



## REMAINING FAITHFUL IN THE MIDST OF IDOLATRY & IMMORALITY EPHESIANS 1:1-2

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I often find myself complaining about the moral and spiritual decline in our world. And rightly so. The percentage of people in the U.S. who regularly attend church has dropped to a historic low. And many of the churches that people do attend have long since abandoned the biblical gospel.

I'm sure that many of you lament the condition of our own city as you drive to work each day. There's simply no way to avoid the sight of things that we know are an offense to God. Perhaps your regular route takes you by one of the countless massage parlors in our city, many, perhaps most of which offer services far beyond that of an ordinary massage. It may be that you take note of the hundreds of marijuana shops that have become a commonplace today. Add to that the numerous non-Christian religious groups who have set up shop in close proximity to your home or place of business. It may be Buddhist or Islamic temple or a Mormon church or the gathering place of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

As if that weren't bad enough, at least once a year you may have to change your normal route to work because of a gay pride parade that has blocked off all traffic. I'm sure there are additional sites and situations that you and I face on a daily basis that are grievous and ungodly. And so our complaint grows ever more intense and loud and angry.

Without in any way wishing to minimize the sad state of life in our country and in our cities today, ***nothing that we experience in Oklahoma City could even remotely compare with what Christians in first-century Ephesus confronted every day.*** Not just once a week or once a month or an annual celebration of sexual deviancy. No, the Ephesians were surrounded every day in every way by people and religious activities and all manner of idolatry that we find almost impossible to believe.

### *The City of Ephesus*

Back in 1991 I had the privilege of joining a large group of individuals on a trip that followed the missionary journeys of Paul. Although we didn't make it to all of the places where he ministered, we did visit Athens, where Paul delivered his famous speech to the Athenian philosophers as recorded in Acts 17. We also spent time in Corinth and in Rome. But the highlight of the trip for me was the entire day we spent in Ephesus. At the time we were there, the temperature reached 110 degrees. No one was permitted to walk its streets unless you had a hat or umbrella and a plentiful supply of water.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians the city had a population approaching 250,000. Only Rome and Alexandria were larger. It was often referred to as the "mother city" of Asia. In the era of the NT Ephesus served as the major port city for the west coast of Asia. Today it is regarded as the most archaeologically excavated city in the world.

All along the streets there were signs of what have now been identified as brothels or houses of prostitution. We made our way to the famous amphitheater where Paul was taken and threatened within an inch of his life. Although much has been destroyed over time, it is still an impressive sight. I've included a picture of it at the end of these notes.

But the central and most dominating feature of ancient Ephesus was the temple of Artemis. You have no doubt heard of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Artemis was one of the seven.

Those seven ancient wonders are Colossus of Rhodes, Great Pyramid of Giza, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Lighthouse of Alexandria, and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Of these wonders, 4 were destroyed by an earthquake, 2 were destroyed by fire, and 1 is still standing. The one that remains is the Great Pyramid of Giza.

The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus was built in 550 BC and was destroyed by fire in 356 BC. The Temple was built and rebuilt over the course of many years. Today the temple no longer exists.

Unlike many other temples of its time, it was built of marble and glittered with gold. The temple's foundation was over 180 by 350 feet, and its steps led to a high platform on which stood more than one hundred beautifully sculptured columns that supported its roof. At least twice the size of the Parthenon, it was so breathtaking it was said to rise to the clouds.

The temple housed many incredible works of art, but the most famous was the statue of Artemis herself. Although the original no longer exists, it was thought to have been made of gold and other beautiful materials. Although destroyed and rebuilt many times, we have a photograph of one of the statues of Artemis that has survived. A picture of it is included at the end of these notes.

If you look closely at the statue, you will see a row of lions, steers, bees and other animals depicted on her skirt. These were designed to emphasize the authority she had over all the harmful spirits of nature. You can't see it, but her necklace is composed of the signs of the zodiac to remind those who worshiped her that she exerted a power greater than that of whatever power there might be in the stars and planets above.

One obviously cannot help but notice the 18 bulbous objects on her chest. Many believe these are breasts designed to highlight Artemis as the goddess of fertility. Other scholars dispute this explanation. Some insist that at minimum these "breasts" signified the nourishing power to those who would worship at her feet. More recently it has been suggested that these were leather goatskin pouches that were filled with magical material and were used as fetishes. But the most important thing to remember about Artemis is that she was believed to have power and authority over all demons. People would regularly come to the temple to seek protection as well as blessing for prosperity.

