

## Week 1: Paul and the Ephesians (Acts 18-20; Eph 1:1, 2; 6:21-24) Good Word, 2023

For June 24-30

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. Which of the events, listed below, provides the most help in understanding the setting of Ephesians? Why?
2. One modern commentator writes, “‘Pound for pound’ Ephesians may be the most influential document ever written.”<sup>1</sup> Why do you think Ephesians has been so impactful?
3. An Adventist author of yesteryear compared studying Ephesians to a mountain climber who “suddenly comes out at a place where bursts upon his vision a grand and enrapturing scene in every direction, filling his soul with wonder and admiration.”<sup>2</sup> What passage or theme in Ephesians triggers a similar reaction from you?
4. In what ways is the experience of the modern, Christian disciple similar to and different from the early Christian believers Paul addresses in Ephesians?

- **Why Ephesus?** Paul does not randomly wander into the streets of Ephesus, the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire and the transportation center for the Roman province of Asia (see the map, below). He intends to found the Christian church there, traveling some 1,800 miles to arrive at the city: On his third journey, “Paul brought his years of experience together in the *hub* principle, establishing the Ephesus church as an equipping, multiplying hub of church-planting—to build movements elsewhere.”<sup>3</sup> His strategy proved successful, with Ephesus succeeding Jerusalem as the powerhouse of Christian faith in the first century.

### • What prior events, recorded in Acts, provide the back story of Ephesians?

- Acts 18:18-21 – Paul’s initial visit to Ephesus (at the end of the second missionary journey, AD 52)
- Acts 18:24-28 – Apollos ministers in Ephesus (in Paul’s absence)
- Acts 19:1-20:1 – Paul ministers in Ephesus for 3 years (at the start of the third missionary journey, AD 53-56)
  - 19:1-10 – Paul’s baptizes twelve, speaks in the synagogue for three months, and teaches for two years in a lecture hall
  - 19:11-20 – The strange case of seven itinerant, Jewish exorcists, the sons of Sceva
  - 19:21-20:1 – The riot incited by the silversmith, Demetrius
- Acts 20:17-38 – Paul meets with the elders of the church of Ephesus at Miletus (at the end of the third missionary journey, AD 57; Note: Miletus is about 50 miles from Ephesus by modern roads; see the map, below)

- **How influential was the goddess Artemis and her cult in Ephesus?** Ephesus was an important center for the imperial cult and for the practice of magic (cf. Acts 19:11–20) and dozens of deities were worshiped there. However, “Artemis of the Ephesians” (19:28; identified with the Roman “Diana”) dominated the politics, culture and economy of Ephesus and the city was the center of her widespread cult. Her richly decorated temple, the Artemision (19:23–41), was located outside the city walls. It was the largest temple in antiquity and was lauded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (see the portrayal of the temple, below). It served as the major banking center for the city and was the starting and ending point for bi-weekly, circuitous processions that featured images of Artemis. Coins displayed her image; regular, athletic games, the Artemisia, were conducted in honor of her. Her birth was celebrated elaborately each year, and a month of the year was named after her.

A huntress, Artemis was worshiped as “Queen of the Cosmos,” “heavenly God,” “Lord,” and “Savior” who controlled heaven, earth, the underworld, and the spirits who inhabited them. Statues show her in an elaborate costume, presenting various symbols of the power she offered to her worshipers. She wears the zodiac as a necklace or garland, symbolizing power over the supernatural and astrological powers that determined fate. She also wears a tight skirt featuring heads or busts of real and mythical animals, announcing her power over animals and demons.

- **What does Paul mean by his statement that “I fought with beasts at Ephesus” (1 Cor 15:32)?** In 1 Corinthians, which Paul wrote from Ephesus, we find brief references to Paul’s time in the city. Paul’s introduction of Christian faith in Ephesus proved countercultural and disruptive, evoking both strong support and fervent opposition. Paul’s time there “was anything but an Aegean holiday”<sup>4</sup> featuring life-threatening conflict (2 Cor 1:8–10) against “many adversaries” (1 Cor 16:9) and “wild beasts” (1 Cor 15:32), probably best understood as a metaphorical reference to Paul’s combat against the evil spirits who inspired the sorcerers, idolaters, and the Artemis cult in Ephesus (cf. Acts 20:1 Pt 5:8; Eph 6:10–20).<sup>5</sup> Paul “is punning on Artemis’s identity as ‘mistress of wild beasts’ by likening her devotees to the animals she was known to protect.”<sup>6</sup> These events provide important context for Paul’s discussions in Ephesians of Christ’s power, expressed in the lives of the addressees (1:15–23; 2:1–10; 3:10, 14–21; 6:10–20; see Friday’s lesson).<sup>7</sup>
- **What is the theme or theological message of Ephesians?** Paul announces his theme early on (1:9–10) and works it out comprehensively in the letter. God has acted in Christ to initiate His plan “to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10 ESV) by creating the church as “one new humanity” (2:14) composed of both Jews and Gentiles (2:11–22; 3:1–21). Believers are called to act in concert with this divine plan (4:1–6:20), signaling to the evil powers that God’s ultimate purpose is underway (3:10).
- **Did Paul really write Ephesians?** Paul introduces himself as author at beginning and end (1:1; 6:21–22) and often addresses the audience using the first person (1:15–16; 3:1; 4:1, 17; 6:18–20). Early and consistent attestation ensured that the epistle was readily accepted among the Pauline Epistles. Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the authenticity of the letter has been questioned based on the vocabulary and style of the letter, the seemingly detached relationship it expresses between Paul and the addressees, the similarity with Colossians (with Ephesians viewed as a pseudepigraphical reworking of that letter), and the theology of the letter (which is seen as straying from Paul’s own views).

It is argued that Ephesians was a benign, “honest” fiction, with early Christians being fully aware it was not written by Paul. However, Ephesians does not fit the category since it offers no obvious indicators that it was falsified. Nor does it fit the category of deceptive pseudepigraphy, since such documents were crafted as weapons in the battle between orthodoxy and heresy and Ephesians is not a polemical document, but peaceful in tone. If pseudepigraphical, Ephesians urges the addressees to speak truth (4:14–15, 25–32; 5:9; 6:14) but lies about the author of the document without any motivation to do so.<sup>8</sup> Given the letter’s own claim, the early and consistent affirmation of the letter as coming from Paul, and the availability of reasonable explanations for the features of the letter mentioned above, it is best to affirm Ephesians as an authentic letter composed by Paul.

- **How does Ephesians end?** Paul concludes with two brief, moving prayer benedictions (6:23, 24). The last two Greek words of the letter, *en aphtharsia* (“in incorruptibility” or “in immortality”) offer an interesting puzzle and are usually translated similar to the ESV, “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ *with love incorruptible*.” Since the word “love” (*agapē*) does not occur in the final phrase and since such a translation fails to echo any central theme in the letter, there is opportunity to reconsider the suggestion that the phrase *en aphtharsia* be taken in a geographical sense, “in immortality,” and be seen as identifying the exalted location of “our Lord Jesus Christ”<sup>9</sup>: “Grace (be) with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ, (who dwells) in immortality” (cf. 1 Tim 1:17; Jas 2:1). In this view, the letter that begins with Christ “in the heavenly places” (1:3) concludes with a benediction invoking grace for all who experience tender, deep, personal love for the resurrected, exalted, eternal Jesus (cf. 1:19–23; 2:4–7).



Adapted from John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Baker, 1991), p. 228



One Reconstruction of the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus  
<https://drivethruhistory.com/the-temple-of-artemis-at-ephesus/>

<sup>1</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIVAC (Zondervan, 1996), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Tyler E. Bowen, “From the Heights of Ephesians,” *Review and Herald*, August 21, 1919, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Roennfeldt, *Following the Spirit: Disciple-Making, Church-Planting and Movement-Building Today* (Warburton, Vic., Australia: Signs, 2018), 158.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1987), 769.

<sup>5</sup> See esp. Guy Williams, “An Apocalyptic and Magical Interpretation of Paul’s ‘Beast Fight’ in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15:32),” *Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (2006): 42–56.

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Frayer-Griggs, "The Beasts at Ephesus and the Cult of Artemis," *Harvard Theological Review* 106, no. 4 (2013): 459–77.

<sup>7</sup> See Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Baker, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> I am summarizing here the arguments of Frank Thielman, *Ephesians, BECNT* (Baker, 2010), 1-5.

<sup>9</sup> See Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1991), 79.

## Week 2: God's Grand, Christ-Centered Plan (Eph 1:3-14)

Good Word, 2023

For July 1-7

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. Reviewing Ephesians 1:3-14 and the long list of gifts Paul includes in his thank you note to God, which one is most precious to you? Why?
2. How might our eschatological outlook change if we focused on God's "plan for the fullness of time," to "unite all things" in Christ? (Eph 1:9, 10)
3. How would your life change if you took more seriously the great purpose of life, to live "to the praise of His [God's] glory"? (Eph 1:11, 12)
4. Compare the "sealing" by the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 1:13, 14; 4:30 with the apocalyptic sealing of the servants of God with "the seal of the living God" on their foreheads in Revelation 7:1-8 (cf. Ezek. 9). What similarities and differences are there between these two "sealings"? (See Thursday's lesson)

- **What blessings do we receive when we believe in Christ?** In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul draws believers into "the heavenly places" (v. 3), to God's cosmic throne room and to the initiatives of God's grace anchored there. We listen agape to the ageless dreams and plans God has for us. Eight verbs summarize the grand variety of God's blessings poured out upon believers:

1. God *blesses* believers (us!) with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ" (v. 3, NET)
2. In Christ, God *chooses* believers to be "holy and blameless before him" (v. 4; cf. v. 11)
3. Through Jesus Christ, God *destines* us. This is no sterile, legal relationship since we are adopted as His children (v. 5)
4. "In the Beloved" (that is, in Christ), He *gives* us "his glorious grace" (v. 6)
5. In Christ, God *lavishes* upon us redemption and forgiveness. "In matters of God's grace, hyperboles are understatements" (Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* [Eerdmans, 2010], 63)
6. God *makes known* to us all this "mystery of his will" and His "purpose," which He exhibits in Christ (v. 8). All these blessings wouldn't mean much if we didn't know about them.
7. In His "plan for the fullness of time," God *heads up* "all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (v. 10)
8. At their conversion and "in him" (Christ), God *seals* believers with the Holy Spirit (v. 13)

All of these verbs describe actions of God that occur "in Christ." All God's blessings, including the faith in our hearts and the praise of God on our lips, are ours only "in Christ." The riches of God's grace are lavished upon us in our spiritual bankruptcy. All is of grace! *Our passage invites us to join believers across the ages in accepting all God's blessings and praising Him for them.*

- **How is the introduction to Ephesians unusual?** Paul usually starts his letters with a "thanksgiving," reporting how he thanks God for believers (e.g. Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; Phil. 1:3-8). In Ephesians, though, he begins with a brief *prayer benediction* (1:2), followed by the lengthy *praise benediction* we study this week (1:3-14), continuing with a *thanksgiving* section (1:15, 16a) and a *prayer report* (1:16b-23). Later, he concludes the first half of the letter with another *prayer report* (3:14-19) and a *doxology* (3:20, 21). In the second half of the letter, he adds two *exhortations* concerning worship, one focused on shared worship (5:3,4, 18-21) and the other focused on prayer (6:19-20), concluding the letter with two brief *prayer benedictions* (6:23, 24). Moreover, the entire letter was intended to be read out as part of house church worship (see 6:21, 22). *Taken together, all this worship material makes Ephesians especially valuable as a handbook of worship, providing models of how to worship God and how to praise Him for the many blessings He has provided.*

- **How might we define the worship elements mentioned just above?**
  - *Thanksgiving* – Expresses how and why Paul gives thanks to God for the addressees. Example: In 1:15, 16a, Paul thanks God for the believers in Ephesus because of their “faith in the Lord Jesus” and their “love toward all the saints.”
  - *Prayer benediction* – A prayer blessing inviting God’s blessing on believers. Example: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2).
  - *Praise benediction* – A prayer blessing that “blesses” God. Example: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ Jesus . . .” (1:3).
  - *Doxology* – A specific type of praise benediction, attributing “glory” to God. Example: “To him [God the Father] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (3:21).
  - *Prayer Report* – Paul reports how he prays for believers. Example: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father . . .” (3:14).
  - *Exhortation* – Paul invites believers to participate in prayer or worship, instructing them how to do so. Example: “Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs . . .” (5:18, 19).
- **In what sense are believers “predestined” (vv. 4, 11)?** Adding to the important observations included in Friday’s lesson is this one: Paul’s original audience would have heard Ephesians 1:3-14 as good news. Before their conversion they would have understood their lives to be determined by the astral powers/deities, with their destinies irreversibly set. As Ralph Martin writes: “Oriental astrology and occultism . . . with [their] . . . accompanying astral religion and dominant fatalism, haunted like a nightmare the soul of first-century people. . . . People who came under the spell of star worship were made to feel that all things were ruled by ‘fate.’ The particular conjunction of the stars or planets under which people were born was of decisive importance and settled irretrievably their destiny” (*Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* [John Knox, 1991], 91). Paul’s good news teaches that God offers them new trajectories for their future and invites their free choice to choose them, encouraging them to respond in faith (1:13; 3:17). We should not turn an announcement of good news into a fatalistic and deterministic message similar to the one from which Paul’s hearers had escaped. “This is a rescue from impersonal fate, from astrological charts, from karma and kismet, from ‘biology is destiny’” (Peterson, 61).

