

Have you ever been rolling down the interstate on a road trip and seen one of those **signs** that gives an indicator of where you are headed? We are embarking on a journey through the book of Ephesians today. From the very start of the journey, I think it is important that we see where this particular road is going to take us.

Ephesians is a book of the Bible that is six chapters long. The book is broken into two parts. The first three chapters cover God's story, the story of the gospel. It is one of the most thorough presentations of the gospel in all of Scripture. It reminds us of God's great works and what He has done to save us by His grace through Jesus Christ our Master.

The last three chapters make up the second half of the book. These chapters contain our story, the story of the church. Paul takes time to explain in detail how the gospel of Jesus Christ should impact every area of our daily lives. From church; to work; to our homes; to family; to personal decision making... the gospel story outlined in the first three chapters is more than just a story: it is a worldview that shapes the way Christians see God, others, and themselves.

The two halves of the book are joined together with the word, "Therefore." That word is located right in the middle of the book, at the beginning of **chapter four**. The word, "Therefore" serves as a link between the two halves. It stands as a mile-marker on our journey. It tells us exactly where we are headed. The book of Ephesians is a book about how the ONE TRUE GOSPEL transforms the ONE TRUE CHURCH of Jesus Christ.

Of all the books in the Bible, no book emphasizes the theme of unity and oneness more than the book of Ephesians. Let's open Google Maps and check out street view. Let's take a look at this mile-marker in the middle of the book of Ephesians that links both parts of the book together.

Ephesians 4:1-6

I **therefore**, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

ONE. ONE body, ONE Spirit, ONE hope, ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE baptism, and ONE God – who unites all things in Himself.

Unity is the central theme to the book of Ephesians. Unity that comes from knowing the gospel and how faith in the ONE TRUE GOSPEL transforms our everyday lives.

The mile-marker is set. We know the destination. Unity in the church through unity in the gospel. With our destination locked into our GPS, it is time to start the journey. It has been a little while since our church did a book study. The last one I could find was a study on the book of John that we did together a

few years ago. One of the great things about a book study is how familiar we can get with the setting of a book and how the context helps us understand the book's purpose in the Bible.

The tendency of some people can be to lift verses right out of the Bible as if every verse is its own stand-alone statement. That approach is not handling the Word of God faithfully. Every passage in Scripture was written by a specific author, to a specific audience, in a specific setting. The more we can understand about the audience and the setting, the more we understand the true intent and the right interpretation of God's Word.

Today, we will only take on the first three verses of Ephesians. It is the introduction to the book of Ephesians. The first three verses provide important information that help us understand the author of the book, his original audience, and the setting in which the book was written.

I'm going to read the first three verses to the book of Ephesians. As I read, notice that we discover that the author is the Apostle Paul, that Paul is writing a letter to the church located in the city of Ephesus, and that He intends to begin the letter by leading the church to focus on the spiritual blessings they have received in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 3:1-3

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the **saints who are in Ephesus**, and are faithful[a] in Christ Jesus:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has **blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing** in the heavenly places

We know that the central theme to the book of Ephesians is unity and oneness in Jesus. Why is Paul writing this letter to the church in Ephesus? What is going on in that city that causes Paul to feel moved to write such a targeted letter to this specific group of people?

The first three verses of Ephesians are more than just a greeting: they are an invitation into a story. A story about ancient practices, black magic, mythological Greek gods, Jewish exorcisms, and the movement of the Holy Spirit through the gospel that prevails against all odds. Let's accept the invitation this morning. Let's discover the story behind the book of Ephesians. Are you with me? Open Acts 19 and let's begin the journey.

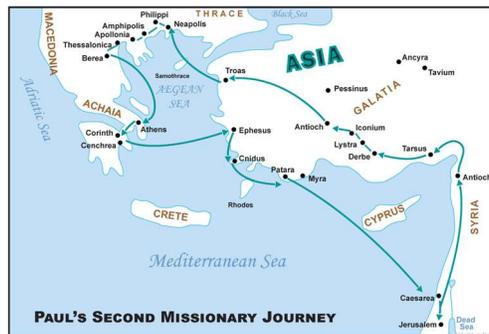
It was just a few years into the turn of the century AD, not many years after Jesus's resurrection and ascension into heaven. By the grace of God, Jesus had appeared to a man named Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul was a murderer and a persecutor of Christians. He had tremendous faith and zeal for God, but He did not recognize Jesus Christ as the living God who came to this earth in human flesh. On the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Saul. Through a series of miraculous events, Jesus led Paul to believe by faith that He was God. Saul was saved from his sins, baptized, and received the Holy Spirit. He changed his name from Saul to Paul. His life would never be the same. Jesus told Paul that He had called him out and set him apart for a specific purpose: to be a missionary to the Gentiles and to make the gospel known throughout the world.

