

God's Eternal Purpose in Christ and in the Church: A Study of Ephesians and Colossians

1. Background and Introduction

Ephesians and Colossians have in common their geographic location in Asia Minor and their common theme of God's eternal purpose in Christ and in the church. Although Colosse is not mentioned outside the letter to the Colossians, written to them by Paul, it was just south of the more notable Laodicea. This proximity suggests that similar problems with the church at Laodicea might have existed. The Lord addressed the church at Laodicea in one of his seven letters in Revelation 3:14-22. Later, this study will note that Paul encouraged Colosse and Laodicea to exchange letters.

Of Ephesus, the scriptures are more illuminating and shed light on the region of Asia Minor that included Colosse also.

The Common Theme of the Books

The great commonality of these two churches is how the letters written to them by Paul focus on Christ and the church as they fulfill God's eternal purpose. This importance is overwhelming, since the letters focus on the one Lord and the one church. These letters reveal an unchanging Lord, an unchanging church, and an unchanging truth, forever excluding the multiplicity of churches and modern denominations with their multiple and universal ways of salvation.

Inspiration reveals the eternal nature and unity of this thesis in each book: For Ephesians, the thesis statement is in Eph 1:9-10:

9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

The thesis of Colossians, which is similar in wording and exact in meaning, reads in Col 1:19-20:

19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.



No other Christ reigns; no other plan will suffice; no other doctrine will instruct.

Paul's Interaction with the Church of Ephesus

Paul first arrived in Ephesus in Acts 18:18-22, where he left Priscilla and Aquila and sailed on to conclude his missionary journey at Antioch. When Paul returned to Ephesus in Acts 19:1-7, he taught those who were baptized in the baptism of John to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus:

19 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples 2 and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

3 So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

4 Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. 7 There were about twelve men in all.

This passage alone illustrates the unity of the doctrine of Christ as it demands a specific baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus. No other teaching on baptism will do.

In Acts 19:23-27, the silversmiths assaulted Paul and the disciples at Ephesus, verbally and physically, for their opposition to idolatry. In Acts 20:16-19, Paul called the elders of the church at Ephesus to Miletus where he spoke of the impending apostasy in Acts 20:27-31:

27 For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. 28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

It was at Ephesus that Paul fought wild beasts, according to 1 Cor 15:32.

The Lord's Letter to Ephesus in Rev 2:1-7

Evidently, by the time that John wrote his letter in Rev 2:1-7, the Ephesian church had overcome the influence of idolatry and false apostles and the general wickedness toward which most of Paul's letter aimed. That they had left their first love, perhaps, speaks to their lukewarm departure for the truth

2 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

The Lord's Letter to Laodicea

At the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians in Col 4:16, he tells them to exchange their letter with the one that he wrote to the Laodiceans:

16 After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

This letter by Paul to Laodicea has long since disappeared. However, John did record a letter to the Laodiceans. Since Laodicea was only 10 miles north of Colosse, the Lord's letter to the Laodiceans in Rev 3:14-22 may reflect the regional influences on the church at Colosse:

14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Outline of Lessons from Ephesians and Colossians

1. Background and Introduction
2. God's Eternal Purpose in Christ – Ephesians 1:1-10
3. God's Eternal Purpose in the Church – Ephesians 1:11-23
4. Salvation by Grace through Faith – Ephesians 2:1-10
5. Reconciliation in Christ and in the Church – Ephesians 2:11-22
6. The Revelation of God's Mystery – Ephesians 3
7. The Unity of the Spirit through the Bond of Peace – Ephesian 4
8. Children of Light in the Lord – Ephesians 5
9. Strength in the Lord and His Mighty Power – Ephesians 6
10. The Fullness of God Dwelling in Christ – Colossians 1

11. Human Laws and Regulations Rejected – Colossians 2

12. Hearts Set on Things above in Everything – Colossians 3

13. Final Instructions and Close – Colossians 4

Study Questions from the Scriptures

1. Eph 1:9-10: What did God make known to us? What things did he bring together? In whom were they brought together?
2. Col 1:19-20: In whom does all fullness dwell? What things were reconciled to God? Through what was peace made?
3. Acts 18:18-22: Whom did Paul leave at Ephesus? Where did Paul go?
4. Acts 19:1-7: What baptism were the Ephesians practicing? In whose baptism did Paul instruct them? How did they respond?
5. Acts 19:23-27: Why did the silversmiths turn on Paul and the faithful Christians?
6. Acts 20:16-19: What was the duty of the elders at Ephesus? Who was going to come into the church? From where would these men arise?
7. 1 Cor 15:32: What special trial did Paul face at Ephesus?
8. Rev 2:1-7: What were the number of good things the church at Ephesus had done? What did the Lord hold against them? What were they told to do? What reward did the Lord promise to them who overcame?
9. Col 4:16: With whom were the Colossians to exchange letters?
10. Rev 3:14-22: Why would the spit the Laodiceans out of his mouth? What did the Lord counsel them to buy? Whom does the Lord rebuke and discipline? What did he promise them who overcame?