

Ephesians Week 8 TDs

1. Tune in—as much as possible—to the historical setting.

That's Rule #6 of the “Ten Rules of Good Bible Reading.” Here's some information about the meaning of the “historical setting” or “context” from *Rediscovering the Books of God* (pp. 27-28):

The literary and historical contexts work together to create the (book-level) context of a Bible book. The historical context is the actual surroundings (to use our defining term) that caused the book to be written. Though the authors are sometimes unnamed and so technically anonymous, the books that made their way into the Bible were written by devoted followers of God in order to communicate teachings and convictions about God to a group or groups of people. They are, therefore, not works of fiction in the modern sense (stories describing imaginary people and events), but concern real ideas and teachings about God delivered to a set of people at a particular point and time in history. The contents of the books thus deal with particular persons, beliefs, events, and actions within the community to which the books were written. (Paul's letters are sometimes called “occasional documents” to highlight the cutting-edge, real-life contexts of their production.) The books reflect the dynamic faith of the authors and of the audiences. The historical context refers to everything involved in the life of the author and the audience that surrounds and informs the writing and receiving of the book.

Scholars sometime refer to the historical context as the “setting” of the book—the “setting in life” from a popular German phrase (*Sitz im Leben*). What are the historical ingredients that merged together to create the book? This includes such basic things as the author, the audience, the reason for writing, and the content of the book as part of the actual historical exchange. Though it begins to delve into the literary context, these ideas are sometimes expressed with a series of questions starting with the letter W:

Who wrote it? Whom was it written to?

When (and where) was it written?

What does it say?

Why was it written? What does the author hope to accomplish?

These are the types of things we often read in commentaries or other study guides when we want to learn something about the *background* of a Bible book.

What clues are contained in the book of Ephesians that help to reveal the historical context of the letter?

- **Who wrote it? (1:1; 6:21-22)**
- **Whom was it written to? (1:1, 1:12-13; 2:11-13; 3:1; 4:17; 6:21-22)**
- **When and where was it written?** (What do we know about when and where Paul was in prison from other sources? Is he in Rome? Or Caesarea?)
- **Why was it written? What are the circumstances that prompted Paul to write the letter? Can we tell from the letter?**

There's not a lot in the letter to answer this question directly, is there? Do the major themes and purpose of the letter help to answer the question? How might Eph 3:1-13 (also 6:19-22) be related to the specific circumstances of the letter? Is there a connection between Paul's situation and the reason for and purpose of the letter?

The references to the purpose of Tychicus's visit at the end of the letter (6:21-22) imply that the purpose of his visit was to tell them about Paul and to encourage them. The overarching tone and content of Ephesians certainly fits within the scope of that general purpose. The continuous emphasis on the blessings, plan, and power of God in Christ; the prayer that they would come to know the hope . . . the riches . . . and the power . . ., culminating in the picture of divine empowerment through the armor of God; along with the specific explanation of the situation of Paul gives Tychicus powerful written accompaniment (the "presence" of Paul) for the purpose of his visit (cf. 3:13: "So I ask you not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you . . .").

Extra, Extra . . .

An important part of Paul's third missionary journey was to take up a collection of money for the poor (Jewish) Christians in Jerusalem/Judea who (for economic/famine [Acts 11:25-30] and social reasons) were struggling at the time (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15, Romans 15:14-32, Acts 11:25-30, cf. Galatians 2:1-10). Paul saw the collection as a way to affirm and help create unity between the Jewish and Gentile churches/Christians, as his ministry to the Gentiles served to fulfill God's promises that through Abraham the world would be blessed. In fact, Paul saw the "priority" of the Jews in God's plan as a blessing and benefit to the Gentiles, for which they should be grateful (cf. Eph 2:1-22). Look at what Paul says in Romans (and compare this to the progression and theme of "every spiritual blessing" in Eph 1:3-14):

. . . . Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there, so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen (Romans 15:23-33).