## Week 3: The Power of the Exalted Jesus (Eph 1:15-23)

Good Word, 2023

For July 8-14

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. In the age of hyperconnectivity and social media, what “powers” attract our allegiance today, threatening to compete with Christ for our loyalty and worship? *Read back through Ephesians 1:19-23, praying that the exaltation of Jesus may occur in your heart and mind.*
  2. In what ways do you most need the power of Christ’s resurrection and exaltation to be expressed in your life?
  3. How might we live if we truly believed that Jesus is exalted at the heart of the cosmos?
  4. Isn’t the exaltation of Jesus more a matter of Evangelical faith? Is it really significant to Seventh-day Adventist theology?
- **What setting informs our study of Ephesians 1:15-23?** The believers in Ephesus are at low ebb, in danger of “losing heart” (3:13). They recall the grand days when Paul was in town, working miracles and grabbing the headlines. But now, they are grinding away through tougher times. Paul is in prison. The miracles have vanished. The worship of Artemis is again ascendant. All the deities and powers worshipped in Ephesus seem more powerful and influential than ever, while Jesus seems sidelined. Difficult times!
  - **What is Paul’s answer for tough times in Ephesians 1:15-23?** Our lesson focuses on Ephesians 1:15-23, Paul’s answer to those tough times. The segment illustrates a significant feature of Ephesians —Worship, prayer, and praise passages. Whereas 1:1-14 is a lengthy praise benediction, blessing God for the blessings offered to believers, 1:15-23 is a “prayer report.” In it, Paul reports to the believers in Ephesus his prayers for them, asking the Father to give them the Spirit, who actualizes in their lives the power of the risen and exalted Jesus. If believers get drawn back into the worship of the numerous deities and powers on offer in Ephesus, they will miss out on experiencing this supreme reality: Jesus sits on the throne of the cosmos and dispenses the Spirit who conveys inestimable power to believers. [Note a crucial correction on p. 23 of the quarterly where a sentence should read: “Here is Paul’s transforming secret for prayer: pray in the key of praise and thanksgiving.”]
  - **What three grand realities are important for believers to know?** Paul prays that the Spirit might be active in bringing believers intellectual and experiential insight into three grand spiritual realities: (1) The hope of God’s call (v. 18); (2) The riches of the glory of God’s inheritance in the saints (also v. 18); (3) The exceeding greatness of His power exercised on behalf of believers (v. 19).
  - **How is the power of the Spirit related to four specific salvation history events?** Paul spills the most ink on the third grand reality, the exceeding greatness of God’s power exercised on behalf of believers, which he unpacks in vv. 19-23. For Paul, *the dynamic, effective power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers has its source in four important, salvation history events that have already occurred, each of which is something God the Father did for His Son, Jesus Christ.* The Father:
    1. Raised Jesus from the dead (v. 20a)
    2. Seated Him at His right hand (v. 20b-21)
    3. Put all things under His feet (v. 22a)
    4. Gave Him, as head over all things, to the church (v. 22b-23)
  - **How does Paul portray the resurrection/exaltation/coronation of Jesus in Ephesians 1:20-23?** Paul’s answer to the ever-present temptation to worship other powers is to hone in on the resurrection/exaltation/coronation of Jesus (vv. 20-23). He invites believers to replay every step, to celebrate afresh the grand reality of Christ’s status as Ruler of the cosmos.
    - As I write this study guide, the coronation of King Charles III of England is underway, following [a tradition-based string of events](#): the Recognition, the Coronation Oath, the Anointing, the Investiture (in which Charles is given the royal robe, the orb, the coronation ring, the sceptre and the rod of his position, and St. Edward’s Crown is placed on his head), the Enthronement and the offering of Homage.

- In the grand coronation that Paul envisions, it is not the Archbishop of Canterbury who presides, but God the Father. The venue is not some earthly structure, but the courts of heaven itself, “the heavenly places” (v. 20).
- **What is the sequence of events in Christ’s exaltation?** While echoing ancient coronations, the sequence of events in Ephesians 1:5-23 is dramatically different from an earthbound coronation:
  - It begins with a **resurrection!** Jesus, who is now about to be crowned King of the cosmos, had died. The sequence of His exaltation begins when the Father raises Him from death, with His conquest of death (v. 20a)
  - Then comes a central and recognizable element of every coronation ceremony—the **enthronement**. The father “seated him [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly places” (vv. 20b-21). The new position of the enthroned Jesus places him not just “above” but “far above” every real or imagined power for all time: “. . . all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (v. 21).
  - The next event might be labelled **the subjugation**. The scope of Christ’s domain is celebrated by a ritual act of subjugating that domain to Him. In the case of King Charles III, the domain is constrained—the U.K. and the Commonwealth countries. *In the case of King Jesus, the scope of His domain is boundless. It encompasses “all things”*: “And he [God the Father] put all things under his [Jesus’s] feet” (v. 22a).
  - The coronation of Jesus culminates in **the presentation**. After King Charles was crowned, he was driven back to Buckingham Palace in a gold-encrusted coach, and appeared on the palace balcony to the homage of the assembled throngs. *With the enthronement and subjugation complete, the Father conducts the final act of the heavenly coronation, presenting Jesus to His people: “. . . and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (v. 22b-23)*. Note carefully an important nuance: Jesus is not given to the church as its head (though He is the head of the church, Eph 5:23). Rather, having been crowned/installed as head of all things, He is given to the church. The church is superintended by the One who rules everything!
- **How does Paul rely on the Psalms in portraying the exaltation of Jesus?** Paul is not *inventing* these scenes but *reflecting* what he sees in the Psalms, reading Psalm 110 and Psalm 8 through a christological lens:
  - **Psalm 110: 1-3a**: The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”<sup>2</sup> The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!<sup>3</sup> Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments.”
  - **Psalm 8:3-8**: When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,<sup>4</sup> what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?<sup>5</sup> Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.<sup>6</sup> You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet,<sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,<sup>8</sup> the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.



## Week 4: How God Rescues Us (Eph 2:1-10)

Good Word, 2023

For July 15-21

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. Paul describes the conversion story of pagans who have become Christians. Does every conversion story track on the same basic steps he discloses here in Ephesians 2:1-10?
2. Paul writes that the believers “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (v. 3). What does that mean? How does the phrase relate to concepts of “original sin”? (See the “Excursus” that concludes this study guide)
3. In what sense is the believer called to track on the trajectory of Jesus from death to exaltation/enthronement? (vv. 4-6) How does one actually practice this?
4. Just where are “the heavenly places” and what goes on there?

- **Which segment of Ephesians 2:1-10 do you like the best? Why?** Our text exhibits three parts: (1) The sad, pre-conversion existence of those who are now believers (vv. 1-3); (2) God’s intervention to redeem them and His plans for them (vv. 4-7); (3) A celebration of the gospel as exhibited in their story (vv. 8-10).

- **How challenging was the plight in which believers in Ephesus were once enmeshed?** In vv. 1-3, Paul underlines the sad reality of the pre-conversion existence of the addressees by noting that they were spiritually dead, practicing trespasses and sins as their regular pattern of life (v. 1), dominated by a daunting mix of forces, both external (v. 2) and internal (v. 3), and destined to receive God’s wrath (v. 3). Note that Paul uses the phrase “the course of this world” (v. 2), to describe how the customs and behavior that hold sway in this world misshape human life into rebellion against God.

- **Just how much transformative love is packed into that brief phrase, “But God . . .” (v. 4)?** In a dramatic shift, Paul turns to God’s merciful and love-motivated initiative (v. 4) to rescue the once lost addressees. They become participants in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus Himself (vv. 5–6) and the showcase of God’s grace (v. 7). Paul turns from the existence of the addressees (and all humankind) before conversion (vv. 1–3) to their lives and identity after the intervention of God (vv. 4–8). ***The hinge between the two is the all-transforming phrase, “But God . . .”*** (v. 4; cf. 2:13).

“The story shifts with a striking suddenness to the stupendous intervention of God on behalf of his enemies with the greatest short statement in the history of human language: ‘But God, because he is rich in mercy . . .’” “The grim, plodding hopeless, long-syllabled announcement of human lostness—dead in trespasses and sins, children of wrath by nature—is shattered by a lightning bolt from heaven; not in judgment but with intervening mercy—and love beyond all reckoning” (S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians* [Lexham, 2016], pp. 141, 153).

Paul drenches vv. 4–8 in mentions of the mercy, love and grace of God. Before he describes any action God has taken, he identifies central elements of God’s character—His mercy (*eleos*) and love (*agapē*)—as the origin of those gracious actions. He expands on those elements as “rich in mercy” and “great love,” personalizing this last characteristic by adding “with which he loved us.”

- **To what specific events in the story of Jesus does Paul refer in vv. 6-7?** Paul refers to three salvation history events that the Father performs for Christ, ones in which believers somehow participate. The identity of the first and third seem quite obvious. The phrase “made us alive together with Christ” refers to Christ’s resurrection from death and the phrase “seated us with him [Christ] in the heavenly places” describes Christ’s exaltation/enthronement (cf. 1:20-23). But what does “and raised us up with him” mean? Given its placement between the other two, it seems best to take it as a description of the ascension of Jesus to heaven. *With head-shaking amazement, we learn that believers track on the cosmic trajectory of Jesus—resurrected from death, ascended to heaven, exalted to the throne of the cosmos.*
- **Where are “the heavenly places” (v. 6) and what goes on there?** Reviewing the occurrences of the phrase in Ephesians (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12) and answering that question is challenging work. We will not be far off if we think of “the heavenly places” as “heaven,” the place of the throne of God where all important decisions about the future of humankind are made, a place “decisively marked by

Christ's redemptive work" (Stephen Fowl, *Ephesians*, p. 38), and where the exaltation of Christ is instituted. However, this is with an important proviso: Since it is in some sense the habitation of the "powers of darkness," "It is also a place whose final transformation into a place fully under Christ's rule has yet to be accomplished" (Fowl, p. 38, again), a place of conflict and war, of cosmic conflict. It is just the sort of place that we see reflected in another document oriented toward the Roman province of Asia, Revelation: "Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon . . ." (12:7).

Consider this quotation from Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Baker, 2017), p. 91: "Clearly Paul thinks about this 'above' [the heavenly places] as a battlefield: on one side is Christ the field marshal, standing at the king's right hand [cf. 1:20-22], and we with him; on the other side are the principalities and powers [cf. 6:12], which are alienated from God and opposed to him, in their utter disarray, exercising their limited influence."

*If this line of thinking is correct, being in "the heavenly places" is less about finding a place of utter peace and safety than about participating in the unfolding of the plan of redemption in all its wonder and conflict. In "the heavenly places" believers do not so much experience peace as they gain perspective, understanding that their stories are part of the grandest story of all.*

- **Just how grand is God's grace?** Verses 8–10 represent one of the most famous summaries of Paul's gospel (cf. Rom 1:16–17). At its heart is the term grace (*charis*), already employed repeatedly by Paul (Eph 1:7; 2:5, 7), which we often define as "unmerited favor." However, God's grace is offered to those who are "children of wrath," under a death sentence (v. 3). It is not just that we do not merit God's grace or gift (*dōron*); we deserve just the opposite. So, our usual definition fails to grasp the profound depths of divine grace: "Grace is that reality in God that moves Him because of His own character to do good to those who are not only undeserving, but who deserve exactly the opposite. . . . God bestows the best of His goodness on those who deserve the worst of His wrath" (Tom Pennington, "All the World's a Stage: Understanding the Ultimate Purpose of Our Salvation (Eph 2:7)", *The Master's Seminary Journal* 22.1 [Spring 2011]: 104).

## Excursus: Ephesians 2:3, Seventh-day Adventists and Original Sin

While still bearers of the image of God, we have come to understand that there is something deeply awry in us. Living the Christian life, then, is not just a matter of conquering a pesky, bad habit or overcoming whatever “transgressions and sins” (Eph 2:1) are currently threatening. We do not just contend with sins but with sin. We are bent toward rebellion against God and toward self-destruction. In theological terms, this is referred to as “original sin” or “original corruption,” the inherited disposition to sin. There is no more succinct and poignant depiction of this bent than Paul’s description in Ephesians 2:1–3 (though for a longer treatment by Paul see Rom 1:18–3:20). Humans, by default, are caught in a pattern of self-destructive, sinful behavior, following the dictates of Satan (Eph 2:2) and our own innate, sinful desires. Believers once were “by nature children of wrath.”

It is important to note that in offering this description Paul employs a past tense—we “were by nature children of wrath” (v. 3). This does not mean that an inherent bent toward evil is no longer a reality for believers. Paul spends a considerable portion of his letter, 4:17–5:21, warning that sinful acts, rooted in a sinful nature, remain a threat for Christians. It does mean, though, that this “old self” need no longer dominate the believer, who through the power of Christ can “put off your old self” and “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:22–24 ESV).

In reflecting on the topic of “original sin,” it is helpful to understand how the theme has been understood in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the early decades of the church, Seventh-day Adventists accented sins as acts, not sin as an inherited bent toward evil. Sinful behavior was understood to be adopted more by imitation than through a fallen, sinful nature. In this view, infants do not need a Savior since they have not reached the age of moral consciousness and have not sinned.

