gone to Jerusalem, lived under house arrest for two years, and then was sent to Rome on an appeal to Caesar. It had not been that long since he had seen Ephesus, but a lot had happened in the meantime. Because of the volatile nature of the spread of Christianity, Paul emphasized themes of unity between Jews and Gentiles and awareness of false teachers in most of his letters. Ephesians is no exception, though his words about false teaching are more indirect than in other writings.

The terms and phrasing Paul used in Ephesians were not random or coincidental in the least. They were specific to the culture of western Asia Minor, particularly to Ephesus and its environs, in ways most modern readers would never notice. Though the Ephesian letter is sweeping and majestic, full of depth and insight for any reader, the original context makes it more so. When the implications of Paul's words for first-century

believers are understood, the implications for Christians today become all the more relevant.

Ephesians is in many ways a bird's-eye view of salvation history, from the foundation of the world to the full and final inheritance of the kingdom. It is both lofty and practical, inspiring and applicable, and deep enough to spend a lifetime exploring.

How to Use This Guide

The questions in this guide are geared to elicit every participant's input, regardless of his or her level of preparation. Obviously, the more group members prepare by reading the biblical text and the background information in the study guide, the more they will get out of it. But even in busy weeks that afford no preparation time, everyone will be able to participate in a meaningful way.

The discussion questions also allow your group quite a bit of latitude. Some groups prefer to briefly discuss the questions in order to cover as many as possible, while others focus only on one or two of them in order to have more in-depth conversations. Since this study is designed for flexibility, feel free to adapt it according to the personality and needs of your group.

Each session ends with a hypothetical situation that relates to the passage of the week. Discussion questions are provided, but group members may also want to consider role-playing the scenario or setting up a two-team debate over one or two of the questions. These exercises often cultivate insights that wouldn't come out of a typical discussion.

Regardless of how you use this material, the biblical text will always be the ultimate authority. Your discussions may take you

many places and cover many issues, but they will have the greatest impact when they begin and end with God's Word itself. And never forget that the Spirit who inspired the Word is in on the discussion too. May he guide it—and you—wherever he wishes.

The Way and the World

ACTS 18–20

The chants pushed their way over the hills so relentlessly that the whole city could hear them—even a mile away at the Artemision. In fact, the famous temple was the indirect cause behind the commotion at the amphitheater. Tourists—tons of them—came not only from the provinces of Asia but also from the far reaches of the empire to seek Artemis’s favor, and the new Christ cult was bad for business. It was a perfect example of how a minor problem can become a major threat if proper measures aren’t taken early enough. Now the economy was under attack, and something had to change.

Demetrius, a silversmith, had seen the warning signs. As a responsible business leader, he felt obligated to gather the members of the craftsmen’s guilds to expose the threat. After

all, the stability of the local economy was at stake, and that was no small matter; with a population of at least 250,000 people, probably more, Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It wasn't hard to get the guilds to understand the problem—or to stir them to action. A few words about declining sales in temple models, goddess figurines, sacrificial animals, amulets, magic scrolls, astrological readings, and worship attire was enough evidence for any astute businessman. The implications for every proprietor were clear: fewer travelers at the temple meant less food on their family's table. In their minds, Demetrius had provided a valuable public service.

The ensuing rush into the amphitheater was everything Demetrius could have hoped for and more. It was a full-scale riot, enough bluster and chaos to intimidate any disciple of

ARTEMIS OF THE EPHESIANS

Artemis was one of the most widely worshiped deities in the Greco-Roman pantheon. Her temple in Ephesus was financially influential; it functioned essentially as a large lending bank for local businesses as well as a worship center. Her devotees variously called her Savior, Lord, and Queen of the Cosmos, and they believed she ruled not only the great supernatural powers of the universe but also the underworld—including demons and disembodied spirits. As goddess of the underworld, she was sometimes invoked to raise the dead. Her worshipers were mission-minded, establishing Artemis cults in cities from Syria to Spain. Signs of the zodiac were displayed around her neck as a symbol of her authority over fate and the astral powers. People who served Artemis often did so out of fear of the demonic realm, which Artemis, in her great strength, would be able to overcome and subdue. Paul, as he had done in Athens, apparently declared quite publicly that Artemis and other man-made idols were no gods at all (19:26).

the Way into silence, and perhaps even enough to run Paulos out of town. “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians,” they chanted defiantly for two hours. The whole city was drawn into the confusion, many locals running to the twenty-five-thousand-seat theater to find out what was going on, others simply joining in the spirit of defiance without even knowing the cause. If not for a levelheaded city clerk pointing out the complete absence of any crime, not to mention the consequences of a riot under the watchful eye of Rome, the protest might even have resulted in a mob execution of two of Paulos’s friends. If anything could stop the Way in its tracks, public outrage certainly would.

That pivotal scene in Ephesus captures the conflict between the kingdom of God and the cultures and systems of the world. There’s a different set of priorities and values in the kingdom—eternal truth is more important than the economic well-being of a city, for example. By definition, whenever one kingdom comes, another has to go. That’s always threatening to the established order: politics, religion, economy, social relationships, academics, arts and entertainment, and more. In other words, it brings an entirely different way of life. It’s unsettling in any town.