What task was it that Paul wanted to finish? The collection—from the Gentile churches for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. And why was he "worried" that he might be kept safe? (How might Gentiles have been inclined to feel about the opposition, persecution, and harm perpetrated upon Paul by Jews?)

Fast forward through Paul's journey and arrival in Jerusalem to deliver the collection. (Acts 20:4 probably includes delegations from various churches traveling with Paul to deliver the collection.

Acts 20 displays the strong, emotional bond Paul shared with the church/elders at Ephesus: “They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.”) On his way to Jerusalem, while staying in Caesarea,

. . . a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’” When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done.” After this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-15).

What happens when Paul arrives in Jerusalem is very significant:

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.”

The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them. When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.” (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.) The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains (Acts 21:17-33; see also 24:17-21).

Paul then speaks to the mob. They listen quietly when he begins to speak in Aramaic, the Hebrew language . . . , until he says that God had sent him to the Gentiles. Then the crowd goes nuts, throwing dust into the air and shouting to kill Paul . . . that he was not fit to live.

In the middle of demonstrating Gentile Christian salvation and community in Christ through his ministry, delivering gifts from Gentile churches to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem in symbolic expression of their unity in Christ, reflecting the very core and purpose of his ministry in Christ, Paul is beaten, arrested, and put in prison (and it appears that Jewish Christians could have been involved [Acts 21:20-21, 27-32]). Think about that. Paul is attacked and put in prison for the very reason that the Gentiles poured out their gifts and hearts in love to Paul. Some hated him violently for the same reason others loved him deeply: “I, Paul, am the minister of Christ for the Gentiles” (Eph 3:1; cf. Acts 22:21).

And did you notice the specific charge of bringing a Gentile (an Ephesian) into the Jewish temple? As a result of all this, Paul was kept in prison for several years (first in Caesarea, then in Rome). Can you see why Paul would be concerned how Gentile Christians might feel and react, that they might be worried, potentially upset, and discouraged over what has happened to him (Eph 3:13; 6:19-22; Colossians 4:7-9; cf. Philippians 1:12-26 for a “defense” of Paul’s imprisonment).

Though you will not find this in many—if any—commentaries on Ephesians (remember Rule #7, “Use commentaries and other study tools with discretion”),¹ I believe the situation of Paul and its potential impact upon Gentile Christianity lies behind Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (and other Gentile churches). What happened to Paul in Jerusalem and beyond, as he sat in prison in the days “ahead, preventing him from going to Rome and on to Spain in his ministry for the Gentiles (as was his intention), separating him from his spiritual “children,” provides a perfect setting for a letter like Ephesians—a letter concerning the essential nature of God’s new creation in Christ; the inherent unity of the church; the importance of the Jewish foundation and the various roles/gifts in the one body of Christ; the need to act in ways that honor and maintain the unity of God’s Spirit; to live worthy of that shared calling of God; to be strengthened and encouraged with the blessings, presence, and power of God. From this perspective, the description of Paul’s imprisonment in Eph 3:1-13 is not a digression or tangent, but is at the heart of the message and purpose of Ephesians. “In the end, Paul’s suffering is not just cause for discouragement and certainly not division. It is, on the contrary, ‘according to the working of his [God’s] power.’”

When Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed on April 4th, 1968 for his outspoken leadership of the civil rights movement, racial hostility broke out across this country unparalleled in the nation’s history.² The dimensions of the tension created by Dr. King’s assassination were grippingly and

¹There are exceptions, however, as in John Polhill’s introduction to Ephesians (“An Introduction to Ephesians,” *RevExp* 76 [1979] 465-79), where he concludes, “And so his collection, his symbol of Jew and Gentile together in Christ, led him to prison—to Caesarea, then Rome. The Jew/Gentile problem was not settled; he lay in chains over it. No longer able to bear collections, he could still address the problem, and that he did supremely in the Ephesian epistle” (p. 477).

