

INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS

by

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Note: Author's introduction in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1858). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

I. *The City of Ephesus.*

The city of Ephesus, under the Romans the capital of Proconsular Asia, was situated on a plain near the mouth of the river Cayster. It was originally a Greek colony but became in no small degree orientalized by the influences which surrounded it. Being a free city, it enjoyed under the Romans to a great extent the right of self-government. Its constitution was essentially democratic. The municipal authority was vested in a Senate, and in the Assembly of the people. The γραμματεὺς, "Town Clerk," or Recorder, was an officer in charge of the archives of the city, the promulgator of the laws, and was clothed with great authority. It was by his remonstrance the tumultuous assembly of which mention is made in Acts 19:24-40 was induced to disperse.

The city was principally celebrated for its temple of Diana. From the earliest period of its history, Ephesus was regarded as sacred to that goddess. The attributes belonging to the Grecian Diana, however, seem to have been combined with those which belonged to the Phoenician Astarte. Her image, as revered in Ephesus, was not a product of Grecian Art but a many-breasted, mummy-like figure of oriental symbolism. Her famous Temple was, however, a Greek building of the Ionic order. It had become so celebrated that its destruction three hundred and fifty-six years before the birth of Christ has conferred immortality on the author of the deed. All Greece and Western Asia contributed to its restoration, which was a work of centuries. Its vast dimensions, its costly materials, its extended colonnades, the numerous statues and paintings with which it was adorned, its long accumulated wealth, the sacred effigies of the goddess, made it one of the wonders of the world.

It was this temple which gave unity to the city and to the character of its inhabitants. Oxford in England is not more Oxford on account of its University than Ephesus was Ephesus on account of the Temple of Diana. The highest title the city could have assumed, and that which was impressed on its coins, was Νεωκóρος, *Temple-sweeper*,--servant of the great goddess. One of the most lucrative occupations of the people was the manufacture of miniature representations of the temple, wrought in silver, which being carried about by travellers or revered at home, found an extensive sale both foreign and domestic.

With the worship of Diana the practice of sorcery was from the earliest times connected. The "Ephesians letters," mystical monograms, used as charms or amulets, are spoken of frequently by heathen writers. Ephesus was, therefore, the chief seat of necromancy,

exorcism, and all forms of magic arts for all Asia. The site of this once famous city is now occupied by an inconsiderable village called Ajaluluk, supposed by some to be a corruption of ἅγιος δεόλογος, (pronounced Seologos by the Greeks), the title of the apostle John as the great teacher of the divinity of Christ. If this is so, it is a singular confirmation of the tradition which makes Ephesus the seat of St. John's labours. Others explain the name from the Turkish, in which language the word is said to mean *City of the Moon*; and then the connection is with Ephesus as the worshipper of Diana.

II. *Paul's labours in Ephesus.*

In this city, the capital of Asia, renowned through the world for the temple of Diana and for skill in sorcery and magic, the place of concourse for people from all the surrounding countries, Paul laboured for nearly three years.

After remaining eighteen months in Corinth, at the conclusion of his second missionary tour, he sailed thence to Ephesus in company with Priscilla and Aquila. He left his companions there, but he himself entered into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they desired him to tarry longer with them, he consented not, but bade them farewell saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem. But I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus. After his departure, Apollos, "an eloquent man, and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the Spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue; whom, when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly" (Acts 18:18-26).

Paul, agreeably to his promise, returned to Ephesus, probably in the fall of the year 54. Here he found certain disciples who had received only John's baptism, to whom Paul said: "John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came upon them, and they spake with tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:3-6).

It seems from the narrative that there was in the apostolic period a class of persons who had renounced Judaism and professed their faith in the person and doctrines of Christ (for Apollos, it is said, was instructed in the way of the Lord), and yet passed for John's disciples in distinction from the other followers of Christ. They were Christians, for they are called "disciples," and yet had not received Christian Baptism. That is, they had been baptized with water, but not with the Holy Ghost. They may have received the inward saving influences of the Spirit, but they had not been made partakers of those extraordinary gifts, the power of speaking with tongues and of prophesying, which those converted and baptized by the apostles had received. They were Christians through the instructions and testimony of John the Baptist, as distinguished from those made Christians by the preaching of the apostles. Their knowledge of the Gospel was, therefore, necessarily imperfect. This at least is one answer to the question concerning the disciples of John spoken of in Acts.