Ellen White treated the matter differently, arguing: “Children are the lawful prey of the enemy, because they are not subjects of grace, have not experienced the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> She believed: “The sin of Adam and Eve caused a fearful separation between God and man. And here Christ steps in between fallen man and God, and says to man, You may yet come to the Father; there is a plan devised through which God can be reconciled to man, and man to God; and through a mediator you can approach God.”<sup>2</sup> She wrote of “the natural depravity of the heart” and argued that “because of sin his [Adam’s] posterity was born with inherent propensities of disobedience.”<sup>3</sup> Even more forcefully, she states: “At its very source human nature was corrupted. And ever since then sin has continued its hateful work, reaching from mind to mind. Every sin committed awakens the echoes of the original sin.”<sup>4</sup> For her, “there is in his [man’s] nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist.”<sup>5</sup>

Under the influence of passages such as Ephesians 2:1–3 and through the guidance of Ellen White, Seventh-day Adventists believe that “we inherit our basic sinfulness. The universal sinfulness of humanity is evidence that by nature we tend toward evil, not good.”<sup>6</sup> And we reach out to accept the salvation offered in Christ as One who personifies the comprehensive salvation that we need.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, “The Duty of Parents to Their Children,” RH 6:6 (Sept. 19, 1854): 46.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, “Christian Recreation,” RH 35:24 (May 31, 1870): 185–86.

<sup>3</sup> Letter 26d, 1887, *ibid.*, 195 and Letter 8, 1895, reprinted in Nichol, ed. *SDA Bible Commentary*, 5:1128.

<sup>4</sup> “The Warfare between Good and Evil,” RH 78:16 (April 16, 1901): 241.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this topic, see Gerhard Pfandl, “Some Thoughts on Original Sin.” <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/sinoriginal-web.pdf>. I am summarizing Pfandl’s essay in this excursus, which is drawn from the Seventh-day Adventist International Biblical Commentary volume on Ephesians.

## Week 5: Horizontal Atonement: The Cross & the Church (Eph 2:11-22) Good Word, 2023

For July 22-28

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. What does Paul say in Eph 2:11-22 about Christ's work of reconciliation performed at the cross? (See the phrases "by the blood of Christ," v. 13; "in His flesh," v. 15; "through the cross," v. 16). How does that work relate to Paul's earlier "announcement of theme" (in 1:9, 10)?
2. How might Eph 1:11-22 help believers bring something distinctive and effective to current conversations about race relations? How might it add value to usual concepts of diversity? (And, should Christians be less interested in relationships among races or more so?)
3. While Paul's emphasis in Eph 2:11-22 is on the horizontal—the impact of the cross on relationships between Jewish and Gentile believers—he also has the vertical relationship between believers and God in view. How does Paul address the "vertical" in our passage?
4. Imagine a scenario in which a local congregation is in significant conflict. How might they actualize Christ's completed work of reconciliation? Be concrete in your suggestions.

### • How might we outline the passage? It may prove helpful to think of our lengthy passage in three parts:

1. Why the reconciling work of Christ was necessary (vv. 11, 12)
2. The reconciling work of Christ on the cross and what it accomplished (vv. 13-18)
3. Celebrating the reconciling work of Christ (through a set of "telescoped" metaphors that culminate in the inclusive metaphor of "a holy temple in the Lord," vv. 19-22)

### • Were Jews and Gentiles really at loggerheads in the ancient world? There are certainly accounts of Jews and Gentiles navigating life together in positive ways. However, there is significant evidence of a deep hatred and wide gulf, including our passage this week, which refers to the practice of name-calling between the groups (v. 11). Ancient author Tacitus describes the divide between Jews and Gentiles from his Roman and Gentile perspective: "The Jews are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion, but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity" (*Hist* 5.5)."

### • Why and in what sense is the law invalidated or nullified? Some of our evangelical friends turn to Eph 2:14-16 to defend the idea that the Ten Commandments no longer apply to Christians. This view is difficult to defend since Paul, in the ethical instruction he offers in Ephesians (4:1–6:9), advocates a behavioral code endorsed by the Ten Commandments. He cites the fifth commandment (6:1-4) and seems to allude to others as well (7<sup>th</sup> in 5:31-4, 21-33; 8<sup>th</sup> in 4:28; 9<sup>th</sup> in 4:25-32, esp. v. 25; 10<sup>th</sup> in 5:5). Scott Moonen, concludes that "Paul draws from all ten commandments, with a significant amount of overlap" (see the bibliography). Paul's use of the Ten Commandments makes the following views more attractive:

*What is abolished may be the ceremonial requirements of the law, inclusive of later additions.* "What is abolished in Ephesians as 'the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances' are the ceremonial laws and legal regulations [including both 'the very specific ceremonial laws in the Old Testament' and 'in the Jewish writings of the intertestamental period, in which Jewish laws multiplied' and in which 'the idea of separation was strongly emphasized'] that made it difficult for Gentiles to become part of God's people. When this barrier of separation was overcome by the Cross, which was the fulfillment of the Old Testament ceremonial system and which put to death the hostility (2:16), what emerged was 'one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace' (2:15)." Ivan Blazen (see bibliography).

*Or, Paul's focus may be on the misuse of the whole OT system of law, as it had come to be interpreted, augmented, and misused as a wedge to distance Jews from Gentiles. The law is being "abolished" or "annulled" in the function it had acquired of separating Jews and Gentiles. "Paul assumes that the torah, as given by God and properly understood, would lead to the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, each being reconciled to God. Under Sin's influence the torah became both a source and an*

instrument of hostility. Ephesians asserts that in his passion (i.e., ‘in his flesh’) Christ nullifies this hostility, fulfilling the law rather than abolishing it” (Stephen Fowl, see bibliography).

- **How might we know whether or not we are taking Eph 2:11-22 seriously?** “Christians bear witness to Christ only when their words and deeds make it plain that Christ is as much the outsiders’ and opponents’ Christ as their own. He is the end of division and enmity. . . . When no tensions are confronted and overcome . . . then the one new thing, peace, and the one new man created by Christ, are missing; then no faith, no church, no Christ is found or confessed.”—Markus Barth, *The Broken Wall*, 44-45 (see bibliography).
- **Is it really appropriate to apply Eph 2:11-22 to the modern, fraught context of race relations?** To do so could feel a little faddish. Friday’s lesson addresses this question in some detail, arguing that: (1) The specific context of Eph 2:11-22 addresses relationships between Jews and Gentiles within the church; (2) Unity, in Ephesians, is grand and broad taking in “all things” and “every family in heaven and on earth”(1:9, 10; 3:15); (3) That ultimate plan is to be signaled through the unity of the church (3:10); (4) Therefore, it is appropriate to apply 2:11-22 to the topic of relationships among people groups or races. Audit that rationale. Is it sound? What might you add or subtract?
- **Why is Paul so interested in shared access on the part of both Jewish and Gentile believers “in one Spirit to the Father” (v. 18)?** Given the context, especially the mention of the destruction of “the middle wall of separation” (v. 14, NKJV) and the temple imagery (vv. 19–22), Paul seems to be thinking of “access” (Greek, *prosagōgē*; v. 18) in relationship to the temple and the desire for access to worship God (see the text of the prohibition against Gentiles entering “The Court of Israel” in the Sabbath Afternoon” segment of our lesson).

“Access” implies more than being in someone’s presence. Ancient author Xenophon tells of Sacas, the cupbearer, whose job it was to “introduce” (*prosagō*) those who wished to conduct business with Astyages, King of the Medes. Xenophon also describes how Cyrus expected anyone wishing for “access” (*prosagōgē*) to him to request it through his friends, who could grant entrance into the royal presence with the privilege of making requests of the king. Such a background suggests the image of Christ as “the ‘bringer’ of the suppliant into God’s presence”—David Williams (see bibliography).

Paul reminds us that when we enter to lay our business before the King, we discover that He is our Father.

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## Week 6: The Mystery of the Gospel (Eph 3:1-21)

Good Word, 2023

For July 29-August 4

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

- Eph 3:10 provides something a bit unusual, a “job description” for the church. How would you paraphrase the church’s task? How might we go about accomplishing it?
- Eph 3:13 may come as close to a “purpose statement” as Paul provides in the letter. What worry might well motivate the letter?
- In his prayer report (3:14-19), Paul reports his prayer request for wonderful, spiritual assets. Which means the most to you (or which do you need the most) just now?
- The last half of our passage, Eph 3:14-21, presents us with a problem that looms large for Ephesians as a whole: How do we bridge the considerable gap between Paul’s idealistic gospel (e.g., “strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,” v. 16; “filled with all the fullness of God,” v. 19) and the reality of our humanity and sinfulness?

### • How is Eph 3:1-21 structured?

- *The Introduction (v. 1)*: Paul begins to express the reason for his prayers on behalf of the Ephesian believers.
- *The Lengthy Interruption (vv. 2-13)*: He interrupts that thought with as “aside,” an autobiographical reflection on the “the mystery of Christ” entrusted to him and his calling to ministry.
- *The Prayer Report (vv. 14-19)*: He then returns to discuss the reason for his prayers.
- *The Doxology (vv. 20-21)*: He concludes with a doxology.

### • What is the purpose of Ephesians? Paul’s mention of his worry about the addressees “losing heart” (3:13) helps us identify the letter’s purpose, why he wrote it. Paul writes to raise the addressees’ vision of their Christian identity by exalting what it means to be part of the church. The church plays a central and integral role in actualizing the unity Christ won at the cross (2:14–16; 3:10), which unity constitutes God’s ultimate, eschatological plan for the cosmos (1:10). Paul urges them to recognize that they are part of the church, which is sustained by the power of God, relativizing all names and powers to the omniscient and exalted Jesus (1:20–23). This purpose gains urgency in view of Paul’s imprisonment, which could prove discouraging (noting Paul’s direct appeal in 3:13).

### • What is “the mystery of Christ,” v. 4? Paul uses the word “mystery” (Gk, *mystērion*) three times in Eph 3:1-13 (vv. 3, 4, 9; cf. 1:9; 5:32; 6:19). The term refers to something revealed by God to at least some people. Though inexplicable apart from divine revelation, it has become an “open secret” that offers insight into God’s plan. Paul may use the term with an evangelistic eye toward the “mystery religions” with initiation rituals and disclosed secrets initiates were forbidden to share. For Paul, the real “mystery,” the only one with any true and lasting value, is the one revealed in Jesus Christ.

### • What do we learn about “the mystery of Christ” in our passage?

- It was revealed to Paul and to the “holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (vv. 3–4).
- Paul has already written about this mystery in the earlier segments of Ephesians (v. 3). So, 1:1–2:22 (and especially 2:11–22) help to define the plan of salvation understood as “the mystery.”
- It was not revealed in its fullness to “the sons of men in other generations” (v. 5).
- While it does not use the Greek word for “mystery,” v. 6 offers the clearest definition: The “mystery of Christ” (v. 4) or “the mystery of the gospel” (6:19) is “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs [with Jewish believers], members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” *The grand mystery Paul describes is this: The full inclusion of Gentile believers in the gospel and in the church.*
- It was Paul’s mission to preach the gospel (“the unsearchable riches of Christ”) to the Gentiles and to reveal this mystery to all (vv. 7–9).