²Flip Schulke and Penelope O. McPhee (*King Remembered*, [New York: W. W. Norton, 1986] 251) give a flavor for the hostility engendered:

“Before it was all over, thirty-nine people died and countless numbers were injured in civil

profoundly captured in a question asked by his daughter Yolanda soon after she had gotten the news of her father's death. With tears streaming down her young face, Yolanda said, "Mommy, should I hate the man who killed my daddy?"³ In contrast to the answer Mrs. King gave to her daughter, one example of the violence resulting from the assassination of Dr. King: "In Minneapolis, a black man vowed to kill the first white person he saw and shot his white neighbor to death."⁴ If that sort of thing happens when beloved leaders are attacked/killed for "civil rights," how might people (Gentile Christian/churches) react when questions of "spiritual rights," God, Jesus, church, and salvation are at stake? How might the Gentiles react to news that their spiritual father is brutally attacked and imprisoned for love of Gentiles?

Let's put it in question form: Who's responsible for what has happened to Paul? Or even a little more negatively: Who's to blame for Paul's imprisonment? "I, Paul, am the prisoner *of Christ Jesus* for you Gentiles . . . according to the working of his power . . . for your glory." If some non-Jewish believers were to blame the Jews, you might just have the basis for division in the church and a possible Gentile-independence movement. Paul's answer is to shift any possible blame to God and thereby evoke the most unifying response throughout this letter: worship.

disorders that struck more than 130 American cities. The indiscriminate looting and burning resulted in \$45 million worth of damage. There were more than twenty-thousand arrests. In Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Baltimore, more than twenty-thousand regular army troops and nearly fifteen thousand Guardsmen had to be deployed. An additional thirty-thousand Guardsmen were called into action in thirteen other states. Curfews were imposed in thirty cities" (pp. 253-54).

³Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) 321.

⁴Schulke and McPhee, *King Remembered*, 258.

2. Prepare a “digest” of Ephesians.

Rule #8 of the “Ten Rules” says, “Digest your experiences in the word” (for more on what this means, see *Rediscovering the Books of God*, pp. 141-45; pp. 213-18 provide an example from the book of Philemon). Here’s a guide for how you might create a “devotional digest” (a sort of condensed book-level context):

Building a Devotional Digest of Bible Books

Title or Subtitle

Give the book a title (instead of its Bible name) that you believe captures the essence of its message and purpose.

Purpose

What is the primary purpose of the book?

What result or action did it seek from the original readers?

What other actions did the book seek from the audience?

Message

What is the major message of the book?

What idea(s) or teaching does it convey?

What are other key points or messages?

Themes

What are the key words and themes of the book?

Is there a verse or set of verses that seem to capture the essence or core of the book?

Shape/Map

How is the content shaped?

What are the major sections?

How do they fit together and function in relation to each other?

Summary

Summarize the main ideas and primary purposes of the book in a short paragraph.

Theology

What does the book teach us about God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit)?

Kingdom

What does the book teach us about living for God in the kingdom of God.

3. Apply what you've learned.

Rule #9 of good Bible reading is to “Live what you learn.” In one sense, this is the most important rule—the goal of all the others—as change in our heart and character is a key reason we seek God through scripture. Once we've learned the major points of a book of God—what God wanted to say to us—then don't we want to do it!

Extra, Extra . . .

Most of the time, *knowing* how to apply the teachings (values and actions) of scripture is easy—it's consistently *doing* them that's difficult. There are times, however, when knowing how and what to apply can be more complicated. To help with this, I like to use a little tool called “the triangle of application.” To see more on the triangle, check out the section on Rule # 9 in *Rediscovering the Books of God*, pp. 146-53; and, for an example of digesting and applying the messages of a Bible book, see pp.213-29 on Philemon.

Make a list of the primary points and purposes of Ephesians, including, of course, the major request of the letter: 4:1-3. (Perhaps use your summaries of each major section and your “digest” from above.)

How Should We Then Live? is the title of a famous book by Francis Schaeffer. Paul asks the same question in the second halves of his letters, applying the things he talks about earlier. Same is true in Ephesians.

