

Historical Cultural Context

At the time of the writing of the letter to the Ephesians, the Roman government ruled a major portion of the known world. The Jews were a religious ethnic group who were descendants of a patriarch named Abraham through his son Isaac.¹ The children of Israel evolved into the Jewish people, which were a prominent religious group who once had commanded their own nation and had laid claim to the geographical area currently known as Palestine, which, at the time of the writing of the letter to the Ephesians, was ruled by the Romans. The Romans placed the Jews under the charge of a ruler of Jewish ethnicity who was subservient to the local Roman governor. One of the main features of the nation of Israel is that the Jewish people were zealous in the practice of maintaining their distinct religious and ethnic identity by having only limited contact with non-Jews. These non-Jews were known as Gentiles.²

Through their religious teachings, the Israelites believed that they alone were God's chosen people. They believed that the Gentiles were without hope, without God in the world, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel (the Jewish nation), and strangers from the covenants of promise. (Eph. 2:11-12).

¹ Abraham had two sons. Ishmael was the eldest son, who was born to Abraham's bond servant, Hagar. Isaac was the son of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Ishmael became the father of the ethnic group known as the Arabs. Isaac had a son named Jacob, whose name was changed by God to 'Israel.'

² The word 'gentile' had a connotation of being an unclean animal or 'dog.'

The religious writings of the Jews had promised the rise of an ideal king, or Messiah, who would restore the nation of Israel to the greatness of King David, one of its former rulers. Several decades prior to the writing of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians, an itinerant Jewish preacher and faith-healer named Jesus of Nazareth had appeared on the scene demonstrating the ability to perform miracles, signs and wonders such as raising dead people back to life, feeding thousands of people with only limited amounts of food resources, and restoring sight to people who had been born blind. Jesus claimed himself to be this Jewish Messiah, or Christ.³

Jesus attracted many followers, who thought that he was going to deliver the Jewish people from their subjugation to the Romans and restore the Nation of Israel to the former glory which it enjoyed under King David. However, Jesus had his own plans. Jesus also had detractors, primarily leaders of the Jewish religious community who felt threatened by the miracles and the popularity of Jesus. In the end, the Jewish religious leaders were able to convince the Roman authorities to execute Jesus as a common criminal. Jesus died through one of the most brutal forms of capital punishment: crucifixion on a wooden cross.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, many of his disciples reported that Jesus rose from the dead, walked around the Earth for forty days, and then ascended into heaven where he sits at the right hand of God. These disciples claimed a God ordained energy which they called the Holy Spirit. During the celebration of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the disciples first experienced a supernatural phenomenon called 'being filled with the Holy

³ The Israelites spoke the Hebrew language. However, the international trade language of the Romans was the Greek language. 'Messiah' is a Hebrew word for the ideal king. The Greek word for 'Messiah' is 'Christ.'

Spirit,' after which these disciples themselves were able to perform miracles and faith healings.

These disciples were hunted down and persecuted by the Jewish and Roman authorities, and they fled to the uttermost parts of the Earth. Everywhere the persecuted disciples went, they told people about Jesus. After hearing about Jesus, a response was required of the listeners. The listeners who believed in Jesus as Christ, the Son of the living God, often experienced the phenomenon known as being filled with the Holy Spirit. Being 'baptized with the Holy Spirit' and being 'filled with the Holy Spirit' became interchangeable terms.⁴ Some of the people who experienced this supernatural phenomenon of 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' were Gentiles, or non-Jews.

Saul of Tarsus was a Jewish rabbi of this time period. He received an excellent formal education through instruction by the religious leaders of Israel. The initial response of Saul to the message of Jesus was that Saul became one of the religious authorities who persecuted people who followed the Way of Jesus. However, while traveling on the road to Damascus, Saul had a religious experience where he encountered the risen Jesus. The encounter was manifested as a voice from heaven and a bright light, which blinded Saul. The followers of the Way later met Saul and performed a miracle which restored his sight to him. Saul changed his name to Paul, and began a series of missionary journeys, traveling all over the known world and preaching the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ. As a result of this preaching activity, Paul was often put in

⁴ There also was an initiation rite known as water baptism. These initiations were usually held in a local river. The Greek word which is translated 'baptize' literally means 'to plunge.'

prison by the Romans in a variety of cities. During these imprisonments, Paul wrote a series of epistles, or letters, to the followers of Jesus, whom he called “saints.”⁵

The followers of Jesus founded the Christian religion, which eventually became a distinct religion from Judaism. The Christian religion adopted its own sacred Scriptures known as The Christian New Testament. The letters of St. Paul make up a large portion of the New Testament. The focus of this paper is a passage from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians, Chapter 1, verses 15-23.

