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EPHESIANS: AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY

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—Dr. Joel R. Beeke
President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

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AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY

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R.C. SPROUL



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Ephesians: An Expository Commentary

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Series Preface | ix |
| 1 Author and Audience (1:1–2) | 1 |
| 2 Chosen in Him (1:3–6) | 9 |
| 3 Redeemed by God’s Rich Grace (1:7–12) | 17 |
| 4 A Glorious Inheritance (1:13–23) | 21 |
| 5 By Grace You Have Been Saved (2:1–10) | 27 |
| 6 Breaking Down the Dividing Wall (2:11–22) | 35 |
| 7 Paul’s Calling (3:1–13) | 41 |
| 8 Paul’s Prayer (3:14–21) | 47 |
| 9 Life in the Church (4:1–16) | 53 |
| 10 Life in the Spirit (4:17–32) | 67 |
| 11 Children of Light (5:1–20) | 73 |
| 12 Marriage and Submission (5:21–33) | 79 |
| 13 Children and Servants (6:1–9) | 85 |
| 14 The Armor of God (6:10–24) | 89 |
| Index of Names | 97 |
| About the Author | 99 |

SERIES PREFACE

When God called me into full-time Christian ministry, He called me to the academy. I was trained and ordained to a ministry of teaching, and the majority of my adult life has been devoted to preparing young men for the Christian ministry and to trying to bridge the gap between seminary and Sunday school through various means under the aegis of Ligonier Ministries.

Then, in 1997, God did something I never anticipated: He placed me in the position of preaching weekly as a leader of a congregation of His people—St. Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Florida. Over the past twelve years, as I have opened the Word of God on a weekly basis for these dear saints, I have come to love the task of the local minister. Though my role as a teacher continues, I am eternally grateful to God that He saw fit to place me in this new ministry, the ministry of a preacher.

Very early in my tenure with St. Andrew’s, I determined that I should adopt the ancient Christian practice of *lectio continua*, “continuous expositions,” in my preaching. This method of preaching verse-by-verse through books of the Bible (rather than choosing a new topic each week) has been attested throughout church history as the one approach that ensures that believers hear the full counsel of God. Therefore, I began preaching lengthy series of messages at St. Andrew’s, eventually working my way through several biblical books in a practice that continues to the present day.

Previously, I had taught through books of the Bible in various settings, including Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and audio and video teaching series for Ligonier Ministries. But now I found myself appealing not so much to the minds of my hearers but to both their minds and their hearts.

I knew that I was responsible as a preacher to clearly explain God’s Word *and* to show how we ought to live in light of it. I sought to fulfill both tasks as I ascended the St. Andrew’s pulpit each week.

What you hold in your hand, then, is a written record of my preaching labors amid my beloved Sanford congregation. The dear saints who sit under

my preaching encouraged me to give my sermons a broader hearing. To that end, the chapters that follow were adapted from a sermon series I preached at St. Andrew's.

Please be aware that this book is part of a broader series of books containing adaptations of my St. Andrew's sermons. This book, like all the others in the series, will *not* give you the fullest possible insight into each and every verse in this biblical book. Though I sought to at least touch on each verse, I focused on the key themes and ideas that made up the "big picture" of each passage I covered. Therefore, I urge you to use this book as an overview and introduction.

I pray that you will be as blessed in reading this material as I was in preaching it.

—R.C. Sproul
Lake Mary, Florida
April 2009

1

AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE

Ephesians 1:1–2



Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The English Standard Version has the words **to the saints who are in Ephesus** (v. 1), but many other modern translations delete the words **in Ephesus** from the translation of the text and simply announce that this is a letter from Paul. Why the discrepancy?

For centuries, no one challenged the traditional belief that Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus in Asia Minor. But modern scholarship has raised various questions about its intended audience. Before we plunge into the content of this book, we need to consider some of these preliminary questions.

The fact that a majority of versions contain the words **in Ephesus** and other versions do not is a matter of textual criticism. A person doesn't have to be a Greek scholar or a professional theologian to take some interest in this science. Textual criticism is the attempt to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, the original Greek text of the New Testament.

When this letter was composed in the first century, it was written in the Greek language. It went to its destination, where it was read and preserved before being copied for the next generation. Those copies were then copied, and soon copies

were spread all over the world. The original letter that was penned by the Apostle has long since been lost, but various copies have survived down to this day.

Scholars in textual criticism examine all the surviving copies of the New Testament literature. Of the manuscripts that survive, they agree with each other 99 percent of the time because the copying process in the ancient world was carried out meticulously. We do, however, find some discrepancies in the copies. So there are copies of this letter that have the words “in Ephesus” and other copies that omit those words.

The majority of surviving manuscripts contain the words “in Ephesus.” This is the reason that, for centuries, the church kept this designation in the English version of the New Testament. Only two or three significant copies do not have these words. The unfortunate problem is, however, that two of the very finest and most trustworthy of the surviving manuscripts from the ancient world are the very copies that don’t have the words “in Ephesus.” For this reason, the evidence is almost equally weighted for and against the phrase’s inclusion in the text. It is possible that the designated destination was never part of the original epistle.

There are other factors that biblical commentators see as bearing on this decision. We know from Luke’s record in the Acts of the Apostles that during his third missionary journey, Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years. A congregation developed there in which he obviously had a vital ministry. Normally, whenever Paul writes back to churches where he knows individuals personally, he gives personal greetings to his dear brothers and sisters who are still alive in those congregations. That kind of personal communication is glaringly absent from the letter to the Ephesians. This does not necessarily prohibit the possibility that the original destination was the Ephesian congregation, but it provides added support for the idea that perhaps this letter was not originally destined for the congregation at Ephesus.