Paul embraced that mission. After training, Paul began to embark on missionary journeys that lasted several years at a time. On each missionary journey, Paul was sent out by the church to go and visit Gentile cities for the purpose of sharing the gospel and planting new churches. Through these missionary journeys and what we know about them in Acts, Paul has developed the reputation as the greatest missionary in church history.

On his first missionary journey, Paul kept to a smaller loop. Antioch was a headquarters of the early church, and Paul used it as a launching pad for his missionary journeys. Antioch was a Gentile city that had embraced the gospel, and there were plenty of other Gentile cities around that needed the gospel.



After his first missionary journey, Paul embarked on his second missionary journey. This loop was much larger. Paul's journey took him into Asia Minor and even across the sea to Macedonia. On his way back, as he was nearing the end of his second journey, Paul stopped in city known as Ephesus. You can see it on your map. It is on the western coast of Asia Minor.



At the time when Paul stepped into that city, he stepped into the city Rome considered to be the most predominate city in all of Asia, and certainly Asia Minor. Today, what they called Asia Minor is known as Turkey. See on this modern day map the location of the ruins of the ancient city of Ephesus.



As Paul arrived in this city, the city was about 300,000 people strong – a rather large city for that time period in human history. The city was very wealthy.



Wide streets were lined with Greco-Roman style columns. Very nice houses could be found in the city – houses with such wealth that they had servants, heated air vents, and even indoor plumbing! There were many temples in the city that were constructed as part of idolatrous worship towards Greek gods and goddesses. There was even an amphitheater that could seat 24,000 people!!

At the center of the city were two prevailing features that provided the source of economic prosperity for the city of Ephesus. The first was a natural harbor in the Mediterranean Sea that made Ephesus an ideal port for trade in the ancient world. As incredible as this harbor was, it came in second in its economic importance. The most primary source of economical income and prosperity in the city was none other than the Temple of the Greek goddess, Artemis.



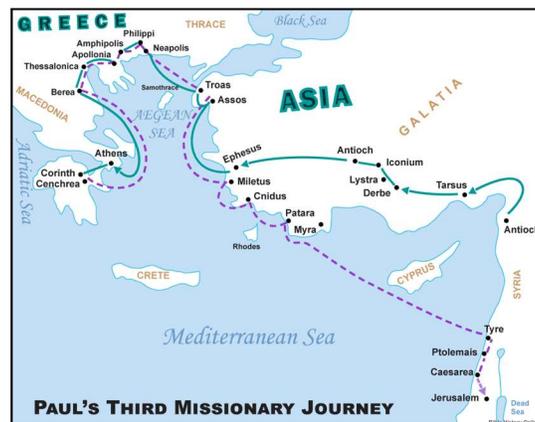
Artemis was the mythological goddess of life and fertility. The fame of this false god grew rapidly in the ancient world. The temple constructed for her in Ephesus dwarfed many of the temples of the ancient Greek gods. In fact, this temple stood as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world!

Religion, specifically the worshipping of false gods and the practice of black magic, was the number one source of economical income for the city of Ephesus. This made Ephesus a very evil place and an unlikely place for a new message like the gospel to take root. The ancient practices of idol worship and black magic were very immoral practices. The rituals often included immoral acts such as sexual sins, prostitution, and murder. Strong, demonic spiritual forces were at play in this city. In the book of Ephesians in chapter six, Paul even recognizes the demonic forces at hand when he reminds the church that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, and powers, and rulers of darkness in this present age.

When Paul arrived at the end of his second missionary journey, it would have been easy for Paul to see that the task of reaching this city with the gospel was a God-sized task. The city was huge, and it was strongly divided by various religions, cults, and worldviews. Satan had a strong grip of deception on the city.

