

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Ministry at Ephesus

by Dan Trygg

“They traversed the Phrygia-Galatian region, being hindered by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.” Acts 16:6

“They came to Ephesus, and he left [Priscilla and Aquila] there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, ²¹ but taking leave of them and saying, ‘I will return to you again if God wills...’”

Acts 18:19-21

“Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, ... ⁸ And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. ¹¹ God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul.” Acts 19:1,8-11

The city of Ephesus was located on the western side of the Roman province of Asia, which is modern-day Turkey. It was built on the south side of where the Cayster river entered the Mediterranean Sea. Just opposite Ephesus, about a mile further to the west, was the island of Samos. There was a natural harbor formed by the Cayster and the Mediterranean, and the Cayster river was navigable for about 80 miles inland, to the east. This made Ephesus a very desirable location. It was the most accessible port in the province of Asia, and was the destination of many trade routes, radiating out from the city. The name “Ephesus” means “desirable”. It was a wealthy, highly prosperous city, the capital of Asia.

Ephesus was famous for having the largest theater in the entire province of Asia, capable of holding 25,000 spectators, and, of course, the world famous Temple of Diana (Artemis), one of the “wonders of the world”. It was 450 ft. long by 225 ft wide, and 60 ft. high. It was open to the sky in the middle, but was surrounded by a colonnaded roof, supported by 120 stone columns in twin rows. This was four times larger than the Parthenon, and twenty-one times larger than the Temple in Jerusalem. Local lore indicated that the Amazons, a civilization of warrior women, had built a city and temple in that area. They were defeated and enslaved by Greeks, who built the city that became Ephesus. It is thought that the Temple of Diana was rebuilt over the ruins of the earlier Amazonian temple. Amazons were part of the artwork in the decorative frieze above the columns that supported the roof.

Artemis is the Greek name, and Diana is the Roman name for the same goddess. She was thought to be a goddess of wild animals, forests, and the hunt. She was supposed to be an expert archer. Although she rejected marriage, and vowed to remain childless, she was seen as the goddess of chastity, midwifery and fertility. Supposedly an “image” of her fell from heaven that was kept in the Temple. Craftsmen made and sold copies of this image on coinage and as statues, for sale to visiting devotees. The version of her celebrated by the Ephesians was a many-breasted fertility goddess. (Some think that the “bumps” on her body are not “breasts”, but “bull testicles”, a sign of female dominance over males.) Women were viewed as the source of spiritual light and leadership in the Artemis religion.

Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the Roman empire, with about 250,000 inhabitants. There was a sizeable population of Jews in residence. This provided a starting point for proclaiming the gospel in that area.

It is interesting to see how God introduced the gospel there in stages. There were Jews from Asia at Pentecost, in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church. Most likely, there would have been people from Ephesus, given its wealth, prominence and accessibility. We don't know if any returned, and were able to find others to meet with. Eighteen years later, when Paul tried to go into Asia to preach, the Holy Spirit blocked the way. Instead, He directed Paul and his team to go to Macedonia and Achaia. Up until that time, Paul's methodology was to come to town, preach in the synagogue for a few weeks, start a church, and then move on. In Corinth, however, that strategy changed. God instructed him to remain there. He met with other believers in a house next door to the synagogue for 18 months. Many of the relationships he formed there became co-workers that continued to follow his ministry. When he went back to Jerusalem, at the end of that second missionary journey, he stopped briefly in Ephesus. People were responsive to his synagogue preaching, but he declined to stay, when they asked him. He left Priscilla and Aquilla there, and went on to Jerusalem. When he came back, however, he remained in Ephesus for three years. He found a place to preach, teach and answer questions every day, and he sent out his trainees into the surrounding areas. As a result, “all of Asia heard the word of the Lord”. To summarize, it seems that Paul went from simple evangelism to a more long-term discipleship model. Ephesus was the most fruitful time of his ministry. The book of Romans was written just after his time at Ephesus, as he prepared to travel through Macedonia and Achaia to take up a collection for the impoverished saints in Jerusalem. Shortly afterwards, he was arrested in Jerusalem, and spent the next several years under house arrest, both in Caesarea and in Rome. Sometime during his imprisonment, he

wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus (61 AD). Romans and Ephesians are the finest, most developed examples of his thoughts. Ephesians is definitely more warm, pastoral, personal and even deeper than the letter to Roman church.

