



Ephesians



REFORMED
EXPOSITORY
COMMENTARY

BRYAN CHAPELL

Ephesians

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

Testament Editors

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Ephesians

BRYAN CHAPELL



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2009 by Bryan Chapell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are from The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, ©1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Page design by Lakeside Design Plus

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chapell, Bryan.

Ephesians / Bryan Chapell.

p. cm. — (Reformed expository commentary)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-59638-016-5 (cloth)

1. Bible. N.T. Ephesians—Commentaries. I. Title.

BS2695.53.C43 2009

227'.507—dc22

2009017034

CONTENTS

Series Introduction	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction: Author, Setting, and Themes	xv
1. Our Calling (1:1–2)	3
2. The Father’s Purpose (1:3–6)	17
3. The Son’s Mission (1:7–10)	32
4. The Spirit’s Assurance (1:11–14)	44
5. The Church Triumphant (1:15–23)	59
6. The Gift of God (2:1–10)	77
7. Identity Found (2:11–13)	91
8. Breaking Down Barriers (2:14–18)	105
9. Built Tough, Built Together (2:19–22)	120
10. Counterfeit Callings Exposed (3:1–13)	134
11. The Prevailing Power of a Supreme Love (3:14–19)	149
12. He Is Able (3:20–21)	167
13. Owner’s Manual for the Church (4:1–16)	181
14. The Life of Lizards and Stallions (4:17–24)	201
15. Witness of Grace (4:25–32)	217
16. The Smell of Jesus (5:1–7)	235

Contents

17. The Light Bearers (5:8–21)	250
18. The Sacrificial Head (5:21–33)	270
19. The Submissive Wife (5:22–33)	290
20. The Godly Household (6:1–9)	305
21. The Armor of Faith (6:10–24)	327
Index of Scripture	351
Index of Subjects and Names	373

SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

Series Introduction

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with

the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The book of Ephesians celebrates the church of Jesus Christ, and I must do the same. I have certainly seen the church at her grumpy and mused, irritable and tear-stained worst. But I have also seen her nobility in the courage and compassion of those who have shown integrity under pressure, displayed respect despite differences, returned good for evil, distributed mercy instead of revenge, displayed humility where pride was due, and shown me Christ's love when there was no cause. Contributing to my life and soul from my youngest years are the Cane Creek Primitive Baptist Church, First Evangelical Church, Glen Ridge Presbyterian Church, Winnetka Bible Church, Woodburn Presbyterian Church, Bethel Reformed Presbyterian Church, Covenant Presbyterian Church, and the collective churches of the Presbyterian Church in America. All are of the body of Christ and, despite their rich diversity and significant differences, each has contributed to his ministry in my life. I praise God for each and all.

I am thankful for the students, colleagues, and trustees of Covenant Theological Seminary. Their encouragement and support have made my life very rich as we have walked and worked together in preparation of the next generation of church leaders. I know of no greater fulfillment than preaching to such eager, loving, and discerning hearts. By preaching the messages of this book in our weekly chapels, I have learned more of the gospel and grown in my love for the Savior we serve and the church he loves.

I am thankful for Mrs. Mary Beth McGreevy who shared her considerable talents of mind and heart to help me convert these messages from their original sermon form to a commentary format. Mary Beth's similar work

Acknowledgments

for Dr. James Boice and Dr. George Robertson, as well as her magnificent teaching abilities, have made her a major contributor to the gospel efforts of this generation.

I am thankful for my colleague, Dr. David Chapman, whose New Testament scholarship far exceeds my own. He graciously and carefully analyzed my exposition and offered much exegetical insight, counsel, and occasional correction. His help with the footnotes was extensive and invaluable. On rare occasions, we saw a passage somewhat differently. Thus, where defects are discerned they should be attributed to me.

Because this is a homiletical rather than an exegetical commentary, I have retained the sermon structure through which I first presented the exposition of the passages that follow. Though these messages have been expanded to handle additional exegetical content, I have kept the original divisions to help pastors with the duties of regular congregational preaching. This means that I have often chosen not to debate exegetical intricacies within the body of the text. I have tried to follow the preachers' old mandate to display the fruit of my labor rather than the sweat of my labor. At the same time, where there are important exegetical ideas that may further pastors' understanding of issues in the text, I have included relevant details either in expanded discussions or in footnotes. These are not meant to be exhaustive (nor exemplary of what should be said in sermons) but rather to point pastors to areas where important issues lie that may require special care or study. Since this material will receive wider distribution than the original sermons I preached, I have also occasionally changed illustrative names or details to protect identities.

