

Ephesians 1A

- Studying a New Testament letter can feel a little like taking a college course
 - The epistles are usually stuffed with deep, theological explanations of Christ and our salvation
 - They are like onions that have to be unpeeled one layer at a time
 - We encounter challenging words that require explanation, words like propitiation, predestination, grace
 - We may find references to obscure Old Testament passages or some new spiritual mystery
 - So if you've ever found yourself reading a single verse from one of Paul's letters over and over again trying to make sense of it, you're not alone
 - But other times studying an epistle can feel like you've intercepted someone else's mail
 - Paul, Peter, John, James addressed believers from long ago and in unfamiliar circumstances
 - Sometimes the situations they cover will be familiar to us, like marriage or children
 - Other times we're left scratching our heads trying to find relevance in eating meat sacrificed to idols or slaves returning to their masters
 - But apart from the unique subject matter and style of each epistle, we generally find a common pattern in most every New Testament letter
 - You will find teaching on doctrine followed by exhortation for practical application of that doctrine
 - The writer tells us something about the Person of Christ or the work of Christ or the future of the Church
 - And then the writer turns to his readers and urges us to act in accordance with that knowledge

- And of course this makes perfect sense, that we should first need to understand God's ways and expectations before we can seek to please Him
- Moreover, if we appreciate what God has in store for us, we're less likely to live in a shortsighted fashion
- And we certainly find this pattern in Paul's letters
 - Perhaps more than anyone else, Paul uses teaching on Christian doctrine as a springboard into exhortation for how to live
 - He gives us the "what" so he can then give us the "so what"
 - Near the end of his life Paul declared he was innocent before men for having declared the whole counsel of God
 - He understood that believers need both doctrine and exhortation to achieve their full measure of spiritual maturity
 - I once heard someone foolishly suggest that the church needed *less* teaching on doctrine and *more* calls to action
 - That's a clear denial of what we find in the New Testament letters
 - That's like the captain of a cruise ship ordering more propeller but less rudder
 - It merely results in going nowhere faster
- But we can see in the epistles themselves evidence that the Lord expected us to understand the doctrines of our faith so we may live by them, as Jesus said:

Luke 8:21 But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it."

- Jesus wants followers to hear His word (which means to understand it) and then to put into action what we've learned
 - It's possible for a person to understand God's word yet fail to put it into action
 - Sadly, believers do this all the time
 - But it's impossible to act on something you've never taken time to understand

- Therefore, the Church must endeavor to know the mind of God as revealed in scripture as a prerequisite to living according to the word
 - We study epistles to learn doctrine
 - Then we dare to put into action what we learn, even against the rebellion of our flesh and the resistance of the world
 - That's why the Lord gave us the epistles and that's why we study them
- Today we begin our study in a letter written to a major city of the Roman Province of Asia Minor, called Ephesus
 - But we aren't starting in the letter Paul wrote to that city
 - Instead, we begin this morning in a letter Jesus wrote to Ephesus some 30 years later
 - From Revelation 2:

[Rev. 2:1](#) "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

[Rev. 2:2](#) 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;

[Rev. 2:3](#) and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.

[Rev. 2:4](#) 'But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

[Rev. 2:5](#) 'Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent.

[Rev. 2:6](#) 'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

[Rev. 2:7](#) 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'

- Obviously, we're not starting a study of Revelation, but we're looking at Revelation 2 today because Jesus' letter to Ephesus directly relates to Paul's letter
 - The Apostle John records Jesus' commendation to the church in Ephesus for standing strong against false teachers
 - Certainly, standing up to false teachers is a commendable thing

- Other churches in their day were not so diligent
- False teachers, particularly Judiazers, were making inroads into churches in the empire at that time
- But Ephesus remained devoted to proclaiming and preserving the true doctrines of the apostles
- Ephesus' resistance to false teaching probably came from their close association with early church leaders
 - Paul lived and taught in Ephesus for about three years during his second missionary journey
 - The Apostle John himself ministered inside the city for some years
 - And Paul's protege Timothy ministered there as well
 - There are even some who suggest Peter may have spent time in Ephesus after fleeing Jerusalem
- With so many strong teachers guarding the flock in Ephesus, it's not surprising that the church held the high ground on doctrine
 - But what is a little surprising, however, is that this church failed to put that doctrine into action
 - Jesus told this church that He had one thing against them: they had left their first love
 - What is the "first love" of the church?
 - One possible answer (and perhaps the first one that comes to our minds) would be Christ Himself
 - But I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about here
 - I don't think Jesus is saying the church abandoned Him personally, as if to suggest they were no longer believing in Jesus
 - The word in Greek for "first" is *protos*, which means most prominence, before all else
 - He's not speaking of chronological order, that is the first kind of love
 - He's speaking of most important, the highest priority