- Paul's success would help trigger a wider revelation of the mystery by the church "to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (v. 10).
- **How valuable is the Christian's right to exercise "boldness and access with confidence" in coming to God (v. 12)?** "We have no need to be abashed, if we approach the Divine Majesty with a true faith in Christ. His name gives the sinner access to the holiest place. The cherubim sheathe their swords of flame. The heavenly warders at this passport open the golden gates. We 'come unto Mount Sion, the city of the living God, and to an innumerable company of angels' [Heb 12:22]. Not one of these mightinesses and ancient peers of heaven ... would wish or dare to bar our entrance" (G. G. Findlay, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* [New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1931], 177).
- **What three prayer requests does Paul make on behalf of believers? (vv. 14-19)** [Note: Each prayer request is marked by the use of the Greek conjunction *hina*, "in order that," "that"]
  - Paul's **first prayer request (vv. 16-17)** asks God to grant the believers in Ephesus an abundant spiritual experience, one marked by inner strength through the Spirit's presence ("strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being," Eph 3:16 ESV), intimacy with Christ who is also portrayed as dwelling within ("that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith," v. 17), and a settled, secure spiritual identity ("rooted and grounded in love," v. 17). *N.B.: Christ does not just come for an occasional visit, but lives/dwells/resides with believers who have the privilege of sharing life with the One who has been elevated to the throne of the cosmos (Eph 1:20-23; 2:4-6).*
  - Paul's **second prayer request (vv. 18-19a)** invites fresh understanding for the addressees as "strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."
  - Paul's **third prayer request (v. 19b)** is succinct, summing up the intent of his prayers: "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."
- **Looking back over chapter three, how might we apply its message devotionally?** One way is to imagine the aged, imprisoned Apostle Paul, who is arguably the greatest Christian missionary and leader of all time, mentoring us in Eph 3:1-21. Offering a critique of the usual world of résumés and interviews, Paul offers an upside-down résumé that provides important principles for living a life of significance:
  - *True success is all about getting caught up in the grand plan of God. God is calling you into His great project—to unify all things in Christ (vv. 1-6, cf. 1:9-10).*
  - *Don't just tune in to your own passion. Listen for God's call (vv. 1-6).*
  - *True success is all about getting caught up in the grand plan of God. God is calling you into His great project—to unify all things in Christ (vv. 1-6, cf. 1:9-10).*
  - *The best opportunities are not earned based on your own merit. They are gifts of God's grace (vv. 7-8)*
  - *The scope of God's plan for you is vast. He imagines you engaged in cosmic leadership (v. 10).*
  - *Don't work for a boss. Join the family business. Work for your Father (v. 14).*
  - *Be sure to choose a powerful Mentor who will provide you with everything you need (vv. 14-19).*

## Week 7: The Unified Body of Christ (Eph 4:1-16)

Good Word, 2023

For August 5-11

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. Is the role of the ascended Jesus described in our passage limited to the first century? If not, what are the implications for the way we staff congregations and view each other as church members today?
  2. How have vv. 11-13 been important to Seventh-day Adventists in understanding the functioning of spiritual gifts in general and in understanding the role of Ellen White? (see Wednesday's lesson)
  3. How might Eph 4:1-16 offer a corrective to some, defective views of church "unity"?
- **What shift occurs at Eph 4:1?** Paul begins the second half of his letter with a verb that signals the shift to pastoral counsel: "I . . . urge" (ESV; *parakaleō*). As a way of sharpening the appeal, Paul alludes again to his difficult circumstances as a prisoner. The urgency of Paul's entreaty suggests that he is applying the teaching he has shared in chs. 1–3 to real issues he believes need to be addressed.
  - **How can we understand our passage—which can seem a bit disjointed—as a coherent whole?**
    - 4:1-6 A Call to Unity
      - vv. 1-3 – Adopt the attributes and actions that foster unity in the church
      - vv. 4-6 – The seven "ones": A hymn-like celebration of unity
    - 4:7-16 The Exalted Jesus gives gifts that nourish unity
      - v. 7 – Each church member is gifted by Jesus
      - vv. 8-9 – How Ps 68:18 predicts the exalted Jesus giving unifying gifts
      - vv. 11-16 – The gifts the exalted Jesus gave to His church and how they unify the body of Christ
  - **What should we learn about the unity of the Church from our passage?** Paul accents two different perspectives on the theme of unity in Ephesians 4:1–16, ones that he holds together as complementary: 1) The unity of the church is a reality, a theological fact that is to be proclaimed and celebrated (vv. 4-6); 2) The unity of the church requires the vigorous nurture of believers and is a goal toward which the church moves, nourished by Christ and the gifted ones He has provided (vv. 1-3, 7-16). The blessed, God-given reality of unity should not lead us to passivism. Paul encourages us to be "eager [*spoudazō*, "be zealous or eager," "make every effort"] to maintain the unity of the Spirit."
  - **How many church members are to contribute to the health, growth, and unity of the church?** It is crucial to note that while Paul will accent the crucial role of "ministers of the word," he believes that every church member is a gifted and important "part" of the "body of Christ." "None misses out on Christ's bounty" (Peter O'Brien, *Ephesians*, PNTC, 287). He begins and ends the segment, vv. 7-16, with this thought. Since spiritual gifts are seen as an expression of God's "grace" (Rom 12:6; 1 Pet 4:10), we may understand the phrase "Christ's gift" (v. 7) as referring to Christ's role in giving spiritual gifts and see Paul as alluding to the giftedness of each church member. Paul returns to the thought in the context of the body metaphor in v. 16b, noting that it takes "each part . . . working properly" for the body to "grow" and "build itself up in love."
  - **How does Paul use Ps 68:18 to talk about the exalted Jesus as the Giver of gifts?** Paul quotes Ps 68:18, reading it as a prophecy about Jesus: "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." The psalm portrays the Lord, *Yahweh*, as a conquering general who, having won a great victory, (1) *ascends to his capital city*, leading a large group of captives, and then (2) *distributes gifts* to those generals and soldiers who contributed to the conquest. To understand our passage, we need to stay close to the plot of the psalm, to the order of events it discloses. Paul reinterprets the psalm, applying it to *Jesus* who, following His resurrection, (1) *ascends to heaven* and then (2) *descends (through the Spirit at Pentecost)*, distributing gifts to His church.



In vv. 9-10, Paul is establishing two things: (1) The Jesus who ascends and is exalted is the same One who descends-in-the-Spirit to distribute spiritual gifts (v. 9); (2) Reversing the point, the One who descends-in-the-Spirit is to be identified with the exalted Jesus who had ascended to the throne of God (v. 10) [Note: See Friday's lesson for important comments on translating v. 9, which does not in the Greek text distinguish which happens first, the ascent or the descent, and remarks about the phrase "He led captivity captive" (NKJV) or "he led a host of captives" (ESV)].

- **What gifts does the exalted Jesus give?** The Greek text names the gifts without any explanatory phraseology, reflected well in the ESV: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers" (cf. NKJV "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers"). The Greek syntax suggests that the last two labels represent a single group, pastor-teachers, which means we have four types of "ministers of the word" that are identified. Note two interesting shifts from Paul's earlier discussions of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12, 14; Rom 12): (1) Jesus is the Giver of the gifts (cf. the Spirit); (2) The gifts are not spiritual gifts given to people; they are people, gifted people given to the church.
- **In this idealistic, nearly problem-free letter, what challenge does Paul discuss in v. 14?** (See the remarks in Thursday's lesson) Paul may have intended readers to bring the three metaphors he uses together something like this: "'Stop being babies, tossed high by waves and blown all about by every gust of teaching in this sea of human trickery.'"<sup>1</sup> Paul's descriptions whet our appetite for more information. Does he know of actual heresies that are threatening the house churches of Ephesus? Perhaps he has in mind the erroneous views circulating in Colossae (and reflected in the closely related epistle to the Colossians) and worries that these might become more widespread. To quote Thursday's lesson: "Paul believes divisiveness to be an important mark of error: That which nourishes and grows the body and helps it 'hold together' is good while that which depletes and divides is evil. By turning from the divisive teaching and to that of tested and trusted teachers (v. 11), they will advance toward true Christian maturity and play effective roles in the body of Christ (vv. 12, 13; cf. vv. 15, 16)."
- **How does Paul redeploy the body metaphor here in Eph 4:1-16?** Ephesians 4:1-16 represents the most detailed use of the body metaphor in the later writings of Paul (cf. Col 2:18-19). The passage focuses on the role of the "gifts" (*domata*, v. 8) as they relate to the theme of unity. It is instructive to compare Paul's use of the body metaphor in 1 Cor 12. In both passages, Paul uses the body metaphor to understand spiritual gifts. In 1 Cor 12, while God arranges the gifts in the body (vv. 18, 24, 28), it is the Spirit who gives the gifts (vv. 4-11). In Ephesians, as we noted above, the gifts are given by the triumphant Christ (4:8, 11). In 1 Cor 12 there is a greater variety listed of both spiritual gifts and body parts (foot, hand, ear, eye, head), though none of the gifts is identified with a specific body part. In Eph 4, referents are provided for a shorter list of body parts. Christ is the "head" (*kephalē*, v. 15; whereas in 1 Cor 12 the head was not distinguished as a particularly significant body part), ministers of the word (Eph 4:11) are "ligaments" (*haphē* [s.], v. 16),<sup>2</sup> and other church members are "parts" (*meroi*, v. 16). Here in Eph 4:11-16 Paul wishes to accent the role of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers in fostering the unity and growth of the church. These leaders are to be treasured "as part of the royal largesse which Christ distributes from his position of cosmic lordship after his triumphal ascent."<sup>3</sup> Paul also innovates in his use of the body metaphor in introducing the concept of the growth of the body, a thought that permeates vv. 11-16.

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<sup>1</sup> David Williams, *Paul's Metaphors* (Hendrickson, 1999), 206 n. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Following the technical sense of the term defended by BDAG, 155, J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2nd ed. (Macmillan, 1904), 186; "*haphē*," L&N 1:101-2; "*haphē*," *EDNT* 1:181.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 162.

## Week 8: Christ-Shaped Lives and Spirit-Inspired Speech (Eph 4:17-32) Good Word, 2023

For August 12-18

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. In Eph 4:17-32 Paul is very interested in the quality of speech practiced by Christians, especially within the fellowship of believers. Why is this such a big deal for him? How are we doing on this today?
2. How do we build a culture of intra-church communication that mirrors Paul's counsel in Eph 4:17-32? (See the [overly-idealistic?] addendum to the lesson, "Take the Pledge!")
3. What does Ephesians 4:30 suggest with regard to the themes of the "personhood" and full divinity of the Holy Spirit? Compare Eph. 4:3-6; Matt. 12:31, 32; Acts 5:3, 4; 16:6, 7; Rom. 8:16, 26, 27; 1 Cor. 2:10, 13; 12:11; Gal. 5:17, 18. (See Wednesday's lesson)

- **How is Eph 4:17-32 related to the earlier segment, 4:1-16?** In Eph 4:1-16, Paul celebrates the thoroughgoing transformation experienced by believers in Ephesus, one indicated by the use of speech to build up one another. Close parallels between 4:1 and 4:17 suggest that Paul is not taking up a new theme in 4:17-32 but addressing the same theme—unity—from a different and initially more negative point of view.

His emphasis in 4:1-16 has been on the positive, on building up the unity of the church. Now he addresses the pattern of living that undermines that unity, the calloused, selfish pattern exhibited by Gentiles (vv. 17-19, 22), contrasting that pattern to the new, Christian one (vv. 20-21, 23-24). Offering negative exhortations against divisive behavior, which undermines the unity of the Christian fellowship (vv. 25-31), Paul concludes with a positive exhortation about kindness and forgiveness, one that echoes the pattern of life he affirmed at the beginning of 4:1-16 (vv. 1-3). In this understanding, 4:1-16 and 4:17-32, while separate sections, are closely related. Both deal with the theme of unity in the church, banning patterns of behavior that undermine it and affirming attitudes and behavior that nurture it.

- **How might we outline 4:17-32?**

- 4:17-24 The contrast between Gentile and Christian Lifestyles
  - 4:17-19 The Gentile pattern of life: futile, darkened, alienated, calloused, spiraling downward into increasing impurity (note the echo of this assessment in v. 22)
  - 4:20-24 The Christ-shaped pattern of life: Renewed, the new self, reflecting the righteousness and holiness of God
- 4:25-32 The use of speech to advance the health and unity of the church
  - 4:25-30 Negative exhortations against divisive behavior
    - 4:25 Avoiding falsehood and exhibiting truth
    - 4:26-27 Limiting expressions of anger
    - 4:28 (In an interesting thematic shift) The thief turns to honest labor and philanthropy
    - 4:29-30 Jettisoning "corrupting talk" in favor of speech that "builds up" and "gives grace," which avoids grieving the Holy Spirit
  - 4:31-32 Concluding contrast: What is to be put away—bitterness, wrath, anger, etc.—and the Christ-patterned life of forgiveness that is to be adopted

- **How does Paul's emphasis on speech in 4:25-32 connect with the rest of the letter?** "Paul imagines his Epistle to the Ephesians being read out in house churches in greater Ephesus, turning written language into speech. In his letter-speech he has a great deal to say about harmful speech ("corrupting talk," 4:29), such as boasting (2:8-9), name-calling (2:11), sharing false doctrine (4:14; 5:6), falsehood (4:25), sexually explicit conversation (5:3-4), and provoking and threatening others (6:4, 9). He also discusses and exemplifies Spirit-inspired, healthy speech—truth-telling (4:25) that "builds up" (4:29) those who hear it. To speak in such a way is to pattern our speech after Jesus Himself who is the preacher of reconciliation, preaching peace (2:17), a vocation Paul inherits

(3:8-9). In place of damaging speech such as angry, slanderous outbursts (4:31), Paul offers the replacements of praise to God (1:3-14), tender-hearted words of forgiveness (4:32), thanksgiving and songs of worship addressed to God (5:4, 18-20), and praying for others (6:18-20; a pattern of speech Paul himself repeatedly illustrates: 1:15-21; 3:14-21).” John McVay, *Ephesians* [the companion book to the study guide] (Pacific Press, 2022), 68.