After this the apostle continued for three months to attend the synagogue, "disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God." Meeting with opposition from the Jews, he withdrew "and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. And this continued by the space of two years, so that all they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul. So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs, or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them" (Acts 19:8-12).

It appears from this, and from the subsequent account given by the sacred historian, that the effects of Paul's preaching in Ephesus were:

1. The conversion of a great number of the Jews and Greeks.
2. The diffusion of the knowledge of the Gospel throughout proconsular Asia.
3. Such an influence on the popular mind, that certain exorcists attempted to work miracles in the name of that Jesus, whom Paul's preaching had proved to be so powerful; and that other magicians, convinced of the folly and wickedness of their arts, made public confession and burnt their books of divination and mystic charms.
4. Such a marked diminution of the zeal and numbers of the worshippers of Diana, as to excite general alarm that her temple would be despised.
5. A large and flourishing church was there established. This is proved from the facts recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Having spent a few months in visiting the churches in Macedonia and Greece, Paul, when he arrived at Miletus on his way to Jerusalem, sent for the elders of Ephesus and addressed them in terms which show that they had an important church committed to their care. In this address the apostle predicted that false teachers would soon rise up among them, not sparing the flock. From the epistle to this church in the Book of Revelation, it appears that this prediction was soon fulfilled. The church is there commended for its faith and patience, and especially for its resistance to the inroads of heresy.

III. *The date of this Epistle and the place whence it was sent.*

As the apostle speaks of himself in this epistle as being in bonds, it is plain it was written either during his imprisonment at Rome or at Caesarea. Everything conspires to favour the assumption that it was written at Rome, which until a recent period has been the universally received opinion. In the first place, it is clear that the Epistles to the Ephesians, to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Philippians, all belong to the same period. As to the first three, it is expressly stated that they were sent together by Tychicus and Onesimus (comp. Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7-9; Philem. v. 12). And that the fourth belongs to the same period is plain, (1) because Timothy is mentioned as being with Paul when he wrote to the Philippians, and he was with him when he wrote to the Colossians and to Philemon; (2) because he enjoyed great liberty of preaching at the time when the Epistle to the Philippians was written (Phil. 1:13), and so he did when that to the Ephesians was

written (Eph. 6:20); (3) because he expresses both to the Philippians and to Philemon the expectation of being soon set at liberty (Phil. 2:11; Philem. v. 22). If, therefore, one of these letters was written from Rome, they all were.

But it is almost certain that the Epistle to the Philippians at least was written during his imprisonment at Rome. In 1:12,13 he says, "The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel; so that my bonds are manifest in all the palace and in all other places." Even admitting that the word *πραιτώριον* here used does not necessarily refer either to the well known pretorian camp at Rome, or to the imperial palace, yet when taken in connection with what is said in ch. 4:22, there is little doubt that the reference is to the place of abode of the pretorian guard in immediate attendance on the Emperor. The phrase *οἱ ἐκ τῆς Καισαρος οἰκίας*, can only mean *those of Caesar's household*; and as they sent their salutations to the Philippians, there is no reasonable doubt that the Epistle to the church in Philippi was written at Rome. If, therefore, it was during the same imprisonment that he wrote the four epistles above mentioned, then it follows that the Epistle to the Ephesians was written from Rome.

In the second place, everything contained in the Epistles to the Ephesians, Colossians, and to Philemon, which are admitted to belong to the same period, agrees with this assumption.

