

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 21 - Ephesians

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, everybody, welcome back. You ready for another deep dive? I am. Always excited to jump into these fascinating texts with you.

So today we're tackling Ephesians. And you know, I've got to admit, whenever I hear Ephesians, I think of spiritual warfare, putting on the armor of God. Yeah, that's the classic image, right? It is.

But we're going beyond that, right? We're going a little deeper, thanks to some interesting insights from Dr. Dave Mathewson. He's a New Testament scholar, and he's got this really intriguing take on Ephesians. He calls it a story of cosmic reconciliation.

I love that framing, cosmic reconciliation. It really captures the grand scope of what Paul is getting at. It does.

It's kind of mind-blowing when you think about it. So we're diving into one of his lectures for this deep dive. So tell me, like, when you hear cosmic reconciliation, what comes to mind? Well, you know, a lot of times people think Ephesians is just about dealing with problems in the church at Ephesus.

You know, like there was all this stuff about magic and sorcery going on there. Right. But Dr. Mathewson, he suggests that Ephesians was probably a circular letter, you know, meant for a wider audience.

And so it's not so much about addressing a specific crisis in Ephesus. It's got this much bigger universal message. Okay.

So if it's not just about magic in Ephesus, what's this whole cosmic angle about? What does he mean by cosmic reconciliation? Well, one of the things that Dr. Mathewson points out is that, like, Ephesians is full of this language of power and authority. Okay. Yeah.

You can see that. But he says it's not about, you know, overthrowing the Roman Empire, like some people might think. He actually connects it to the Old Testament, specifically Psalm 110.

You familiar with that one? I am. Yeah. It talks about a king, you know, seated at God's right hand, ruling over his enemies.

Right. And Paul takes that image from the Psalm and applies it to Jesus, but not in a political sense. He's saying Jesus is a cosmic victor ruling over these spiritual forces of evil.

And that's where this cosmic reconciliation comes in. Okay. I'm starting to get it.

So how does reconciliation play into this whole cosmic battle? So think of it this way. The universe, like creation itself, was disrupted by sin, you know, kind of thrown out of whack. And what God is doing through Jesus is bringing everything back into harmony with himself.

So it's like a cosmic reset button, almost. You could say that. It's like taking a puzzle that's been completely scattered and putting all the pieces back together, restoring the original picture.

That's a great analogy. It helps to visualize it. So, I mean, is that what Paul means when he talks about, like, all things being summed up in Christ? Exactly.

He even quotes that verse, Ephesians 1.10, where Paul talks about God's plan, that all things will be reconciled to Christ. Wow. That's pretty huge.

But I'm still trying to wrap my head around this whole idea, you know, like how does spiritual warfare fit in with this idea of cosmic reconciliation? Because that's a big theme in Ephesians 2, right? Oh, absolutely. And it's a question that Dr. Matthewson really digs into. He doesn't see it as, you know, like this random add-on at the end of the letter.

It's actually, it's all connected. Okay. I'm intrigued.

Tell me more. So, the way Dr. Matthewson explains it, he says that this victory, you know, over evil, this cosmic victory has already been won by Christ. But we still have a role to play.

You're called to participate in this ongoing work of reconciliation. Okay. That's where I was getting confused.

So, the victory's already won, but the battle's still going on. Exactly. And that's where the armor of God comes in.

Okay. Now we're talking. So, the armor of God is not just about, you know, protecting ourselves from demons or something.

It's about equipping ourselves to live out this reconciliation that Jesus has already secured. You got it. It's about participating in the victory that's already ours.

This is really making me rethink what it means to put on the armor of God. It's a whole new perspective, isn't it? And it's really empowering, I think. It is.

So, you know, before we get into the specifics of the armor, maybe we should take a step back and really define what we mean by cosmic reconciliation, you know, make sure everybody's on the same page. Yeah, that's a good idea. It is a pretty big concept to grasp.

So, let's break it down a bit further. Let's do it. So, like, think about all the division and brokenness that we see in the world today.