- **Does Eph 4:26 offer a vigorous defense for “righteous indignation”?** Paul is quoting Ps 4:4, which advocates careful thought, silence, and trust in God (Ps 4:4-5). In Eph 4:31, Paul bans anger and angry speech. This suggests that Paul’s statement about anger should be understood as a concessionary one: “Should you become angry, do not allow your anger to bear fruit in full-blown sin.” That Paul is interested not in defending the exercise of anger but in limiting it is confirmed by his additional command, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (v. 26).
- **Does Paul’s command “do not give place to the devil” (*diabolos*; v. 27) signal that Paul is thinking of the cosmic conflict?** The use of the term in 6:11 suggests the possibility of an intra-textual echo, with 4:27 serving as a “prequel” of 6:10-20. Might v. 27 constitute a brief, “cosmic conflict” reference? Is Paul already on the battlefield here, urging the *militia Christi* to hold the battle line? Note that 6:11 shares not only vocabulary but also the thought of a devious, demonic adversary looking for every possible way to gain an advantage over believers.
- **What Spirit-inspired speech filter does Paul assume will be active in the minds and hearts of believers?** Every phrase of Eph 4:29 offers valuable counsel. Paul asks believers to adopt an internal, Spirit-inspired interrogation of their speech that applies three criteria before releasing any statement:
  1. **Is it “good for building up”?** Will it encourage (or discourage) the hearer? Will it build their faith and fuel their hope?
  2. A word may be positive, but **does it also “fit the occasion”?** Is it a timely, fitting word? Is it appropriate in the specific context you are about to speak it?
  3. The culminating test is this one: **Does the statement “give grace to those who hear” it?**
- **How does our misuse of speech impact a member of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit?** See Eph 4:30 and Wednesday’s lesson.
- **How does Paul tie together “vertical forgiveness” and “horizontal forgiveness”?** Paul invites us in our speech to model God’s treatment of us (cf. v. 32), to convey to others the “grace”—the undeserved favor, blessing, and forgiveness—that God has practiced toward us in Jesus. Tim Keller, recently deceased, activates this principle of dual forgiveness. For him, forgiveness is both a process and a promise in which one must first make the promise to activate the process. Forgiveness is granted before it is felt. Forgiveness has two important steps: (1) Remember you are a sinner (I live by God’s grace; Christ did not take vengeance on me); (2) Making a commitment not to throw this thing back up to the perpetrator, to others, or to rehearse it yourself. If you work on this, slowly but surely you start to feel it (The Russell Moore Show—Bonus Episode: Tim Keller’s Heavenly Hope, c. 12:00-15:30; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/russell-moore-show/>).
- **How might we summarize the lessons of Ephesians chapter 4 concerning speech?** Our speech should foster the unity of the church (4:1-16) and should minister to the emotional and spiritual health of its members (4:17-32). Speech should not be a flippant, thoughtless act but should signal that we are followers of Christ, acting in concert with the divine, ultimate goal of cosmic unity in Him (1:9, 10).

## Take the Pledge!

John McVay

I grew up in the Seventh-day Adventist Church at times and places where those small, local church fellowships seemed marked by joy and love for one another. They were excited about being Seventh-day Adventists and about worshiping and serving together. They even relished doing Ingathering in the snow so they could drink hot chocolate together afterwards!

Today, all-too-often, our local churches and larger gatherings become mere opportunities to argue for some narrow agenda or, worse still, the locales for real acrimony and conflict.

We must change that environment. And by the grace of Christ, we can do so. By taking—and living—The Pledge:

1. I wish for my influence within the Seventh-day Adventist Church family and beyond to be positive, uplifting, faith-building and morale-boosting.
2. Avoiding unnecessary dissension and narrow agendas, I will do everything in my power to contribute to my Seventh-day Adventist Church being a joy-filled, Spirit-filled place where the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—abounds. (Rom 16:17; Titus 3:9-11; Gal 5:22-23)
3. Recalling Christ's calls for unity amidst our diversity and love as the mark of His church, I will expend more energy affirming those doing and saying things I believe to be good than in pointing out the failings of those I believe to be wrong. (John 13:34-35; 17:20-23; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:1-6; 1Thess 5:9-11)
4. I will be more conscious of my own faults and failings, which I acknowledge to be many and which I will make the focus of concerted and prayerful effort to amend, than I am of the failings of others, which I will seek to minimize and dismiss. (Matt 7:1-5; Gal 6:1-5; Phil 2:1-5)
5. When I do disagree with someone and feel the need to share my view, I will make my respect for my fellow believer clear. I will assume his integrity and her commitment to Christ. I will offer my differing opinion gently, not stridently, and will trust my fellow church members to reflect on the issue without the need of raising my voice or offering any threat. (Eph 4:31-32)
6. When I perceive some wrong that I believe demands wider attention, I will carefully follow the way of Jesus outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. I will seek to explore and understand before I feel the need to condemn. I will work within established structures toward a redemptive end. (Matt 18:15-17; Gal 6:1)
7. I will remember that leaders do not forfeit their status as brothers and sisters in Christ. I will honor leaders as gifts from our risen Lord and will avoid inaccurate or false accusations against them. If I am a leader, I will be a caring one, remembering that I am

both a member of the flock and an "undershepherd" of Jesus. (Eph 4:11-16; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Tim 5:17-20; Heb 13:7, 17; 1 Pet 5:1-4)

8. I will bear in mind that humility is always becoming for humans and that there exists always the distinct possibility that I could be wrong. (1 Pet 3:8)
9. I will trust the risen Christ, who is the Bridegroom of the church, to perfect the bride, smoothing every wrinkle and correcting any flaw. (Eph 5:25-27)
10. I will live joyfully, looking for every opportunity to build up and affirm my fellow church members, as I await the return of Christ. (Gal 6:2; Eph 4:29-30; Heb 10:24-25)

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

• **Key Questions**

1. What arguments does Paul offer to support his ban of crude speech among Christians? (5:3-5, 12). Which of these arguments are most applicable to our day?
2. What “bargains” are on offer to you as you await Christ’s return? (see v. 16 and Wednesday’s lesson). What would it mean to “snap up” those bargains?
3. In Ephesians 5:18b-20 Paul imagines Christians gathered to worship. In your own words, describe the early Christian worship service he recounts.
4. Paul has illustrated the use of thanksgiving in prayer (1:3-23, esp. v. 16; 3:14-21) and put thanksgiving forward, in contrast to crude speech, as central to discipleship (5:4). In Eph 5:20 he shares how pervasive thanksgiving should be in Christian worship: “. . . giving thanks always for all things” (v. 20, NKJV). Why such a fixation on thanksgiving?

• **How might we sketch out the major themes of 5:1-20?**

- 5:1-2 The overarching call: To live as imitators of God, loving others in a way that mirrors Christ’s self-sacrificial love for us
- 5:3-6 A call for sexual purity in immoral days
- 5:7-14 A call for Christian witness in dark days
- 5:15-20 A call for strategic worship in evil days

- **Is Eph 5:1-20 just a set of jumbled, miscellaneous commands?** Like the verses before it (4:25-32), 5:1-20 exhibits relatively short sentences and “not this, but that” pattern, correcting vices and advocating Christian virtues. The passage can seem like a random, rapid-fire stream of commands. To understand the passage, we must grasp Paul’s perspective and his tone. His *perspective* is that of the end time, as is evident in 5:15-16 where he uses a word borrowed from the marketplace to describe the behavior believers should practice: *exagorazō*, to “snap up the bargains” on offer as we await Christ’s return. His *tone* is the urgent one of the battlefield, which is indicated by his use of a variety of battlefield motifs such as awakening out of sleep (v. 14) and attending to the time (vv. 15-16; cf. Rom 13:11-14; 1 Thess 5:1-11). *Our passage is not a random list of exhortations but Paul’s end-time, battlefield instructions to combatants in the great controversy.*

- **Why is Paul so interested in sexual purity?** Paul’s tart ban of sexually-explicit speech (v. 4) makes it clear that his focus is on the Christian house churches as they gather for worship (cf. vv. 18-20). He writes in awareness of the devastating impact that adultery and other forms of sexual immorality could have on the Christian house churches in Ephesus, damaging God’s grand initiative in establishing the church as a signal of His planned, cosmic unity in Christ (1:9-10; 2:11-22; 3:10). He dares to offer substitutes to fill any vacuum created by the absence of salacious speech—“psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit” and “giving thanks . . . to God” (vv. 19-20). Instead of recounting sexual experiences, conquests, and jokes, he imagines songs of praise and thankful speech directed toward God.

Living a life that revolves around sexual sin is not just a threat to the effectiveness and unity of house churches in the present, it imperils future salvation (v. 5). Any who do so fall victim to “empty words” that suggest sexual sin and Christian discipleship may coexist happily in the lives of believers (v. 6; cf. 1 Cor 6:12-20; 2 Tim 3:6; Heb 13:4; 2 Pet 2:1-22; ; Jude 4; Rev 2:14, 20). Paul cautions that believers who are deceived in this way will suffer the same judgment, “the wrath of God,” that “comes upon the sons of disobedience” (v. 6). Paul earnestly warns believers to avoid both decimation of church fellowship in the present and the loss of eternal life at Christ’s return.

- **How does Paul encourage believers to bear witness?** In another word of battlefield advice, Paul calls believers to bear witness in a time marked by “the works of darkness” (v. 11). Declaring that believers are “light in the Lord,” he charges them to “Walk as children of light,” living out what they discern to be “pleasing to the Lord” (vv. 8-10). Beyond avoiding “works of darkness,” believers are to “expose” such deeds (vv. 11-12). Paul refers both cryptically and poetically to how they are to do so:

“But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light” (v. 13-14a). He does not envision harsh, public confrontation of their pagan neighbors. He imagines instead that they will employ a “show forth God’s goodness” strategy, exhibiting a God-honoring lifestyle for all to see. Such a witness holds promise of light-bathed transformation.

Paul concludes his call for Christian witness in dark days by citing a saying or hymn: “Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (v. 14b, ESV). Is Paul addressing the unbeliever? Or is he encouraging the believers’ witness? Probably the latter, since Paul draws on Isaiah 60:1-3, which is addressed to God’s people. If so, the statement offers a heartwarming promise: *As you seek to bear witness to Christ in difficult times, Christ Himself will inspire and encourage you. The light you share will be refracted light, originating in the light Christ shines into your life.*

- **How can we practice strategic worship (vv. 15-20)?** Paul urges believers to make an end-time substitution for the elaborate dinner and drinking parties, the *symposia*, which were the focus of social life and entertainment at the time (see vv. 3-4, 11-12, 18). Audaciously, he advocates shared, Christian worship as that substitute. For Paul, these are the essential characteristics of strategic, end-time worship:
  1. *Worship is not a spectator sport, but is highly participatory:* Paul portrays believers “filled with the Spirit, addressing one another . . .” in worship (v. 19).
  2. *Worship offers varied types of heartfelt, God-centered music:* “. . . psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (v. 19).
  3. *Worship is not a public relations event, advertising the church and its programs. It is exclusively focused on the worship of God:* “. . . giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 20).
  4. *Worship nurtures and actualizes Christian camaraderie and community:* “. . . submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21). For Paul, battlefield worship is shared, corporate worship, which Paul regards as an essential survival strategy for evil, end-time days.
- **How does our passage inform the pressing question, “How can I know God’s will?”** Paul twice commends an important, end-time task: “Try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (v. 10); “Understand what the will of the Lord is” (v. 17). Taking the two passages together, we learn that understanding God’s will does not (at least usually) happen in a momentary flash of insight, but is a process of thought, discernment, and testing (v. 10), leading to a decision about the values that will determine one’s choices (v. 17).

Ephesians 5:1-20 suggests useful strategies that inform the process of discerning God’s will:

(1) *Observe carefully the Pattern* (vv. 1-2). We are to be “imitators of God” and of Christ, patterning our lives after the God of love and the self-sacrificing Christ; (2) *Reflect on the lifestyles of unbelievers as a negative exhibit of how not to live* (vv. 3-20). Paul develops this thought in detail, pointing to sexual immorality (vv. 3-6), crude speech (v. 4), etc.; (3) *Learn with fellow believers* (vv. 19-21). Decisions about God’s will are not intended to be lonely, individual ones. The process of discerning God’s will is advanced by worshiping with other believers, seeking their counsel, and submitting to the wisdom God shares through them (vv. 19-21).

## **Addendum: Wine and Drunkenness in Ephesians 5:18<sup>1</sup>**

It is frequently assumed that Paul, in his exhortation “Do not get drunk with wine” (Eph 5:18), is careful to distinguish wine-drinking from drunkenness. In this view, he does not speak against drinking wine but is opposed only to becoming drunk as a result of drinking wine to excess. The passage is taken to mean, “It’s OK to drink wine.” Is this an appropriate understanding?

Two arguments suggest this view is an inadequate one:

1. Paul is drawing on Proverbs 20:1 and 23:29-35, passages that locate the evil associated with wine and strong drink not just in the drunkenness that results from consuming it, but in the drink itself: “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler” (20:1). The wise man’s commands move beyond a ban on drunkenness: “Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly” (23:31). Danger is present from the moment the cup is lifted toward one’s lips. Paul’s Greek grammar is clear, the “debauchery” is located in or attached to the wine itself, “And do not get drunk with wine, in which [i.e., in the wine] is debauchery.” Mirroring Proverbs, Paul warns against the risks associated with imbibing wine.
2. Eph 5:1-20 reflects the vocabulary and thinking Paul has already used in Rom 13:11-14 and 1 Thess 5:1-11, encouraging believers, cast as soldiers preparing for battle, to not be drunk but rather to be sober, drawing a sharp contrast between the two behaviors. Since you are “children of light, children of day,” you should not “sleep as others do,” but “keep awake and be sober” (1 Thess 5:5-6). “Since we belong to the day, let us be sober,” fully alert and fully armed and prepared for spiritual battle (1 Thess 5:8). Paul wishes Christian believers to be as stone cold sober as someone who has just awakened (cf. 1 Pet 1:13, “fully sober,” NIV).