Content: Ephesians 1:15-23

During his third missionary journey, Paul had founded a congregation of believers in Ephesus. The City of Ephesus, a part of the Roman Empire on the east side of the Aegean sea in an area which is modern day Turkey, was founded in 2000 B.C. by the Hittites. Paul was a pastor of the congregation in Ephesus for three years, after which time a young man whose name was Timothy became the pastor. While Paul was in prison in Rome around 60-62 A.D., he wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus known as the Epistle to the Ephesians. The Epistle has six chapters: the first three chapters are theological and emphasize New Testament doctrines; the last three chapters are pastoral and focus on Christian behavior. The passages in this letter are described by Foulkes as being more lyrical than argumentative. (Power-point notes, Silk).

The key theme of Ephesians is the mystery or “unrevealed truth.” This unrevealed truth is that through Jesus Christ, the Gentiles are to be included in the family of God and household of faith as fellow heirs with the Jews of the covenants of promise

⁵ The word ‘saints’ literally means ‘holy ones.’

given originally to the patriarch Abraham. This agency of this inheritance is through the bride of Christ: the Church (or ‘called-out ones’) of Jesus Christ.

The Epistle to the Ephesians contains several eloquent prayers written to God on behalf of the congregation. The passage in 1:15-23 is Paul’s first prayer for the saints in Ephesus. Paul prays “that they may know spiritually the divine purpose regarding them, and thus be able the better to cooperate with God in the fulfillment of it.” (The Pulpit Commentary, Vol. XX, p. 35)

Paul’s prayer to God is that the saints in Ephesus will have wisdom in order to know this divine purpose which consists of, but is not limited to:

1. Knowing the hope of their calling. (The hope of their calling is to salvation from death to life, teaching others about Jesus Christ, and initiation into the Kingdom of God and all of its privileges);

2. Knowing their glorious inheritance. (Their glorious inheritance consists of houses, lands, parents, wives (Lk. 18:29), many mansions (Jn. 14:2), streets of gold (Rev. 21:21), rivers of living water, (Jn. 4, Rev. 22:1), and entrance into eternal life in the Kingdom of God);

3. Knowing God’s power towards them. (This power is the Holy Spirit).

The passage describes four ways in which the God (Father of Jesus Christ) showed His mighty power:

- 1). By raising Christ from the dead, (v. 20);
- 2). By causing Christ to ascend to his own right hand in the heavenly places, (vv. 20-21);
- 3). By putting all things under Christ’s feet, (v. 22);
- 4). By giving Christ the headship of the Church, (vv. 22-23).

(Pulpit Commentary, pp. 35-36)

In another one of his epistles, St. Paul states, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” (2 Cor. 3:17) It has been the experience of the centuries that the divine purpose of the Gospel is to bring freedom to people. Over the last 2000 years of the history of the Christian Church, this freedom has been extended to more and more segments of society. I am referring to practical real-time freedom, not a pie-in-the-sky freedom promised in an afterlife. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is among us. (Lk. 17:21 NAB) The promise of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven is gravy, lagniappe, and icing on the cake.

Application

When Paul was writing the letter to the Ephesians, he was promising the freedom of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, who were a group which the Jews at that time considered to be in the same category as dogs. In the world view of the time, this concept was a radical and revolutionary teaching!

Over the centuries, this freedom has been extended to various other ethnic groups. In the last two-hundred years, the influence of the Christian church has brought about the liberation of the African American slaves in the United States of America. In the last one-hundred years, this freedom has been extended to women and to other formerly marginalized groups of people.

In the last fifty years in the United States of America, the fastest growing minority group has been the prisoners-in-custody for crimes against the people in society. Through a variety of prison ministries, including the New Orleans Baptist Theological

Seminary FBI program, the light of the Gospel of Christ also is being offered to prisoners.

The expectation is that, over the passage of time, social, economic and political freedom will be extended to more and more groups of people, and Jesus Christ will return to rule and reign over a free people in a new heaven and a new Earth. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” (Rev. 22:20)