



EPHESIANS'

UNIQUE

MESSAGE



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EPHESIANS READS LIKE a collection of what Paul had written in his other letters. As any Bible with cross references reveals, every verse in Ephesians leads the reader to passages in Paul's other letters that deal with the same subject. This is especially true since Ephesians is so similar to Colossians—they share the same outline, they develop the same topics in much the same way, and they even have the same instructions regarding Tychicus (nearly verbatim agreement, Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8). What makes Ephesians unique, however, is the way certain ideas Paul briefly mentioned in other letters are developed more fully in this letter, which was written toward the end of his life. "We may never know for certain the situation that prompted Paul's letter to the

Ephesians. What is apparent, however, is that this letter captures the heart and soul of his gospel ministry, the essence of his Christology and ecclesiology."¹ Although several topics in Ephesians could be explored, for the purposes of this article, I would like to feature what could be considered the main themes of the letter: the cosmic rule of Christ, how believers reign with Christ, and how believers can overcome evil.

Paul's Message

Paul wrote about the implications of Christ's resurrection for all creation in Romans 8:18-25. His main focus, however, was on believers—how the resurrection glory of Christ will be revealed in us on the last day: a hope that is

THE COSMIC RULE OF CHRIST: *A term that refers to the authority and power of Christ as revealed in "His victory over death, over the malevolent powers 'of the air,' and over every named creature of this age and the age to come." It is limitless in its scope and eternal in its duration.*

Marketplace at Ephesus.

Lower left: Found at Ephesus, bronze statuette of Eros riding a dolphin. Many of the new believers in Ephesus had come from backgrounds that included the worship of multiple gods.

Below: A sign of wealth, mosaics were part of the hillside houses in Ephesus.



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not seen but confirmed by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. That Christ's resurrection would affect all creation—an ancillary point in Romans—Paul developed in Colossians 1:11-23 and Ephesians 1:11-23. In particular, Paul wanted “the eyes” of the Ephesians’ “heart to be enlightened” to realize the power of Christ’s victory over death, over the malevolent powers “of the air,” and over every named creature of this age and the age to come (Eph. 1:18-2:2).² Indeed, Paul used quite a bit of “power talk” wrapped in royal imagery as he tried to get his converts to see the implications of Christ’s resurrection: Christ ascended to God’s throne, was seated at the right hand (an idiom of unquestioned authority), having put all creation “under his feet” (another idiom of royal supremacy), and was installed with the highest name (the King!). Therefore, no power can oppose the Ruler of all things.

On the heels of making these claims regarding Christ's resurrection power, Paul wrote about how believers share in Christ's reign (2:1-16; see also Rom. 6:4-14; Col. 2:9-15). Paul made the connection when he described the church as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). In other words, since the church is the body of Christ, and since Christ has put all creation under His feet, then the church reigns over all things—even created powers that are hostile to Christ and His kingdom. And, what does that look like? Before they were saved, Paul's converts were dead in sin—beholden to the ways of the world, to fleshly desires, and to the “spirit” that incites disobedience (2:1-3). But Christ's resurrection—His victory over sin, death, and all powers that oppose God—is a power that is realized by those who have been saved by grace through faith. Believers are co-regents of Christ's kingdom, installed by God “in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” because we are His body. This explains how believers live transformed lives; they do the work of God because they are the work of God (vv. 8-10). For Paul the best evidence of transformed lives was the peace of Christ found in the church. Ethnic strife (what Paul called “the enmity”) between Jews and Gentiles—a wall erected by the law—was abolished through the work of Christ because God has reconciled the whole world, turning enemies into friends (vv. 11-16).