Twice, every week, without exception, a procession or parade marched through the streets of Ephesus in her honor, with her devotees praising her and petitioning her for blessings, crying aloud and repeatedly, "Great is Artemis of Ephesus!" Just try to imagine: two times every week of every year such a parade filled the city of Ephesus. As Clinton Arnold has said, "the influence of this goddess and the cult attached to her permeated every area of life for those who lived in this city" (31). Artemis was believed to be the daughter of Zeus and was regularly hailed as Queen of Heaven and Lord and Savior.

It simply isn't possible to overstate the extent of her influence and the power that people believed she wielded. She was worshiped as "supreme in divine power" (Arnold, 21). In addition to Artemis as many as 50 other 'gods' and 'goddesses' were worshiped there. The authorities in Ephesus couldn't have care less about which 'god' you worshiped. What set Christianity apart was the insistence that there is only one God and that all others are expressions of demonic idolatry.

Artemis, or Diana, was also viewed as a goddess of the underworld. She is portrayed as possessing power and authority over the many demons of the dead and the demons of nature. She could be invoked by her followers to raise the dead, heal the sick, and protect the city. It was thus quite common for people in Ephesus to pray to Diana, to seek favors from her. Shouts of praise were heard virtually every day: "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" Here is one example of a prayer directed toward Artemis:

"O Great Artemis of the Ephesians, help! Display your power upon this young man who has died. For all the Ephesians know, both men and women, that all things are governed by you, and that great powers come to us through you. Give to your servant what you are able to do in this regard. Raise up your servant Domnos" (cited in Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*, 22).

Ephesus was a hotbed of magic, sorcery, and divination. The city was famous not only for the Temple of Artemis but also because of what came to be known as the "Ephesian Letters." These six magical terms/names (*askion*, *kataskion*, *lix*, *tetrax*, *damnameneus*, and *aisia*) were alleged to possess power that would ward off evil spirits. People used them as either spoken charms or written amulets to obtain power and to protect them from harm. According to one popular story of the day, an Ephesian wrestler was unbeatable in the ancient Olympics because he wore the "Ephesian Letters" around his ankle. When this was discovered by the officials it was removed, after which he proceeded to lose three consecutive matches!

Given the spiritually dark, idolatrous, and immoral lifestyle of so many in Ephesus, I find it remarkable that Paul would open his letter to the Ephesians in the way he does. You might not think there is much in the first two verses, but I beg to differ. I think Paul is writing strategically in light of what he knows about where the Christians in Ephesus are living.

Let me remind you once again that Ephesus was a hotbed of the magical arts. Curses, incantations, and all manner of appeal to the forces of darkness were daily fair in Ephesus. And yet Paul has no problem in reminding them of what they knew all too well: they lived in Ephesus, the home of the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Now, you may be wondering why I took the time to describe the unimaginably dark, sinister, and demonic atmosphere that permeated the city of Ephesus. Is there anything of value in our knowing what the Christians in Ephesus faced every day of their lives?

Yes. Think deeply with me about the implications of Paul describing the believers there as “saints” and the “faithful” in Christ Jesus. If nothing else, it means that Paul believed it was possible to live in that sort of cesspool of idolatry and immorality and still retain one’s faith in Jesus!

Every time I read these opening words, I ask myself why Paul didn’t say, “Hey, Ephesians, *get the heck out of town!* There is danger and temptation and immorality and demonic activity and idolatry on every corner. There simply isn’t any way for you to remain faithful in that sort of environment. If you linger long there you will surely end up denying the faith. I refer to you as ‘saints,’ as those set apart and consecrated unto God by his grace, but living in Ephesus puts you in jeopardy of being sucked back into the sinful muck and mire of unbelief and immorality. You won’t be saints for long if you stay. You will have a terribly difficult time remaining faithful to Jesus if you don’t get out of town now.”

Why didn’t Paul give them that sort of advice? I think the answer is found here in vv. 1-2 and elsewhere in the letter. Paul will make it ever so clear that real power, the power of God the Holy Spirit, has more than adequately supplied the church in Ephesus to resist temptation, to not live in fear of Artemis or the countless demons associated with this idol. Paul does this here in vv. 1-2 in five ways.