Because Paul was ending his second journey, he did not have time to stay and really press into the work that needed to be done in Ephesus. He spent a short time preaching in their synagogue while there. The synagogue was the community hub for the Jewish people in that city. It was always Paul's practice to take the gospel to the Jews first; after all, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who had come in fulfillment to all the Jewish prophecies and laws written in the Old Testament Scriptures. The people Paul was preaching to wanted Paul to stay, but he told them he had to go. However, Paul told them that he would come back to them if the Spirit allowed.

Paul completed his second missionary journey. A little while later, Paul set out once again from Antioch and began his third missionary journey. Paul stopped through a few cities at the start, but he had his eyes set on Ephesus. This time, Paul arrived at the beginning of his missionary journey and set up his base there.



The beginning of Paul's ministry in Ephesus started with just a handful of men. God often starts the most incredible movements of His Spirit on the grassroots level. As Paul and the disciples with him entered the city, they encountered a group of men who Luke, the storyteller of Acts 19, called disciples. These men, however, were not yet disciples of Jesus. They had heard of the baptism of John the Baptist – a baptism of repentance of sins and looking forward to a future Messiah – but they had not yet heard of Jesus or of the Holy Spirit. After Paul shared the gospel with these men, they were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. They even experienced signs of the Holy Spirit as they began to speak in tongues

and prophecy. This had to of been comforting to Paul – he was able to witness the activity of the Holy Spirit at the start of his work in Ephesus.

Apparently, these men went to the Jewish Synagogue with Paul and accompanied him as he began to share the gospel with his Jewish brothers in Ephesus. Paul continued in the Synagogue for three months, teaching and reasoning with the Jews in that place. After a while, some believed, but others grew hard in heart and began to publicly criticize the gospel. So, Paul gathered those who believed and found a new place to meet. A Greek man named Tyrannus offered up his facility (likely a school facility) for Paul to use. For two years, Paul spent time meeting daily with the new Christians in that place. There was progress, and the church was growing, but the Word of God was not yet prevailing in the city. Everyone in the city had heard about Christianity, but the gospel appeared to be another religious idea in a city filled with deception and false religion. Then, God did something that moved the city in an incredible way.

All along, the Spirit had been doing miracles through Paul. In fact, God’s working in Paul was so great that people would take handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin and took them to sick people and their diseases left them and evil spirits would come out of them! Still, the gospel had taken root, but it had not shot up and prevailed in the city.

Well, some Jewish exorcists learned about Paul’s success, and they learned that Paul was doing these miracles in the name of Jesus. They thought, “Maybe we should try to cast out some demons in Jesus’s name.” However, these Jews were not believers in Jesus. They did not have the Holy Spirit, so they had not been given any authority by Jesus. These seven Jewish men were in a house with one man who had an evil spirit. When they tried to exercise the demon in Jesus’s name, the man said to them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” The man then attacked these men and mastered them all so they left the house naked and wounded!

Word of this reached the ears of everyone in the city, both Jews and Gentiles. When people heard what had happened, the fear of God fell on them all. Strongholds of deception and demonic practices began to come down. People began to lift up the name of Jesus and magnify His name instead of the gods. Not only that, but Christians who had been hanging on to their black magic books began to confess their sins and rid their homes of those items they used for evil practices. They brought their black magic books together and burned them!

It is hard for me to paint a picture for you of how significant this was in the city of Ephesus. The thought of droves of people denouncing other gods to exalt the name of Jesus was unimaginable! This Spirit had worked in incredible ways.

The movement of the Spirit in this city was so powerful that it began to impact the city economically. The last story in Acts about the church in Ephesus is a story of a silversmith named Demetrius who gathered other idol makers and craftsmen and started a riot in the streets of Ephesus protesting the work of Paul and the way the gospel had impacted their businesses negatively. A lot of money was made off of selling idols, false prophets and priests for mythological gods, and diviners who helped others practice black magic – not to mention the sell of black magic books that were now being burned. You can read that whole story in Acts 19. For now, it is just important that we realize that the movement of the gospel began to transform the culture of the city, and the Word of God began to prevail mightily among them!

With a background like this, it is no wonder that Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written on the subject of unity! Paul wrote this letter years after completing his third missionary journey while he was in house arrest in Rome. No doubt that Paul revisited his memories of this city. He knew the division of the city and the culture of idol worship and black magic. He knew how many false ideas were constantly raising up their heads against the knowledge of God and His gospel. Paul wanted the church of Jesus in Ephesus to hold true to what they had found in Christ, to not waiver in their faith in the gospel, and to continue to renounce evil practices and walk in a manner worthy of their calling in Christ Jesus.