If believers are seated in heavenly places with Christ, having authority over all powers, then what happens in the “real world”—for Christians who still face the reality of living on the earth “below” with the “ruler of the power of the air” (the devil?) above us? In Ephesians 4:24, Paul encouraged his converts to put on “the new man,” wearing Christ like a garment. A similar idea appears in Romans 13:12-14, where Paul encouraged the Romans to resist evil by wearing Christ like an “armor of light.” In this way, they would make “no provision for the flesh.” Paul expanded that idea in Ephesians 6:10-17, where he described the “whole armor of God,” relying on imagery in Isaiah 11:5; 49:2; 52:7; and 59:17. By wearing Christ like an armor, the believer does



Doorway in the foreground. In the distance, columns of the Church of St. John. According to some early church traditions, after John completed his exile on Patmos, he made his home in Ephesus. Once a massive structure, the church was built over the supposed burial site of John.

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POINT TO PONDER: *If persons in Ephesus wore amulets to protect certain parts or zones of their bodies, what does that say about Paul instructing Ephesian believers instead to put on the full armor of God?*

battle against evil powers, both in heavenly places and on earth (Eph. 6:12). Like a bullet-proof vest, Christ defends His co-regents from the flaming missiles of the evil one, that is, “the schemes of the devil” (v. 16, see v. 11). And, by His Spirit, Christ empowers believers to use God's Word like a sword through prayer and the proclamation of the gospel (vv. 18-20). In this way, Ephesian believers would “be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might” (v. 10). Christ leaves them neither defenseless nor powerless.

Paul's Motivation

Why did Paul highlight these ideas in his Letter to the Ephesians? His reason had everything to do with what was going on in Ephesus at the time. Said one writer:

Ephesus was the center of magic, astrology, and the



Left: Relief of Nike, the Greeks' winged goddess of victory, shown with a wreath in her left hand and a palm branch in her right.

Below: Baths with stilted floor. At Ephesus, the Baths of Varius were located just off Curetes Street. The limited excavations have revealed a changing room, a frigidarium (for a cool bath), a tepidarium (for warm baths), a caldarium with its heated floors (shown), and a sudatorium (sweat room).



mystery religions, and many converts to Christ in that city were once involved with these religious practices. They believed that their lives were under the influence of cosmic powers. Paul may have written, among other purposes, to alleviate their fears by showing that Christ is sovereign in the cosmos.³

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was in Ephesus, the great Temple of Artemis (also called Diana). The temple had a reputation for trafficking in magic; priests who served sold magical amulets to protect devotees from malevolent powers. Sown into their clothes or worn around their necks and wrists (charm bracelets!), these charms protected parts or zones of the body: head, heart, hands, loins,

or feet. According to Luke, when the Ephesians believed Paul's gospel, they burned all of their magical paraphernalia (Acts 19:18-19). Once Paul left the area, evidently the Ephesians began to question their impulsive response to the gospel: should they have destroyed their magical protection? Without their amulets, would they be vulnerable to the attacks of the devil and his minions?

This makes Paul's argument regarding the power of Christ's resurrection even more poignant. Since Christ put all enemies under His feet ("rule, authority, power, and dominion" were technical words used to refer to the angelic or demonic powers), and since the church is His body, then all powers (angelic and demonic) are—by the power and presence of Christ in us—under our feet, too. Indeed, believers reign with Christ in their victory over every enemy of God: sin, death, the flesh, and the devil. Raised with Christ, a believer wears Christ in His resurrection power like an armor, protecting every zone of his or her body: head (helmet of salvation), heart (breastplate of righteousness), hands (shield of faith), loins (belt of truth), and feet (gospel of peace). So that, no matter what happened to them (even to a man like Paul who was in prison when he wrote this letter, Eph. 6:20), the Ephesian believers should have been inspired to proclaim boldly the good news of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, more than for self-defense, Christ put into the hands of the Ephesians the sword of His Spirit—the Word of God—to advance His reign against the forces of darkness in wicked places. The Ephesians had everything they needed to "stand firm" (6:14) in the faith because Christ was raised from the dead and His soldiers reigned with Him—on earth as it is in heaven. **B**

1. David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 234.
 2. Scripture quotes are the writer's own translation.
 3. John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 348.

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