Make a list of the most important values and resulting actions that you believe are taught and/or implied by the book of Ephesians. (You might call this list “God's Priorities from the Book of Ephesians.”)

How might Ephesians apply to questions of how churches get along and work together, or the concept of “denominationalism”? What about issue of race and segregation? What about our view (in the church) of Israel? And other Christians throughout history?

What does Ephesians teach about overcoming hatred and prejudice?

Now—and this is extremely important—make a list of the specific views, attitudes, and actions that you plan to implement from hearing the word of God from Ephesians. In other words, how is Ephesians changing your life?

4. Do it again.

Good Bible Reading Rule #10 is to “Do it again,” which means, after you've done all the exploring you plan to do for a while in a particular book, read the book one more time. I think you'll be amazed at how much more sense all the verses make as they fit together in one Spirit-inspired book-level context. “Do it again” also means to come back to the book again (and again) later in your life—for 3 reasons: (1) because we forget, (2) because we grow and change, and (3) because we can never exhaust the word of God.

I suspect we will have little time to discuss it, but it's fun and helpful to go back to some of the key questions that we asked during the course of the study to see what might have changed in our perspective, like, for instance . . .

Compare your initial overview (from Week 1) of the main points and purposes of Ephesians to your digest or how you might write that summary now.

Inkblots

Think about some “classic” or potential inkblot verses (like 3:14-21: “. . .more than we ask or imagine,” 6:14-18: armor of God). How do you see those verses or sections now?

For example,

3:14-21

Why do you think Paul ends the first half of the letter praising God with the following:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

What is the power at work in us, according to Ephesians? Why is it important for the audience? How does it help Christians to deal with temptation and discouragement?

What's important about God being able to do *more* than we ask or imagine (within the context of the letter)?

Why and how is glory to be given to God in the church and in Christ Jesus? How does that relate to the primary point and purpose of the letter?

5:31-32

What about the inkblot verses we highlighted: Eph 2:8-10: “For by grace you have been saved . . . so that no one can boast”? And let's focus on Eph 5:31-32:

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and the two shall be one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

I suspect that you see much more in these verses than you have before. If so, it's because you have learned to read them within their book-level context! (Rule #2 in short: “Book-level focus the verses.”)

Are there any connections with the word “mystery” as Paul used it earlier in the letter?

And . . . (this is an important question) in the middle of his description of the family as part of God's new creation/humanity and as part of a lengthy “so what” ethical section (4:17-6:20), why would Paul interject this comment: “but I'm talking about Christ and the church”? Does that say something about the intentionality and “on-topic” focus of what

Paul is writing? In other words, Paul gives us direction about how to hear and interpret what he is saying. It's obviously about husbands and wives as part of new-creation family. But Paul lets us in on a little secret. He has a bigger picture and purpose for writing! He hasn't forgotten that. And he doesn't want us to forget it!

Extra, Extra . . .

From a literary or rhetorical perspective, we would say that Paul is using the new creation relationship of husband and wife (as it was intended to be in the beginning, thus quoting from Genesis) as an "argument from analogy." In other words, he's adding depth and force to his argument/teaching about the church through analogy. The "one flesh," two-into-one relationship of husband and wife (about which he gives graphic details) becomes an analogy for the relationship between Christ and the church—as he says explicitly. The way Christ loves the church as his body and bride thus provides compelling force for how the audience should also love the church. Remember how the book ends, with a blessing of grace upon those who love the Lord Jesus *with faithful and forever love?*

Does this reference say anything about the primary point/purpose of the letter? The unified (two-into-one) relationship between Christ and the church? How about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles (two-into-one) in the church? (Can you see why "every spiritual blessing" is *in Christ*?) Here's how Jesus feels about and treats the church:

. . . as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. . . . For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body (5:26-30).

Since the church is the bride/body of Christ, for which he gave himself, and now reigns as Lord over all things *for the church* (1:22-23), how should the audience/we treat the church? (How about as 4:1-16 says?)