That's what the book of Ephesians is all about. In a world with many false claims and deceptions that rise up against the knowledge of God in His gospel, only one thing can unify the church of Jesus Christ: that is the ONE TRUE GOSPEL, of the ONE TRUE GOD.

As we conclude this introduction to the book of Ephesians, what does God want us to learn from this story today? The book of Ephesians was written to the saints in Ephesus. They were saints then in the same way we are saints now. Our culture is not unlike the culture in Ephesus, right? America is the melting pot of the nations. There are so many false ideas circulating all around us in our world. So many arguments that are humanistic and spit directly in the face of God. Church, there is only one thing that will unify us. It isn't politics, it isn't causes, it isn't organizations or education... our unity can only be found in the ONE TRUE GOSPEL, of the ONE TRUE GOD.

How did the church in Ephesus find unity in the gospel? What happened so that the Word of God began to prevail among them?

1. They feared God
2. They magnified the name of Jesus
3. They confessed their sins and ridded themselves of evil practices

They feared God. What is the fear of God? We know it is to reverence Him and to hold Him in high esteem. We know fearing God means honoring and keeping His commands and fearing Him over the fear of people. But is there a clear definition in Scripture that can help us really understand what it practically looks like to fear God? Consider this definition from the book of Proverbs:

Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.

Fearing God means agreeing with God by calling "evil" those things He says are evil. It is to hate evil just as God hates evil. We cannot find unity in the church so long as we are not agreeing with God and calling evil those things He calls evil. It is pride and arrogance and the way of evil for us to elevate the thoughts and opinions of men over the ways of God.

If we were to step back in time and visit the church in Ephesus, don't you think it would be easy for us to recognize that the Christians in that place should not have been practicing black magic? I mean, seems obvious to us, right? Why were they continuing in the practice? Well, they did not fear God! They wanted to do what they wanted to do. The culture around them accepted black magic and idol worship as normal. If other people thought it was okay, then it must be okay, right?

It wasn't until they feared God and agreed with Him on what He called evil that they began to find unity and the Word of God began to prevail among them. The culture and the opinions of other people cannot be factors in what we decide to call good or evil. The Word of God must be the only factor in what we call good and what we call evil.

What I am about to say is not very popular in our society. It is about as unpopular as saying that people should burn their black magic books and rid themselves of idols in Ephesus. But here it goes.

The abortion of babies is evil. God is the giver of life. Murder is a sin. Everything about abortion is evil. It promotes a culture of murder in our society by devaluing the human life. It robs God of the fruit of the womb, which is His reward. Abortion is promoted because people want to protect their lifestyle of sexual sin outside the biblical covenant of marriage. It is self-motivated and exalts self over God.

Ephesians 4:17-24

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self,[f] which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Sexual immorality is evil. Our society calls it good. Turning children into sexual objects in series like the new one of Netflix is pure evil. Homosexuality and the normalization of sexual perversions lifted up by the LGBTQ+ community is evil. Sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend or moving in together before marriage is evil. Filthy language and crude joking is evil. Sexting or sexual indulgences between unmarried people is evil. Pornography is evil.

Ephesians 5:3

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.

Drunkenness is evil and so is getting high. Substance abuse and addiction is evil.

Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 5:8

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit

8 Be sober-minded

Filthy language is evil.

Ephesians 5:4

4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

We must agree with God, regardless of what our society says:

- Abortion
- Sexual immorality
- Drunkenness
- Filthy language
- What does a good marriage look like?
- What does godly parenting look like?
- What does a healthy church look like?
- What does it look like to follow Jesus on issues like race and injustice?

Ephesians is a guiding post. It brings us back to the gospel as what unifies us. It helps us remember what is true and what is evil. It shows us how to live our daily lives.

Unity in us and the prevailing of the Word of God begins with FEARING GOD.

Next, the church in Ephesus magnified the name of JESUS!!

I will not spend a lot of time on this point. This is exactly what we are learning in our series on Wednesday nights during midweek with Pastor Jerry. What he shared this week has stuck with me all week. There have been several times when I felt discouraged that I have chosen to magnify and exalt the name of Jesus!