You know, conflict, injustice, hatred, even the way we treat the environment. Like, all of that stems from this initial disruption caused by sin, this cosmic disruption. Okay, so we're not just talking about some, like, spiritual realm far removed from our everyday lives.

This cosmic disruption, it's got real-world consequences. Exactly. It's playing out all around us.

And cosmic reconciliation means that God is actively working to heal that brokenness, to restore harmony and wholeness to every aspect of creation. Wow. So then, like, if we're called to be part of this cosmic reconciliation, I mean, what does that even look like, practically speaking? That is the question, isn't it? And it's a good one.

And that's where the armor of God comes in. It gives us the tools we need to engage in this battle. But before we dive into that, you know, I think it's helpful to understand the context in which Paul was writing.

Right. Like, what was going on back then that might help us understand Ephesians better? Well, you know, Ephesus was a bustling city. I've heard that.

Yeah. Like, a major center of trade and culture, you know. But it was also a place where all these different spiritual forces and ideas were kind of constantly clashing.

You had the Roman Empire with its emperor worship and pagan deities. You had the influence of Greek philosophy and mystery religions. And then you had the Jewish community with its monotheistic faith.

It sounds like a real melting pot of spiritualities. So how did Christianity fit into all of that? Well, early Christians were definitely a minority group, you know, often misunderstood and even persecuted. Yeah, I can imagine.

Seen as a threat to the established order, both politically and religiously. And within that context, you know, Paul is writing to encourage and equip them to stand firm in their faith. I bet that idea of cosmic reconciliation would have been incredibly powerful for them back then, huh? Like a reminder that even though they were facing challenges and opposition, they were part of something much bigger.

Right. Like this cosmic drama that God was ultimately in control of. Exactly.

So it's a message of hope and victory, but it's also a call to action, right? Absolutely. And that's where the armor of God comes in. It's not just about surviving in a hostile world.

It's about actively participating in God's plan of reconciliation, bringing his kingdom values into every sphere of life. All right. Now I'm ready to dive into this armor of God and really unpack what it means for us today.

Let's do it. But, you know, before we get there, I am curious about something. You mentioned earlier that Ephesians might have been a circular letter meant for a wider audience.

Right. Yeah. What evidence is there to support that? Why would some scholars think it wasn't specifically for the church in Ephesus? Well, it goes back to those early manuscripts of Ephesians.

You know, some of them actually omit the phrase in Ephesus from the opening verse. Oh, interesting. Congesting.

It might have been intended for wider circulation, you know, among various churches. So it's like a little detective work with ancient texts, huh? Exactly. It's fascinating stuff.

But then if Paul wasn't addressing specific issues in Ephesus, why do you think he chose to focus so much on power and authority in this letter? Well, even though it may not have been about, you know, magical practices in Ephesus specifically, the themes of power and authority were still incredibly relevant for Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Right. Because they were living under Roman rule, right? Exactly.

And remember, they were living under a system that promoted emperor worship, where political power was intertwined with spiritual claims. So in a way, by emphasizing Jesus as the ultimate, like, cosmic ruler, Paul is challenging the very foundation of Roman power. Exactly.

He's proclaiming that true authority rests with Christ, not with any earthly ruler. And that message would have resonated deeply with Christians who are facing pressure to conform to the norms of Roman society. So even though Ephesians wasn't written to address magic in one particular city, its message about spiritual authority and a cosmic reconciliation would have been just as powerful, maybe even more so, for a broader audience of Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

Absolutely. It provided them with a framework for understanding their place in the world, a source of hope and strength in the face of opposition, and a call to live out their faith in a way that challenged the prevailing power structures. This is really making me rethink my understanding of Ephesians.

You know, it's not just a collection of moral teachings or spiritual insights. It's a bold proclamation of God's power and authority, a call to participate in his plan of cosmic reconciliation, and a source of hope and encouragement for believers in every generation. You got it.