In view of these two arguments, which of the following two positions aligns more accurately with the thought and intent of Paul’s command, “Do not get drunk with wine, in which is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18)? (1) Paul is only concerned about drunkenness and approves the consumption of wine. Believers may with perfect propriety and clear conscience participate in drinking wine as long as they avoid getting really drunk; or (2) There is inherent danger in drinking wine. The Christian believer should be on the alert, careful to practice sobriety.

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<sup>1</sup> This addendum is a condensed version of an excursus on the topic in John K. McVay, *Ephesians* [the companion book to the quarterly] (Pacific Press, 2022), 82-83.



• **Key Questions**

1. What element of Paul's discussion of the relationship between Christ as Bridegroom and the church as bride (Eph. 5:25-27, 29) do you find most inspiring? Why?
2. How does Paul's "one flesh" model of marriage enrich the common models debated by Christians today—the "complementarian" model (which looks to creation as establishing enduring, complementary roles for men and women in marriage) and the "egalitarian" model (which also looks to creation, this time for an enduring understanding of the equality of husbands and wives)?
3. What strategies might struggling families find in Eph 5:21-33 to aid in moving toward wholeness and healing? What might it look like to take a step toward "one flesh" unity (5:21-33), toward the reconciliation of Calvary (2:15-16)?

- **What does it mean that Eph 5:21-33 is part of a "Household Code"?** It means that Eph 5:21-6:9 discusses household relationships in the context of the Greco-Roman "household," which included parents, children, slaves, clients (free persons who depended on the householder), and even customers. Aristotle (384-322 BC) treated three sets of relationships as the building blocks of society—husbands and wives, parents and children, and slave masters and slaves—and many others took up this topic of household relationships. In both Ephesians and in Colossians (3:18-4:1), Paul discusses these same three sets of relationships. In Ephesians, Paul offers advice to: Wives and husbands (Eph 5:21-33); Children and parents (6:1-4); Slaves and slave masters (6:5-9; cf. other NT passages that treat various family and congregational relationships in a similar way: 1 Pet 2:13-3:7, 5:1-5; 1 Tim 2:1-3:15; 5:1-6:2, 17-19; Titus 2:1-10).

- **How does Paul's "Household Code" differ from discussions by others?** Sirach, a Jewish document (c. 198–175 BC), advises husbands, "Do you have a wife who pleases you? Do not divorce her; but do not trust yourself to one whom you detest" (7:23–26). It advises fathers concerning treatment of a son, "He who loves his son will whip him often," "Pamper a child, and he will terrorize you; play with him, and he will grieve you," and "Discipline your son and make his yoke heavy, so that you may not be offended by his shamelessness" (30:1–4, 7–13). With regard to slaves, "Fodder and a stick and burdens for a donkey; bread and discipline and work for a slave" and "Yoke and thong will bow the neck [of an ox], and for a wicked slave there are racks and tortures" (33:24–30; NRSV).

Like Sirach, most ancient authors wrote only to the husband-father-slave master in this tone: "Here's how to treat those around you to pump up your authority, reputation, and honor." Paul's take is radical, edgy, different. He addresses everyone: "Here's how to treat those around you the way Jesus has treated you." *When set in the context of other counsel, Paul's advice in Ephesians 5:21–6:9 radiates respect and care for wives, children, and slaves in the context of loyalty to Christ.*

- **Is the purpose of Paul's "household code" in Ephesians to undergird patriarchal authority and affirm the institution of slavery?** While many see it that way, a different view is taken here—that Paul's counsel is distinctly countercultural: The household code in Ephesians "presents a comprehensive vision of the eschatological New Humanity [2:15]—the new creation *politeia* [state]—realized under the conditions of this present fallen age. It is a manifesto for a radically new society . . . a radical confrontation to the corruption and abuse in patriarchal systems found within the Old Humanity" (Timothy G. Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity: The Function of the Haustafel in Ephesians." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 2 [2005]: 322, 328).
- **How does Paul develop the marriage metaphor for the relationship between Christ and His church? What are the elements of that metaphor?** In vv. 25-27, 29 Paul develops the idea that Christ is the bridegroom/husband and the church is His bride to set forth Christ as the great example for Christian husbands. Paul borrows various elements and roles in ancient weddings in developing his metaphor: (1) Christ is the bride price. He "gave himself up for her" (v. 25); (2) Christ bathes His bride (v. 26); (3) Christ speaks "the word" of promise (in the betrothal?; v. 26); (4) Christ presents the bride to Himself (v. 27), providing an important "picture" of the second coming; (5) Christ dresses

and adorns His bride (v. 27). *A powerful and inspiring theme emerges as we watch Paul concentrate elements and roles of the ancient wedding ceremony in Christ: Jesus is everything to His bride, the church.*

- **In what way is Christ also the example for Christian wives?** Sunday’s lesson asks, When Paul says wives are submit to their husbands “as to the Lord” (v. 22), does he mean a wife is to submit to her husband as though he were Christ; or does He mean that Christ is the truest and highest focus of her submission? In affirming the second view, the lesson points to Eph 6:7 (where slaves are to serve “as to the Lord, and not to men,” NKJV) and Col 3:18 (where wives are to submit to their husbands “as is fitting in the Lord,” NKJV). Ellen White writes, “There is One who stands higher than the husband to the wife; it is her Redeemer, and her submission to her husband is to be rendered as God has directed —‘as it is fit in the Lord’” (AH 115-116; see Friday’s lesson). Additionally, we should not miss the fact that both husbands and wives are included within the image of the church as the bride of Christ.
- **How might Eph 5:21-33 be understood in the context of slavery?** Interesting features of Paul’s counsel should be considered in view of the existence of slavery in Christian house churches (Eph 6:5-9): (1) Often masked by English translations, the Greek text repeatedly emphasizes loyalty to “one’s own” spouse. Wives are to submit to “*their own*” husbands (v. 22), husbands are to “love *their own* wives” and “the one who loves *his own* wife, loves himself” (v. 28), while in the citation of Gen 2:24, the husband “holds fast to *his* wife” (v. 31); (2) Christ is described as “Himself savior of the [church as His] body” (v. 23) in a way that suggests the Christian husband is to be the “savior” of his wife. These features may be understood in view of the common practice of the slave master’s sexual access to slaves. *Paul may well be defending slave marriages, which were not recognized as legal ones, as valid, Christian marriages to be respected by all and he may be activating Christian slave husbands to protect their slave wives against abuse.* If so, a passage demeaned as hopelessly patriarchal instead offers a dramatic, counter-cultural stance opposing a common feature of slavery.
- **How is Paul’s use of Genesis 2:24 the apex of his argument?** In Eph 5:21-33, Paul develops the idea of the husband’s identity with his wife, culminating in his citation of Gen 2:24. Given Paul’s discussion of the submission of the Christian wife to her own husband (v. 22), it might have been natural for him to cite Gen 3:16, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (NKJV). Fascinatingly, he instead chooses a pre-Fall passage, Gen 2:24 to complete his argument: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (cf. Jesus’s own citation of Gen 2:24 in Matt 19:3-6).
- **Does Paul have in mind only ideal marriages or does he address imperfect and flawed ones?** Paul hints that Christian marriages were often less-than-ideal. Husbands seem inclined to abuse their wives, too-ready to exercise their near-total authority (vv. 25, 28-30). The temptation to adultery and other forms of sexual immorality hovered close at hand (5:3-11). The Christ-saturated, grace-filled gospel in Ephesians applies to real marriages and families, which have become part of God’s grand family (1:5; 2:19). He is the *Patēr* (Father) from whom “every *patria* (family) in heaven and on earth is named” (3:14-15). He lays claim to their imperfect families and to ours, including us in the wide circle of His family and His grace.<sup>1</sup> *He is drawing your family into His grand plan to unify all things in Christ (1:9-10) and calling you to imagine your family as part of that plan.*

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<sup>1</sup> See John McVay, “How to Enjoy Your Imperfect Family” in *Building Family Memories: Adventist Family Ministries 2015 Planbook* (Department of Family Ministries, 2014), 25-29.

• **Key Questions**

1. What principles should we use in interpreting and applying the counsels of Paul's "household code" in Ephesians 5:21-6:9? See the "Excursus," below.
  2. What "grand substitution" does Paul ask slaves to make? (See Wednesday's lesson) Since slave masters were active agents of an immoral institution, why didn't Paul simply dismiss them from the church?
  3. In considering how to apply Paul's counsel to children and parents and to slaves and slave masters, Friday's lesson offers five challenging questions to be considered. Which of those questions do you find most pressing and important? Why?
- **How might we succinctly summarize the main thrust of this week's lesson?** Paul, as a pastor, addresses children and parents as well as slaves and slave masters, inviting them to relate to the social structures of their time from the vantage point of a supreme loyalty to Christ.
  - **What was it like to be a child in the first century?** To be a child in first-century Ephesus was a challenging assignment. Some three per cent of the population lived lives of abundance, for which the famous "terrace houses" of Ephesus provide impressive evidence. The rest of the population—the ninety-seven per cent—lived just above, at, or below subsistence level. Among the realities of the time were high rates of infant mortality, which influenced a low value placed on infants. Fathers had the legal right to "expose" a newborn, to leave the infant in the open to die or be "adopted" by a slave trader. This right was often exercised in the case of newborn girls, especially by the poor. Child mortality rates were also high, with only half of children surviving until age five. Children of slaves lived particularly challenging and insecure lives. By birth they were themselves slaves. They could be sold and separated from their nuclear family at any time. Expected to work from an early age, they had little to look forward to except a life of toil. *In offering his counsel to children and their parents, Paul addresses a complex and challenging setting.*
  - **How does Paul describe the responsibilities of fathers toward their children?** Paul commands "fathers" negatively to refrain from "provoking their children to anger" and positively to bring their children up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (v. 4). While Paul addresses children as themselves believers (v. 1), the father is an intermediary, offering instruction and admonition that come ultimately from "the Lord," from Christ, with the father passing along what has nourished his own loyalty to Christ (cf. 4:20-24). Parents are to help their children move toward intrinsic motivations for sound, mature behavior by nurturing their children's own personal relationships with Christ. This will require careful, personal instruction. And it will require something more. In a statement widely attributed to Albert Schweitzer, "There are only three ways to teach a child. The first is by example, the second is by example, the third is by example." The instruction of parents must be supported by their personal example in living out their loyalty to Christ.
  - **How can we discern, honor, and nurture the relationship that children have with Jesus?** Reviewing Ephesians 6:1-4, we note that Paul begins his counsel to children by arguing their obedience should be "in the Lord" (v. 1) and concludes his advice to parents with the call to Christ-centered child-rearing, "the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (v. 4). He signals at the beginning and end of the passage the importance of discerning, honoring, and nurturing the relationship that children have with Jesus. The story of God calling to the child Samuel, 1 Samuel 3:1-21, is a moving, biblical narrative that affirms our mandate to honor the relationship between children and their God. In the story, Eli finally perceives this truth: "Yahweh" is "calling the boy"! (v. 8). *We should be alert to that same moment in the lives of the children God has entrusted to our care and be in awe at the realization that the Lord of the cosmos is speaking to that girl or boy.*
  - **What was it like to a slave in the first century?** Slaves were completely under the thumb of the slave master, subject to his every command. For example, the master controlled the sex lives of slaves and could demand sexual favors from them for himself or for whomever he wished. While some household slaves could hope for "freedom" or manumission around age thirty, this was an advanced age at a time when the life expectancy for males was forty years and for females, thirty. Moreover,

with so-called freedom, a slave would become a “freedman,” which hardly resembled the existence of a freeborn person. The manumitted slave retained a durable, demeaning identity as a slave as well as a continued relationship with the former master, who could still require various tasks and could revoke their manumission if it was economically advantageous to do so.

- **What does Paul say in his brief words to slave masters?** Paul’s counsel to slave masters is brief but powerful. They are to “do the same to them” (that is, they should respond to their slaves with deeds of goodwill governed by their allegiance to Christ, corresponding to what Paul has just asked of slaves) and to “stop your threatening” (probably threatening one of the many punishments available to the master, e.g. beating, being sold, extreme labor). Both actions are to be based on the conviction that they share a single Master (*kurios*, referring to Christ) with their slaves, One who exercises no “partiality” (Greek *prosōpolēmpsia*, lit. “to accept [or recognize] a face,” an idiom for showing favoritism or partiality) based on social class. The term was used “pejoratively to denote unjust preferential treatment” especially with regard to judges who “were continually tempted to pervert justice by showing favoritism. Most often the temptation was to favor the rich and powerful,” with the early Christian community continuing “to struggle with the problem of discrimination based on worldly social distinctions (Jas. 2:1-9; cf. 1 Tim. 5:21)” (“Partiality” in ISBE 3.671-672). While Paul’s comment about Christ as judge having no partiality accents accountability in the present, it points to the eschatological judgment, to which Paul has already referred in describing “the Lord” (Christ) as the rewarder of faithful slaves (v. 8).
- **Is it appropriate to simply “port over” Paul’s words to slaves and slave masters to the setting of employees and employers?** We should exercise care in applying Paul’s words to very different relationships, like those between employees and their employers, since he addresses slaves embedded in the immoral institution of slavery. However, Paul’s repeated call to put Christ in place of others echoes across the millennia. In our relationships, especially when they chafe and pinch, we may look up, finding fresh orientation and encouragement in acknowledging the exalted Christ. How might I substitute the Lord for the fallible, difficult, egotistical people in my life? (And how might I perceive Christ in those I am tempted to overlook—like the fifty million who find themselves in modern slavery—as we move toward Christ’s final pronouncement, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me,” [Matt 25:40]?)
- **To what extent does slavery still impact our world today?** Friday’s lesson reflects some statistics from the Global Slavery Index, whose 2023 report may be accessed at [cdn.walkfree.org](https://cdn.walkfree.org) (click on “Explore the Global Slavery Index”). The index uses “modern slavery” as “an umbrella term, which encompasses several types of exploitation, including forced labour, human trafficking and forced marriage.” The GSI judges that today 49.6 million people live in modern slavery, up by 10 million people since 2018. When our church was limited to the United States, it participated in the abolitionist movement to combat slavery. What role should a global Seventh-day Adventist Church play with regard to the global phenomenon of modern slavery?