1. The persons mentioned in these epistles are known to have been with the apostle at Rome, but are not known to have been with him at Caesarea.
2. Paul, according to Acts 28:30,31, enjoyed liberty to preach the gospel at Rome, but it is not known that he had that liberty in Caesarea.
3. He had at Rome the prospect of being soon set at liberty, which he did not enjoy during his imprisonment under Felix and Festus.
4. The reasons assigned by the few modern critics who refer these epistles to the time of his confinement at Caesarea have very little weight. It is said that Onesimus, a fugitive slave, would more probably seek refuge in Caesarea than in a place so distant as Rome; that it is to be inferred from Eph. 6:21 that Paul expected the Epistle to the Colossians to reach its destination before the letter to the Ephesians came into their hands. This would be the case if Tychicus travelled from Caesarea, not if Rome was his point of departure. Besides, it is said that Paul cherished the purpose to visit Spain as soon as he obtained his liberty at Rome whereas he wrote to Philemon that he hoped to see him soon at Colosse, whence it is inferred that he could not have been in Rome when he wrote that letter. The two former of these reasons have no force. If the third proves anything with regard to the date of the Epistle to Philemon, it proves the same respecting that to the Philippians, because in that also he expresses the hope of being soon at Philippi. These expressions only prove that the apostle had been led to postpone the execution of the purpose which he had formed long before of visiting Spain. There seems, therefore, to be no reason to depart from the commonly received opinion that the Epistle to the Ephesians was written from Rome.

IV. *The persons to whom this Epistle was addressed.*

As to this point there are three opinions. (1) That it was addressed to the Ephesians. (2) That it was addressed to the Laodiceans. (3) That it was a circular letter designed for all the churches in that part of Asia Minor.

In favour of the first of these opinions it is urged:

1. That the epistle is directed *τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Εφέσῳ*, *to those who are in Ephesus*. If this is the true reading, it settles the question, at least so far as this, that whatever may have been its further destination it was primarily designed for the church in Ephesus. That the reading above given is the true one is proved because it is found in all extant MSS., in all the ancient versions, and in all the Fathers. This array of external evidence is decisive. No critic would venture to alter the text against these authorities. The only opposing evidence of a critical nature is, that it appears from the comment of Basil that the words *ἐν Εφέσῳ* were not in the copy which he used, and that in the MS. B. they stand in the margin and not in the text, and in MS. 67 they are inserted as a correction. This is altogether insufficient to outweigh the concurrent testimony above mentioned. On all critical principles, therefore, the reading *ἐν Εφέσῳ* must be pronounced genuine.

2. That this epistle was addressed to the Ephesians is proved by the concurrent testimony of the ancient church. This Basil does not question; he only explains *τοῖς οὖσιν* in such a way as to show that they were not followed in his copy by the words *ἐν Εφέσῳ*. These two considerations would seem to be decisive. How came the epistle to be addressed to the Ephesians if not designed for them? How came the whole ancient church to regard it as addressed to the church in Ephesus if such were not the fact? It is a fundamental principle in historical criticism to allow greater weight to historical testimony than to conjectures drawn from circumstantial evidence.

The objections to this view are:

1. That there is evidence that in some of the ancient MSS. no longer extant, the words *ἐν Εφέσῳ* were not in the text.

2. That although Paul was personally so well acquainted with the Ephesian Christians, he speaks as though he were a stranger to them and they to him. The passages, however, cited in proof of this point admit of an interpretation perfectly consistent with the common hypothesis. When Paul speaks in 1:15 of having *heard* of their faith and love, he may refer to the intelligence which had reached him at Rome. And the expression in 3:2, *εἶγε ἀκούσατε*, does not necessarily express doubt of their knowledge of him or of his being an apostle.

3. It is objected that the epistle contains no reference to the peculiar circumstances of the Ephesians. It is so general that it might as well be addressed to one church as another.

4. It contains no salutations from Paul or from his companions to anyone in Ephesus.
5. It contemplates exclusively heathen Christians, whereas the church in Ephesus was composed of both Jewish and Gentile converts.

The facts on which these last three arguments are founded are undoubtedly true and very remarkable, and certainly distinguish this epistle from all others addressed by Paul to particular churches. They prove, however, nothing more than that the apostle's object in writing this epistle was peculiar. They cannot be allowed to outweigh the direct critical and historical testimony in support of the fact that it was addressed to the Ephesians.

In favour of the hypothesis that this epistle was written to the church in Laodicea, it is urged:

1. That Marcion so entitled it. But Marcion was a notorious falsifier of Scripture.
2. That in Col. 4:16 it is said, "When this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that ye also read *the epistle* from Laodicea." It cannot, however, be inferred that "the epistle *from* Laodicea" was an epistle which Paul wrote *to* Laodicea; much less that the epistle intended was the one addressed to the Ephesians. Paul may have written to the Laodiceans a letter which is no longer extant.
3. It is urged that on this hypothesis all the peculiarities of the epistle can be readily explained. But those peculiarities can be explained without resorting to a hypothesis destitute of all historical foundation.

The assumption that this epistle was not designed specially for any one church but intended equally for all the churches in that part of Asia Minor has met with more favour. This view, first suggested by Archbishop Usher, has been adopted, variously modified, by Bengel, Benson, Michaelis, Eichhorn, Koppe, Hug, Flatt, Guericke, Neander, Olshausen and many others. The great objection to it is the overwhelming authority in favour of the reading ἐν Ἐφέσῳ in the salutation and the unanimous testimony of the early church. Perhaps the most probable solution of the problem is that the epistle was written to the Ephesians and addressed to them, but being intended specially for the Gentile Christians as a class rather than for the Ephesians as a church, it was designedly thrown into such a form as to suit it to all such Christians in the neighbouring churches, to whom no doubt the apostle wished it to be communicated. This would account for the absence of any reference to the peculiar circumstances of the saints in Ephesus. This seems to have been substantially the opinion of Beza, who says: *Suspicio non tam ad Ephesios ipsos proprie missam epistolam, quam ad Ephesum, ut ad cæteras Asiaticas ecclesias transmitteretur.*

V. *The relation between this Epistle and that to the Colossians.*

This relation is in the first place one of remarkable similarity. This similarity is observable (1) in the occurrence in both epistles of the same words and form of expressions; (2) in

passages which are identical in thought and language; (3) in passages in which the thought is the same and the expression is varied; (4) in others where the same topic is more fully handled in the one epistle than in the other; (5) in passages in which different topics follow each other in the same order.

In the second place, although there are these striking points of resemblance between the two epistles, there are no less striking points of difference.

1. While the Epistle to the Colossians has every indication of having been written to a particular congregation and in reference to their peculiar circumstances, the absence of these features is the most marked characteristic of the Epistle to the Ephesians.
2. In the Epistle to the Ephesians the doctrinal element prevails over the practical. In the Epistle to the Colossians it is just the reverse.
3. The main object of the Epistle to the Colossians, is to warn the church against "philosophy falsely so called." Of this there is no indication in the Epistle to the Ephesians, the great design of which is to unfold the glories of the plan of redemption as embracing both Jews and Gentiles, and designed to be the great medium for the manifestation of the grace and wisdom of God to all intelligent creatures.
4. There are, therefore, topics discussed in the one epistle to which there is nothing to correspond in the other.
5. The order of sequence, or the concatenation of subjects, except in the case of some particular exhortations, is entirely different in the two epistles.
6. The Epistle to the Ephesians has much greater unity than that to the Colossians. This evidently arose from the different purposes with which they are written.

In the third place, the two epistles are evidently independent the one of the other. Each is a complete whole. In each one, topic flows naturally from another, the association of ideas in every case being clearly indicated. Neither is a patchwork, but both are a closely woven web.

All these characteristics of similarity, dissimilarity, and mutual independence are naturally accounted for on the assumption that the two epistles were written at the same time, the one for a particular congregation, the other for a particular class of readers.

VI. *The Genuineness of the Epistle.*

1. The epistle announces itself as written by Paul the Apostle.
2. There is nothing in its contents inconsistent with the assumption of his being its author.
3. All the incidental references which it contains to the office, character and circumstances of the writer, agree with what is known to be true concerning Paul. The writer was

an apostle, an apostle of the Gentiles, a prisoner, one to whom Tychicus stood in the relation of a companion and fellow-labourer.

4. The style, the doctrines, the sentiments, the spirit, the character revealed are those of Paul.

5. The whole ancient church received it as genuine. As to this point the judgment of the early ages is unanimous. Even Marcion, though he dissented from the common opinion as to its destination, admitted its Pauline origin.

6. Finally and mainly, the epistle reveals itself as the work of the Holy Ghost, as clearly as the stars declare their maker to be God. In no portion of the Sacred Scriptures are the self-evidencing light and power of divine truth more concentrated than they are here. Had it been first discovered in the nineteenth century, in a forsaken monastery, it would command the faith of the whole church.

The genuineness of this epistle, therefore, has never been doubted, except by a few modern critics to whom nothing is sacred. These critics object:

1. That Paul was familiarly acquainted with the Ephesians, whereas the writer of this epistle had only heard of their conversion and of their faith and love. This objection is fully met by showing that the expressions referred to may be understood of information received by Paul during his long imprisonment, first at Caesarea and afterwards at Rome; or, on the assumption that the epistle, though addressed to the Ephesians, was designed for a large class of readers, with many of whom Paul had no personal acquaintance.

2. They object that this epistle is merely a verbose imitation of the Epistle to the Colossians. Nothing can be more inconsistent with the fact. The relation between the two epistles, instead of being a ground of objection against either, is a strong proof of the genuineness of both. Of this any reader may satisfy himself by a careful comparison of the two.

3. It is objected that the epistle contains no reference to the peculiar circumstances of the Ephesians, so that the address and contents are irreconcilable. This absence of specific reference, as before remarked, is accounted for from the design of the epistle as addressed to Gentile believers as Christians not as Ephesians. Reuss remarks in reference to such objections, "If Paul wrote friendly letters, these critics say they are spurious, because they are not doctrinal; and if he wrote doctrinal epistles, they say they are spurious, because not friendly."

4. It is objected that the style is not that of Paul. The very reverse, in the judgment of the vast majority of competent readers, is the fact. There is the same fervour and force of expression, the same length and complication in his sentences, clauses linked with clause till he is forced to stop and begin the sentence anew. *Idem in epistola*, says Erasmus, *Pauli fervor, eadem profunditas, idem omnino spiritus ac pectus*. DeWette, the originator of these and similar objections, admits that they do not justify the rejection of the epistle, which, he says, contains much that is worthy of the apostle, and which all antiquity acknowledged as genuine. Unfortunately, however, he afterwards retracted this admission.

It is to the honour of the German critics, for whom in general novelty is everything, the last opinion always being the best, that with the exception of the destructive school of Tubingen, few, if any, of their number attach any weight to the arguments against the apostolic origin of this epistle.

5. The principal objection urged by Baur of Tubingen, in addition to those suggested by DeWette, is that the Epistle to the Ephesians contains allusions to Gnostic opinions which did not prevail until after the apostolic age. But, in the first place, the great majority of scholars deny that this epistle contains any references to Gnostic sentiments; and, in the second place, even if it did, the Epistle to the Colossians affords abundant evidence that principles afterwards developed into Gnosticism had manifested themselves in the age of the apostles. If it be said that the allusions in the Epistle to the Colossians to those principles proved that it also is spurious, that would be only a *dictum* in the face of all evidence and utterly subversive of all history. There is no portion of the New Testament the genuineness of which the church has from the beginning, with more cordial unanimity, acknowledged than that of this epistle.

VII. *Contents of the Epistle.*

The apostle addresses himself principally to Gentile Christians. His object was:

1. To bring them to a just appreciation of the plan of redemption, as a scheme devised from eternity by God for the manifestation of the glory of his grace.
2. To make them sensible of the greatness of the blessing which they enjoyed in being partakers of its benefits.
3. To lead them to enter into the spirit of the gospel as a system which ignored the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and united all the members of the church in one living body destined to be brought into full conformity to the image of Christ.
4. To induce them to live as it became a religion which had delivered them from the degradation of their condition as heathen and exalted them to the dignity of the sons of God.

