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# Introduction

Twenty-first century American religious culture and that of ancient Ephesus in the time of the apostle Paul have had much in common. This book is about both where we live and also a city 2000 years removed. It is about religious beliefs and expressions that impacted Ephesian Christians' spiritual voyage that is now history. It is also about the religious voyage of people following Christ today. The book focuses on three of the apostle Paul's letters: Ephesians, 1 Timothy, and 2 Timothy. Each was written to Christians in Ephesus (and the first perhaps to the entire Roman province of Asia).

*Deceiving Winds* looks at Paul's letters, not chapter-by-chapter, but instead by key religious questions that had surfaced in Ephesus and Asia. However, a complete reading of the letters helps set the context of the questions. Interestingly, the same questions have surfaced in our day. For example, will following Christ lead to financial success? Is apostolic teaching from God? What does it mean to be a Christian? What should we make of sensational worship and instrumental music as part of Christian assemblies? What are the characteristics of the roles of husband and wife in a marriage? What role should women have in the worship, work, and leadership of the Church? Similarly, what is the role of a church elder/ pastor and who should staff the role? How can Christian adults talk to children, teens, and young adults about religious matters without frustrating them? How should Christians reach out to people of other religions and how much should they embrace their beliefs and practices? What about goddess worship and religious mysticism?

Some of the questions have carried prominence for decades (and longer) in a society filled with images and news of the feminine. Newsstands, television broadcasts, and Internet websites abound with images of female politicians, entertainers, journalists, cooks, lawyers, models, athletes, medical professionals, and police officers. More closely related to New Testament teaching, of late female religious

leadership has influenced millions of people and assembled a treasury that probably exceeds a billion dollars. The news, while positive in addressing inequities in the workplace, has also placed pressure on apostolic teaching and the language of Scripture. The pressure urges us to spend a little time better understanding the setting of apostolic teaching and how it compares to today.

### **The Deceiving Winds of Ephesus**

The winds of religion that blew in the first century Roman province of Asia had been blowing with gale force for centuries. Ephesus, the religion, trade,<sup>1</sup> and education center of the region, woke up each morning to a goddess image believed to have fallen from heaven (Acts 19:35). Surrounding the image was a massive marble building accented with gold. An opening in the roof allowed light to fall on and accent the complex statue covered with carvings of various creatures. The supposed goddess was perceived as a protector; the diverse symbols may have illustrated belief in her authority over both the natural and supernatural realms.

The temple to the supposed goddess Artemis (Roman Diana)<sup>2</sup> had no rival in the ancient world (see Illustration 1 for an example of the temple portrayed on a coin of Ephesus). Situated about two miles northeast of downtown Ephesus, the marble structure represented a powerful expression of civic pride. It was also a prominent part of the capital city's economic security. As large as a football field and adorned with famous sculptures<sup>3</sup> and rich, colorful mosaics, the temple was known as "the common bank of Asia."<sup>4</sup> The gleaming white and gold structure, as tall as a mature pine, had been built with vaults for securing large caches of coins.<sup>5</sup> Guarding the vaults was the role of a dedicated security force.<sup>6</sup> To further protect the deposits, the foundation of the temple had been carefully built with layers of stone, charcoal, fleece, and wool to absorb the shock of earthquakes.<sup>7</sup> Ephesus saw its financial and spiritual fortress as a place where heaven touched earth.

Tending the Artemis cult's legendary resources was the influential council of priest/bankers.<sup>8</sup> The priests and priestesses<sup>9</sup> offered sacrifices and blessings. They loaned money and likely assisted people walking in to make a payment on their loan or to pay taxes to the supposed goddess.<sup>10</sup> The cult leaders even managed the ancient equivalent of fishing leases around the capital city.<sup>11</sup>

Further, the priestly council performed important social functions. It reviewed requests for asylum from people experiencing difficult financial and social circumstances. The priests and priestesses also managed the child slaves that owners consigned or dedicated to the supposed goddess.<sup>12</sup> Two inscriptions from Ephesus and the city of Aphrodisias, 100 miles east, link the office of High Priestess with the title "Magistrate of Artemis Ephesia."<sup>13</sup> Religious leader; banker; supervisor; social worker; game warden. The priests and priestesses of Artemis fused together numerous important roles, reinforcing the power of the goddess cult.