Here's the idea of this point that is important for this message on unity:

When my opinions and feelings are what drives me, I will never experience unity and oneness with God or with His church.

When I lift up Jesus and exalt His truth over my emotions and feelings, I can experience unity with God and with other people who are willing to do the same thing.

This is the transformation that happened in the church in Ephesus. They stopped exalting their own opinions and feelings and gods and idols and culture above the name of Jesus, and they started lifting up the name of Jesus together.

Fear God. Lift up Jesus.

Confess your sins and RID yourself of evil practices.

When it comes to ridding ourselves of evil practices, let's start with the elephant in the room:

PORNOGRAPHY

58% of PASTORS in the church say they searched for pornography in the last year.

72% of young Christian adults say they look at pornography regularly.

3 out of 5 marriages cite porn as a MAJOR factor.

These are just the tip of the iceberg of the problem the church of Jesus Christ in America is facing with pornography. The use of pornography is evil. Agree with God! Fear Him.

More and more people are finding it difficult to agree with God on this. They harden their hearts. A new problem with porn in the church is that people are excusing it away. There is less agreement on what constitutes pornography and more division on whether or not it is even wrong!

Matthew 5:27-28

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Agree with God! Gratify sexual desires in any form or fashion outside of the biblical covenant of marriage is sin! Pornography is sin. Looking at images with lustful intent is sin.

Confess your sin and RID yourself of evil practices!

Let’s identify the main instrument of pornography: the cell phone.

Since the smart phone, pornography has been at an all time high. 67% of pornographic images are viewed on a cell phone. Yet, in the church, few people take action to rid themselves of their evil practices. Instead, they make excuses to keep their dark magic books.

Why? The fear of God is not in them. If you are tolerating porn, you are not agreeing with God, so you are not fearing Him! Get help! You certainly need to confess your sin to other Christians in the church. You certainly need to get rid of you magic books – whether by getting a monitoring software or even just chunking your phone altogether! What do you have on your phone that is worth disregarding God and living arrogantly and pridefully towards Him! Burn the books! You may need to go get professional help. If you think you might need it, come meet with a pastor and get help. Rid yourself of evil practices. We cannot have unity until you do it. Do it or leave the church. Do not be a cancer in the body.

Husbands and Fathers, take ownership of your homes. Rid them of pornography and evil practices. Draw clear boundaries. Call evil what God calls evil. Don’t tolerate evil in your homes.

Wives and Mothers, call evil evil in your home. Bring things to the light with your husband. Draw clear lines. If you husband is tolerating evil get help from godly women in the church. Remain godly yourself, but know that you do not have to tolerate ongoing evil in your home. Seek God’s way for addressing evil and conflict in your home. Be godly, and lift up the name of Jesus.

Children, if you are hiding evil practices in your home, bring them to the light. Tell your parents what is going on. You may think no one sees, but God sees. Sin never happens in a vacuum. Your sinful practices will always effect you, your family, and others. Confess your sin! Agree with God! Fear Him! Seek unity and peace.

Addicts, you have it really tough. Your addiction is not just with a substance, it is with a way of thinking. Your thoughts have been perverted by evil. Addicts are always abusive to those they love. That’s why HIA exists to radically transform the lives of addicts AND those who love them! Repent! Turn from evil. Get the help and treatment you need. Stop abusing substances and people you love. Call evil what God calls evil.

Those in unforgiveness, call bitterness evil and repent! You are a slave and you have a master. The master commands you to forgive.

Those who curse and use filthy language, call it evil and repent!

The beginning verses of Ephesians are more than an introduction to a letter. They are an invitation into a story. The story is really our story. The book of Ephesians is truly for us today. It is a book about unity and oneness, something the church in America desperately needs.

The story of the church in Ephesus shows us exactly what it takes to leave behind deceptive lies and to find unity in the truth. We must fear God by agreeing with Him. We must lift up the name of Jesus. We must confess our sins and rid ourselves of evil.

Ephesians 1:1-2

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are the saints in America. Will we be the faithful in Christ Jesus?

It starts with your decision right now.

1. Will you fear God by agreeing with Him?
2. Will you exalt the name of Jesus above your own thinking and ways?
3. Will you confess your sins and rid yourself of evil practices?

This is the first step in the journey to unity.