And with that understanding in mind, we can now start to unpack the armor of God and see how it equips us to live out this incredible calling in our own lives. All right, I'm ready to suit up. Let's dive into this armor piece by piece and see what practical wisdom we can glean for navigating the complexities of the 21st century.

Let's do it. We're about to discover that this ancient text has some surprisingly relevant things to say about how we live, work, and interact with the world around us. I can't wait.

This deep dive is getting more and more interesting. Me too. Buckle up, we're about to go deep.

So, like we were saying, you know, Ephesians really has this huge cosmic scope, right? It's all about this, this grand reconciliation that God's bringing about in the universe. Yeah. And the idea that we get to be part of it, it's pretty mind-blowing.

Totally. But like, what does that even look like in our everyday lives? You know, how do we actually participate in this cosmic battle? That's, that's where this whole idea of the armor of God comes in. Okay, I'm ready to suit up.

What's the, like, what's the first piece of armor Paul talks about? He starts with the belt of truth. The belt of truth. And I think it's so fitting that he begins there, you know, because in a world that's like just saturated with information, misinformation, and outright lies, you know, truth becomes even more crucial.

Don't I know it? It's like every time I open my phone, I'm bombarded with all these conflicting news stories and opinions and social media posts. And it's like, it's hard to even know what to believe sometimes. It really is.

And that's exactly why Paul emphasizes this idea of, like, girding ourselves with truth. You know, it's about actively seeking it out, discerning what's real and what's not, and then building our lives on that solid foundation. So it's not just about like passively accepting whatever we hear or read, right? It's about being critical thinkers, questioning assumptions, and really digging deeper to, like, find that truth.

You got it. And that takes effort. You know, it takes intentionality, but it's so important because if we're not grounded in truth, we're just, like, so easily swayed by deception, you know, manipulation, and all sorts of spiritual attacks.

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. It's like, you know, if you're going into battle, you want to make sure your belt is, like, fastened and securely holding everything together. Otherwise, you're just going to be like vulnerable and easily defeated.

That's a great analogy. And the same principle applies in our spiritual lives, right? Like, if we're not anchored in truth, we're just going to be easily shaken and led astray. Okay.

So we've got our belts of truth fastened nice and tight. What's next? What's the next piece of armor? All right. So next up, Paul talks about the breastplate of righteousness.

The breastplate of righteousness. Okay. And you know, I know that might sound a little old-fashioned, but like, it's essentially about living with integrity.

It's about having a strong moral compass, even when it's hard, you know, even when no one's watching. So it's not just about, like, avoiding bad things, right? Yeah. About actively pursuing what's right.

Even when it costs us something. You got it. It's about cultivating a character that reflects God's goodness, his justice, his fairness, you know, and it's in that righteousness that we find true protection.

Yeah. I think sometimes we can fall into this trap of, like, thinking about righteousness in this legalistic way, you know, like checking off a list of rules. But you're saying it's more about developing an inner strength, like a moral core that really guides our actions and decisions.

Exactly. It's about aligning our hearts and minds with God's will so that our actions just naturally flow from that place of righteousness. You know, it's about becoming the kind of people who just instinctively do what's right.

Not because we have to, but because it's who we are. Yeah. I love that.

It's like the breastplate is protecting our hearts, the very core of who we are, you know, from those attacks of like cynicism and compromise and corruption that can just so easily seep into our lives. That's a great way to put it. And that protection is so essential because when our hearts are right, you know, when we're living in alignment with God's truth and righteousness, we become way less vulnerable to those temptations and traps that the enemy lays out for us, you know.

That makes a lot of sense. All right. We've got our belt of truth.

We've got our breastplate of righteousness. What comes next in our spiritual armor? What are we putting on next? Okay. So now Paul shifts our attention to our feet.

He tells us to put on the shoes of the gospel of peace. And this one is particularly interesting, I think, because it's not about, like, avoiding conflict altogether. It's about being peacemakers.