Belief in the patron goddess was deeply rooted in centuries of stories, gifts, and family heritage and powered a far-reaching cult (see Illustration 4 for an image of the supposed goddess). Ephesians and others visited her temple even when it meant wading through low areas flooded during heavy rains.<sup>14</sup> They trusted her to guard them from evil spirits and illness.<sup>15</sup> Ancient novels and histories from the Roman period have revealed just how much Artemis, her temple, and other religions mingled into the daily thought of the city.<sup>16</sup> The Asian cults flexed a strength that extended far beyond the boundaries of a given public sanctuary.<sup>17</sup>

The visual trappings of Artemis Ephesia's magnificent temple and her cult priests and priestesses fueled the belief that her power was immense. Waves of veneration and worship to the supposed goddess spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Acts 19:27 records no idle boast.<sup>18</sup> The powerful cult captured the attention of trade unions as well as individuals and couples seeking a spiritual blessing. It also enticed a younger group as well. One Ephesian coin prominently featured boys playing a fortune-telling game at the temple foundation (see

Illustration 3).<sup>19</sup> Other evidence indicates that cult priestesses often were chosen from the young virgins of aristocratic Ephesian families.<sup>20</sup>

The Artemis cult's popular cohort, the Dionysus (Roman Bacchus)<sup>21</sup> cult, was known for its sensational religious celebrations. Weaving through the streets, holding symbols as visible and sexually charged as newsstand pornography, Dionysus worshipers were not easily ignored. The city of Ephesus knew well the feminine dominance and leadership,<sup>22</sup> sense of freedom, and emotional draw of the religion. It was familiar with seeing waves of women leaving the city for all-night celebrations to the god of wine.

Female worshipers of Dionysus believed that intoxication from wine and frenzied worship helped usher them into an intimate relationship with the supposed god, perhaps strengthening them for childbirth.<sup>23</sup> Both women and men were captivated by the religion, believing that people experienced the presence of Dionysus. Under the supposed god's influence, women even believed that they received supernatural knowledge for a time.<sup>24</sup> The religious group represented a powerful, broad-based example of ancient mysticism.

Similar to the religious sights of the city, the sounds of Ephesus often ushered in thoughts of religion as well. Marketplace bartering enlivened the sale of silver shrines of the goddess (Acts 19:24).<sup>25</sup> Applause from theaters and gymnasiums accented religious festivals. The shouts of children playing at the temple and prophecies by the young priestesses of Artemis announced to the city a next generation of faith. The famous display of prophecy may have been associated with priestesses' drinking sacred honey wine.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps related to honey wine (mead), the bee represented the long-standing symbol of the city. The ancient symbol was stamped on city coins dating back more than 500 years before Paul's arrival (see Illustration 2).

Additionally, the first century metropolis of Asia heard the sound of music to the patron goddess of the city and to the god of wine (and other supposed deities). Artemis was called the "Queen of Clamor;"<sup>27</sup> Dionysus was renowned for his supposed entrance to the sound of shrill, bellowing instruments.<sup>28</sup> In light of the prominence the two religions

enjoyed within the city, it would have been no surprise to see and hear festivals and religious rituals erupt frequently.

Ephesian and Asian evenings probably heard even more music than the daylight hours. Dionysus worship, especially prominent at night, declared itself with music from flutes, tambourines, cymbals, and frame drums (kettledrums).<sup>29</sup> The religion was famous for its instrumental music – laced with lots of wine. Music and wine were joined at the hip – or the vine – in celebration of the supposed mountain god. Dionysus worship rituals and celebrations fed off people’s desire for sensual events, connection with the supernatural realm, and the blessing of the god. (See Appendix C for more information.)

