

EPHESIANS

Date of composition: between A.D. 60-63.

Newly baptized Gentile Christians in first-century Ephesus (western Turkey) struggled daily as they withdrew from their former pagan ways and lived their new faith. Throughout the approximately two thousand cities and towns of the Roman Empire, the people worshipped the goddess Artemis and burned incense before the imperial cult of the Emperor Nero. Ephesus was the home of the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. Her image was everywhere—from coins to statues to fountains. Artemis was the symbolic patroness of the city.

In addition to Artemis, every household within the empire honored the Emperor. All such pagan devotions were meant to reinforce Roman superiority in every way, including over the people's spiritual lives. Confronting this, Paul had an enormously difficult task ahead of him. To proclaim that "**gods made by human hands are not gods**" (Acts 19:26) struck at the heart of a city surrounded by images of its patron goddess. To preach the invisible God made known in Jesus Christ, Paul was challenging not only a religious cult but an entire civic and economic system.



Chapter 1

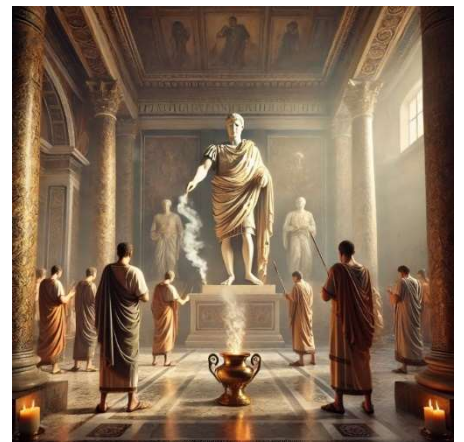
Paul begins his letter to the Ephesian Christians in the typical fashion then of first identifying himself as the sender, followed by a greeting.

Paul writes that God is the Father of all and that believers are his children. Paul uses the rare term "adoption," that is, adoption through Jesus Christ. Adoption of adult sons was common among Gentiles, but it was rare among Jews; and Paul's use of the term says that a believer is not simply "saved," but a member of God's family.

Paul also uses the term *charis* ("gift" or "grace") at the beginning or ending of his letters. In ancient Greece and Rome, relationships were generally strengthened through reciprocal gift-giving. However, gifts were not given randomly. To give indiscriminately was seen as foolish, arrogant, or an example of showing off before others. Benefactors were careful when distributing their gifts. One gave generously to those who would reciprocate so that they would later receive help in return. In turn, the recipient—honored by the gift—responded with an even greater gift. If that was not possible, he gave public praise to the gift-giver.

Paul is praising God's grace, which is not parceled out reluctantly or miserly manner, but lavishly poured out in Christ's blood for the forgiveness of sins. Paul wants this understanding of God's unrestrained generosity to give confidence to the Ephesians. For God's power to accomplish his purpose through the forgiveness of sins is not a simple washing away of evil, but is a preparation for the joyful unity of God's creation in Christ.

Then, having praised God for the plan to restore creation and reconcile believers, Paul gives thanks for the Ephesians and prays for them. For Paul has heard two things about the Ephesians: their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for the saints (fellow Christians). In



all, Paul stresses that the Church is one body, made one in Christ who is their peace.

Chapters 2, 3

As pagans, the Ephesians were once far from God and alienated from God's Chosen People, the Jews. But now they share in Christ's victory over the evil powers that kept them from the true God and his love. Thus Paul highlights the fulfillment of God's promises to unite his people into a new household, a new "temple." As the ancient world had built numerous temples to the gods, Paul declares that the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—dwells in the midst of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that he is now "**a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles**" (3:1). Indeed, the physical violence that Paul endures as a prisoner, as well as the social shame that can discredit him and his message, might lead some within the community to distance themselves from him (Galatians 2:4).

Paul is imprisoned due to charges that he brought Gentiles into the Temple's inner courtyards, areas which are reserved for Jews and circumcised proselytes (Acts 21:33). As the Jews guarded the sanctity and purity of the Temple, their leaders were given extraordinary authority by the Romans to put to death any Gentile who violated such boundaries.

However, Paul's imprisonment is also the Gentiles' glory; for their great faith and Paul's imprisonment are living proof of God's grace. Since the Romans would hardly imprison Paul for preaching a Jewish messiah to Jews, faith in the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus on behalf of *all* people is what strikes at the heart of the pagan Empire.

Chapters 4, 5, 6

While under house arrest Paul waits for an audience with the Emperor who will determine his fate. Since Paul can no longer preach in the marketplace, he asks the Ephesians to pray that he will be bold and fearless.

Paul insists that unity among Christians is achieved by submitting to each other as they would to Christ, and standing firm within the armor of God against evil forces. Yet within this unity there are distinctions based on responsibilities within the Church, and in recognition of the wider social and legal orders. Still, humility and love are always the guiding virtues for the community.

Paul focuses on unity because he knows from his prior experience with the Corinthians that internal forces can tear a community apart; that the devil looks for opportunities to defeat believers in their attempts to build unity and foster love.

When Paul says that one must "**not grieve the Holy Spirit of God**" (4:30), he is speaking of believers who, sealed with the Spirit, choose to fall back into old pagan ways because they are deceived into tolerating sinful behavior.

Paul refers to the well-known Gentile custom of the banquet, a meal marked by excessive drinking and sexual immorality. Paul writes that rather than being drunk with wine, believers should be filled with the Spirit.