I am a preacher who depends upon the scholarship of others. As I have prepared the messages and chapters that follow in this commentary, I have studied other commentaries. I am mindful that God blesses neither the ministry of preachers who think they do not need wisdom from others, nor the ministry of those preachers who will never think for themselves. So as I have sought to pray, think, and preach through these rich passages of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I have also benefited from the wisdom of many others. Since these messages were prepared as sermons rather than as essays, I rarely give precise citations for quotations or commentary information. Still, I want to acknowledge my debt and gratitude to these scholars whose work I consulted to produce the messages that appear in this book:

- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.
- Eadie, John. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*. Original 1883. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rpt. 1977.
- Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Ephesians*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005.
- Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Ephesians*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967.
- Hoehner, Harold. *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.
- Hughes, R. Kent. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990.
- Lincoln, Andrew T. *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary. Edited by Bruce Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker. Volume 42. Dallas: Word, 1990.
- O'Brien, Peter T. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

INTRODUCTION: AUTHOR, SETTING, AND THEMES

The opening words of this epistle attribute the authorship to the apostle Paul (1:1), and the author affirms his identity midway through the letter (3:1).

Critical scholars have sometimes raised questions about the Pauline authorship because the style (especially in the first half of the book) seems more abstract, more corporate, and more repetitive than other of his epistles. However, this revisionist thought not only denies the clear statements of the text, but naively assumes that an author cannot adjust styles for varying purposes. For example, while many themes and phrases of Paul's letter to the Colossians also appear in Ephesians (further confirming Pauline authorship), Paul writes Ephesians with a grander theme in mind.

Most Pauline epistles are directed to the problems or progress of an individual church, requiring an initial exposition of doctrinal truths that will drive later practical instructions. However, most scholars understand that Paul writes Ephesians as a general letter to the churches within the vicinity or cultural influence of Ephesus. For this collection of churches in a culture antagonistic to the gospel, Paul pens themes so grand they can still take our breath away, and often they move even the apostle to doxology and prayer.

Paul writes to the Ephesians during a time of his own imprisonment (see 3:1; 6:20), probably reflecting his A.D. 60–62 house arrest in Rome (described in Acts 28, and also mentioned in Col. 4:3, 10, 18). This two-year imprisonment itself follows two years of trials and incarceration subsequent to his initial arrest on trumped-up charges by his Jewish countrymen in Jerusalem. The circumstances surrounding Paul's arrest and appeal to Caesar have kept

him from personal nurture of the fledgling churches hatched from his missionary journeys. Yet, despite four years of bonds, Paul's vision is never more free and expansive. He writes with the enthusiasm of a father and the vision of a prophet to inspire the infant churches he must love from afar.

Instead of following his normal epistle pattern of introducing doctrinal development that will be directed toward individual problems, Paul immediately moves from a personal salutation to a sweeping explanation of God's eternal plan of salvation. Paul says that God predestined his love for the Ephesians before the creation of the world and will culminate his purposes for his covenant people in the church's transformation of the world (chapter 1). God's eternal plan and sovereign power include and unite all races, bring the entire world under the reign of Christ through the ministry of the church, and are so certain as to have already secured the position of believers with Christ in heaven (chapters 1–2). Paul's scope runs to the past and future horizons of eternity, bridges earth and heaven, levels all human barriers, transcends all human effort, gives heavenly origin and purpose to differing gifts in the church, and yet is driven by such an intimate love that it compels unity, mercy, and purity in the church (chapters 1–4). Ultimately believers are not only assured of a transformed world, a place in heaven, and a purpose on earth, but they are also told how to have their lives and homes indwelt by the Spirit (chapters 5–6). Finally they are assured of the power of the resurrected Christ for the defeat of Satan (chapter 6).

The practical instructions in the second half of the epistle are reminiscent of other Pauline epistles, but given the grandeur of his opening subjects, the majesty and intimacy of the God he describes, and the hope these themes provide during the apostle's own peril, we should not wonder that his mind and heart would often fill with doxology and prayer. This epistle is rightly referenced as key for establishing the truths of God's sovereignty in our personal salvation. However, when we lift our eyes beyond personal borders to share even a glimpse of Paul's expansive vision, then we, too, will join his doxology for God's amazing grace that saves individuals, empowers the church, and through both, transforms the world.