The two religions, together with others such as the worship of the supposed goddess Isis, likely penetrated deeply into every path of life. Fathers and mothers; silversmiths; dock workers; ranchers; leather workers; cooks; fishermen; physicians; shipbuilders; merchants; city administrators; accountants; soldiers; blacksmiths; teachers; slave housekeepers; midwives; professional athletes; jailers; stonecutters; entertainers; students; wine growers.<sup>30</sup> The people of the capital city and metropolis looked to the Asian religions and their priests and priestesses for social and religious camaraderie, economic security, and medical counsel. As such the familiar cults influenced much of the city, province, and Mediterranean world – and served as a very capable religious wrecking crew of Christian faith. The squalls of ancient religion confronted the benevolent wind of the Gospel of Christ with force. So, it is no surprise that the city of Ephesus, along with all of Roman Asia, had the distinction of receiving the largest number of letters from the risen Lord and his apostles. The Spirit guided the writing of the letters to the seven churches of Asia, Ephesians, and 1 and 2 Timothy (and 1 Peter, along with the rest of Asia Minor).<sup>31</sup>

### **Where We Live**

The ancient cults promoted thought and practices that have trickled into (or flooded) our time and place 2000 years later. Our nation

has experienced teaching about Jesus and worship in the name of Christ that have been sheared by the strong winds of mysticism, sensational religion, and even the idea of the “inner goddess.” Spiritual events drenched with inviting sights, sounds, and stories have permeated our society.

Influential religious mediators and leaders – both real and imaginary – have made their mark on our time. Numerous Internet websites link the supposed ancient goddesses Artemis and Isis with present examples of religious renewal. Strong currents of religious feminism and equal rights continue to shape Christian understanding of the role of women in worship assemblies and church leadership. The powerful currents challenge the application of Paul’s teachings regarding female submission in the family and in the Church (Eph. 5:24, 1 Ti. 2:11).

Equally important, at the beginning of the twenty-first century we have begun to witness the broad distribution of gender-neutral and feminist Bible translations. Further, many people have asked what we should make of phrases such as “heavenly Father” that have described a being who is spirit. These and other similar questions have raised the suggestion by some that parts of Scripture represent no more than an outdated perspective. They have suggested that God wants us to sift and discard what is obsolete in his Word as we grow an equal rights society. Questions about male headship, submission, and God as Father have developed into a strong tension between people (see, for example, [www.cbmw.com](http://www.cbmw.com), [www.cbeinternational.org](http://www.cbeinternational.org), [www.gal328.org](http://www.gal328.org), and [www.herchurch.org](http://www.herchurch.org)).

Adding to the religious melting pot, an increasing number of worship groups, seminars, and university curriculums have urged people toward various forms of religious mysticism as a means to experience God and feel/see the supernatural. Wiccan and New Age Spiritualism, religious feminism, and some “emerging church” voices have begun to harmoniously blend together in their message of mysticism. Significant change has penetrated even religious groups long known for a strong commitment to Scripture and to apostolic authority. Christians today have begun to feel more acutely the deep struggles Eph-

Asian Christians felt when they realized that following Jesus pressed so strongly against much of Asian society.

At the same time, western Turkey has grown in importance for archaeologists, feminist scholars, and students of earliest Christianity.<sup>32</sup> As a land of deeply-rooted goddess religion, many have explored it in order to better understand the ancient cults. The surge of goddess religion in our day has itself helped urge the well-crewed exploration. The excavations at ancient Ephesus and other ruins in western Turkey have also led to a better understanding of the people who received Paul's letters.<sup>33</sup> They have revealed inscriptions, coins, and architecture that tell us more about the thriving metropolis of the Roman period.