- Notice in v.5 the Lord gave the church the recipe for returning to their first love
 - He told the church to do the deeds they did at first
 - Once again, the word is *protos* meaning most important
 - So apparently, the first or highest priority love of the church is serving the Lord through our deeds
- We're talking about worship, study, prayer, meeting the needs in the body
 - Witnessing concerning their new-found faith to the citizens of Ephesus
 - Enduring persecution even as they rejoiced in miracles of the Spirit
 - In short, living by the Spirit in light of the salvation they have received
- Ephesus had great respect for doctrine, great intolerance for false teaching, and at one point they did deeds in keeping with the doctrine they knew
 - But at some point, things changed in Ephesus
 - They left their first love, Jesus said
 - They set aside the more important work of the Church, of serving Christ and God's people
 - Instead, they returned to the lower priority of pursuing worldly things, earthly accomplishments, earthly wealth, earthly recognition
 - Because they knew so much and did so little, Jesus declared it was to their condemnation in the end
 - Jesus warned the church in Ephesus they could lose their lampstand
 - In other words, if they would not fulfill their mission to be light in the world, then they forfeit their place as a church
 - This is a sobering thought we shouldn't run past too quickly

- Jesus says that putting our faith and our knowledge of doctrine into action is so important to Him, that if we fail in that mission, we no longer have reason to exist as a church
- James famously says that faith without works is dead, is useless, because it exists by itself (James 2:17)
- In other words, the Lord never intended for our faith to exist “by itself”
- Faith was always intended to lead to action
- We should ask what distracted the church in Ephesus away from the deeds they did at first?
 - False teaching is often the cause for a church wandering, but we know it wasn’t false teaching in the case of Ephesus
 - Jesus praised them for their adherence to sound doctrine
 - No, in this case it must have been something else
 - The most likely cause was the culture of Ephesus itself
 - Ephesus was a very wealthy, very exciting, metropolis but it was also a very corrupting place to do ministry
 - It was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia Minor, famous for its temple to the goddess Diana and for its Roman stadium
 - The temple drew worshippers from around the empire and featured thousands of prostitutes who participated in the pagan ceremonies
 - The city’s stadium was the largest of its kind in the world, seating 50,000 people for gladiator games
 - And the city was alive with commerce and food and drink, fueled historically by its major port, but also by trade, banking and temple visitors
 - In short, Ephesus was a “happening” place
 - So if you wanted to chase the world’s riches or perhaps obtain a name for yourself or power in an earthly institution, Ephesus was a good place to do it

- And it seemed the church in Ephesus began doing just that
 - History records that Jesus did, in fact, follow through on his warning to remove the church's lampstand
 - He withdrew His hand of blessing causing the church to disappear
 - By the second century, the city was in decline, the port having silted up over the years, and the church having died out
 - Eventually, the city itself became a ruin
 - This sad outcome is even more surprising when you remember the church's beginnings
 - Not only did Paul and other apostles live and teach in the city for several years
 - But Paul made special effort to meet with the church elders and exhort them concerning this very threat while on his way to Jerusalem for the final time
 - Listen to Paul's words of advice to the church leadership

[Acts 20:17](#) From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

[Acts 20:18](#) And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,

[Acts 20:19](#) serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;

[Acts 20:20](#) how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,

[Acts 20:21](#) solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Acts 20:22](#) "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,

[Acts 20:23](#) except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

[Acts 20:24](#) "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

[Acts 20:25](#) "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.

[Acts 20:26](#) "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

[Acts 20:27](#) "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

[Acts 20:28](#) “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

[Acts 20:29](#) “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

[Acts 20:30](#) and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

[Acts 20:31](#) “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

[Acts 20:32](#) “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

[Acts 20:33](#) “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes.

[Acts 20:34](#) “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.

[Acts 20:35](#) “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

[Acts 20:36](#) When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

- These were Paul’s parting words to the elders at Ephesus
 - For our purposes this morning, I want us to focus on the last part of that passage
 - Paul ends his comments by asking the leaders to remember Paul’s example as he lived among them for several years
 - Specifically, he says in Acts 20:31 that he admonished them day and night with tears while he lived in Ephesus
 - Paul speaks like a man who was burdened by what he experienced in Ephesus and he dearly wanted better things for the church
 - What burdened Paul?
 - We get a clue by what Paul says next in v.32
 - Paul commends them to the word of God, which he says can build them up and deliver an inheritance to the sanctified
 - Paul’s mention of an “inheritance” is key here, because it turns out that the church’s key weakness was pursuit of riches in all forms

- As I said, this was a wealthy city, a city that not only possessed great wealth but also inspired its citizens to seek for more of it
 - We all know this feeling to some extent, the feeling that we wish we could have what others around us possess
 - It's human nature to see wealth on display and to covet for it
 - If we are dishonest, then we will seek to obtain it in illegitimate ways
 - But even if we are upright and honest, we may still become distracted working for it at the expense of serving God
- Next, Paul exhorts the church to remember his example while he lived among them
 - In v.33 Paul says, remember that he coveted no one's silver and gold
 - Paul was not defending himself against accusations that he was a thief
 - He was pointing out by way of example that he never set his sights on obtaining the wealth of Ephesus
 - He didn't desire their silver and gold, it didn't distract him and he didn't work to obtain it from them
 - Instead, Paul says he worked to support his basic needs, enough to ensure he wasn't a burden on others, but that's where it ended
 - Paul says in v.35 that he did this so that he had time remaining to work on more important matters, on spiritual concerns
 - Specifically, he says he worked to help the weak in the church
 - Paul meant he spent time working to assist the poor financially, perhaps those too sick or old to work themselves
 - But I think Paul also meant he invested time in the spiritual needs of the church, teaching and praying and encouraging
- These things Paul told the church to remember, as a model for their own behavior, because back in v.32 he told them they had an eternal inheritance
 - Paul is talking about riches in Heaven, riches awaiting those who are sanctified