5. A Final Question (or Two).

Why do you think Paul chose to use an extremely ornate, big-picture, flowing, long-sentence (1:3-14 is one sentence in Greek), grandiose style of language in Ephesians?

Much of the language in Ephesians is the language of worship. The book starts in worship: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .," praises God often, and refers to our purpose and need to praise/worship God. Majestic language and prayer punctuate the letter. The recipients are admonished to pray at all times in the Spirit, to speak to each other "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Why the emphasis on giving thanks *always* and for *everything*? In addition to the basic need for Christians to be appreciative to God for all he is and does for us, this admonition has some teeth when you remember that Paul is writing from prison to people who are potentially discouraged and even upset over what has happened to him. (Remember also the strong emotional/attitudinal flavoring

of the primary request: “. . . with all humility and gentleness, with patience . . .”) So . . . here’s the question:

Why do you think Paul wrote Ephesians in the language and style of worship?

What is the purpose of “those who were the first to hope in Christ” in the plan of God (1:6, 12)? “For the praise of his glory.” What is the purpose of the non-Jewish recipients of the letter in that plan of God (1:14; cf. 3:10)? “. . . the praise of his glory.” Paul starts and punctuates the letter with praise of God, with worship. One reason Ephesians is cast in the language and style of worship is likely because Paul always modeled the character and actions he encourages.

(Read Psalm 68 with this question in mind. See how the Old Testament described the appropriate reactions of God’s people to his victory, ascension, and blessings on the people—observe how similar praise and worship of God punctuates that Psalm. Paul is, in actuality, envisioning and describing the reality of God—and responding appropriately.)

But how do you respond when someone attacks and arrests you unjustly? When they strike you and beat you and lock you up in a cold jail cell, and keep you locked away from doing what you want to do, and take you all the way to Caesar in chains several years later (Paul wanted to keep preaching God’s word to others in Rome and Spain and beyond. After all, isn’t that who and what Paul is? [Or is the “the prisoner of Christ for the Gentiles”]?) How do you respond to that? (And by extension, how do we respond to circumstances of suffering and discouragement in light of God’s plan and power?)

Paul models the answer.

How do the Gentile Christians who love and depend on Paul, those to whom this letter is sent, how do they respond?

Eph 3:1-13 says that Paul’s ministry—and at this point that includes his imprisonment—is “according to the working of his [God’s] power.” It’s according to the power and plan of God. So how does Paul respond?

. . . with worship.

How should the Gentiles Christians/churches respond?

. . . with worship.

Does that help to answer the question why the book of Ephesians uses the language and style of worship?

And what about that question as to why Paul starts the book praying like a Jew? In order to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” what attitude toward the Jewish sector must the Gentiles maintain? (Another way to say this is what role does the “priority of the Jews” play in God’s plan for the universe, and thus Ephesians?)

Could it be that the ultimate answer—or at least bonding side-effect—to the question of unity . . . is worship?

Extra . . . Extra . . .

To answer the question of why Paul began Ephesians praying like a Jews? I would list the following:

1. Because he is a Jew and part of his purpose is to remind his audience of the importance of the Jews in the plan and purposes of God. Paul is the link between the two sides.
2. Because Paul bases some of his thought in Ephesians on Psalm 68—he sees God’s creation and plan for the church as the fulfillment of that Psalm: note the very similar praise and worship of that Psalm.
3. Because Paul models the appropriate reaction/response to God’s sovereign power and plan.
4. Because in the face of God’s plan, power, and purposes, how should we respond?

Expert’s Corner

Key Questions Review

Ephesians

- What’s the primary message and purpose of the book of Ephesians? What title would you give it to reflect that purpose?
- How does Paul encourage the Gentile audience through the content of the letter?
- How would you structure/outline the letter as a whole? What function or role does each section play in the developing content and purpose of the letter?
- What are the “givens” of the letter? What assumptions does Paul make from a theological perspective?
- What are the primary points or messages of the letter?
- What are God’s priorities (for us and for the church) from Ephesians?