With regard to slavery, Paul insists on the inherent worth of each individual who—empowered by the Holy Spirit—is called to love. While the early Christians do not challenge the Roman legal system, they do act counter-culturally by treating slaves as full members of the Church. Thus Paul addresses slaves as full members of Christ's body who await the same inheritance. In doing so, Paul honors slaves as children of God.

"**Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her . . .**" (5:25). This is the *agape* or sacrificial love that Paul says is a husband's love for his wife, and Christ's love for the Church.

Paul writes that children are also promised life in Christ as members of his body, the Church, and are co-heirs in Christ. Of course, Paul commands children to obey their parents, but also warns fathers against exasperating or provoking their children.

Note: while Ephesian parents certainly loved their children, the ancient world saw the child as a kind of “miniature adult” in need of strict discipline. Roman society believed character was set at birth, and that circumstances merely revealed what was already true about the person. Sadly, most children worked in fields or shops by the age of seven, and only about half lived beyond age ten.

In closing, Paul’s charge is to put on God’s armor, that is, the Church and her powers; for the unity of mankind in Christ foreshadows the ultimate unity of all creation under the love of God.

And as Paul concludes he admits again that he sits in chains under house arrest. He shifts the language from “prisoner” to “ambassador,” reinforcing the claim that his message is from God.

Final greeting: Paul praises his co-worker, Tychicus, whom Paul considers a dear brother and a faithful servant of the Lord. According to custom, Tychicus would have read the letter aloud to the congregation, fielding questions and offering explanations. Paul closes with wishes for peace and love with faith for all believers through God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.



TemplIn Acts 20:29, Acts of the Apostles records Paul warning the Ephesian elders:

“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock...”

Scripture scholars have interpreted the “savage wolves” in a few closely related ways, but the dominant scholarly view is that Paul is referring to **false teachers and divisive leaders** who would arise either from outside or inside the Christian community and corrupt the church at Ephesus.

A few major interpretive strands:

- Many scholars connect the “wolves” with **heretical teachers** who distort apostolic teaching for personal influence or gain. This fits the very next verse (Acts 20:30), where Paul says:

“From your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.”
- Some commentators think Paul is anticipating the kinds of false doctrines later addressed in the Pastoral Epistles, especially First Epistle to Timothy and Second Epistle to Timothy, which are associated with Ephesus and warn against speculative teachings, factionalism, and corrupt leaders.
- Others broaden the image to include **persecutors, opportunists, or morally corrupt church leaders** who exploit believers spiritually. The “wolf” metaphor was a standard Jewish and Greco-Roman image for dangerous, predatory people.
- Catholic, Orthodox, and many Protestant commentators also see an ecclesial warning: even leaders within the church can become spiritually dangerous if they abandon apostolic truth.

For example:

- F. F. Bruce interpreted the wolves primarily as false teachers who threaten the church from both outside and inside.
- John Chrysostom emphasized corrupt leaders arising from among the clergy themselves.
- Joseph Fitzmyer linked the passage to later doctrinal disturbances in the Ephesian church.

So, according to mainstream biblical scholarship, the “savage wolves” are not usually identified as one single historical group. Rather, they symbolize **destructive teachers and leaders who would corrupt doctrine, divide believers, and spiritually exploit the Christian flock in Ephesus**.

Was Ephesus at that time an especially wicked city, given that it was the home of the Temple of Artemis?

Yes — by early Christian and Jewish standards, Ephesus would certainly have been viewed as a profoundly pagan and morally dangerous environment. But scholars usually avoid describing it as uniquely “more wicked” than every other major Greco-Roman city. Rather, it was a **major center of pagan religion, magic, wealth, and imperial culture**, all of which posed serious challenges to Christianity.

The presence of the Temple of Artemis was central to that identity. The temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and made Ephesus internationally famous. Artemis worship involved:

- pilgrimages,
- sacrifices,
- festivals,
- economic activity tied to idol production,
- and religious prestige for the city.

In Acts of the Apostles 19, Luke portrays Ephesus as deeply immersed in:

- idol worship,
- occult practices,
- magical arts,
- and commercialized religion.

That chapter mentions converts burning expensive magic books and describes the riot led by silversmiths who profited from Artemis shrines.

Many scholars note that Ephesus had a reputation throughout the Roman world for:

- magic and incantations (“Ephesian letters” were famous magical formulas),
- religious syncretism,
- luxury and wealth,
- and moral looseness common in large port cities.

At the same time, historians caution against exaggerating. Ancient moralists routinely described large cosmopolitan cities — such as Corinth, Rome, or Antioch — as corrupt. Ephesus fit that broader urban pattern.

Scholars also debate how immoral Artemis worship itself actually was. Older Christian writers sometimes assumed the cult centered on ritual prostitution, but many modern historians think the evidence for organized “temple prostitution” at Ephesus is weak or overstated.

So the scholarly picture is nuanced:

- Ephesus was unquestionably a powerful pagan religious center hostile to Christian monotheism.
- Christians there faced intense pressure from idolatry, occultism, and civic religion.
- But Paul’s “savage wolves” in Acts 20 are usually understood less as pagan Ephesians in general and more as deceptive teachers and corrupt influences threatening the church from within and without.

miniature replicas of the temple,
miniature cult statues,
portable household shrines,
or combinations of these.

They served both pilgrims and local devotees.

The riot itself demonstrates how economically central Artemis was to Ephesus.

5. Public Buildings Displayed Her

Her image appeared throughout civic life:
statues in public squares
reliefs on monuments
dedications
fountains
e of Artemis