

Study 1: Introduction

Introduction. As you study the Bible, you will discover something important: the Bible isn't just a book; rather, it's an entire library. Many human authors have contributed to it, men with widely varying backgrounds -- common laborers, scholars, kings, priests, fishermen, tax collectors, all kinds of people -- and they lived during a period that encompassed more than a thousand years. Because of this diversity of authorship spread over such a long period of time, at first glance the Bible is an apparent hodge-podge of literary types and styles. It contains history, scraps of battle songs, poems, family trees, legal codes, plays, short stories, prophecies, political speeches, sermons, letters to individuals and groups, to mention just some of its elements.

But the most important thing you will discover is that throughout the entire work there is one unifying thread which draws it all together. The Bible is the story of God's activity in human history; but even more than that, it's the story of God's love for His People: God's love story.

From the very dawn of time, God has been working out a plan to bring humanity to salvation. And that plan was carried out in a little corner of the Middle East, God's workshop, where he prepared all mankind for the coming of Jesus Christ and His Church.

God revealed Himself, not suddenly or completely -- for as the Bible tells us, "Who can see God and live?" -- but step by step, a little at a time, as His People were ready for it. The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* states it best in his opening words: "*In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets...*" [Heb 1:1] Our task during this Bible Study will be to trace this gradually developing communion with God through the record given us in the pages of the Bible.

Perhaps unexpectedly, we're going to begin near the end, with St. Paul. Why here and not at the beginning? It's no mystery. To understand the full message of the Bible, we will begin, not with the first faint outlines of God's plan, but with its full development as found in some of the Bible's concluding pages. By looking first at the reality of God's finished product, we will more readily recognize its ancient shadows and the signposts that point the way to it.

Keep in mind that anyone can read the Bible; but you can enter into the mystery of God's plan only by prayer and faith. You are not only undertaking a study, you are also undertaking a meeting with God!

Reading. Now open your Bible and read: Letter to the Ephesians, chapters 1 through 4.

[St. Paul's adventures in Ephesus are described in the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 19 and 20.]

Background. The people of Ephesus were especially close to St. Paul and the city has a prominent place in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Ephesus, an important center of trade and learning, boasted a famous shrine to the goddess Diana and its merchants did a brisk business in the manufacture and sale of her souvenir statues.

St. Paul had good reason to remember Ephesus, since he spent over two years there. At one point during this time he escaped an Ephesian lynch mob intent on killing him. Like Paul, the Christians of Ephesus had also undergone violent persecution.

This letter was written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. Considering the close bonds of love and friendship between Paul and the Ephesian Christians, the letter's obvious impersonal tone might seem surprising. But Paul didn't write the letter to discuss personal issues; rather he wanted to address the purpose of God's activity in human history leading up to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and extended and continued in His Church. It was a message intended for wide circulation, not just for the Ephesians. Paul probably sent it first to the Ephesians because of the old and enduring friendship between them. As was common at the time, copies were no doubt quickly made and dispatched to other Christian communities.

Key Passages. Your Bible is a book you will return to every day, so don't hesitate to mark or underline key passages, to write notes in the margins, to make the message of the Bible your own.

- † **Eph 1:9-10.** Here St. Paul tells us of God's redemptive plan for humanity, long a secret, now fully revealed in Christ. This plan of God for our true happiness gives union and harmony to the whole of creation, all ages, and all events. It gives life real direction and purpose. These two verses form a part of a larger section [Eph 1:1-15] which is a powerful and inspired decryption of Christ's saving work. It is sometimes called a "*Hymn of our Redemption.*"
- † **Eph 2:11-22.** In some respects this is the key passage of Ephesians. All people are now called to the life-giving intimacy of God's family; all are now inheritors of God's ancient promises to a single nation, the Jews. Try to imagine what wonderful "good news" this was to the Pagan world of St. Paul's day. Many of the period's greatest philosophers could find little or no meaning to life; and slavery, the lot of so many at the time, offered little joy. But through the Good News people learned that life was important, that each person was important, that all were members of the household and family of God.
- † **Eph 3:8-10.** Here St. Paul addresses the solidarity between Christ and His Church. The Church, the extension and presence of Christ down through the ages to the end of time, continues Christ's work on earth carrying forward God's great plan for our salvation.

In the above verses Paul tells us what the Bible is all about. He describes it as a record of God's efforts to prepare humanity for the Church of which we are all members. For we are the pilgrim People of God. We are the Church. And our roots go back through the centuries.

We are there with Moses at Sinai, with David as he brings the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, with Ezra as he reads the Law to the remnant of God's People after the exile. We are there beneath the Cross on Calvary; we are there at the Ascension; we are in the upper room when the Holy Spirit comes and sends His Church out into the world. We are present at each of these momentous events because we are the People of God, and nothing has happened or will happen to His People that is foreign to us.

Questions:

1. Do you think these four chapters of Ephesians are a good statement of what it means to be a Christian? Explain.
2. In the light of St. Paul's words in Eph 2:19-22, is it correct to say that the whole Bible puts forth one basic idea? If so, what is it?
3. What does it mean to say that the Church is the fullness or completion of Christ? [Eph 1:22-23]

Notes: