

Together in the Glory of Christ

Pentecost +8

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*Isaiah 57:14-21, Psalm 22:23-31, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-44*

We are reading the book of Ephesians during the summer. Sometimes it is helpful to think of an entire book in one setting, so I am going to try and hit the highlights of this book today. Some of you have probably participated in a Bible study on Ephesians. There are so many rich themes in this book that it is possible to return to the text again and again and continue to see it through a new light. Hopefully, this overview will stir our imagination as we meditate upon the details of this text throughout the summer.

Last week Katie asked two questions:

How am I neglecting the glory and unity of Christ and instead choosing destruction?

How am I aligning with the systems of power in the world and neglecting the way of Christ and his kingdom?

As we think about Ephesians, we can think both about the glory of Christ and the systems of power in that city. Acts 19 gives us a sense of the systems of power in Ephesus. When Paul enters this city he proclaims the glory of Christ transforming the lives of the people and he encounters the dark powers that threaten him and his ministry.

When Paul proclaims the Gospel, people respond. Lives are changed; bodies are healed; individuals are delivered from the oppression of the evil one. In fact, people were healed and delivered from evil spirits through cloths that had touched Paul.

While magic rituals were common all throughout the Roman empire, they were particularly important in Ephesus. It could be because of the Temple of Diana or simply how the culture grew up, but magic power was embedded in the very economy of the city. People incorporated various gods and powers into their incantations, prayers, rituals, and even curses. There are even artifacts that indicate some within the Jewish community were using incantations that called upon the power of Old Testament characters in their rituals. This is probably why Acts records the story of itinerant Jewish exorcists attempted to incorporate Jesus' name into the exorcisms. They had probably heard about Paul's success and were attempting to replicate his ministry by adding Jesus' name to their rituals.

Things didn't go well. The evil spirit in the man replied, "Jesus I know and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" Then the man who was demonized jumped on them and ripped off their clothes, and drove them out of the house naked.

Their shame brought fear to the community and many people decided to burn their magic books in the sight of all. After a time, the businesses who depended upon trade in idols and magic supplies recognized the threat this new Gospel cause for their trade.

One day, a silversmith Demetrius who made shrines for the goddess Artemis or Dinah got fed up with Paul's interruption of his business. He gathered a group of idol makers and began chanting,

“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Suddenly the city erupted into a dangerous riot. IN the chaos, Paul’s disciples snuck him out of the city and sent him forward on his journey.

Paul leaves a community of Christians who have turned their backs on the power structures of their city. These saints left a world where magic spells and amulets were common protection against evil powers. This is so bound up in the economic and social life of Ephesus, it would be a great sacrifice to withdraw and renounce it. A person could risk losing social connections, economic opportunities and may face violence. And yet, the power of the Gospel is such that many people did just that. They left that whole world behind and embraced a new way of life.

Paul writes a letter of encouragement to the church in Ephesus. It is in some sense a doxological catechesis. He rehearses the authority of our victorious Savior and how the church is bound up with Christ in His glory, his mission, and his love. He encourages the church in Ephesus to stand, to remain faithful, to continue in the work of the Lord.

Paul is aware of how the evil one may attack them in thoughts and temptations. In the final verses of the book, Paul speaks the spiritual battle around us. He writes, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:10-12). While his final instruction is explicit, the victory over the surrounding powers is all through the letter.

While this letter is a gift of the Spirit to all saints across the ages, Paul is addressing a specific community in a specific time. We read it as the church: that is as a specific community in a specific time. These words ring true within this community as they did in Ephesus.

Here’s a big picture view of the whole book. Chapters one through three are filled with worship, praises and instruction that emphasizes the victory of Christ over the powers that would separate people from God and from one another. Chapters four through six instruct the church how to live in unity around the Gospel, in freedom from the old life, and in household relationships. All of this catechesis culminates in the final words of stand firm in the face of powers that would intimidate or tempt them.

He opens with a glorious blessing:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. (Ephesians 1:3–4)

We have no need of spiritual amulets or magical rituals because we have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

In the first chapter, Paul prays that “the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might. (Ephesians 1:17–19)

It's a wonderful prayer that we can pray for ourselves and others. I used to pray it, assuming there was some secret wisdom that God would give me. But Paul is praying that we will actually have ears to hear what he is saying about Jesus Christ and about us in this very letter. In other words, the mystery is being revealed in the letter. There is no secret wisdom in the Gospel. It is a public Gospel preached publicly since the beginning of the church.

He want us to have an expansive image of the risen Christ. The power of God has raised up Christ far above all rule and all authority and power and dominion. Christ rules and reigns over all creation, over all Caesars, kings, Presidents, over all spiritual forces. There is no power in the cosmos outside His rule. He has taken hold of us, his saints, his church and raised us up with Him as His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. No wonder Paul can boldly proclaim that God's purpose is to unite all things in Christ: things in heaven and things on earth.

We may not trade in magical amulets or secret incantations to hold the powers at bay and yet we still face the powers both earthly and spiritual all around us. We feel the pressure of the antagonisms in our culture and many Christians and have fallen prey to losing their witness through angry exchanges online. We also feel the pressure of unrelenting consumerism and the temptation to make more money and get more things. There are economic, social, moral, relational pressures all around us that can cause us to lose sight of what it actually important in life.

In chapters 2 and 3, Paul is going to open this picture of the church. As Paul reminds the Gentiles of the life they left, he is reminding us as well that we have turned away from a way of illusion, a way of magic rituals, a way of manipulation, a way of trying to use people and powers for selfish benefit. This is the way of all flesh and the end is the way of death. It is a way without restraint. It is way of descending to destruction as children of wrath. But God loved us even as we were sinking in the grave of sin and death and He made us alive together. This together is a key word.

In Ephesians 2:4, Paul explains that to be in Christ, is to be made alive together with Christ. In this case, Paul is most likely speaking of Gentile and Jew: both have been raised together. Thus the Jews are not more important than the Gentiles and simultaneously the Gentiles cannot judge the Jews.

Being raised together also speaks to all our particularities, all our differences: gender differences, political differences, economic differences, racial differences, and more. Christ redeems a people, a new family from all races and classes. There is no special class of Christian; we are raised together in Christ.

The dividing wall that physically separated Jew from God-fearing Gentile has been removed in Christ. At the same time, this speaks directly to reconciling groups and individuals.

Reconciliation and healing must begin in the work of Christ. Paul emphasizes the peace of God made known in the cross. In Ephesians 2:16-18, we have an explicit reference to the cross. The cross is peace with God but it is also peace between people. As we seek peace and healing of those who have been unjustly treated, we do so in and through the work of Christ. By the grace of God in Christ we are called to become one new people, the very dwelling place of God.

The reconciliation of Gentiles with Jews is a great mystery that has been made known in Christ. As it unfolds and as the people of God begin to live in this new life of reconciliation, they come face to face with a love that know no heights or depths or breaths. It extends beyond every broken place within us and between us. It is in the mystery of this new man, this new family, this church that we come to discover the love of God that is more glorious than we could ever imagine.

At this point, Paul has to pause and sing out glory to God:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20–21).

As we begin to grasp the glory of this life of love in Christ and one another, Paul says that we now live out this reality as a family that God has raised up and God will provide all the gift we need to organize, resolve conflicts, grow, and continue being shaped in Christ. The body is filled with people who have gifts that move in all directions. These gifts can sometimes lead to conflict because people may see things from a different perspective, but at the same time, these gifts can help us to grow up as a family who reveals the glory of God in this world.

We are learning to live in Christ. We are learning patience, forgiveness, humility, gentleness, and more. At the same time, we are learning to discern the deceptions of the evil forces, or the devil. We are learning to discern and turn away from false doctrines that diminish the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We turn away from unforgiveness, jealousy, resentments, greed, lust, and falsehood. We turn away from those through and actions that would harm the communion of love. We speak the truth in grace.

We know from Paul's other letters that there is a time to confront sin or division within the community. At the same time, we are learning how to "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesian 5:2). Here Paul gives us a subtle reference to the cross as a pattern of living within the community. We offer our lives to one another in service as an offering to God. This is not a call to a few people to offer their lives, but the whole community to become a living reflection of the love of God between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Paul will offer a reflection on family life: husbands and wives, children and parents, servants and masters. In one sense, we all play these different roles at different times in life and in different situations. There are times when we may be leading a group, a business, a family, and there may be times when we are submitting to a boss, a parent, a leader. We learning in Christ how to work this out in a daily way.

Finally, we return to the end of Paul's letter. The battle with spiritual forces. In one sense, this whole letter has been a catechism to teach us how to live in the midst of world of malevolent powers: demonic, government, political, and more. Paul speaks of the armor of God, which is in fact to be clothed in Christ.

As community clothed in Christ, we learn how to stand in this world, in this place. We learn the reality of who we are in Christ as individuals and as brothers and sisters in Christ. Whether we

name the armor or simply keep turning toward Christ and His redeeming grace, our safety is as one people in Christ, shaped and formed and raised up for His glory and for His purpose to redeem and reconcile the world to God.