Ephesians

THE GLORY OF CHRIST IN
THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

1

OUR CALLING

Ephesians 1:1–2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph. 1:1–2)



lease pray—our church is in the fight for its life over the issue of polygamy. Please pray—rebel attacks came again this spring and forced our evacuation from the people we are trying to serve while they remain in great danger. Please pray that the catechism being formed by this new church will truly reflect the primacy of the gospel of grace and not simply establish the authority of local leaders to set new rules in reaction to generations of pagan customs. Please pray for my habitual tendency to be activity focused—acting as though my self-worth and God’s work depend on my ability to accomplish tasks.”

These prayer requests are from Rick Gray, a missionary who serves in Bundibugyo, Uganda. When I read such reports in his mission letters, the challenges that Rick faces often leave me marveling at his faith—and longing for it. Consider the overwhelming odds against which he labors: an entire society crippled by extreme poverty and torn by civil war; an indigenous church caught in familial and sexual sin that is culturally

Our Calling

sanctioned and generations old; church leadership that seeks to combat such evil with authoritarian legalism; and a heart that tries to do ministry amid all these problems with a reflex reliance on “what I can do to fix it.”

The world outside and the world inside pose such imposing challenges that it would be understandable if Rick were to wilt or run, but he does neither. Somehow faith has granted him the ability to face the reality and the immensity of his challenges and still to serve with persistence, courage, and joy. What is the source of this ability to face a challenge greater than oneself with the expectation that God has a purpose in it—that one’s efforts are not in vain? This is something all Christians want to know because we understand what it means to face challenges greater than ourselves, even if our mission field is not Uganda but our neighborhood, workplace, or home.

We know what it means to face shortages of resources and not know how or if God will supply as we wish. Many of us also know what it means to face families whose problems run through generations, to face companies or churches so influenced by the sins of our culture that they cannot even see what is wrong. And we wonder how we will make any difference because sometimes we do not see the wrong either. The challenges that are greater than we are not just outside us; they also are inside us. If we dare to look inside, we see our failures to overcome besetting sin, our persistent doubts about our capabilities to do what God calls us to do in our own homes and personal lives, and our own heart’s resistance to the humbling freedom of the gospel. The immensity of the challenges outside and inside makes us want to wilt or run from God’s calling, too. “The challenge is too much, Lord. I can’t do this,” our hearts cry. So how do we face the challenges that are greater than our resources and resistance? The apostle Paul answers for us in the opening words of his letter to the Ephesians. His introduction signals the responses of faith needed to meet the great challenges of an outside culture and our inner heart.

AFFIRM THE SOURCE OF YOUR STRENGTH (1:1)

Paul has an immense challenge before him. He is to be an apostle—a chosen messenger of the Lord Jesus to the Ephesian Gentiles (Eph. 1:1a and

Eph. 1:2a).¹ Not only is their culture historically opposed to the message of God’s covenantal love, but the covenant people—the Jews—are opposed to the Gentiles receiving that message. Immense barriers of cultural, historical, and racial differences confront the apostle. And what can he do about it? He is in prison under Roman guard.² We would understand if Paul simply said, “I give up, Lord; the obstacles are greater than I. You’ll just have to find someone else.” Yet Paul refuses to quit because he recognizes that his strength to face the obstacles lies in provisions beyond him: God’s Word and God’s will.

God’s Word (1:1)

When Paul says that he is an “apostle” of Christ Jesus, he is claiming to be an appointed messenger. The term is not incidental. The crucified Jesus who is the Christ—the Anointed One of the Jews, the long-prophesied Messiah, the One once dead but risen and alive with God, the King of the universe, the Lord who struck down the rampaging Saul on the road to Damascus to make him a redeeming voice to the Gentiles of the eternal love of God—this same Jesus Christ is the One for whom Paul has been called to speak. All of this means not only that Paul belongs to Christ Jesus, but also that Paul represents him so definitely that Paul’s message is Christ’s own message. When Paul speaks under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, Christ himself speaks. When Paul speaks of grace and peace to the Ephesians, “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” are bestowing their very own blessing on the people. What does it matter that Paul is in prison, that his deprivations are real, and that his opposition is great? He speaks for God, and knowing this fills him with courage and purpose for the challenges of his calling.

One might think that the special calling of Paul denies similar confidence to us. “After all,” one might reason, “I am not an apostle. So what does his assurance have to do with me?” The answer is that all believers benefit from

1. A Gentile audience is clear in light of the references to “you Gentiles” in 2:11 and 3:1, and Paul emphasizes his role as an apostle to the Gentiles in this letter (3:1–12; cf. Rom. 11:13; 1 Tim. 2:7). This does not preclude the possibility that Paul also addresses Jewish members of the church, which would explain his emphasis on the unity of the church (Jew and Gentile alike) in 2:11–3:7.

