

New Testament Literature - Ephesians

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson

Session 21

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Abstract

In this lecture on the book of Ephesians, Dr. Dave Mathewson presents the epistle as a circular letter addressed to believers living under the pressure of the Roman Empire, centered on the overarching theme of cosmic reconciliation. Departing from Clinton Arnold's magic hypothesis, Mathewson demonstrates how Christ's death, resurrection, and heavenly exaltation fulfill Psalm 110 and Psalm 8 by conquering the hostile spiritual powers that rule behind physical earthly authorities. The church, comprising reconciled Jews and Gentiles into one body, functions as a visible demonstration to these spiritual forces that their dominion has been broken. Finally, Mathewson reinterprets the spiritual warfare passage of Ephesians 6 through the lens of Isaiah 59, arguing that believers engage in cosmic warfare not through mystical rituals, but through practical ethical living—truth, righteousness, peace, and faith—grounded in Christ's already-won victory.

Outline

I. Introduction and Context of Ephesians

A. Structural Overview of the Epistle

1. Chapters 1–3: The Indicative – Theological portrayal of believers' identity and spiritual position in Christ
2. Chapters 4–6: The Imperative – Ethical ramifications and practical instructions for daily Christian living

B. Debates Over Purpose and Occasion

1. Absence of a specific crisis or false teaching (contrasted with Galatians)
2. Hypothesis of a circular letter sent to multiple churches across Asia Minor
3. Clinton Arnold's proposal: Addressing fear of widespread local magic and spiritual powers
 - a. Magic as an attempt to manipulate or placate spiritual forces
 - b. Assurance that Christ's power supersedes all magical and spiritual forces
4. Textual evidence regarding recipients
 - a. Earliest and best manuscripts omit the phrase "in Ephesus" (1:1)
 - b. Likely added by later scribes due to the prominence of Ephesus

II. The Central Theme: Cosmic Reconciliation

A. Defining Cosmic Reconciliation (Ephesians 1:9–10)

1. God's overarching plan to sum up and unite all creation in Christ
2. Inaugurated eschatology: The process is already initiated through Christ's resurrection and exaltation

B. Christology of Cosmic Rulership

1. Contrast with Gospels: Focus shifts from earthly Messiah/Son of David to Cosmic Lord over the entire universe
2. Old Testament foundations for Christ's cosmic exaltation
 - a. Psalm 110:1 – Seated at God's right hand; enemies made a footstool
 - b. Psalm 8:6 – All creation and powers subjected beneath His feet
3. Target of Christ's victory: Demonic and spiritual powers ruling behind physical earthly structures (e.g., Rome)
4. Implication for believers: Assurance and boldness when living under the pressure of pagan Rome

C. Earthly Manifestation of Reconciliation (Ephesians 2:11–22)

1. Breakdown of historical hostility between Jew and Gentile
2. Creation of "one new humanity" in one body through the cross
3. The church as a cosmic signpost (Ephesians 3:10)
 - a. Demonstrates God's manifold wisdom to hostile heavenly powers
 - b. Serves as living proof that the rule of evil powers has been broken

III. Spiritual Warfare as Ethical Living (Ephesians 6:10–20)

A. Old Testament Background of the Armor of God

1. Rejection of the traditional view (Paul observing a Roman soldier in prison)
2. Old Testament roots in Isaiah
 - a. Isaiah 59:17 – Divine warrior putting on the breastplate of righteousness and helmet of salvation
 - b. Isaiah 52:7 – Feet fitted with the good news of peace
3. Believers called to wear the very armor that God Himself wears to conquer evil

B. Integration of Indicative and Imperative in Chapter 6

1. Chapter 6 as the grand summary of chapters 1–5, not an isolated topic
2. The nature of spiritual warfare: Practicing Christian virtues discussed throughout the letter
 - a. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation as spiritual weapons
 - b. Defeating spiritual darkness through ethical, holy living and unity rather than mystical rituals

IV. Conclusion and Administrative Details

A. Summary of Ephesians' Core Message

1. Encouragement for Christians to stand firm in Christ's completed cosmic victory

B. Course Logistics

1. Scope of upcoming Exam 3 (Acts through Galatians; Ephesians excluded from Exam 2)
2. Study guide distribution via email and Blackboard