## **Conclusion**

Owing to the cultural, financial, and historical importance of Ephesus and Roman Asia, apostolic teaching in the region has had far-reaching significance. Asia Minor was a land bridge. As the Gospel took root in the capital city, it quickly spread into one of the most important regions in the ancient world. Not surprisingly, potent spiritual dangers stalked the region. Perhaps for both reasons the Spirit's guidance through an apostle of Christ has provided counsel for some of the most challenging spiritual times and issues - both then and now.

It is the strength of the letters that they reveal far more than Asian, Greek, or Jewish religion and thought. Ultimately, they show us the eternal, immortal, invisible King (1 Ti. 1:17) and what it means to submit to his care and guidance as children of light (Eph. 5:8). In the middle of one of the greatest challenges early Christian faith faced, the apostle Paul addresses the real spiritual needs of the young Christian congregation in Ephesus.

For Christians seeking to navigate turbulent religious winds in our day, Paul's letters to Ephesus help us steer through a stormy sea as well. They show us how to unfurl our sailcloth and trim the mainsail. They help us get our bearings, adjust the jib and keep our head when the ocean swells become huge. They guide us to Jesus Christ.



## Chapter One

# Adopted by God and the Blessing of Hope, Wealth, and Power

(Acts 18:24-19:41; Ephesians 1:3-23; 1 Timothy 6:3-10)

The three words hope, wealth, and power captivate people. Whether a better job, hope tied to a specific stock investment, a lottery ticket, or an Internet scam, many frequently search for ways to build a stronger bank account. Indeed, the last quarter century has seen the nation buy heavily into the concept of a global economy and NAFTA. We have been sold the belief that progress and hope are bound up largely with economics.

Perhaps for that reason it is common to hear messages about Christ that attempt to weave Jesus' teachings together with the goal of financial or social strength. *The Gospel of Good Success*;<sup>1</sup> truth measured by a group's size or wealth; charitable giving as the key to financial success. All point to a gospel of economic power. So, what is our portrait of God when following Christ holds economic trials? Equally challenging, what happens to our faith when feelings, imagination, or family heritage becomes our source of religious strength?

The people of Ephesus faced precisely those temptations – as have many Christians today. Paul made clear that some of the Christians in Ephesus had bought into religion centered on financial profit (1 Ti. 6:3-10). The Lord knew their spiritual needs and provided help through Paul’s preaching and through his letters. The same apostolic teaching continues to fill a similar need in our day.

### **The Gospel Spreads to Ephesus**

We are introduced to Ephesus, the “metropolis of Asia,”<sup>2</sup> in Acts 18:24-19:41. Luke’s narrative reveals a capital city interested in the Gospel and also stunned by images of genuine power. Paul describes the spiritual interest in the city as being “a wide door for effective service” (1 Cor. 16:9, NASB). However, he also sees opposition, as the later riot in the city makes clear (Acts 19:23-41). Despite the opposition, many of the Ephesians – both Jews and Gentiles – are attentive to Paul’s teaching and discussion in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10).<sup>3</sup> A city is also captivated by the supernatural healing acts of God. Indeed, in one of the ancient world’s most famous medical centers, many burn their magic books!<sup>4</sup> (Acts 19:19)

Many of the Ephesians had been firm believers in the power embedded in their religions – to secure their health, social standing, finances, and afterlife. The temple-bank, priestly blessings, and border stones of the supposed patron goddess’s cattle and grain estates announced long-standing security. The cult spoke of power built by many generations of time, taxation, loans, gifts, and human thought and emotion. Still, the power of God that the Ephesians saw caused them to be “seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.” (Acts 19:17, NIV)

Similarly, the stories about Dionysus told how the supposed god had been born during a lightning strike.<sup>5</sup> They described how his presence caused nature to erupt with milk, wine, and honey<sup>6</sup> or become barren at his whim.<sup>7</sup> The drum music of his worshipers recalled an army on the move.<sup>8</sup> Sensational Dionysus worship ritual expressed

freedom. Even in Paul's day the religion's rituals probably were considered ancient; the rituals may have represented a corrupt, distorted look at the very beginning of humanity.

