



Two weeks ago our elders were on a retreat together in Twain Harte. As we sat around the dinner table one night we got to talking about our favorite novels. I told them my favorite novels are *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit* which precedes it. I read those books years ago and found myself swept up in the whole drama of the dark lord Sauron, the pitiful Gollum, and the seductive powers of the ring. I fell in love with heroic little Hobbits like Bilbo Baggins, his cousin Frodo and Samwise Gamgee. And has there ever been a more compelling character than Gandalf? Tolkien does a masterful job of developing these characters in an unforgettable setting called Middle Earth. These books sucked me into their world to the extent I grieved when I finished them.

I sometimes wonder why we don't read the Bible with the same sort of passion and excitement. It's one thing to read a fascinating novel, but for many of us, the Bible can be a boring, stuffy book with about as much excitement as reading a dictionary. Sure, we may believe it's the Word of God, but the reality is for most of us it's not that exciting.

This morning we're starting a new study in the book of Ephesians. Ephesians is part of what we call the New Testament. It's a book you might read with several purposes in mind. You might read it to learn more about life in the first century. Or you might read it to mine from it doctrinal truth and fit that truth into a tidy system of theology. Or you might read it as a devotional book, extracting daily nuggets you can apply to your life.

Each of those approaches has some merit, but I've come to see Ephesians as something more. I've come to see Ephesians as a drama. It's a narrative. It tells a story. And much like *The Lord of the Rings* it's a story filled with dark powers that rule this present evil age. But it's also a story filled with heroic characters, the most compelling of which is Jesus. Ephesians portrays how Jesus triumphed over these dark powers and how we as his followers participate in that triumph. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The first two verses of the book introduce us to a few of the main characters as well as the theme.

Ephesians is a Drama with Several Characters.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:1–2).

Paul

One of the characters in this drama is Paul. Ephesians was originally a letter written by Paul. It was the custom in those days to begin a letter by identifying yourself, and that's what Paul does here. He calls himself "*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.*" We know Jesus selected twelve apostles and sent them out. Paul claims Jesus also chose him and vested him with the same authority. He says he didn't volunteer for this job, nor did he do anything to earn it. It was a job he received "*by the will of God.*" So Paul enters this drama as one with the authority that comes with being sent by Jesus Christ.

Ephesian church

A second character is introduced here as well, and that's the Ephesian church. They're the recipients of this letter. Paul says a couple of things about them right from the outset. He says they're "*God's holy people.*" Some translations use the word "saints." This doesn't mean they were super pious and a cut above other believers. This was Paul's favorite word for ordinary, run-of-the-mill Christians. We've been set apart by God; that's what it means to be holy. But that's not all. He also says they're "*faithful in Christ Jesus.*" This could mean they're faithful and trustworthy people, but more likely it simply means they've placed their faith in the person of Christ.

Paul says these believers are "*in Ephesus,*" although some of the earliest manuscripts we have of this letter leave those words out. Because of that, many believe this letter was meant not only for the church at Ephesus, but for other churches in the surrounding area as well. You can see from the map that Ephesus is in modern-day Turkey right on the coast of the Aegean Sea. It was originally a Greek colony but in Paul's day it was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Ephesus was a busy commercial port. It wasn't just a couple of dusty streets with a few dozen houses, goats, and donkeys. It was the 4th largest city in the 1st century world with about 250,000 people. It was the headquarters of the cult of the goddess of Diana (Artemis) whose rebuilt temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The footprint of that temple was about the size of a football field and had 127 60-foot marble pillars. It may have been the largest building in the world when it was completed. Ephesus also had the largest theater in the Roman world with 25,000 seats. There was also the *agora*, which was a triple archway into a marketplace the size of two football fields. You could buy anything there. It was like the Great Mall!

And it was in this place a church was planted; a church mainly made up of Gentiles (non-Jews) from a pagan background.

One of the questions we have to ask is how did the message of Jesus actually come to this city and take root there? Again, Paul is at the center of that story. He'd made two visits to Ephesus. First, he made a brief visit during his second missionary journey in A.D. 52 (Acts 18:18-21). A year later, he made a much longer visit of about 2 1/2 years. Most of that time was spent teaching and preaching in what was called "the lecture Hall of Tyrannus." Paul also performed miracles of healing there and cast out demons. The result was "*all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord*" (Acts 19:1-41). Paul's ministry was having an impact even beyond Ephesus.