Beginnings: Acts 18:19–19:7

Focus: Acts 18:19–22; 19:1–7

When Paul first arrived in Ephesus, he went to the synagogue to persuade Jewish leaders that Jesus was the Messiah. That was his typical strategy, and it made sense for several reasons: (1) as a Pharisee trained by the highly respected rabbi Gamaliel, Paul had a ready-made audience among Jewish leaders; (2) because of their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and their messianic expectations, Jews would be more likely to understand

THE WAY

“The Way” is used five times in Acts—twice in the setting of Jerusalem and three times in the setting of Ephesus—without any explanation of why Christianity earned that nickname. It *could* refer to Christians’ insistence on only one way of salvation, but it’s probably more than that. Because it only occurs in the geographical context of major, long-term ministry situations, it probably refers to Christians’ distinctive way of life. Whereas Judaism in that context emphasized theology and Roman paganism emphasized ritual, early believers adopted a radical, counter-cultural, comprehensive lifestyle change. Regardless of the term’s origin, we can be sure of one thing: the Christian movement stood out in Jewish and Roman society enough to merit a descriptive title.

how Jesus fit Israel’s prophecies; and (3) because Jews were the people through whom God had chosen to reveal himself, Paul felt that they deserved to hear the news of the Messiah before Gentile audiences did.

By the time Paul returned to Ephesus, a well-educated Jew named Apollos had already spent some time there teaching about Jesus. His knowledge, however, was incomplete. He and his followers knew “the baptism of John”—repentance in preparation for the kingdom of God—but had not yet experienced the Holy Spirit birthing the kingdom within them. When Paul laid hands on them, they did.

Discuss

- Paul was usually rejected by synagogue leaders very quickly in each city, which would prompt a shift in his ministry to Gentiles (at Corinth, for example; see 18:5–6). What

response did he receive at first in Ephesus (see 18:20)?
Why do you think he didn't jump at the invitation?

- What's the difference between being baptized into the baptism of John and being baptized in the name of Jesus? What role did the Holy Spirit play in the baptism of these disciples?

Public Persuasion: Acts 19:8–22

After teaching for three months, Paul encountered strong resistance at the synagogue and was suddenly a preacher without a forum. Because a formal venue was critical for a public speaker, Paul and the Ephesian converts had daily discussions for two years at the hall of Tyrannus. This was either the private property of a patron named Tyrannus or a public auditorium named after him—a place where anyone interested could come join the discussion after daily business was done.

Supernatural power came dramatically to the forefront in Ephesus. Remarkable healings accompanied the ministry of Paul, while some Jewish exorcists discovered that the name of Jesus didn't "work" like other names normally invoked in Ephesian magic and exorcism. The result in this series of spiritual showdowns between the powers of darkness and the Spirit of

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God was a public bonfire. In mass repentance, many citizens of Ephesus threw their magic scrolls into the fire—a visible statement that when people accept Jesus, they reject whatever they used to rely on. The total value of the scrolls, Luke notes, was the equivalent of fifty thousand days' worth of labor.

Discuss

- The book of Acts does not treat sorcery and magic as ignorant superstition. It assumes a real and evil power at work in the lives of the Ephesians. Is this still relevant today? Why or why not?

- What's the difference between the Ephesians' burning of magic scrolls and book burnings imposed by the church at various times in history? Why was the voluntary nature of the act significant?

- Is your lifestyle as a Christian distinctive enough to earn a label like “the Way”?

Public Protest: Acts 19:23–41

The craftsman guilds of the city were not unaware of the bonfire. Led by Demetrius, they were eventually stirred to action. The riot in Ephesus was more than a verbal protest; it was a real danger to Paul and any other high-profile Christian. There are records even in other cities of people being put to death for disrespecting Artemis. The danger was serious enough that the disciples and even some sympathetic city leaders prevented Paul from going to the amphitheater during the riot.

The city clerk's argument was persuasive, mainly because he effectively reminded the crowd of Rome's reaction to unlawful assemblies. The protest could, if it continued, invite the Empire to take away some of the city's freedoms. That's how strongly Rome felt about riots and developing factions. There were laws for settling disputes. If they weren't observed, consequences could be severe.

- How willing are you, like Paul, to risk stirring up trouble for the sake of the gospel, if necessary? How do you think history would have changed if Paul left Ephesus after being rejected by synagogue leaders rather than persevering in spite of opposition?

The Miletan Charge: Acts 20:17–38

Focus: Acts 20:17–21, 28–31

On his way to Jerusalem (and to imprisonment), Paul called the leaders of the Ephesian church to meet him in Miletus. His

A Walk Thru the Book of Ephesians

words provide a lot of information about his leadership style and the character God's servants should exhibit. He reminded them of his ministry among them, particularly pointing out the opposition he faced. With great affection and tears, he exhorted his friends to continue serving in faithfulness, warned them of dangers to come, and strongly urged them to be extremely careful about those who would distort the truth. Then he told them goodbye.

- In what ways might Paul's words in Miletus apply to your church today?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: Tourists come to your town from all around to see the ruins of a tribal shrine. Many come out of curiosity, others come to study the history or help with the ongoing archaeological research, and some even show up in indigenous robes and reenact the ancient rituals. Regardless of the reason, nearly everyone buys a trinket at your shop. But recently, business has slowed.

That's because a new sect has won many local converts and convinced them that God is not pleased with anything associated with the ancient religion. Already one hotel has closed and some of your suppliers have quit making their traditional crafts and replicas of the shrine's relics. Several museum staffers have resigned, and the town's economy is flailing. But your shop is all you've known. Your grandparents opened it when the shrine was discovered, you spent half your time there growing up while your parents worked, and now you're the proud owner and the resident expert on local lore. But unless something changes, your kids won't be following in your footsteps. The business is barely even making enough right now to put food on the table for them.

- How would you feel about the new sect? Would you listen to its teachers to find out why it's so popular, or would you feel threatened and react against it?
- If government agencies or social activists stepped in to try to stop the trend, would you support them? How vocal would you be about the new group's right to freedom of thought if your kids were hungry because of it?