

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Heaven on Earth_ Ephesians 6

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Well, hello National Community Church friends, it's wonderful to be back with you. One of these days, hopefully not too long down the road, I get to come be with you in the flesh as they say so we'll pray toward that end. If we were on a flight, if we were flying a plane called the Ephesians airplane, we're on the downwind leg, going to make the base leg and turning for a landing we've got this week and one more week with Pastor Mark.

But as I prepared this message for these last verses of Ephesians, six, I just took the time to sort of reflect back on where we've come to that this has been a wonderful study, from my perspective, a wonderful series and Ephesians is this very special letter, I don't know how long it took Paul to write it. I imagine it took hours and hours to write it in a dark dungeon and on a scroll and all of that. But it only takes us at least in English about 20 minutes to read it. But it's this punchy intense expression of Paul's view of the large view of what God's about in the world and his part in it. And our part in it, or at least the church at Ephesus because we're reading somebody else's mail here aren't we, but because the word isn't just for a moment in time, it's our mail, as well. And I just see this letter as so powerful, so rich. If it were a painting, it would be bold slashes of color on the dark motif or background. If it were music, this would be the Hallelujah Chorus, you know, punching through some cacophony of sound and squeaks and groans and howls of a sort of disreputable culture into which Paul is speaking and writing this letter because Ephesus was a pagan community. These people are floating in a soup of paganism and all kinds of practices that are unhelpful to say the least. So Paul takes ideas and makes them into word pictures, all the way through this letter. And I just want to reach back and just pick out a few of those before we get to the text today.

In Ephesians, six, for example, in chapter one and verse four, he talks about them being a chosen people before the beginning, if you will, I don't know how all that works but they are chosen. I don't know about you, but when I was in elementary school, and we'd go to recess, and they choose up teams, you know, I'd be the kid - I wasn't the greatest ballplayer, but I didn't want to be the last guy chosen. There's something about being chosen that is profound. It's unique, it gives me identity. And Paul starts right there - you're a chosen people He doesn't get very far. He's just into what we call the second chapter that might be the third scroll of the deal or something. And he says you were dead in your transgressions, but now you're alive and let me tell you how that happened. By grace, this is Ephesians 2:8 through 10, "By grace, you have been saved through faith." And that's not because you did it, it's because of his mercy, that he did that for you. And he goes on to say you're his craftsmanship. The word there is really the base idea for a poem. One of the translations says that you are a poem created by God. So he says, not only did he choose you, but he shaped you in a very profound way.

He goes on to say you once were far away, but now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ. "Consequently," chapter two, verse 19, "*you are no longer foreigners and strangers.*" You're not those guys over there, those people, those men and women, "*but you are fellow citizens, with God's people, and members of his household.*" Now we need to understand Paul is speaking from a Jewish community perspective as God's chosen people. And these are the goys these are guys like me, the non Jews, and he's saying, you were once over there as a foreigner, but through Jesus, you are embraced as part of God's household, a citizen of a new place called the kingdom of God. This is a call to community. This is a call to community, not community, just some sort of passive thing but a vibrant, light bearing community in a very dark place.

He goes on and says, you're a temple set up against the background of the Temple of Artemis, this pagan god, if you will. He says, that's a temple but it's nothing like this temple. This temple is a vibrant thing that's built on the foundation of the apostles, the prophets, the cornerstone is Christ Jesus.

I'm just going to go on for a couple of minutes here, then I'll be done with this part. So he goes on to say in chapter three, verse 10, "*through the church*" through you, "*the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities and the heavenly realms,*"¹¹ according to His eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus, our Lord." He sets the tone in these first chapters, that this situation is the church in the world, but it's not just working in the world, it's over against this realm of heavenly beings. And we'll get back to that in just in just a moment. This is a call to create a community that has reach. It's a call to create a community that has reached that goes beyond our general understanding of how things work.

And then he goes on with this tremendous prayer that they might experience the love of God. In chapter three, verse 20, he just stacked superlatives like this.²⁰ "*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,*"²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

Whenever I read that passage, it takes me back to about 1980. I was a young college president in California, and I was invited by the Vatican, if you can imagine that, to go with a team of theologians and others, to sit for five days in Venice, Italy, in an old nunnery. And they're to have discussions a dialogue, as they put it on the Holy Spirit; this was a 10 year event a 10 year dialogue. And once a year, folks would get together and have discussions on various aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit. And when I read these verses, it brings me back to a moment because we would do Vespers, that is sort of evening devotionals. And there were a team of Catholic priests, PhDs and all kinds of things from all kinds of places. And then this other group of us who were more low church, we really didn't come from a highly liturgical background. And so we would have these conversations, but we would take turns doing Vespers over those five days. And I think it was maybe on the Thursday night, they had asked me to do it. And I'm sort of the young guy on the block; I'm in my late 30s. And so when it came time, I read these verses from Ephesians. And I said, now from our background, gentlemen, what we tend to do

is, we're big hand holders. So why don't we stand up, and you have to understand this is a room I don't know, it was probably 30 feet long by 30 feet wide by maybe 40 or 50 feet long. It's pretty big room, but it's all marble. It's all hard surfaces. And we join hands. And I said now, these are the verses and we're also singers, we like to sing choruses. And there are some folks who have put these words to music. And this is a song we sing where I come from, and it goes like this.