**First**, we must never rush past the opening words of a letter such as Ephesians, as if what Paul says here is nothing more than a literary formality. It is crucial for the Ephesians, and for us, to recognize that what is being written comes from a man who by God’s sovereign will was called and empowered to be an apostle. It may not mean much to us today, but to a people who were surrounded on a daily basis by the cult of Artemis, it was of utmost importance. Paul is saying, “Believers in Ephesus, don’t listen to Artemis or the demons that surround her. I come to you as an apostle of Christ Jesus himself. I am his representative. I am authorized to speak on his behalf. Listen to him, through my words. Turn a dear ear to what Artemis might say. Pay her no heed. As Christ’s apostle I speak the words of him who is infinitely superior to Artemis and all her alleged power.”

Paul is also quick to acknowledge that he didn’t nominate himself for this job. He isn’t an apostle because of his own obedience or choice. “I’m not an apostle,” says Paul, “because of my own virtue or accomplishments. In fact, I hold this position and gifting solely due to the sovereign will of God.” This is reaffirmed in Galatians 1:15 where Paul says that God “set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace.”

Paul didn’t ask for the job, didn’t aspire to the job, didn’t apply for the job, sought no human nomination and looked for no human confirmation. Contrast this with many who loudly declare and promote themselves as self-appointed “apostles” today.

This emphasis on the divine initiative in Paul’s apostleship means, as John Stott has said, that we “must listen to the message of Ephesians with appropriate attention and humility. For we must regard its author neither as a private individual who is ventilating his personal opinions, nor as a gifted but fallible human teacher, nor even as the church’s greatest missionary hero, but as ‘an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God’, and therefore as a teacher whose authority is precisely the authority of Jesus Christ himself, in whose name and by whose inspiration he writes” (Stott, 21-22).

**Second**, Paul identifies and addresses the recipients of this letter as “saints.” Paul regularly describes *all* believers this way, not just a select or elite few (cf. 1 Cor. 1:1-2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1). The OT background for this terminology is found in Exod. 19:6. The focus is more on *separation* than *sanctity* (although the former should always lead to the latter). It has in view more one’s *position* than *purity*. It is important to know that the word “saint” (as with the word “priest”) is always found in the *plural* in the NT, with but once exception (Ph. 4:21; but even there, Paul refers to “every” saint!). What are the implications of this?

**Third**, in spite of the countless temptations the residents of Ephesus faced every day, in spite of the pressure put on them by neighbors and friends, Paul is confident that they are “faithful” in Jesus. The term translated “faithful” refers not so much to reliability or trustworthiness (a passive meaning, pointing to their character) but to belief or faith (an active meaning, pointing to their activity). In 2 Cor. 6:15 the word stands in contrast to “unbelievers” (cf. 1 Tim. 4:10,12; 5:16; 6:2; Titus 1:6).

As simple as this one word may seem, its force and significance are magnified when we remember who it is that Paul describes this way. It would have been so very easy to join the majority in the worship of Artemis. It would have been financially lucrative for them to identify with this demonic cult. They could have avoided persecution. They wouldn’t have to fear being ostracized by friends and family. But their faith in Christ Jesus and their commitment to him all along was steadfast and unshakable. I must confess that I am rebuked by this. I all too easily yield to the allure of the world around me with all of its glamour and prestige and power. But if these early Christians can maintain their faith in a city as corrupt and demonically energized as Ephesus, then surely we who live in Oklahoma City can do the same.

But how did they find the strength to remain vigilant and devoted to Christ? The answer comes in v. 2.

**Fourth**, God does not leave them, or us, with no weapons with which to fight. He abundantly supplies to us both his “grace” and his “peace.” Those of you who were here when I began our series in 1 Thessalonians will remember this. But many of you have come to Convergence since then and I do not want you to miss out on one of Paul’s most important statements.

But first, let me remind you that “grace” is not merely a principle or a basis on which God saves us. It is surely that. We are saved “by grace”, by his unmerited favor, as Paul will make clear in Ephesians 2:8. But in numerous places in the NT grace is simply a way of referring to ***the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit***. Grace, then, is more than a principle. It is a power, God’s power, the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is what Paul prays will be imparted to the believers in Ephesus and to us today.

Here in Ephesians 1:2, Paul closes his opening salutation with the words: “Grace **to** you and peace.” And in the last verse of this epistle, he says “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be **with** you” (Eph. 6:24). My point is that in every single one of Paul’s letters, he concludes his letters by saying, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be *with* you” (1 Thess. 5:28). In 1 Timothy, he shortens it and simply says, “Grace be with you” (1 Tim. 6:21).

