

The Biblical History of Ephesus

As one studies the letters to the seven churches of Asia (Revelation 2-3), it is interesting to note that the first congregation addressed by the Lord is one of the most well-known congregations in the New Testament. They are a congregation visited by the apostle Paul. They had a book of the New Testament addressed to them. They were a central point of emphasis for several first century preachers. Consider the Biblical history of the congregation in one of the greatest cities of the first century world: Ephesus.

In 55 or 56 A.D. Paul first comes to Ephesus while on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18-20). He does not remain for a great deal of time, even though the disciples there try mightily to convince him to stay. Instead, he leaves with them two close friends: Aquila and Priscilla. Shortly after Paul leaves, a man by the name of Apollos comes to Ephesus and begins preaching the baptism of John. He is converted by Aquila and Priscilla and begins preaching the truth of Jesus Christ (Acts 18:24-28).

About two years later, Paul returns to Ephesus in the midst of his third missionary journey. Paul spends a greater period in one place at Ephesus, on this occasion, than anywhere else of which we have record in his travels. Acts 19:8-10 records that he spent three months speaking in the synagogue, plus an additional two years teaching in the school of Tyrannus.

It is easy to see why Paul would spend so much time in Ephesus when one understands the immensity of the city. In the first century, Ephesus is estimated to have had approximately 300,000 inhabitants. Additionally, it is a central port and trade city along the Mediterranean Sea, and one of the leading cities promoting trade to the eastern regions. Thus, you have one of the most bustling cities of the first century. The presence of the temple to the goddess Diana, a central attraction within the city and considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, shows the great need of this city for the preaching of the Gospel.

The effect of the Gospel upon this city can be seen at the conclusion of Acts 19. A riot takes place at the hands of Demetrius the silversmith because Paul is taking too much business away from him. He makes shrines to the goddess Diana and has become uncomfortable with the powerful preaching of Paul. Therefore he, along with some of his colleagues, seeks to take matters into his own hands until the town clerk talks some sense into those gathered (Acts 19:24-41). After these things occur, Paul will leave Ephesus and continue his journey.

A few years after leaving the city of Ephesus in Acts 19, Paul writes the letter to the Ephesian brethren. This letter is one of four written by Paul while under house arrest in the city of Rome (Acts 28:30-31). This beautiful letter, dated between 62 and 63 A.D., shows the degree of love and concern the apostle has for these brethren. Though this letter is short by Biblical standards, many beautiful, memorable, and informative passages of Scripture inhabit its pages.

The city of Ephesus plays a major role in the evangelizing of the surrounding region throughout the end of the first century. However, that did not make it immune from problems and deficiencies as is brought out by the Lord in His letter to the church many years later (Rev. 2:1-7). The Biblical history of Ephesus is fascinating. It should be remembered when considering the excellence and impact of the Gospel, as well as the influence it can hold in the community. ~ Adam Cozort