Singing...Unto Him be glory in the church, both now and ever more. Unto him be glory in the church, both now and ever more.

Speaking ...And then we do it antiphonally.

Singing...Unto him, unto Him be glory in the church, both now and ever more.

And I turned to all these priests and I said, "Why don't we do that together?" They seemed a little nervous but we did it together. And by the time we had cycled through that a couple of times, and that sound bouncing off those marble walls it was a magnificent moment. I think the Spirit showed up in that moment. It was this moment in time, where it was almost palpable. You could almost taste it. And Paul in the middle of his letter, speaks those words out and says in the church be glory and glory forever. Amen.

Well, I need to go on. He goes on in chapter four talks about living a life that is worthy.

"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

So he sets the stage for the character of this community. Then he goes on later in chapter four to talk about particular instructions, give particular instructions on how we are to talk and act. Chapter five, he gets into follow God's example as dearly loved children. And later in chapter five, he talks about you are a community of light in the Lord. And then last week, Pastor Mark spoke so eloquently about guidance in relationships and the me world and the world.

So here we are 30,000 foot view. I find it fascinating that he's not saying so just hang in there, just suck it up, have a stiff upper lip? No, no. What he says is, I've been telling you, who you are, you're the Lord's. So be strong in his strength, in his might. I think sometimes we have this idea that we just have to do better, that if we can only generate more energy, if we can only be together and do this thing, then it will work. And what Paul is saying is, look, you're a community of light, your community of life, and your strength doesn't come from within you. Your strength comes from God Almighty and where you need to stand is in him, whatever you need to do to do that that's the place to be. When I look at this0 I

see Paul in his cell, looking at his guards. It's almost like he's doing a list of what they're wearing. Right? And in verse 11, he says, put on the entire armor of God, the complete armor of God, every piece, all the parts, don't miss anything. The thrust of these verses, is make sure that when you are armed when you armor up, that it's got all the parts, it's got the helmet, got the breastplate, got the buckler, the belt that goes around your waist. It's got the things on your shins, got the feet that are shod with the gospel of peace.

And now, as we come on approach, coming in for the landing, we're in chapter six, verse 10, through 17. And what Paul does here, is he pulls it back to sort of a 30,000 foot view, and it reads like this.

"¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, (or literally blood and flesh) 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. ¹³ Therefore 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. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

It's very interesting, last week; I had the privilege to sit at breakfast with a couple of folks by the name of Dean and Tammy Jo Shults. They're actually retired Navy fighter pilots, both of them, F-18 Hornets. And I asked them over breakfast I said, "What was your takeaway being trained as Navy fighter pilots, if you could give me one thing that captured that?" They thought a moment and then almost in chorus said attention to detail. Attention to detail, because when you're in battle, it has to be reflex, doesn't it. It has to be muscle memory, not muscle memory, well might be muscle memory, but it has to be those things that make it work in that moment in time. And here is Paul, who's saying, don't miss a piece. Don't leave the coverings of your feet up, don't forget to put on the buckler, the belt that holds it all together.

And then we come to verse 12 and we have the shift of metaphor that Paul puts in here where he moves from warrior to wrestler, he goes from soldier to a Greek wrestling match. Now for the people listening, they would get this, you know, many of them may live within the sound of the stadium games, which weren't games, they ended in death. But Greek wrestling was this brutal thing that if you lost and forgive this a little gross, but if you lost, you got your eyes gouged out. We're not talking about checkers here. We're not talking about a chess match, not even football, or rugby, or track and field. We're talking about life and death. What he's saying to the church is that I know that this is a desperate situation, this is life and death. And when I talk about armoring up, when I talk about clothing yourself in the strength and armor of God, I'm talking about something that counts forever.

And he goes on to say something about these unseen forces. You're fighting or wrestling not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and things behind the scenes. Now, in his worldview, as a Jewish person, he would understand that there are fallen entities, Satan's minions, if you will, that work behind the scenes against things. I don't know how all that works but in their frame of reference, they would get it. Here are people who walked down the streets in Ephesus, and they've got idols to this and Oracle's over there, so they get this whole spiritual, unseen world. And this is not Harry Potter. This is not Marvel characters. This is much more like I would say Screwtape Letters, okay with CS Lewis, where you have fallen angels with mischief in mind, with things behind the scenes. You say is this a little weird? Like is this warlocks and witches and little green men sitting on your foot? No, no, I don't think so. I mean our walk of faith is unseen. I'm a person who believes in this Jesus born of a virgin, raised from the dead for Pete's sake. Now, I don't think that's weird, because it's changed my whole life. It's given me a new lens on life. I know the Holy Spirit's power at work or his wisdom or his discernment. So even though on the surface, it might seem strange to some, in this context, in this time with these people in this culture, they fully get it. And Jesus comes and says, in that context, I want to create a community. I want to create a family in a fractious world that loves each other that serves in humility across lines that should be barriers. I want to create a place of love and light. And so he's saying to them, don't squabble over things that will pass. Look for the good, bless each other, stand, fully armor up, stand, don't duck, don't run, stand and fight the good fight.