2. Paul’s imprisonment is implied in Ephesians 4:1 (cf. 3:13; 6:20). This would likely be the same imprisonment that Paul experienced during the writing of Colossians and Philemon, since the same messenger, Tychicus, bears the letter (Eph. 6:21–22; Col. 4:7–9; though note 2 Tim. 4:12; Titus 3:12; Acts 20:4) and also accompanies Onesimus (Col. 4:9; cf. Philem. 10–14).

Our Calling

his gift. Through the wisdom of his Lord, Paul provides a written record of God's message that is still available to us. So when we speak faithfully these truths, the Word of God is yet ours. We may face opposition, resistance, and deprivation, but the knowledge that God is yet speaking to and through us means that we are not dependent on our wisdom or authority. Whether we speak to our culture in the public arena or to a lost friend in a family room in the wee hours of the morning, God is still speaking his truth through us. We are not dependent on our words alone. His Word is here for us, and that is a source of strength when we face the limitations of our powers and the immensity of our challenges.

God's Will (1:1a)

Not only do we face challenges strengthened with the Word of God, but also with the will of God. Paul says that he is an apostle of Christ Jesus by "the will of God" (v. 1b).³ Against the great challenges that he is facing, this phrase is his defense, his offense, and his confidence.

Because Paul's apostleship is the will of God, he can *defend* his right to speak. There was a time when Paul breathed out threats against those who confessed Jesus as Lord. He held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen. We could rightly question, "What right did he have to speak for God?" None at all, based on his record. But Paul is not an apostle because of his record. He is an apostle because of Christ's redemption. Jesus had corrected him, claimed him, and commissioned him. Paul could well confess that he was the greatest of sinners, yet he could still speak for God, because it was God's will for him to do so.

What a message of comfort that is for us, too. When others who know about our past life question what right we have to speak for God—when they know the faults and failings in our personal history, we can say like the apostle Paul, "Were my speaking based on my doing, then I would have no right to speak. But God corrected me, claimed me, and commissioned me to speak of himself. Because God wants me to speak, I have a right to speak."

3. Paul's opening greetings often affirm that his apostleship is the result of God's will (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). In the context of the opening verses of Ephesians this theme is all the more significant given the further stress on God's will operative in the predestination of believers unto adoption and glory (1:5, 11–12; cf. 1:9).

But the will of God was not only Paul's defense that he had a right to speak, it was also his *offense*. Because his apostleship is the will of God, Paul could say to his hearers, "I have a right to speak, and you have a responsibility to listen." Paul is about to say some hard things to the Ephesians. He knows how easy it is for them to belittle or ignore his words. But if his speaking is the will of God, then all must heed what he says. Because Paul's calling is the will of God, he has authority.

The will of God is Paul's defense, his offense, and, finally, his *confidence*. Not only does the "will of God" give Paul authority, it also creates a powerful expectation in him: "God has a purpose for me." That is power. When a person believes that he or she has been called from darkness to light by a power greater than any challenge this world can offer, then where others see opposition that person sees opportunity.

Paul's traveling companion, Luke, gives a wonderful picture of the power coming from the confidence that our calling is the will of God. Luke records that Paul did extraordinary miracles in his previous journey to Ephesus (Acts 19:11–12). As a result, many people began to believe on the Lord Jesus, openly confessed their sins, burned their valuable sorcery scrolls, and stopped buying idols from the silversmiths. Then a silversmith named Demetrius convened his fellow tradesmen and incited a riot. He said that the message of Paul was demeaning the goddess Artemis. The whole city erupted into uproar. A maddened mob seized whatever Christians they could find, hauled them to the city theater, and for two hours threatened violence, shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

I have visited that great stone theater which seats twenty thousand people. Even today it is frightening to be there and to envision a huge throng screaming for the blood of these new Christians. But what was Paul doing in the midst of this great danger? He was confidently saying, "Let me at them now that they are all gathered together." Paul's friends had to hold him back from going before the mob. In God's providence the city clerk told the people that if they did not settle down, the Romans would come and punish them for the riot, and that disbanded the crowd. But we do not doubt the confidence of Paul, who looked at a mob breathing for his blood as a providentially gathered congregation (see Acts 19:30).