## **Excursus: How Should We Interpret Paul’s Advice to the Christian Household (Eph 5:21–6:9)?<sup>1</sup>**

Bible students who understand the Scriptures as “the supreme, authoritative, and infallible revelation” of God’s will<sup>2</sup> must accomplish two tasks as they interpret Eph 5:21-6:9. First, they must appreciate its message in the context of the first century: Paul addresses husbands who could choose to “hate their own flesh” (see 5:28–29), fathers who could berate and “provoke” their children (6:4), and slave masters who could mistreat and “threaten” their slaves (6:9). Paul’s counsel extends his “harsh critique of pagan culture” (2:1–3; 4:17–5:17)<sup>3</sup> in which the husband-father-slave master, as the “father of the household” (Latin, *paterfamilias*), held more-or-less absolute authority (“power of a father”; Latin, *patria potestas*), with the social structures of the time designed to protect his power, reputation and comfort. *We will not understand the full force and power of the household code if we fail to understand the challenging context into which these words were spoken.*

That Paul addresses Christian slaves and slave masters (6:5–9) casts in high relief this task, since the Seventh-day Adventist Church was, at its birth, firmly abolitionist at a time when Ephesians 6:5–9 and other passages were frequently preached as affirming slavery. We must adopt a way of interpreting the household code in Ephesians that addresses Eph 5:21-6:9 as a whole since the assumptions and structures that supported slavery in the first century were also determinative for marriage and child rearing. Wives and children were the property of the husband and father and he had absolute power over them, including the right to inflict physical abuse and even death. *As we do this work, it becomes clear that we are not called to adopt first-century, pagan aberrations of the eternal and biblical models of marriage and child rearing (noting Paul’s citation of Gen 2:24 in Eph 5:31 and of Exod 20:12 in Eph 6:2–3) or the immoral institution of slavery.*

Bible students must also accomplish a second task: With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they must be prepared to hear eternal and cross-cultural counsel addressing our relationships today. Paul does not just critique the flawed social structures of the “old humanity” (4:22). He celebrates the creation of a new humanity (2:15), which turns away from the corrupt values believers once endorsed. This new humanity, the church, operates on the basis of new values and rules rooted in God’s actions in Christ. It does not exist in the abstract but is embedded within wider humanity with its flawed social structures. From within these structures, believers demonstrate that a new power, the Holy Spirit (2:22; 3:16; 5:18–21; 6:17–18), and a new, cruciform ethic patterned on Christ (4:13, 15, 20–24, 32; 5:2, 10, 17, 21–33), have been unleashed in the world, pointing toward the fulfillment of God’s ultimate plan, that the self-giving and self-sacrificing Christ will Himself be the Head of all things (3:8–12; 1:9–10).

In this new humanity, those in positions of authority no longer operate to enhance their own power and comfort. They no longer misuse and abuse their charges at will, but reflect the self-sacrificing model of Christ (5:2, 23, 25, 29). Paul accents this insight in the household code, especially in the case of the husband. “As the head of the wife, the husband would have been expected to exercise power over his wife, and not to do so would have been considered shameful.” Paul offers “a radical reversal” in which “the husband as head does not pursue the privileges of leadership for his own gain, but rather fulfills his responsibilities by doing the opposite.” Paul shows “how headship is redefined in the eschatological age of a crucified Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Those who are in subordinate positions will also structure their relationships with a focus on Christ. They will—emotionally, spiritually, ethically and eschatologically—substitute Christ for husband-father-slave master, offering authentic service to the One who promises full justice and reward (5:22; 6:1, 5–8).

In offering rules for the Christian household (5:21–6:9), then, *Paul provides a ringing manifesto for Christ’s new humanity as he challenges the social mores and structures of the first century. As we listen in, we gain profound insight about how to be truly human and Christian in our own time.*

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<sup>1</sup> This excursus represents a significantly condensed version of one included in the forthcoming Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary on Ephesians.

<sup>2</sup> Seventh-day Adventist Church, “Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs,” (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Gombis, “A Radically New Humanity,” *JETS* 48, no. 2 (2005): 318.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Lee-Barnewall, “Turning KEPHALĒ on Its Head: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Ephesians 5:21–33,” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture* (Brill, 2013), 612–13.

## Week 12: The Call to Stand (Eph 6:10-20, Part 1)

Good Word, 2023

For September 9-15

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. Since we are now under the authority of the exalted Christ (Eph 1:20-23), why not simply ignore the powers of darkness (Eph 6:12)?
  2. What is the timing of the battle or war Paul imagines? Is it a future one only, occurring on “the evil day”? Or is it continuous, happening throughout the Christian era?
  3. How does Paul elsewhere use military language in describing his own ministry and that of his co-workers? In what type of warfare are they engaged? How does this contribute to our understanding of Eph 6:10-20? See 2 Cor 10:3-6; Phil 1:27-30.
  4. Is Eph 6:10-20 a decorative add on to the letter or is it closely connected to the rest of the letter? With the help of Tuesday’s lesson, trace the theme of the great controversy in the earlier chapters of Ephesians.
  5. How can the reality of a long-running war between good and evil and your role as a combatant in “the army of Christ” in that conflict reshape your sense of what it means to follow Jesus?
- How is Ephesians 6:10-20 put together?
    - The Call to Arms (vv. 10-12)

Paul begins with an overarching exhortation to “be strong in the Lord” (v. 10), which he repeats as a call to “put on the whole armor of God” (v. 11a). He then specifies a purpose (to be able to stand against the devil’s schemes, v. 11b) and offers a rationale (because the battle is against powerful, spiritual forces of evil, v. 12).
    - The Call to Arms Reissued (vv. 13-17)

Paul next reissues the call to arms in a detailed way. Believers are to “Take up the whole armor of God” in order to stand firm in battle (v. 13). They are to don belt, breastplate, boots, shield, helmet, and sword (vv. 14-17).
    - The Call to Prayer (vv. 18-20)

Paul concludes by inviting now fully armed believers, ready to enter the fray, to do what soldiers on the ancient battlefield would do at that moment—pray. They are to pray for “all the saints” and for Paul, that he might offer bold witness as “an ambassador in chains.”
  - Is the tone of Eph 6:10-20 confident or fearful? The verses that are the focus of this lesson, vv. 10-13, exhibit a realistic assessment of the massed forces of evil but exude a confidence in God’s power and the weaponry He provides. This confident tone is illustrated by Paul’s call for believers, as they enter the fray of the cosmic conflict, to don the “helmet of salvation” (v. 17), probably best understood as the “victory helmet” or “parade helmet,” which a Roman soldier reserved for the victory parade (and which has been illustrated by recent archaeological discoveries like the Hallaton Helmet). Believers are invited to don the parade helmet as a mark of their confidence in their Commander and the resources He has provided to ensure victory. In advance, before the final victory is won, they are to celebrate the grand triumph to come!
  - Why does Paul provide titles for the evil powers? Given that the lists in Ephesians for the evil powers differ (1:21; 3:10; 6:12; see Thursday’s lesson), Paul is not seeking to be exhaustive by providing every label for all evil powers nor does he provide a structure or hierarchy among them. In his broad descriptions (“every name named,” 1:21; “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” 6:12) he does affirm that all evil and supernatural powers are subjugated to Christ (1:21), recipients of God’s revelation through the church (3:10) and joined in an army of evil that opposes the church, one sure to be defeated (6:12).
  - How significant is the command to “stand” to the passage? Paul punctuates his battle cry four times with the urgent command to “stand” or “withstand” (vv. 11, 13, 14). The command does not mean,

as some take it, to stand nonchalantly on the battle field, relying on others to do the fighting. In Paul's vigorous, military metaphor it refers to the urgent action needed when two enemy phalanxes meet—to stand firm and resist the enemy's intended advance. Paul pictures believers as warriors, fully and energetically engaged in combat. See Wednesday's lesson for details.

- **What about “Spiritual Warfare”?** Ephesians 6:10-20 is often judged to be one of the most important Bible passages about “spiritual warfare,” thought of as battling directly with evil spirits who have taken control of someone. What does our passage say about “deliverance ministry”? On the one hand, it says surprisingly little. It portrays the close engagement of believers against “the spiritual forces of evil” (v. 12). However, Paul's emphasis is on God's generous provision for victory through His presence and the weaponry. Paul does not picture would need to happen should a Christian soldier desert the post of duty, join the opposing force, and become possessed by evil spirits.

However, Ephesians 6:10-20 suggests important principles and ideas that should inform such efforts—Trusting in the Lord (rather than in our own spiritual power to rescue Satan's captives), acknowledging the need for God's provisions for the battle, trusting in the completed victory of Christ, requesting and relying on the presence of *the* Spirit (vv. 17-18), using the promises of God (“the word of God,” v. 17), all expressed through “prayer and supplication” to God, trusting in the power of the Spirit to convey, interpret, and expand on our requests on behalf of the oppressed (“praying at all times in the Spirit,” v. 18; cf. Rom 8:26-27).

C. S. Lewis's statement about “devils” is quoted frequently: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”<sup>1</sup> Christians in the West often think very little about the presence of evil powers and would be perfectly happy to ignore them altogether. However, in the rest of the world (the “majority world”), the presence of evil spirits is often part of day-to-day reality and the need to participate in the delivery of the demon-possessed can be very real. In 2005, the Seventh-day Adventist Church added a 28th “fundamental belief” to acknowledge this reality, celebrating that “By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love.”<sup>2</sup>

Those of us who have little experience in helping those oppressed by evil spirits should listen carefully to those who do,<sup>3</sup> while being attentive to the multitude of other, devious and devastating ways in which Satan and his minions work among us (“the schemes of the devil,” v. 11) . . . and alive to God's gracious provisions to counter them.

- **How might we summarize the themes of this lesson, with its focus on Eph 6:10-13?** In Ephesians 6:10-13, Paul recruits believers as active participants in the great battle against good and evil, reminding them of the strength of Christ that empowers them. We learn that we need to be equipped head-to-toe in God's armor to be victorious over a scheming foe, the devil, and his forces of evil. Our battle against these forces is not to be trivialized as though we are merely sparing with human enemies. Nor can it be ignored, since we do not battle these evil powers at a distance but are engaged in up close combat with them.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Screwtape Letters & Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 3rd ed. (Review and Herald, 2018), 151.

<sup>3</sup> A helpful set of essays is “Spiritual Warfare and the Occult,” a thematic issue of the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2015) available online at <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol11/iss2/17/>.

**• Key Questions**

1. In Eph 6:10-20, Paul exhorts believers to adopt an urgent, soldier-like approach to Christian discipleship and witness. How sustainable is such a “battle footing” approach?
2. How important is the “secret weapon” of Eph 6:10-20, Christian *esprit de corps*, camaraderie, and community? How can we best signal our support for one another as fellow combatants in the great controversy?
3. Granted that Paul in Eph 6:10-20 is offering a final metaphor for the church, what may we learn from the passage about our individual battles against sin and temptation?
4. What promise, offered in Eph 6:10-20, do you need the most? How can you lay claim to it?

- **Just what are truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, etc. as mentioned in Eph 6:14-20? Are they human virtues or divine gifts?** For example, what does it mean that the Christian warrior is to “belt on truth”? Does it refer to believers adopting truth-telling as a virtue (cf. 4:25)? Or to believing the truth of the gospel (cf. 1:13; 4:21)? Here, it likely means both as understood in the context of the addressees’ conversion to Christ and through the armor imagery. For Paul, the addressees have experienced a dramatic transformation. Through God’s gracious rescue in Christ, they have been drawn out of falsehood, lies and darkness and have entered into God’s truth and light (2:1–22; 4:17–5:20). This transformation is skillfully symbolized by the act of putting on the implements of the God-given, head-to-toe armor, the *panoplian*. Truth is not their own, it is a gift of God (cf. salvation in 2:8). It is not, though, to remain abstract, a distant asset without any transforming impact on their lives. They are to “put on” God’s truth, to experience and use this divine gift. They do not so much possess God’s truth as God’s truth possesses—and protects—them. Donning the armor is Paul’s picturesque way of encouraging them to adopt afresh their distinct Christian identity, accepting God’s grand, gospel gifts and allowing the Holy Spirit to activate them in their lives.