You know, it's about actively promoting harmony in our relationships and seeking reconciliation where there's division. So it's not about just like sitting back and hoping that peace will like magically happen, right? It's about being proactive, going out there and actually being peace, even when it's hard, even when it feels like an uphill battle. Exactly.

It's an active, intentional way of life. And it starts with our own hearts. You know, like, are we cultivating peace within ourselves? Are we resolving conflicts in a healthy way? Because, like, we can't bring peace to others if we don't have it within ourselves.

Right. Yeah. You can't give what you don't have.

And I can see how this connects back to that whole idea of cosmic reconciliation. You know, like if God is working to bring peace and harmony to the universe, then we, as his followers, are called to be those agents of peace in our own spheres of influence. That's it.

You know, we're his hands and feet carrying out his work of reconciliation in the world. Yeah. And sometimes, you know, that means stepping into those messy situations, you know, having those tough conversations, and being willing to kind of bridge those divides.

Yeah. It's like those shoes are giving us the traction we need to navigate the rough terrain of, you know, conflict. So I stand firm in the face of opposition and just keep moving forward in our mission of peacemaking.

Love that image. Yeah. It's about having that courage and the stamina to keep pursuing peace, even when it feels like an impossible task.

We're making good progress with our armor here. Belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes of peace. What's next? All right.

So now we come to one of the most well-known pieces of the armor, the shield of faith, the shield. Yeah. And, you know, I think it's so powerful that Paul uses this particular image, you know, because a shield is primarily defensive.

Right. It's about protecting ourselves from attack. Right.

And I feel like we need that protection now more than ever. Yeah. It's like the world is just throwing all these like flaming arrows our way.

Doubt, fear, anxiety, despair, you name it. It's easy to just get overwhelmed and lose our footing. It really is.

And that's where the shield of faith comes in. You know, it's that unshakeable confidence in God's goodness and his promises, even when we don't understand what he's doing, even when our circumstances just seem bleak. It's like that deep inner knowing that no matter what happens, God is still in control.

He still loves us, and he's working all things together for our good. Beautifully said. And it's in that place of trust and surrender that we find that true protection.

Yeah. Because when our faith is strong, you know, when we're rooted in God's love and faithfulness, those flaming arrows of doubt and fear, they just can't penetrate our hearts. That is so encouraging.

It's like the shield is deflecting those attacks, preventing them from taking root and poisoning our minds and spirits, you know? Exactly. And the more we use our shield of faith, the stronger it becomes, right? Like the more we choose to trust God, even in those, you know, midst of trials, the more our faith like deepens and matures. All right.

We're almost fully suited up here. Belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes of peace, shield of faith. What's the next piece of armor? What's left? OK, so now Paul directs our attention to our minds.

He tells us to take the helmet of salvation. The helmet. OK.

And this one is all about protecting our thoughts, our beliefs, our very identity as children of God. Yeah, because our minds are like the battleground, aren't they? It's where those doubts, those negative thoughts, those lies about who we are can just like creep in and take root. You got it.

And that's why the helmet is so essential. You know, it represents the assurance of our salvation in Christ. It's that deep inner knowing that we are loved, accepted, and forgiven, not because of anything we've done, but because of what Jesus has already accomplished on the cross.

So it's like that voice of truth that whispers, you know, you are loved, you are worthy, you are free, even when our own thoughts or the voices of the world are telling us otherwise. Precisely. And that assurance of our salvation is what protects our minds from those attacks of condemnation, shame, and self-doubt.

It's like the helmet is guarding our minds, you know, preventing those toxic thoughts from penetrating and distorting our perception of ourselves and our relationship with God. That's a great way to put it. And when our minds are protected by the helmet of salvation, we're able to think clearly, discern truth from error, and make wise decisions that are in alignment with God's will.

OK, so we've got almost all of our armor on here. What's the final piece? What are we missing? Last but certainly not least, we come to the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, the sword. That's the offensive weapon, right? That's the one we use to fight back.