What is the effect of our believing that God's people are chosen for a divine purpose by the will of God? It is not simply affirming that some

Our Calling

missionaries in far places speak because they believe that God has called them to that purpose. Instead, we believe that no challenge facing any of us is beyond God's plan. When my friend and New Testament scholar Hans Bayer returns from ministry in economically depressed areas of the former Soviet Union, he grieves at overwhelming despair that can envelop an entire culture. Still, he returns to those areas again and again, because he says that he believes that God's Word is real, and that it is yet God's will to use his people who believe his Word to overcome overwhelming challenges.

We may face similar cause for despair, such as decades of abortion acceptance in our culture of promiscuity. Yet when we believe that the Word of God has spoken and that it is the will of God to use his people to overcome the greatest challenges, we will not only still dare to speak—we will also bother to speak. When we face the consequences and devastation of generations in poverty, we still fight for justice because we know the Savior we serve still delights in mercy and ministers his grace through it. When we face unbelief, ridicule, and long resistance to the gospel in our own families, we will not give up because of the faith that God's Word can be on our lips. We will believe that God's will in choosing us as his servants is our defense (even though others know our weakness), our offense (even though others may say we have no right to speak), and our confidence (even when there is little likelihood of change from a human perspective).

From where does this confidence come that God's will and Word enable us to overcome such overwhelming challenges? The apostle's starting point is important. Paul himself is an apostle because of the will of God (again, v. 1a). What is before his own eyes is how distant and opposed to the gospel was his own heart when Christ called him. The greatest witness to Paul of the great power of the gospel is its claim on his own heart. When he was Christ's enemy, God called him. When there was no desire to seek Jesus, the Savior made this Pharisee of the Jews an apostle of Jesus. Paul has been transferred from one universe to another, and it is plain to him that this was not and could not be his own doing but, rather, the sovereign work of God.

Once when I was attending a church meeting, this sovereign work became apparent to me. We were facing some difficult issues that could have caused us to despair. But in the middle of our discussions one man recounted how he came to Christ. Then another did the same. Then another. One after another, more men told the story of their salvation. One told of how he grew up in a

non-Christian family; another had lived a hard and rebellious life of thirty years in the military, laughing at men of faith; another acknowledged that his college days were marked by sin and the assumption that Christians were crazy. Each said that the only explanation for their new lives was that God had acted in their behalf and turned their world upside down. Many believers could say the same: “I was caught up in business pursuits . . . caught in a web of immorality and deceit . . . immersed in secular philosophy . . . raised in a non-Christian family . . . sinking in cynicism and despair . . . when God lifted me up.” There is no other explanation. God did something that cannot be explained and no one else could arrange. God changes the world by his will. This is what Paul says, and the affirmation gives him confidence in the face of his challenges.

The greatest evidence to Paul of the power of God’s Word and will to overcome overwhelming opposition is the work of God in his own life. His apostleship is not only for the attestation of the truths of God, it is testimony to the power of God—a message that life can be different, that change is possible, that the greatest challenges to the gospel can be overcome. Paul rejoices in words not unlike those from the hymn that reminds us God is “the power of my power.” Paul starts with this testimony because he knows that the Ephesians (as well as we) need to know the source and strength of spiritual power in light of what he must say next.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE STRENGTH OF YOUR OPPOSITION (1:1B-C)

Paul affirms the source of our strength, in order to help us properly acknowledge the nature of our opposition. Though it can seem overwhelming, it can be overcome.

The Opposition Seems Overwhelming (1:1b)

Our eyes do not make the appropriate U-turn at the second half of verse 1 because we are unfamiliar with the ancient world. When Paul says his letter is to the “saints” in Ephesus, we rarely catch the significance.⁴ We do not

4. A few of the earliest Greek manuscripts omit the phrase “in Ephesus.” This has led to three views: (a) the original letter included the phrase “in Ephesus,” but it dropped out in some early copies; (b) the original epistle was intended as a circular letter to many churches in Asia Minor (including the church in Ephesus), and a space was left to fill in the name of the church as the letter was read aloud; (c) the original

Our Calling

recognize that in modern terms this is something like saying his letter is to the Christians in Iran or the evangelicals working at MTV. The phrases do not seem to go together because the challenges to faith in the place these believers live are so strong.