The majority viewpoint today is that in all probability, the epistle to the Ephesians was originally written as a circular letter. Rather than the Apostle’s writing a specific message to a particular congregation concerning a definite problem that had arisen, Paul wrote an epistle that he intended to be circulated to all the churches in Asia Minor. This would explain why Paul refrains from his normal specified greetings to particular individuals. It seems likely that Paul, toward the end of his life, had a burden to write to the church in general to give a synopsis of the revelation that had been given to him as **an apostle of Christ Jesus** (v. 1), a summary of the great truths of Christianity.

Asia Minor was, in Paul’s day, the Roman province of Proconsular Asia. The book of Revelation speaks of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis,

Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These seven cities were arranged around the urban hub of the province, with Ephesus occupying a strategic point. If Ephesians was a letter intended for all the churches in the area, it may have followed a circular route around these cities.

Ephesus itself was the gateway to Asia. It was at the mouth of the important Cayster River and functioned in a way similar to colonial Pittsburgh (Fort Pitt). Pittsburgh was called the “Gateway to the West” because there the Ohio River originates and flows west to the Mississippi. Waterways were crucial links of transportation and commerce before the advent of mechanized travel. A highway to Ephesus also served as a hub for caravan travel (much as Chicago did for rail transportation). In ancient times, the Greeks and the Romans both vied for control of Ephesus because of its strategic military and commercial location.

We read in Acts 28:

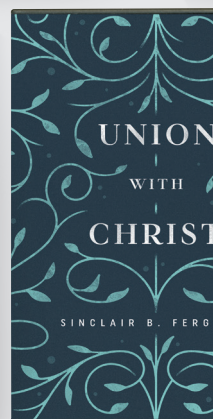
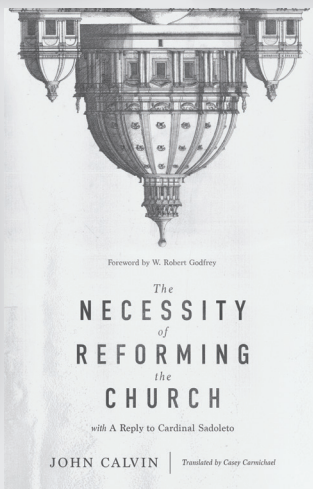
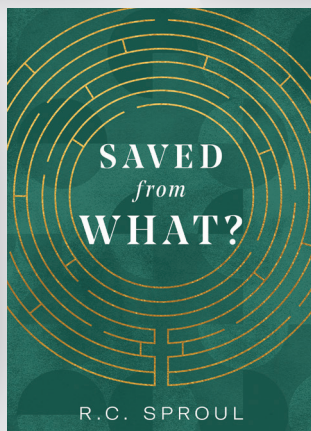
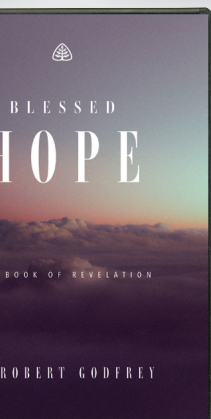
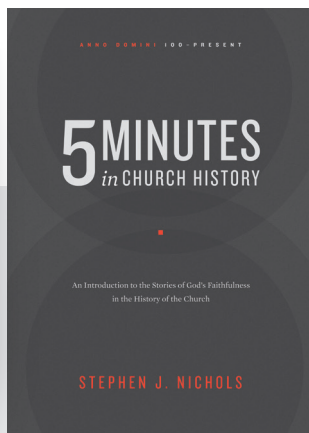
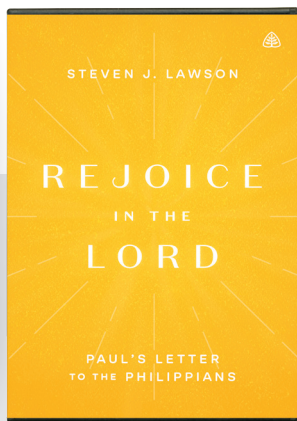
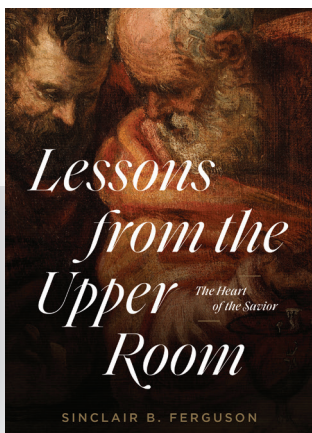
And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” (vv. 16–20)

Paul dwelled for two years in his own rented house and received all who came to him preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things that concerned the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him. Traditionally we are told that Paul was executed in Rome under the reign of the emperor Nero and that Peter and Paul were both executed presumably in the year AD 65, Peter by being crucified upside down and the Apostle Paul by being beheaded with the sword.

Ephesians is often lumped together with Philippians, Galatians, and Colossians as the Prison Epistles of the Apostle Paul. We don’t know which imprisonment was the occasion for Paul’s writing these Prison Epistles, but tradition holds that it was this two-year house arrest in Rome. We estimate, then, that Paul wrote this letter sometime between AD 60 and 62 while he

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