In unique ways the worship of Artemis, Dionysus, and other supposed deities breathed of ancient, long-standing power, wealth, and security. The deeply rooted religions captured the hope and imagination of many of the people of Ephesus and Roman Asia. It is therefore no surprise that Paul uses a triad of words familiar to Ephesus. While Paul talks about faith, hope, and love in his first letter to the Corinthian church, he writes to the Ephesians emphasizing hope, wealth, and power (Eph. 1:18-19). The apostle wants people to see adoption by God for the wondrous blessings it bestows. So, what did the Ephesians hear in apostolic teaching about adoption by a King and Father? What is its importance for our day?

### **Adopted by God and Marked With a Seal**

When Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, he begins his teaching with a sentence composed of numerous powerful phrases. The text reads like a ship unfurling sail after sail, with each moment gaining speed. Both Paul's remarkably long sentence in Ephesians 1:3-14 and his concluding emphasis speak volumes about the work of God and the blessings to his people. In Ephesians 1:3-14 we hear a description of God's powerful and loving work. Ephesians 1:13b-14 completes the securing image begun in 1:5. Our adoption (1:5);<sup>9</sup> our status as chosen (1:11); our position as being "included in Christ" (1:13, NIV). Each successive phrase leads us to the climaxing statement in verses 13b-14 (NIV):

Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory.

Christians have received a “deposit” guaranteeing their inheritance: the Spirit of God. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul turns Ephesian religious thought upside down. He uses the economic and religious security structure that is familiar to the Ephesians, but provides a striking revision. Instead of making a deposit in the temple-bank, Paul writes that Christians have received a deposit from the true God. In contrast to striving for Artemis’ attention, Christians have already received the Lord’s attention and affection as adopted children.<sup>10</sup> We have been adopted by a heavenly Father and King who acts out of his compassion, wealth, and strength. The Ephesian Christians, together with all of God’s people, are the beneficiaries of a remarkable inheritance; the guarantee is seen in the seal they have received.

Seals (tattoos, skin cuts, or brands) having to do with religion were common in Paul’s day.<sup>11</sup> They declared ownership by a supposed deity; they also indicated that a person was under the supposed deity’s protection.<sup>12</sup> Based on what we know of prominent religion in Ephesus, it is likely that many people walked the streets of the metropolis with the ivy-leaf symbol of Dionysus cut or seared into their skin.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, similar to people in our day who try to remove a tattoo, many early Christians may have tried to cover up or remove a “seal” which indicated their former allegiance.

So, is Paul using language and imagery familiar to the ancient cults to describe spiritual truth? Yes, it appears he is doing exactly that in Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30 (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22). Instead of being marked with the seal of Dionysus or another supposed deity, Paul urges the Christians in Asia to see that they have received the mark of the true God.

One important aspect of being “marked” was its character as a visible event at a specific moment in time. As G. R. Beasley-Murray, for one, suggests from Ephesians 1:13 and 2 Corinthians 1:22, being sealed with the Spirit occurs as a visible event, as a person is baptized into Christ (by means of immersion in water). “The seal is given when a man is washed, sanctified, justified, in the Name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God, even as he is baptized to the one Body in the one Spirit.”<sup>14</sup> The nineteenth century preacher T. W. Brents

made the observation that “if we are now sealed with the Holy Spirit, as these Ephesians were, it takes place after, and is something more than hearing, believing, and receiving the Word.”<sup>15</sup> The apostle to the Gentiles was declaring the reality of a supernatural event in our baptism (see also Titus 3:4-7).

Marcus Barth takes the point further by suggesting that Ephesians 1:3-14 and being sealed with the Spirit represents the very heart of Paul’s letter. Indeed, Ephesians may represent a baptismal manual of sorts.<sup>16</sup> The apostle describes exactly when Christians have become the possession of God (Eph. 1:14). As such Ephesians 1:13-14 represents an echo of Matthew 28:19.