Ephesus was the fourth or fifth largest city in the world of Paul's time. The sheer numbers would seem to overwhelm any new faith message. A missionary who flew over Calcutta for the first time sensed similar futility. Seeing the sheer mass of humanity below made him wonder what difference he could make in the city. The only thing that made him stay, said the missionary, was the belief that God was in Calcutta ahead of him. Paul must have had some of the same sense of God's prior presence and purpose, because the challenges to faith at Ephesus were so massive.

Ephesus would overwhelm not merely because of numbers but because of contrary belief. As you walk into the city ruins today, remnants of a great statue to the Roman emperor Trajan can still be seen. Trajan ruled after Paul's time, but the statue still demonstrates the attitude of the Roman rulers Paul faced. It shows the foot of the emperor upon the globe of the world, demonstrating two things: the ancients were not ignorant of the shape of the world, and Roman rule so dominated the ancient world that the emperor portrayed himself as having the authority of a god.⁵

Not only did Paul face the opposition of the Roman emperor cult, he had to face the other cultish commitments that had captured many more hearts. Ephesus was a great port on the sea. Even today as you walk the street from the ancient docks into the city, there remains a sign carved in stone that guides will say was used to direct sailors to a brothel. But the sexual enticement was not merely for the diversion of those passing through. Ancient accounts and continuing evidence amid the archaeological ruins demonstrate that the economy and culture of the entire region were as mired in materialism, sensuality, and idolatrous diversions as any modern city.

contained no reference to the specific Asia Minor church (or churches) for which it was intended (but the Ephesian church later personalized the letter to themselves). Regardless of the position taken, the cultural environment of Ephesus in the first century certainly illuminates the type of Asia Minor social context Paul's audience experienced.

5. Trajan ruled after Paul's time, but the early practice of the emperor cult in Ephesus (even prior to Paul's day) is further evidenced by the construction of the Temple to the Divine Julius and the Goddess Roma around 29 B.C. (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 51.20.6–8).

Ancient Ephesus was not more wicked than other cities. In fact, there were competing religious appeals for moral uprightness from the “solid citizens” of the city. But whether the efforts were to stifle immorality or exploit it, the city exhibited all the normal desperations of a culture in search of something divine. For example, as you walk down the main street of reconstructed Ephesus today, the most imposing ancient building is the city’s library.⁶ The building is a landmark not just of that culture’s commitment to learning but to the Greek notion (embraced in Roman culture) that true enlightenment was about rising to higher levels of mysterious knowledge—not merely knowledge of philosophy but of experience (both ascetic and erotic). The city and its surrounding culture were addicted to forms of paganism both sophisticated and sordid. And to make the situation worse, Greco-Roman culture was capable of claiming that both were religiously good. Modern scholars debate the degree of depravity present at Ephesus, but we do not doubt the darkness of a culture whose pagan gods were worshiped despite accounts of their craftiness and perversions.

For Paul to address believers in Ephesus as “saints,” a phrase of Jewish origins meaning “set apart” or “consecrated ones” (a phrase sometimes reserved for angels), would have been unthinkable—even offensive—to the Jews of that time.⁷ One commentator writes that by this terminology “Paul bestows upon all his pagan-born hearers a privilege formerly reserved in Israel for special servants (especially priestly) of God.”⁸

It was incredible to refer to those who were in Ephesus as “saints,” and maybe it was a stretch of the imagination, too. For how could there be “holy ones” in a place where politics, philosophy, economics, and religion all intertwined to capture an entire culture in pervasive sin? This is a question not only for Paul’s day. For once we face the pervasiveness of sin around us and in us today, we too may wonder if there can be any holy ones where we live.

6. The Library of Celsus in Ephesus was built soon after Paul’s time but well reflects the priorities and philosophy of that Greco-Roman era.

7. Paul commonly calls his readers “saints” in his letters, especially in his opening greetings to the churches (in all epistles except Galatians and 1 Thessalonians). The word *hagios* is actually an adjective commonly used in the Old Testament of God himself, as well as of the temple, the priests, and those sacrifices, days, and objects dedicated to the Lord’s service. The adjective was further applied to the whole nation of Israel in the Old Testament (e.g., Ex. 19:6)—a people called to be “set apart” for the Lord (e.g., Ex. 22:31; Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7–8; Num. 15:40; Deut. 7:6).