- Which explains his concluding comment in v.35 where Paul says it is more blessed to give than receive
- When we give (e.g., time, talent, treasure) to the needs of the body, we are investing in our own spiritual future
- We are serving Christ sacrificially, and by doing so we are storing up treasure in Heaven, as Jesus said
- Our giving will be blessed later in Heaven, and the result will be far greater riches than anything we could have obtained here
- On the other hand, when we structure our earthly lives to “receive,” that is to receive wealth or spend time on ourselves or gain attention for ourselves instead of for Christ, we may be forgoing heavenly things
 - Certainly, we can say we are blessed by what we obtain here
 - A rich man on earth is blessed
 - A man who received great power or honor on earth might say he’s blessed
 - But those blessings are always less than the heavenly one reserved for those who serve Christ
- Paul said he made sacrifices to model what serving Christ looks like to a church that lived in a rich city with many distractions
 - And as Paul lived among them, he was burdened by the sight of their struggles with temptation
 - And he must have pleaded them with tears to not get caught up in chasing the world
- Paul maintained his first love and he admonished the church in Ephesus to do the same
 - To seek for the inheritance found by hearing and doing the word of God
 - And not to covet the gold and silver that will perish
- So you might be asking how this background relates to our study of the book of Ephesians?
 - First, it’s clear that Paul and Jesus had concerns for this church

- In Paul's final instructions in Acts, he was concerned the church might succumb to the temptations of the city to serve self instead of Christ
- And just a few decades later, we hear Jesus telling this church they did, indeed, leave the highest priority, which suggests they went after other things
- Secondly, it's safe to say Ephesus was a church whose affections were divided
 - On the one hand, they knew and respected the doctrines of their faith
 - On the other hand, they desired the wealth and prominence their city offered to those willing to chase after it
 - The Church had known a period of success, early in their walk, when their faith prompted a love for serving God and His people
 - They served the mission of the church, setting aside the pursuit of earthly things and setting their eyes on Jesus and His concerns
- But eventually, they fell to the temptations of earthly things, they left their first love and they lost their way and eventually their place
 - This is how the story of Ephesus ended
 - It's an unhappy ending
 - But it didn't have to be this way
- The circumstances surrounding the Church of Ephesus have much in common with the Church today in many places in the world
 - We are blessed to be living in the wealthiest time in all human history
 - Most developed nations enjoy a standard of living far beyond what was possible in past generations
 - While we still have places of poverty and war and disease, in general those things impact less people to a lesser degree than in times past
 - In many places today the church is surrounded by a culture of materialistic, attention hogging, power grabbing, experience seeking pagans

- Just like the church in Ephesus
- So the question arises, are we in danger of leaving our first love?
 - Are we all doctrine and no action?
 - Do we guard the teaching yet allow our hearts to be tempted by the world around us?
 - Do we acknowledge we have been approved by God through our faith in Christ yet still covet the praises of men?
 - Are we all hat and no cattle, as the phrase goes?
- I'd like to suggest that the story of Ephesus we studied this morning is like the Ghost of Christmas Future from Dickens' Christmas Carol
 - It's a story of how one Church ended, and it could be the story of how other churches will go too...but it doesn't have to be our story
 - We may live in a similar materialistic, pagan culture as the church in Ephesus did
 - But we don't have to succumb to the same temptations
 - Because we have Paul's letter written to Ephesus
 - Paul's letter is one of the notable ironies of the New Testament
 - He wrote the letter precisely to encourage the church not to fall to the very temptations that eventually did them in
 - Having lived among them for years, he knew the culture well
 - And naturally he worried for the church's future, as we heard in his parting comments in Acts
 - So Paul wrote a letter that is 50% doctrine, 50% exhortation hoping to prevent the church's downfall
 - He will explain the true riches that accompany salvation and sanctification for every believer
 - So that the church might have reason to set aside their desires for Ephesus to pursue Christ instead
 - And he calls for the church to live a sanctified life, one that witnesses to Christ in a daily way

- History records that the church didn't heed the instruction they received
 - They may have guarded the letter, they may even have understood it
 - But they certainly didn't put it into action
 - Their faith stood by itself, being useless, dead
 - And ultimately that became the fate of the church itself
- That doesn't have to be our future, if only we would hear the word of God and do it
 - Starting next week, we dive into Paul's letter seeking to hear it and do it...