Paul is describing, not an invisible spiritual event alone, but one that is visible and dramatic – a moment similar to ancient “sealing.” He is talking about people’s belief in and submission to Jesus Christ that is coupled with a supernatural event; the Spirit is sealing them as they take part in Christ’s death and resurrection (see Ro. 6:1-7). The apostle reminds his readers how and when they have been “sealed” by the living God – outwardly and inwardly. Our adoption by God has included our being marked with the seal of the King. Baptism into the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit makes us God’s possession.<sup>17</sup>

### **Hope and Riches in the Lord**

The hope Paul talks about in 1:18 becomes the hope the Ephesian Christians were called to in 4:4, a hope that is part of their unity. Rudolf Bultmann has summarized that the word “hope” in the New Testament “embraces at once the three elements of expectation of the future, trust, and the patience of waiting.”<sup>18</sup> The Ephesian Christians are to live for the Lord in the present by holding on to their hope for the future. Paul challenges them to keep in mind “the riches of the glory of His inheritance” (Eph. 1:18, NASB).

Beyond this initial emphasis on hope, Paul gives the majority of attention to the other blessings. The word “riches” (Gk. *ploutos*) is found more times in the Ephesian letter than in any other letter Paul wrote:

Ephesians 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16. The focus on the riches of God's grace served to announce what Paul saw to be a great need in Ephesus. The Christians in the capital city were reminded daily where the wealth of their metropolis was located. Some may even have become wealthy as a result of the capital city's commercial and religious status (1 Ti. 6:17). They had a need to look beneath the surface of the supposed goddess's seemingly vast sea of wealth and perhaps their own.

Ephesus and the religion of Artemis Ephesia embraced a wealth-bond where each supposedly strengthened the other. The Artemis cult had funded numerous public works. In turn the city was seen as the supposed goddess's temple guardian (Acts 19:35). The action of the silversmith guild (Acts 19:24-25) illustrated the strong chains securing the relationship. Both rich and poor were held in tow by the supposed goddess. However, the native religions at work in Ephesus were no mere systems of banking or social welfare. They were deceptive spiritual inventions - morally decadent and religiously destructive. At the same time as their priestly sponsors and councils proclaimed them to be sources of wealth, safety, and camaraderie - a fit ship - they were in truth a leaky hull with a broken keel.

In contrast the apostle of the Lord emphasizes that the Ephesian Christians know true wealth; they have received the grace of God. Paul says nothing to indicate that Christian identity is determined by deposits in the "common bank of Asia." He also provides no encouragement to perform public expressions of honor toward others as a means to gain status. His letters contain no counsel toward competitive consumerism. Instead, in Ephesians 3:16-17a he writes, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." (NIV) Christians have received wealth that is secure - that is not of this earth (1 Ti. 6:17).

Two thousand years later Christians have the same need to see spiritually. In a time and place where appreciation can get tied to the right running shoes, fashionable clothes, the latest electronics, or an automobile with panache, Paul is describing the spiritual wealth of God's

grace. It is a grace that reclaims and that spiritually renews us to do good works (Eph. 2:7-10). In contrast to a faith and economic perspective that mimics the Artemis cult, Paul is urging Christians to see (spiritual) wealth that will not vanish in the howling winds of a recession, a failed business, or a stock market plunge.