8. Marcus Barth as quoted by Kent Hughes in *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 18.

Our Calling

Can there really be saints, consecrated ones, in a culture of pervasive sin? At one level the answer must be no. For if materialism pervades a culture, how can even Christians not misplace priorities about work, money, time, and family? Can a mother of small children not on occasion feel victimized by them for denying her a better career path? If pornography surrounds us, how can even those whose marriages are healthy and whose morals are right not be tainted by impurity? In a religious culture that worships numbers, affluence, and size, are there any who are not guilty of pragmatism for the sake of success or envy of those who apparently have more than we? In a political culture convinced that human power is a path to glory, have any escaped the lust for power? In a culture where sin is pervasive, there are none who are untouched, but that does not mean that the sin is overpowering. By some measures our challenges will always appear pervasive and overwhelming, but through the gospel we should also realize that they can be overcome.

The Opposition Can Be Overcome (1:1c)

Paul identifies only the earthly location of these saints as being at Ephesus; their spiritual status he will not bind to this place. With clever parallelism in the original Greek the apostle speaks of the people of God as “the saints in Ephesus”—giving their physical locale; and as “the faithful in Christ Jesus”—giving their spiritual status.⁹ Surrounded by paganism they are nonetheless secure in Christ, not on the basis of their consecration, but on the basis of faith that unites them to Christ. Here once again, as is so often the case in the epistles of Paul, is the wonderful affirmation of the beauty and benefits of our union with Christ. Though troubles assail us and temptations attack us, yet they do not overcome us. We remain the holy ones of God because of our union with him. Again the apostle has taken us away from ourselves as the answer to the challenges that are greater than we. When sin is pervasive, we prevail not by our might but by virtue of the consecrating power of God that is ours by faith alone.

9. If the reading “in Ephesus” is deemed not to be original, then the Greek would read “to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus.” Even so, the readers are being called both “saints” and “faithful” (cf. Col. 1:2). The term “faithful” likely describes their status as those who believe in Christ Jesus (cf. 1 Tim. 4:12; also see 2 Cor. 6:15; 1 Tim. 4:3, 10; 5:16; 6:2; Titus 1:6; further cf. Acts 10:45; 1 Peter 1:21).

RECOGNIZE THE STRENGTH OF YOUR MESSAGE (1:2)

In the opening salutation Paul gives the message that he wants to impart in the rest of the book: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:2). These people are living amidst gross and powerful paganism. Their lives are threatened by it and touched by it, and yet the apostle is offering grace amidst sin, and peace amidst the storms of conscience and likely persecution. How can he offer such hope in the midst of such difficulty?

The Power of Grace (1:2a)

Paul can offer such hope because the grace and peace he offers are not of human origin. They are “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” and therefore do not have the limitations of human strength and effort. These words are common for the opening of Paul’s letters (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2; Philem. 3; also in an abbreviated form in Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1). It has often been noted that Paul combines the ancient Jewish greeting of shalom (“peace”) with a Christian modification of the common Gentile salutation. The standard Greek greeting *chairein* (meaning “hello” or literally “rejoice”) has been changed to *charis* (meaning “grace”). Thus, with these simple words Paul underscores the good news that God provides what we cannot provide for ourselves.

The divine origin of the grace in Paul’s life pervades his message in many ways. Even the order of the divine names (Lord Jesus Christ) in his salutation reflects the progress of grace in the apostle’s own life. When he was breathing out threats and seeking to earn divine approval by his zeal, this Jew formerly known as Saul was seeking to pacify God the *Father*. But then this zealot was struck down on the road to Damascus in a blinding light and heard a voice demanding, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Paul responded: “Who are you, *Lord?*” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” was the reply (Acts 9:4–5). And soon Paul begins to proclaim this Jesus as the “*Christ*” (9:22).

The Power of Peace (1:2a)

Paul’s salutation to the Ephesians echoes the progress of his understanding of overpowering grace through the sequence of his experience with the persons of the Trinity. When Paul (as Saul) was God’s enemy, the Father sent

the Son to claim him. Through no effort on Paul's part—in fact, in the face of Paul's contrary efforts—the Son took the steps to make Paul a true child of God. For this reason Paul recognizes Jesus to be his Messiah, the Christ. The knowledge of a God who acts in behalf of his people without any merit of their own is the grace self-evident in Paul's life. He proclaims this grace to the Ephesians not simply as their hope but as their peace, because such grace means that God is not holding their sin against them. God has overcome the obstacles of the human heart and the powers of human evil. Because Paul knows this grace, he knows peace—and he shares both, knowing that when grace is understood as the compassionate and prevailing power of God in behalf of his people, then peace comes.