In Ephesus, people were coming to Christ and leaving lives of paganism and immorality. The book of Acts tells how this actually impacted the economy (Acts 19:23-41). There were many tradesmen there who earned a good living by making artifacts and silver idols associated with the temple of Diana. But their business was suffering because as people became followers of Christ they rejected idolatry. So these tradesmen got together and threw Paul out of the city.

As far as we know, Paul never returned to Ephesus. But now a church was established there, a community of "*God's holy people, faithful in Christ Jesus.*" Elders were appointed to shepherd the flock (Acts 20:13-37). Three or four years after Paul left he found himself under house arrest in Rome. From Rome he wrote this letter and gave it to a friend named Tychicus to bring to the Ephesians.

The Triune God

But there's another character in this drama we haven't talked about. As a matter of fact, he's the **main** character. He's what we call the protagonist of the story. I'm talking about Jesus. Notice how many times he's mentioned in these first few verses. Paul, the writer is "*an apostle of Christ Jesus.*" The Ephesians are "*faithful in Christ Jesus,*" and the blessing of "*grace and peace*" come from both "*God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" The assumption from the outset is unless God has acted in the person of Jesus there's no story; there's no drama; and most of all there's no triumph!

Ephesians is a Drama About the Victory of God in Christ.

This victory took place in the heavenlies

As I said earlier, Ephesians is a drama about the victory of God in Christ. In order to get this you have to understand a phrase that's in this letter no less than five times: in the heavenly realms. For example look at v. 3.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

"In the heavenly realms" doesn't mean the sky or some kind of literal spacial place, but rather the unseen world of spiritual reality. Although this is an invisible realm, what happens in the heavenlies impacts our lives in a profound way.

Do you remember the story in the Old Testament about Elisha and his servant? They were in a small city one day, surrounded by the armies of Syria. The servant looked out at this vast enemy army with their armed chariots. He was frightened and turned to Elisha and said, "Everything's hopeless! We're surrounded, what can we do?" Elisha said, "Don't be afraid! Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then he prayed, "*Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see*" (2 Kings 6:15-17). And the Lord opened his eyes and he saw the hills full of fiery chariots of God, manned by thousands of angels, and he realized the true situation.

We live in a world where most of the important things in our lives aren't visible. They can't be touched or seen or tasted or measured. But they're real and they impact us every day. And it's in this realm, this heavenly realm, Jesus has acted and won a victory for us. Listen to the other verses where this phrase is found:

That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (1:19-20).

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus... (2:6).

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, (3:10).

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (6:12).

The victory is over the spiritual forces of evil

As you look at these verses I hope you noticed that there's a fourth set of characters in this drama. Paul refers to them as "*the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm.*" These are fallen angels. These are spiritual forces of evil that keep people in bondage. Unless we understand these forces are real and they effect us we can't appreciate this drama. Paul sees the present

age we're in as dominated by these dark powers. Look what he says in chapter 2:2, "...you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient."

All of us, whether we knew it or not, were in bondage to these forces. They influenced every aspect of our lives. Again, we couldn't see them, but they were there. It's kind of like organized crime or what we call the "underworld." Especially in years past, everybody kind of knew it was there. Everyone knew there were things they controlled. But they were beneath the surface. It's interesting in our Western culture especially these dark forces stay beneath the surface. It's almost like their strategy here is to make us think they don't even exist. They're like the current in the ocean. They move us away from the Lord without us even knowing it. But if you go to certain parts of Africa or South America, these evil powers are much more obvious. I learned that the hard way this past summer when I visited Niger and encountered a demon-possessed woman in the fistula hospital. When you see something like that you don't have to be convinced that world is real and it's powerful.

Now we need to be careful here. There's a lot of wild and irresponsible speculation about the character of heavenly beings and their activities. It fascinates us. Movies and books about these things rake in millions. There are a lot of believers who over-read every detail of their lives as arenas of spiritual warfare. A lustful act is proof to them that the demon of lust has attacked them. Bad traffic that keeps them getting to church on time is the demon of traffic. There are a lot of ridiculous things believers can do with this. So every time something bad happens we pray a prayer to bind Satan and command demons to be gone. This kind of approach fails to grasp we have a responsibility to act wisely. We might want to stay away from those things that incite our lust. We might want to leave for church five minutes earlier.

The victory is won through the work of Jesus

Maybe the worst thing about that approach is it fails to see the reality of the victory that Jesus has won over the rulers and authorities. That's what Paul was saying when he said God "*raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion...*" It's even clearer in Col. 2:15 where it says he "*disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*" Through the cross and resurrection, Jesus triumphed over the powers and authorities in the heavenlies and we no longer need to live in fear. Though we still wait for the complete abolishing of the powers on judgment day, we know the victory has been won.