### **The Power of God, Christ's Resurrection, and Our Spiritual Security**

As the Lord's ambassador talks about God's power, he does not point to cult magic. Ephesians were ready to hear about evil spirits and powers.<sup>19</sup> They believed in such and believed that magic incantations (cf. Acts 19:19) summoned the protection of Artemis or other supposed deities.<sup>20</sup> The symbolism that covered her temple image announced her supposed sovereignty over the spirits. But the apostle was upending their view of the supernatural world. It is Christ who commands sovereignty over an evil ruler and its minions. All other powers are, in actuality, the subjects and tools of the dark lord he calls "the ruler of the kingdom of the air." (Eph. 2:2, NIV)

In place of power they believed was real, Paul called them to believe in a true blessing. He urged them to believe in God's power seen in the event that announced the Lord of Lords and freed creation from darkness. The apostle announced he was praying that the Ephesian Christians may know,

his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Eph. 1:19-21, NIV)

Further, he emphasizes that the power that raised Christ from the dead is the power that has raised Christians up with Him. (Eph. 2:6)

Paul does not write about the Christian's resurrection that is future, he writes about the spiritual one that has already happened! The Christians in Ephesus (and beyond) have been raised with the head over all creation. They too are seated at the right hand of the Father; they need not depend on the wealth or incantations of an Asian cult. If they look by faith, they will see the spiritual poverty of religion built on little more than marble, gold, deposits of coins and deceptive speech by cult priestesses.<sup>21</sup> Similar illusions exist today, urging people to ride out spiritual storms on nothing but driftwood. Paul calls Christians to sail at speed on an unsinkable vessel.

The apostle pens his message of the power of God as the means for followers of Jesus "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:18-19, NIV) This power is not at a distance; it is at work within Christians in every place and age. It is not only a past and future power, but also power that has a present tense.

Paul's message about the power of God weaves throughout the various teachings in the letter, reaching its conclusion in Ephesians 6:10-18.<sup>22</sup> By closely relating the power of God with the armor of God, Paul calls the attention of the Christians in Ephesus to a typical sight in the Roman world: the Roman military. Arrayed in crafted metal and leather, the Roman military's strength and discipline provided an impressive image of security. However, in Ephesians 6:12 Paul emphasizes that the struggle Christians experience is far different from what Roman Legions face. The Christian's conflict is against "the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Eph. 6:12)<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps no challenge is greater for people - both then and now. We, like the Ephesians, can find ourselves deceived by wealth and power in the hands of those who proclaim a religious illusion that captures broad attention. It is likely that the Artemis cult could fill a huge amphitheater during a religious festival. Similarly, we can be caught up in the belief that who/what can fill a large auditorium or treasury

must hold truth. Sailing close to a rocky coast, the surface of a sea can hide danger to a ship and its crew. Paul reminds Christians of their unseen spiritual danger and urges them to “be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” (Eph. 6:18, NIV) As the Lord taught his disciples, “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into Hell.” (Lk. 12:4-5, NIV)

### **The Danger of a Form of Godliness Without Power - and the Apostle’s Counsel**

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul summarizes for the missionary what to expect in the work ahead. People will begin to lose their focus on the unseen, replacing it with selfishness, a desire for wealth, and a longing for sensuality. They will have a form of godliness, but will deny its power (2 Ti. 3:5). Paul uses the word “godliness” frequently in his letters to Timothy (1 Ti. 2:2; 3:16; 4,7, 8; 6:3, 5, 6, 11; 2 Ti. 3:5). The word (Gk. *eusebeia*) carries with it the idea of religious conduct.<sup>24</sup> But following Christ demands more than ritual. The apostle warns that some Christians will take to sea, but neglect to set the sails and adjust their heading to catch the wind. They will lose sight of true spiritual power. As a result the boat will do no more than flounder dangerously on the swells.

In 1 Timothy 5:15 Paul may have been talking about Christians who had strayed back under the influence of the native Asian religions.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Paul’s use of the word typically translated as “busy-bodies” in 1 Timothy 5:13 (ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV; Gk. *periergos*) may have carried a religious as well as social sense in a city drenched in medical lore and magic arts. Luke uses the same word in Acts 19:19 to indicate “sorcery” (NIV). In a city the size of Ephesus (est. population of 200,000 in the first century),<sup>26</sup> people existed who believed in a supposed goddess or god and who also practiced civil living - but were blind to the true spiritual dangers. A dark lord used the religious

melting pot of Ephesus to confuse spiritual reality and truth and urge people to shift their eyes away from the risen Lord. The early Christians in Ephesus and Asia faced a daunting task. They had to unravel themselves from a culture that wove together civics, religion, medical arts, relationships, financial matters, and entertainment into a single piece of cloth.