He begins, therefore, with the primal fountain of all spiritual blessings. He refers them to their predestination to sonship, and their consequent election to holiness, before the foundation of the world. From this flowed their actual redemption by the blood of Christ, and the revelation of the divine purpose to unite all the subjects of redemption in one body in Christ, in whom first the Jews and then the Gentiles had been made the heirs of eternal life (1:1-14).

He next earnestly prays that God would enable them to appreciate the hope which they were thus entitled to cherish, the glory of the inheritance in reserve for them, and the exceeding greatness of that power which had already wrought in them a change analogous to that effected in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ. For as Christ was dead and deposited in the tomb, so they were spiritually dead; and as Christ was raised and exalted

above all creatures, so they also were quickened and exalted to a heavenly state in Him (1:15-2:10).

He therefore calls upon them to contrast their former condition as heathen with their present state. Formerly they were without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, without God, and without hope. But by the blood of Christ a two-fold reconciliation had been effected. The Jews and Gentiles are united as one body, and both are reconciled to God and have equally free access to his presence. The Gentiles, therefore, are now fellow-citizens of the saints, members of the family of God, and living stones in that temple in which God dwells by his Spirit (2:11-22).

This great mystery of the union of Jews and Gentiles had been partially revealed under the Old Dispensation. But it was not then made known so clearly as it had since been revealed to the apostles and prophets of the New Dispensation, whose great vocation it was to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make all men understand the plan of redemption, hid for ages in God but now revealed, that through the church might be made known to principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God (3:1-13).

The apostle, therefore, bows his knees before the common Father of the redeemed, and prays that Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith; that they being rooted and grounded in love might be able to apprehend the infinite love of Christ and be filled with the fulness of God, who is able to do for us far more than we are able either to ask or to think (3:4-21).

The Gentiles, therefore, are bound to enter into the spirit of this great scheme--to remember that the church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, wise and unwise, is one body, filled by one Spirit, subject to the same Lord, having one faith, one hope, one baptism, and one God and Father who is in, through, and over all. They should also bear in mind that diversity in gifts and office was not inconsistent with this unity of the church, but essential to its edification. For the ascended Saviour had constituted some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers for the very purpose of building up the church; and through them as the channels of the truth and grace of Christ, the church was to be brought to the end of its high calling (4:1-16).

They should not, therefore, live as did the other Gentiles, who being in a state of darkness and alienation from God gave themselves up to uncleanness and avarice. On the contrary, having been taught by Christ, they should put off the old man and be renewed after the image of God. Avoiding all falsehood, all undue anger, all dishonesty, all improper language, all malice, all impurity and covetousness, they should walk as children of the light, reproving evil, striving to do good, and expressing their joy by singing hymns to Christ and giving thanks to God (4:17-5:20).

He impresses upon his readers reverence for the Lord Jesus Christ as the great principle of Christian obedience. He applies this principle especially to the domestic obligations of men. The marriage relation is illustrated by a reference to the union between Christ and the church. The former is an obscure adumbration of the latter. Marriage is shown to be not merely a civil contract, not simply a voluntary compact between the parties, but a vital union producing a sacred identity. The violation of the marriage relation is, therefore, presented as one of the greatest of crimes and one of the greatest of evils. Parents and

children are bound together not only by natural ties, but also by spiritual bands; and, therefore, the obedience on the part of the child and nurture on the part of the parent should be religious. Masters and slaves, however different their condition before men, stand on the same level before God, a consideration which exalts the slave and humbles and restrains the master. Finally, the apostle teaches his readers the nature of that great spiritual conflict on which they have entered, a conflict not with men but with the powers of darkness. He tells them what armour they need, how it is to be used, and whence strength is to be obtained to bring them off victorious (5:21-6:20)

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