Once again, those of you who have sat under my preaching for the past 14 years know well my love of prepositions. They are rich and deep and glorious and communicate wonderful truths to our hearts. So let me once more point out to you that at the beginning of Paul’s letters he says, “grace and peace be **TO** you,” while at the close of his letters he says, “grace be **WITH** you.” Why does he shift from the word “to” to the word “with”? Am I making a mountain out of a grammatical molehill? I don’t think so.

I must be honest with you when it comes to what I’m about to say. It didn’t originate with me. I learned of this from my friend John Piper. Therefore, it seems only fitting that you should listen to how he explains it. John explains the meaning of these two prepositions and why they are crucial for our Christian lives:

“The meaning I would suggest is this: at the beginning of his letters Paul has in mind that the letter itself is a channel of God’s grace *to* the readers. Grace is about to flow ‘from God’ through Paul’s writing *to* the Christians. So he says, ‘Grace *to* you.’ That is, grace is now active and is about to flow from God through my inspired writing *to* you as you read – ‘grace [be] *to* you.’”

What I’m trying to say, what I believe Paul is saying to all of us, is that when we open our Bibles and read them or meditate upon them or hear them explained and applied by a teacher, more is happening than simply the utterance of words and the hearing of those words. More is happening than merely having our minds filled with new ideas or challenging doctrines. As Piper says, “grace is about to flow ‘from God’ through Paul’s writing *to* the Christians.” Now, let’s return to the quote from Piper.

“But as the end of the letter approaches, Paul realizes that the reading is almost finished and the question rises, ‘What becomes of the grace that has been flowing *to* the readers through the reading of the inspired letter?’”

Let me once again pause and highlight this point. Whether it is on a Sunday evening or a small group gathering in someone's home, when our time together in God's Word comes to a close, God's activity in our hearts doesn't cease. The grace that he quite literally imparts to us by means of the Scriptures abides with us and continues to strengthen and encourage us in whatever we face each day. Now, back again to Piper.

He answers with a blessing at the end of every letter [except Romans]: 'Grace [be] *with* you.' *With* you as you put the letter away and leave the church. *With* you as you go home to deal with a sick child and an unaffectionate spouse. *With* you as you go to work and face the temptations of anger and dishonesty and lust. *With* you as you muster courage to speak up for Christ over lunch.

What then do we learn from Paul's unbroken pattern of beginning and ending his letters in this way ('Grace be to you.' 'Grace be *with* you.')

... We learn that grace is ready to flow to us every time we take up the inspired Scriptures to read them. And we learn that grace will abide *with* us when we lay the Bible down and go about our daily living" (*Future Grace*, 66-67).

The point is that when the Scripture text is read, as it was tonight, and as it is read every week, this is not merely some religious ritual that we tag on to our service. ***Something of a profoundly supernatural nature is happening***, and we would do well to pay heed to it. I decided to highlight this fascinating use of prepositions to remind us all that when Paul wrote "grace to you and peace" he means that when you hear the truth of how hope produces endurance you would realize that this is far more than a collection of words that strikes your ears. It is also the instrument or means or channel or conduit, if you will, by which God's grace enters into you and transforms mere words into power and strength to persevere when times are tough.

If you still wonder why Paul didn't say something more powerful to help the Christians in Ephesus stay true and faithful to Jesus, I contend that there is hardly anything with greater force in the life of a believer than the empowering work of the Holy Spirit and the calming, consoling reality of the very peace of God himself in our hearts. They don't really need a pat on the back or a dose of psychological insight. They need God himself to sustain them as they encounter daily the taunts of idolaters and the temptations into sexual immorality.

Whenever they received a letter from an apostle, the habit in those days was to gather together and have an individual or several individuals read what Paul wrote aloud, for all to hear. And when they heard the opening words, "grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," they knew they that Paul was speaking with divine authority. They knew that grace was coming into them through his words.

Some have wondered why there is a reference to God the Father and God the Son, Jesus Christ, but nothing is said about God the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is mentioned here. The "grace" that is imparted to them through the reading of Scripture is nothing else than the person of the Spirit who empowers them to remain faithful and holy to the Lord.

But what happens when they finish reading the biblical text? Does the grace imparted to them through Paul's inspired words disappear, vanish into thin air? No. Paul realizes that they will walk out of the church gathering into a cesspool of wickedness and magic and demonic activity. And so he says, "grace be with you." With you as you face the temptation to join the majority in the worship of Artemis. With you as you encounter temptation at your place of business. With you as you pass by the many houses of prostitution. With you as you interact with your family at home. May this grace, this powerful indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit envelop your life and strengthen you to walk faithfully as those who are called to be saints.