Peace is what enabled Paul to keep going when he suffered, when churches resisted his ministry, and when his ministry seemed incapable of overcoming the obstacles outside and inside the church. Even though Paul was in prison as he wrote to the Ephesians, he remained confident of God's love and purpose. Because he was at peace, Paul's ministry continued. Through his life we understand that peace is the power for ministry, as well as the fruit of grace. Perhaps this is the reason Paul began this letter with a promise of peace, since what he will say in the remainder of his epistle about the church's ministry will be so challenging.

We should be aware of this power in peace as well. The Lilly Endowment recently recorded statistics regarding the pastors of local churches: 30 percent are doing well—they are gifted for the task and seem to be effective in their efforts; however, 40 percent are “just muddling through”—they feel largely ineffective, see themselves as stuck in dead-end locations and ministries, treading water that feels more and more like mud; the remaining 30 percent are already on the edge—they are barely hanging on, under attack, believing that they are failures, looking for any way out that they can find. What this means is that 70 percent of pastors see themselves as ineffective in ministry. The obstacles have become too big. The pastors wonder if anything will ever change, and believe they have run out of options to make a difference.

One does not have to be a pastor to wonder if the ministry challenges are too great to expect change. Some of us work with young people who, despite being in church, seem hardened to the gospel and in bondage to their culture. Others face counselees whose problems are so deep, complex, prolonged, or evil that we wonder what we could possibly say or do that will help. Others

of us work in environments where secular values are no longer questioned, making our Christian witness seem antiquated and even bigoted. We may even worship in a church compromised by generations of bitterness, license, and indifference.

If the problems are so great, the culture so wicked, the church so weak, and the people so human, then what basis is there to expect that any change is really possible?

The apostle teaches us the answer through caring opening words that reveal the key to our power. What Paul says has happened in him can happen for others in the church today. God overcame Paul's sin, his anger, his murder, and his war against the faith. If God can do that, then we can be at peace knowing that God can overcome any of the great obstacles of this life whether they are products of the culture's making or of our own weakness. We can be at peace regarding what cannot be accomplished in our own strength because God's work is not dependent on human strength. We need not despair simply because we are not strong enough to overcome our challenges. When the message of grace yields the fruit of peace, then we possess and reflect gospel power. Human weakness is not the end of the story. God is at work, so believers can be at peace and keep going. The personal peace that grace provides is the hidden power source of unvanquished ministry.

In the face of the overwhelming challenges in Uganda, Rick Gray wrote of a personal incident that reminded him of the source of his strength for facing the opposition and expecting change:

While checking the first draft of the “Katekisimo” (the new catechism being written) I became intent on finishing a certain amount of pages each day. One afternoon as time was ticking away, and my dear Mubwisi co-translator struggled to come up with just the right Lubwisi word to express the English meaning, I grew impatient with him. I became harsh and unsympathetic, impatient for him to go faster. My penchant to get the job done blinded me to Christ's presence with us, and deafened me to the Spirit's conviction of my sin.

Unless I maintain a Jesus-centeredness in the midst of ministry, I will be unable to love people well and bring the glory to God! Only as I realize my self-worth is determined by how awesome is the Savior's love for me, and not by how productive my work is for him, will I be free from my drivenness and need to accomplish tasks. When I gaze upon his nail-pierced hands and believe

Our Calling

they are actually reaching out to embrace me, then I am empowered to reach out with similar compassion and care to those around me. It is gospel love flowing through me into the hearts of others that can alone change the folks with whom I am involved in ministry. . . .

So while I believe the “Katekisimo” and Bundimulinga church discipline are all ministries that God can use to change people’s hearts and lives, I am also convinced that unless these activities are done in partnership with Jesus, and steeped in a deep sense of Calvary’s love, they can easily do as much harm as good.

What great challenges Rick faces: poverty, poor health care, poor education, immature Christians, inadequate catechisms, civil war, and personal danger. Yes, he wonders sometimes if his efforts will make any difference. But he answers such questions by embracing the truths of God’s faithfulness.

The God whose Word and will overcame the obstacles in Rick’s heart is not intimidated by opposing forces in this world. And this same loving God is still saying “grace and peace” to us, indeed, to all who call on his name. When we know his grace, then we can experience his peace no matter what challenges face us. Such peace keeps us from despair or surrender and thus is more powerful than the opposing forces in the world or in us. Peace is the evidence and expression of God’s power. Nothing in this world is more powerful than the peace that is the power of the gospel to them that believe. With such peace the gospel conquers challenges greater than we, and grants us the confidence and compassion to face them in Christ’s name and with his blessing.