The thing I'd like to note here because we don't have time to go through all of the pieces of the armor. Okay? Let me just focus on one. Truth is the centerpiece. It's the belt that held it all together for that Roman soldier. We live in a day, when truth is characterized in this way with a modifier. Well, that's your truth. Good for you I don't need to have it for me but whatever your truth is, that's all good and that's where we'll go. So all truth is relative, all truth is just how I choose to see it. And the question is this what is truth? That's always been the question. That's the question we've been asking over and over again over these months. What's true about this or that or the other thing? I just like to say that I believe this, this revelation to be truth about who God is, who I am, what we are built for, what we're called to, where we've come from, where we're going, as we trust in him.

You know, it just amazes me this lens through which I see the world. What kind of world do we live in that says there is no objective truth? They don't mean that about everything. I mean, we're inconsistent aren't we? Because H₂O, two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen, it's true that that's water, not H₃O, not H₁₄O, that's just how that is. Gravity works like this - Always works that way, every time. H₂O is water every time. A touchdown in football is six points every time that's called objective truth. This is not Jack Nicholson and a few good men shouting in the courtroom, you can't handle the truth. This is God, the Creator of all the universe, shouting across the galaxies saying "You are designed for truth". And if you follow my teachings, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. That's how that works, that idea that as I armor up, as I close myself in the armor of God, truth as the centerpiece holds it all together. We are a holy people. We are citizens of the kingdom. We are a redemptive community. We're

not about fighting each other. But we're about fighting against unseen foes who haven't discovered they have already lost.

Dr. Timothy Gombis says it's so much better than I when he says it this way. "Our warfare is not against others in our culture. Our warfare is to resist being an unholy community. We need to embody God's restoration of the world, anticipating the day when God makes all things new." So some of us feel we've probably had some pretty desperate moments in the last year compared to other people in other places, not nearly as desperate. But it feels that way to us and we just need to remember that we have a king, a king, who cares, a king who knows and a king, whom we follow, and he knows where we're going, and we get to go with him.

Let me wrap it up this way. Let me go back to the breakfast I had with my friends Dean and Tammy Jo Shults. I told you they were retired Navy fighter pilots. But I haven't told you is that they then signed on with Southwest Airlines, both of them are captains with Southwest. And it was April of 2018 - April 17, to be precise, that they had actually swapped flights. And so Tammy Jo took Dean's flight. And that was flight 1380 Southwest Airlines from LaGuardia in New York to Love Field in Dallas that took off that morning. She headed southwest and as she climbed out through 32,000 feet, all of a sudden there was an explosion and a jarring of the aircraft and tremendous vibration. And both she and her first officer thought that they had been hit actually by another aircraft. And the plane tilted to the left and started into a dive got 40 degrees, which is quite a ways over. And what had happened was that the left engine had essentially come apart. And part of the impeller, the fan came in and puncture the fuselage skin caused depressurizing of the cabin. And so everything went crazy in the back and they're trying to control it in the front. And as she tells the story, and I've heard her tell it a couple of times, finally they got control and once they had done that just because they paid attention to detail they reacted like that. Just because they knew what was true and how to get things done they were able to stabilize the aircraft. And then she called the flight attendants and of course, she said if you roll down the windows of a car at 70 miles an hour, you know how loud that is can you imagine at 30,000 feet with the roar of the wind at 500 miles an hour, what that sounds like? And the oxygen masks had dropped down, there were things flying around the cabin. And she got a hold of the flight attendants she said they were heroes. They were already at work helping people with oxygen canisters and getting them fitted for their masks. And things were flying around the cabin, they were getting hit, the plane was vibrating viciously. And she said, tell them this, go down the aisle and shout this to them that we are not going to crash we have a destination. We are not going to crash we have a destination.

One time, I heard her say one of the times she said we are not going down we're going to Philly. Well, whatever. The point is that they were able she and her colleagues were able to get the plane on the ground within a matter of a few minutes in Philadelphia. 148 saved, one soul lost. And she said you never forget that one was lost, but 148 people safely on the ground. And here was the God of the universe, who says to us in whatever our times of trial. Trust me here, we're not going down we have a destination.

And I come back to that language that I love so much in Ephesians, the third chapter.

"²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen." So be it!

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your grace in sending Jesus to us so that we might find strength in him. Help us to be a people, a community of redemption, and light. Help us to be people who stand and don't run or duck. Help us to be together in this fight against unseen forces but that have real consequence. Thank you, Lord for the privilege of being yours in this day. We just want you to know that we are grateful for redemption, and we will never ever get over it. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. God bless you, go in his grace.