Similar to the Christians in Ephesus, we need to keep in sight our Father's power that raised his Son. Jesus' resurrection announced his deity and sovereignty – and our hope. Just as Paul's message challenged the raging confusion of Ephesus, it has met an equally desperate need in our day. Western society is battered by rapid change. However, change and danger are hardly new in the West. For example during the 1940's and 50's (and after), theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann urged believers in Christ to accept a "closed" universe. He was convinced that the ancient world-view was obsolete and that the supernatural did not penetrate our world.<sup>27</sup> He believed scientific observation had correctly rendered miracles as nothing more than fiction. As such Jesus' resurrection was no more than myth.<sup>28</sup> Given the (supposedly superior) perspective of his day, Bultmann concluded that Christian belief must change. But by change he did not mean vanish; he believed that people could believe that the cross of Jesus saved even if the resurrection did not happen!<sup>29</sup> Time has judged his view naïve and empty; even science (courtesy of Quantum Physics) has recognized the limitations of observation. However, the danger has not passed.

More important than Rudolf Bultmann's conclusion about Jesus' resurrection is what he illustrates. We see in his notion a portrait of temptation. A dark lord desires to strip Christian faith and teaching of power and cast it adrift. Jesus, Scripture, the Church, and the work of the Spirit get pressured by the social and religious culture of a given time and place. Similar to Bultmann's time and to Roman Ephesus, spiritual reality and truth are under siege in our day as well. Paul revealed to Ephesus the expression of true supernatural power and ethical and spiritual truth's "true north": the resurrection of Christ (Eph. 1:19-22). The empty tomb declared the victor in an epic spiritual war.

It announced that Jesus had been given all authority over every supposed god or goddess, religious thought, ritual, incantation, hymn, or prayer – for all time and all places. Each either has honored the King or dishonored him.

### **Conclusion**

Surrounded by the wealth and influence of the native Ephesian religions, Christian faith needed far more than merely myth, sheer numbers of believers, or family tradition to give it substance. The Asian religions, built on centuries of belief, powerful priests, ritual, and financial investment, held far deeper roots in the Ephesian soil.

The dangers in our day are no different. We too can be deceived into letting our faith and understanding lean on no more than friendship, personal experience, family beliefs, centuries of religious history, a religious group's size, or the influence of a religious leader. We are urged to trade following the risen Lord for what seems real and close at hand. A dark lord offers a narrow ship with a shallow draft.

In contrast, Paul announces the Father's power seen in his "mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms..." (Eph. 1:19-20, NIV) The event of the risen Christ lays at the foundation of Christianity then and now. Every mission effort by Christ's ambassadors. Every miracle. Every apostolic action to pen a letter or a Gospel. Each depends on the risen King or offers nothing more than dark deception. Even humanity's supposed crown jewels of experience are shown to be valueless next to a first century tomb stripped of death.<sup>30</sup> It is telling that Paul's letters to Ephesus begin with a look at the blessing of hope, wealth, and power – the power that raised Jesus and gave to him all authority.

Our setting course with sails trimmed requires that our hearts and minds take hold of the event that changed the world: the resurrection of Jesus. Singing Anna Barbauld's beautiful eighteenth century song *Again the Lord of Light and Life* provides one helpful way to focus on

the event that proclaimed Jesus' identity and authority. The risen Lord stands as the sovereign ruler over every religious and spiritual thought and expression (2 Cor. 10:5). He commands that our faith stay focused on the power of God to recreate us and equip us to do good - helping others (Eph. 2:8-10).