I'm sure you will recall what Michael shared with us in his sermon on Acts 19:23-41. A local silversmith named Demetrius made a mountain of money by selling silver shrines of Artemis. Paul's ministry would clearly have diminished the income Demetrius otherwise would generate. Enraged by the impact of Paul's words, the silversmiths began chanting, for more than two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." They rushed into the amphitheater to continue their demonstration (Acts 19:28-29). Eventually, the town clerk intervened in order to calm the crowd, warning them that they were in danger of being charged with rioting (Acts 19:35-40).

Luke also refers to the "sacred stone that fell from the sky" (Acts 19:35). This term literally meant "fallen from Zeus," and was originally used to denote "meteorites viewed as heaven-sent cult objects" (BDAG, 250-51). This may imply that a meteorite was somehow incorporated into her cult statue, or that the statue itself was believed to have fallen from heaven.

One more thing. I can't pass by these opening verses without saying something about Paul's sense of geography. Where **are** the Ephesians? That might strike you as a silly question. After all, they are "in Ephesus" (v. 1b). That is where they live and work and raise their families. But at the same time, they also live "in Christ Jesus." And I can assure you that as much as they might be grateful for their city on earth, of far greater importance to them is that they are citizens of a heavenly city. They are in Christ Jesus. No matter how much influence the city of Ephesus might exert on them, the greatest force in making them who they are is the risen and exalted Christ.

Thus, there are two levels of experience for the believer, two kingdoms of which he/she is a citizen, two perspectives from which we may view life. For us today, we are in/at Oklahoma City. In a real sense, that is *where* we are. But it cannot and must not ever exhaust *what* we are. We are more than citizens of an earthly city or state or country. Bishop Handley Moule wrote the following of the same statement in Colossians 1. I have taken the liberty of replacing "Colossae" with "Ephesus":

"They moved about Ephesus 'in Christ.' They worked, served, kept the house, followed the business, met the neighbors, entered into their sorrows and joys, . . . suffered their abuse and insults when such things came – all 'in Christ.' They carried about with them a private atmosphere, which was not of Asia but of heaven. To them Christ was the inner home, the dear invisible but real resting place. . . . And what a rich gain for poor Ephesus, that they, being in Him, were in it" (28).

**Fifth**, Paul not only prays that God's grace would come to them as they read and ponder the Scriptures. He also prays that God's "peace" would be imparted as well. Try to envision the inner turmoil and emotional upheaval that would be experienced by those who daily were confronted by the spiritually dark atmosphere in Ephesus.

I can well imagine the intense inner pain and feelings of chaos experienced by those in Ephesus. All of us today know full well what it is like when everything seems to be out of control. The anxiety and fear of being surrounded by so much demonic activity can create doubt in our hearts about whether God is truly in control. Paul understood this far better than we do. He also understood the discombobulating emotional roller coaster that these Ephesian believers experienced on a daily basis. How does a person maintain their spiritual composure in such circumstances?

Paul's answer is "grace and peace" imparted directly into the hearts of God's people. Let me remind you of what Paul said in Philippians 4:6-7.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The anxiety and fear and uncertainty and doubt that might well plague the people in Ephesus, as well as all of us in OKC, can only be reduced to calm tranquility by the impartation of God's peace. Note well. This isn't simply a "peace" that comes from God. This is God's peace. The very peace that God himself experiences at all times can be yours. This is divine peace designed to overcome all inner turmoil and anxiety.

### *Conclusion*

In comparison with first-century Ephesus, we today have it easy. But that doesn't mean we aren't faced with demonic activity and pressure to conform to the depraved ethics of countless unbelievers. Is it possible for us to remain "faithful" in Christ Jesus? Yes, because the very same "grace and peace" that was imparted to the Ephesian Christians is made available to you and me today. It comes to us through prayer. It is imparted as we worship and celebrate the Lord's Supper. It enters our hearts when we encourage one another and minister to one another through the spiritual gifts that the Spirit distributes. But perhaps most important of all, "grace and peace" are infused into the hearts and minds of people like us when we read and hear and study and ponder and believe the words of God that come to us through the writing of an apostle like Paul.

Now, as you go, may the grace and peace of God go **with** you!







VENKATESWARA  
MURTI  
TIRUMALA