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints, the ones being in Ephesus and believers in Christ Jesus: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 1:1,2

Paul identifies himself as the author. This is well documented, going back to the earliest manuscripts and traditions. As in many of his epistles, he refers to himself as “an apostle”. An apostle is a special term, referring to a person who was sent on a mission as a delegate or representative in place of another. More than a simple messenger, an apostle is someone who is given the authority to “stand in” for his master or superior. He is like an envoy or ambassador. The word “apostle” literally means “sent one”. Paul was chosen and commissioned by Jesus Christ through a personal encounter with Him, several years after His resurrection. Paul had seen the church as a wayward and dangerous sect that had sprung out of Judaism. Out of his zeal for God, he set out to persecute the “followers of the Way” and destroy their gatherings. He had imprisoned many, tortured them, and even had them put to death. On his way to Damascus, with letters from the high priest authorizing him to arrest followers of Jesus there, and return them to Jerusalem for trial and punishment, he suddenly was surrounded by a brilliant light. A voice spoke to him, identifying Himself as Jesus, whom Paul was persecuting. It was His will to call Paul to “carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). After several years of relative obscurity, the Holy Spirit had the prophets and teachers of Antioch commission Barnabas and him to the ministry work He had for them to do. It became apparent, in short order, that he became the primary spokesperson and representative for Christ. The point was, this was God’s desire and design. But, because God did, in fact, call him so directly, and this calling was confirmed by the impact and fruit of his ministry, Paul could confidently say that it was God’s desire and will to call him to this unique role of being a “sent-one” for Jesus Christ. He didn’t “brag about it”. He clearly saw that he did not deserve anything other than God’s wrath, because he had persecuted the church of Jesus Christ! Nevertheless, God *did* choose him, and Paul was not at all shy about openly stating this as the basis for His authority and credibility.

Then, he addressed the letter (and this was originally a *letter*, not a *book*) to “the saints, the ones being in Ephesus and believers in Christ Jesus”. We are referred to as “saints”, “holy ones”. This can be a difficult thing to understand or accept, because many of us have picked up unfounded notions of what a “saint” is. In church history, certain groups have presented “saints” as people who were more highly devoted, or more exceptional in their purity or their service, than the average person. That is a total misunderstanding of the word. A “saint” literally means “a holy one”. A “holy one” also sounds super-religious, highly devoted, and exceptional. Again, this is a wholly unjustified and erroneous understanding of the original word. A “saint” or a “holy one” is someone who has been set apart, dedicated to God, but the reference of the term is on *the point of dedication*, not on *the end result* or level of success at meeting a certain standard. It is about dedication, purpose, and identity, ...not performance. We become “saints” when we choose to commit ourselves to Jesus Christ. A “saint” is a “dedicated one”. It is a statement of direction and purpose. It is a starting point. It is a calling, but it is more than that, ...it is an identity. We aren’t *striving to become* saints. We either *are* a saint, or we *aren’t*. We either are a person who has believed in Jesus, and is choosing to follow Him, ...or we have not yet made that choice. If we believe in Jesus, then we choose Jesus. If we choose Jesus, then we begin a pilgrimage of separation from the past, ...from the old life, the old way of living, the previous identity..., and we choose to walk in a new direction, in new way of living, with a new identity and purpose. That is separation and dedication, ...that is your new identity as a follower of Jesus Christ. I am one who is set apart to live for God. Your identity and purpose changed at the moment of your faith commitment. You became a “saint” at that moment where you consciously began that journey of faith. We *have been* set apart, sanctified, and *are* saints by calling (1 Cor. 1:2).

Note Paul’s greeting: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. Most letters of that time began with the Greek word “*chairein*”, an infinitive of the word for “rejoice”. It is translated as “greetings”, but it more literally meant, “to rejoice”. That sounds like a pretty positive way to begin a letter, but it was a formality, ...almost a polite wish or exhortation that you be joyful, or that joy would come from this interaction. Jews, on the other hand, customarily greeted each other with *shalom*, meaning “peace, order, wholeness”. Paul devised his own unique greeting, using elements of both of these backgrounds. He said, “Grace to y’all and peace”. Grace is from the Greek word “*charis*”. It was a related word, but would have stood out. Instead of simply saying, “Joy to you!”, he drew their attention to the source of true joy, the grace of God and of Jesus Christ. ...and not just the grace, but also the peace that comes from God and from Jesus Christ. This draws the attention of the reader away from their emotional state *as it is*, to the graciousness of God toward them in Jesus Christ, and the reconciliation, peace and serenity that are available through Him. It was a catchy word play that could provoke deeper thought.

Finally, the next verse, verse 3, is the theme verse for the entire letter. “Blessed be God, ...who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ”. Vss. 3-14 are all one long sentence in the original Greek. Take some time to work over it in your mind. Note the “just as” in vs. 4. What are the comparisons he is making?