- How might we summarize the central lessons Paul is picturing in his military metaphor (Eph 6:10-20)? One way is to summarize the passage using four distilled commands:

1. **Follow the Leader.** As a general, Paul conveys the orders of the true Commander in Chief, who calls us to battle while promising to be with us in the fight. We are to be strong “in the Lord and in the strength of his power” (v. 10, NRSV).
2. **Know the Foe.** In battle, it will never do to underestimate the opposing forces. Paul invites a realistic assessment. While we confront enemy forces on the human plane, our real battle is with “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” In according titles of power to the church’s spiritual foes, Paul displays a kind of respect for them. There is wary acknowledgment, too, in his description of the devil as a cunning, devious foe. We need God’s armor to counter “the schemes of the devil” (v. 11).
3. **Join the Army.** Our passage has usually been taken as a description of the individual Christian’s battle against evil. However, in Ephesians 3:10 Paul has the church as a whole engaged with the powers, arguing that “through the church the manifold wisdom of God” is “made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” The church, says Paul, is a well-equipped, united army fighting in the long-running battle of the cosmic conflict. Just as soldiers are to support one another and encourage each other to fight courageously, so believers are called to Christian community and collaboration. Our passage does not portray a solitary, lone warrior confronting evil. Instead, it offers a unified army that vigorously and unitedly presses the battle. There is a “secret weapon” in our passage: Christian camaraderie, community, and *esprit de corps*. (See Sunday’s lesson)
4. **Fight to the Finish.** Paul is adopting no tame metaphor. He imagines the church as army suiting up and entering the fray, charging forward with full energy to that moment when the two opposing forces crash together and fight in deadly, close order combat. The verb “to stand,” used repeatedly in our passage (vv. 11, 13 [2x], 14; see the study guide for lesson 12), refers to



the needed action at the awful moment of impact. Paul commands no defensive posture or mere holding action. As general, he conveys the Commander's orders for a full, zealous, fight-to-the-finish attack on evil.

- **How important is it to avoid “friendly fire”?** “When men arise, claiming to have a message from God, but instead of warring against principalities and powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this world, they form a hollow square, and turn the weapons of warfare against the church militant, be afraid of them. They do not bear the divine credentials. God has not given them any such burden of labor” (Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 22).
- **How does Paul envision believers praying in Eph 6:18-20?** Paul describes the “battlefield prayer” of believers with two participial phrases that urge perseverance in prayer—“praying always with all prayer and supplication”; “being watchful to this end with all perseverance” (NKJV). The battlefield setting of Paul’s invitation to prayer is confirmed by his call to be “watchful,” which echoes expectation for Christ’s return (Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36). Prayer is to be offered “in the Spirit,” likely reflecting dependence on the Holy Spirit to help believers pray as they should (Rom 8:26–27). The two participles (“praying always”; “being watchful”) seem to modify, at least conceptually, the principal verb of the section, the command to “stand” (v. 14). Believers “stand” by practicing diligent, urgent, watchful, persevering prayer. *If the church is to be successful in its battle against the powers of evil, it will be because it practices dependence on God through Spirit-inspired prayer.*
- **What would it have been like to be in the judgment hall with Paul and Nero?** In Eph 6:18-20, Paul looks toward a future show down with Emperor Nero (see Friday’s lesson for a treatment of the phrase, “an ambassador in chains”). He alludes to the scene as history in 2 Tim 4:16. Ellen White describes the scene in some detail in *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, chapter 30, “Paul Before Nero,” 310-318 (cf. *Acts of the Apostles*, 492-497). A sample (p. 312):

Paul and Nero face to face!—the youthful monarch bearing upon his sin-stamped countenance the shameful record of the passions that reigned within; the aged prisoner's calm and benignant face telling of a heart at peace with God and man. The results of opposite systems of training and education stood that day contrasted,—the life of unbounded self-indulgence and the life of utter self-sacrifice. Here were the representatives of two religions,—Christianity and paganism; the representatives of two theories of life,—the simplicity of self-denying endurance, ready to give up life itself, if need be, for the good of others, and the luxury of all-absorbing selfishness, that counts nothing too valuable to sacrifice for a momentary gratification; the representatives of two spiritual powers,—the ambassador of Christ and the slave of Satan. Their relative position showed to what extent the course of this world was under the rule of the prince of darkness. The wretch whose soul was stained with incest and matricide, was robed in purple, and seated upon the throne, while the purest and noblest of men stood before the judgment-seat, despised, hated, and fettered.

- **Bibliography.** Ephesians 6:10-20 has inspired a stream of devotional commentary over the years, including Erasmus’s *Handbook of a Christian Knight* (1501; much treasured by William Tyndale, who translated it into English), William Gurnall’s three volumes totaling more than 800,000 words and 1,500 pages on the passage, *The Christian in Complete Armour* (1655-1662), which was praised by luminaries such as John Newton and Charles Spurgeon, John Bunyan’s *The Holy War* (1682; and to a significant degree his *Pilgrim’s Progress* as well), and two of Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s eight-volume “Exposition of Ephesians” series, *Christian Warfare* (vol. 7, 1976) and *The Christian Soldier* (vol. 8, 1977). Works by Seventh-day Adventist authors include Taylor Bunch’s *The Armor of Righteousness* (1957)

## Week 14: Ephesians in the Heart (Ephesians 1-6)

Good Word, 2023

For September 23-29

Prepared by John McVay, WWU School of Theology

### • Key Questions

1. Reviewing the Epistle to the Ephesians chapter by chapter, what candidates for “life texts” do you see, passages that can inspire and shape Christian discipleship throughout life?
2. With Paul’s thesis statement in Eph 1:9-10 and his theme of unity in mind, work through each chapter of the letter, highlighting how that chapter helps to develop the theme of unity.
3. Review stories of people inspired by studying the Epistle to the Ephesians (“The Impact of Ephesians in History: Five Case Studies,” at the end of this study guide), and ask, “How does God wish to transform my life through this buoyant, Christ-saturated letter?”

*How might we review the Epistle to the Ephesians through the lens of Paul’s teaching about the church in the letter?*

### • What is Paul’s “job description” for the church in Eph 3:10 and how are we to understand it?

1. *What is the essential role of the church?*
2. *What is the church to reveal?*
3. *To whom is the church to reveal this truth?*
4. *For what purpose?*

### • What does Paul mean by “the church” (Greek, *ekklēsia*) in Ephesians? In earlier letters, Paul usually means “local congregation” when he uses the term. However, in Colossians and Ephesians, he means the church at large, or the church “universal,” rather than a local group.

### • Paul uses vivid metaphors to help believers understand the church and what it means to be part of it. What are metaphors and how do we go about trying to understand them? A metaphor is a “figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding these metaphors requires some attentiveness from us, since Paul draws on the first century Greco-Roman world. We should take them seriously since divine revelation uses them to communicate truth to us.

### • What are four major metaphors Paul develops for the church? What does each reveal about the church?

1. *The Church as the body of Christ* (Eph 1:22-23; 2:16; 4:1-16; 5:29-30; cf. Rom 12; 1 Cor 12). The most developed use comes in Eph 4:1-16, where he underscores relationships among members, emphasizing that ministers of the Word were given to the church by Christ from His position of leadership over the cosmos. The metaphor emphasizes the need for healthy relationships among members and cohesion to Christ who as “Head” directs and energizes His church to fulfill His purposes in the world.
2. *The Church as the temple of God* (Eph 1:19-22; cf. 1 Cor 3:9-17; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1). The metaphor functions as a culminating image for the inclusion of Gentiles as full partners in the church, with Jews and Gentiles together forming “a holy temple in the Lord.” In Paul’s metaphor, God is both Builder (implied) and Occupant of the structure. The foundation is “the apostles and prophets,” the cornerstone is Christ, and the building materials consist of both Jewish and Gentile believers, with the metaphor illustrating their cohesion in the church. A number of common ideas about temples are active here including structural integrity (a building or temple made of different materials coheres), the process of building (temples are built), and habitation (since the temple is “a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit,” NIV).
3. *The church as the bride of Christ* (Eph 5:25-33; cf. 2 Cor 11:1-4). In offering counsel to Christian husbands, Paul uses the idea from the OT of the people of God as His bride or wife (e.g., Hosea; Jer 2–3; 13:20–27; Ezek 16, 23), which he had employed earlier (2 Cor 11:1–4), to focus on the relationship between Christ and the church. Elements and roles of the ancient

wedding ceremony are consolidated in Christ in a bid to portray all Christ does for His church. In addition to his central role as groom, Christ himself is the bride price, the one who administers the bridal bath, and the one who presents the bride (to himself!). All of these stretch ancient wedding practice, but the stress on the metaphor serves only to emphasize the importance of Christ for the church. The offers eschatological expectation in the future “presentation” (v. 27). At that time, Christ’s Second Coming, the full result of the bridegroom’s work will be manifested in the splendor of the bride.

4. *The church as the militia of Christ* (Eph 6:10-20; cf. Rom 13:11-14; 1 Thess 5:8; 2 Cor 10:3-6). Paul uses an extended, detailed military metaphor—the church as the army of God—to summarize and conclude the letter. The metaphor could be misunderstood as urging actual combat but Paul carefully guards it, advocating the virtues of kindness, tenderheartedness and forgiveness (see esp. 4:17–32) and clarifying that the church is to proclaim “the gospel of peace” (6:15). Paul’s military metaphor depicts the church’s battle against evil as combat that requires full, sustained, and energetic engagement of the foe. Believers are not merely sentinels, who stand stoically at watch, but combatants (albeit in the interest of peace). The passage represents a call to arms that is especially interested in the esprit de corps of believers. It does not envision Christians (or Paul) as lone warriors battling in splendid isolation, but instead portrays “the church militant” in which the addressees are to enlist as fellow soldiers against the church’s foes.

- **Should we choose a favorite among these four metaphors or treasure them all?** Since every metaphor highlights some aspects of reality while it hides others, we are best served by valuing all these metaphors for the church and treasuring what each teaches us about being part of God’s plan to unify all things in Christ. In the church of which you are a part, “God is building the multiracial, multiethnic, multigenerational church of Jesus Christ, which stands as a monument to his triumph over the powers of darkness” and points the way to the fulfillment of His plan to unite the cosmos in Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Clarendon, 1985), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy G. Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 182.

# The Impact of Ephesians in History: Five Case Studies

## Case Study #1: The Conversion of John Mackay

In 1903, young Scottish lad John Mackay, later president of Princeton Theological Seminary, experienced “boyish rapture” through reading Ephesians “in the Highland hills” of Scotland. He writes, “To this book I owe my life . . . in the pages of the Ephesian letter, I saw a new world. . . . Jesus Christ became the center of everything. The only explanation I could give to myself and to others was in the words . . . . ‘And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins’” (Eph. 2:1, KJV)—*God's Order* (Macmillan, 1956), pp. 6, 7, 9.

## Case Study #2: An Explosion of Joy in the Life of Heather Holleman

Christian author Heather Holleman writes, “For most of my life, I fought to earn a seat at the ‘table’ I *thought* would finally bring me happiness . . . . As a result, I lived in a constant state of comparison and jealousy.” One day, she read Ephesians 2:6. “God says we’re *already seated* with Christ . . . . we’re already at the table. A lightning bolt of realization hit me . . . . I’m already at the Greatest Table with the Greatest King, so my life explodes—not with comparison and jealousy—but with worship and joy as I live *seated with Christ*.”—www.proverbs31.org.

## Case Study #3: Ephesians Inspires Watchman Nee

In his devotional classic, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, Chinese Christian leader Watchman Nee summarizes Ephesians: “The Christian life consists of sitting with Christ, walking by Him and standing in Him. We begin our spiritual life by resting in the finished work of the Lord Jesus . . . . the source of . . . . a consistent and unfaltering walk in the world. And at the end of a grueling warfare with the hosts of darkness we are found standing with Him at last.”—(Christian Literature Crusade, 1962), pp. 63, 64.

## Case Study #4: The Conversion of Martin Luther and John Wesley

Ephesians 2:8-10 has played a role in the conversion of many. Martin Luther found there a grace that won his heart and discovered as well central affirmations of the Reformation: Salvation comes by faith alone, through grace alone, by Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone. In 1738, eighteen days after experiencing conversion in London's Aldersgate Street, John Wesley preached at Oxford University offering “a cry from the heart” and “the manifesto of a new movement.” His text? Ephesians 2:8.—A. Skevington Wood, “Strangely Warmed: The Wesleys and the Evangelical Awakening,” *Christian History* (magazine), vol. 5, no. 1 (1984).

## Case Study #5: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church proclaim Eph 2:14

During World War II, Nazi theologians in Germany struggled with Ephesians and its truth that the church is made up of both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:1-13). That Christ, on the cross, demolished the “dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14) was especially offensive to them. So they attempted to deflect Paul's powerful indictment of Nazi antisemitism by arguing that the *wall* was not a horizontal one between Jews and Gentiles but a *vertical* wall between humans and God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church saw through this perversion of truth and adopted Ephesians 2:14 as a central, biblical argument against Nazi philosophy. *What truth, proclaimed in Ephesians, do you need to stand for today?*

## Case Study #6: Erasmus and Ephesians

Ephesians chapter 6 has inspired a great deal of Christian literature, including *The Manual of the Christian Knight*, written in 1501 by Erasmus (William Tyndale, the Bible translator, valued it highly). Here is a sample of its advice: “After your enemy is overcome . . . . be diligent to avoid crediting anything about the victory to your own merits, but thank only the free gift of God.”—(Methuen & Company, 1905), p. 236, English translation updated.