God is Now Creating a New Community of People in Christ.

So we've seen four characters in this drama: Paul, the Ephesians, Jesus and the rulers and powers of this age. But there's a fifth character I don't want you to miss: You! Us! The Church! Ephesians tells us that through the work of Jesus God is calling together a new community of people on earth called the church. We have a role to play in this story and Ephesians gives us our script.

We're not unlike the believers in Ephesus. We were dead in our sins. We followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air. But Jesus rescued us. What he's given us can be summed up right here in these two words that form part of his greeting: "*grace and peace.*" **Grace** is God's free and undeserved mercy in saving us. Ephesians tells us it's by grace we're saved and it's by that same grace we're gifted for service. **Peace** is what comes as a result of God's grace. Ephesians says Jesus preached peace; he is our peace and he made peace through the cross. So we have peace with God and with one another as members of his body.

Grace and peace describe what God has done for us, but we also have a script to follow. That script can be summed up by these three words: **Sit, Walk, Stand**. The first thing we need to learn how to do is **sit**. That's the focus of the first three chapters. Paul says we've been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. We've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies. That means we don't start with doing, but rather with resting. We start with resting in the work Jesus has done for us. Ephesians talk's about "*the incomparable riches of his grace.*" We didn't earn any of this; we can't take credit for any of it. What we have, we've received and we sit or rest in that. Have you learned to sit?

The second thing we need to do is **walk**. That word "walk" is used to describe how we live our lives in response to what God has done for us. We can't learn to walk until we've first learned to sit. Learning to walk with Christ in this world is the emphasis of chapters 4–5. The key word in this section is *love*. We're called to "*walk in the way of love just as Christ loved us.*" Paul gets very specific about what this looks like in our relationship within the body of Christ, in our marriages and our families, and even at work.

The third thing we need to do in following this script is to **stand**. This is the focus of chapter 6. This is where Paul talks in detail about the battle we're in against the spiritual forces of this darkness. He tells us not to run away but to put on the full armor of God and to stand against them. In talking about spiritual warfare, look at how many times he says to stand, "*Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything,*

to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (6:13-15). You can see how important it is to stand.

Often times we envision spiritual warfare in very individualistic ways. We think of personal struggles with temptation. But I think we need to see these forces of evil on a larger scale of culture and destructive social patterns that are anti-God. Wherever we see oppression, injustice and idolatry we know the rulers and authorities are at work. Don't get me wrong, human culture in all its amazing variety is good and endorsed by God. But the spiritual forces of this darkness love to take what's good and twist it.

Let me give you an example. Let's talk about one of the great examples of the grace of God: baseball. It's true, right? Baseball is a wonderful way to enjoy God's creation, whether by playing or by watching. For those of us who will go home today, sit on the couch and watch the Giants, we're resting and as I said, that's good! But when you watch baseball you can't help but thank God for the great athleticism, strategy and teamwork. There are even players who give God glory and use baseball as a platform to share Christ.

In our world though, baseball has become corrupted and perverted. We no longer play baseball for pure enjoyment. It's become idolatrous. We worship certain players. Parents push their kids way too hard to excel. Players are paid unbelievable amounts of money. Scandals and performance enhancing drugs have hurt the sport. There are so many ways that baseball has become corrupt.

But is baseball evil? No! It's something good that's been corrupted. But what Paul wants us to know is there's more going on behind these things than just human sin. There are evil powers and authorities that have influenced baseball. They're mainly found in the Dodger organization! But the same is true of almost every organization and institution. And so as the church, as

followers of Christ, we must stand against that kind of idolatry wherever it's found. We must resist anything that exploits others and instead work towards spreading life, blessing, joy and hope.

Before we do that, we must learn to sit with Christ in the heavens and walk with him in the world. That's our part in this great drama of Ephesians: **Seated with Christ. Walking with Christ. Standing with Christ.**

In *The Lord of the Rings* there's a great scene where Frodo Baggins is about to give up in his fight against evil. He says to his good friend Sam Gamgee, "I can't do this, Sam."

Sam is a true friend and he says to Frodo, "I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something."

I think Samwise Gamgee was right. We're part of a great story full of darkness and danger. And it's hard sometimes. We're tempted to turn back but we should keep going. We should follow our script, knowing that this shadow of darkness must pass and a new day will come, and holding on to the One who promised he'll never leave us or forsake us.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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