Exactly. It's not just about defending ourselves. It's about actively engaging in the spiritual battle, wielding the truth of God's word to combat falsehood, to dismantle lies, and to proclaim the good news of the gospel.

So it's like using the sword to cut through all that confusion and deception that surrounds us, you know, to expose the darkness and bring light into the world. That's a powerful image. And it reminds us that the word of God is not just like this collection of stories or moral principles.

You know, it's living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It has the power to transform hearts, to break chains and to set people free. So we need to be studying the Bible, meditating on it, and really allowing it to shape our thoughts, our words, and our actions, because that's how we become effective spiritual warriors, right? Wielding the sword of the Spirit with skill and precision.

Absolutely. And, you know, just like any weapon, the sword of the spirit requires training and practice, right? The more we immerse ourselves in God's word, the more we understand its power and authority, and the more effectively we can use it to fight for truth and righteousness in the world. This is so inspiring.

I'm starting to see the armor of God in a whole new light. It's not just about like personal protection. It's about equipping ourselves for a mission, for a purpose that's far bigger than ourselves.

You got it. It's about stepping into our roles as agents of reconciliation, as ambassadors of Christ, as warriors of light in a world that desperately needs hope and healing. And the best part is we don't have to do it alone.

We've got the power of the Holy Spirit within us, guiding and empowering us every step of the way. That's right. We're part of an army, a community of believers who are all fighting for the same cause, you know, advancing God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Wow. This has been an incredible journey through the armor of God. You know? Yeah.

I feel like I have a much deeper understanding of what it means to be equipped for spiritual battle and to live out my faith in a practical and impactful way. I'm glad to hear that. But before we wrap up this whole conversation, I'm curious to hear more about what Dr. Matthewson says about how we can actually apply these principles in our daily lives.

That's a great question. And that's where things get really interesting, because Dr. Matthewson doesn't just, you know, leave us with a theoretical understanding of the armor of God. You know, he challenges us to really consider, like, how we're putting this into practice, you know? Yeah.

In our relationships, our work, our interactions with the world around us. Okay. Yeah.

I'm ready for that challenge. Let's dive into the practical application of the armor of God. But but before we do, I think we need to just take a minute and like recap what we've covered so far.

All right. So we talk about this whole idea of cosmic reconciliation and how it really changes how we think about Ephesians. Yeah.

It's not just about, you know, our own individual struggles or problems in like one specific church. It's about this huge story, this narrative of God restoring everything, bringing, you know, harmony back to a broken world. Yeah.

And what's really cool is like we get to be a part of that. Yeah. We're not just like sitting on the sidelines watching it happen.

Right. Exactly. We're called to actively participate, you know, in this work of reconciliation.

Yeah. And we said that the armor of God is key to that, right? It's how we equip ourselves for this cosmic mission. We've talked about each piece, but like, how do we actually apply this in our daily lives? I mean, I'm not facing like literal demons or fighting with swords.

Yeah. Right. And that's a really great question.

And that's where I think things get like really practical and interesting, because Dr. Mathewson, he uses this question, this verse from Ephesians 6.13, you know, where it says, 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. And he kind of uses that verse to challenge us, you know, like he asks, if living out these virtues is spiritual warfare, are we equipped for the battle? Whoa. Yeah, that's a good question.

Really makes you think. Right. It's not just about, like, wearing the armor for show.

It's about actually using it in those everyday battles that we face, you know? Right. So, like, think about the belt of truth, you know, in a world of, like, fake news and all this, being, you know, standing up for truth, even when it's unpopular, that becomes an act of spiritual warfare. Oh, yeah, that's good.

Like having the courage to like call out a lie, even if it means like going against the crowd or having that that tough conversation with someone. Exactly. And then there's the breastplate of righteousness.

You know, it's about living with integrity in all areas of our lives, whether it's, you know, in our relationships, our work, even how we use social media, like all those things. So it's not just about, like, the big grand gestures, you know; it's those small everyday choices that

really show, you know, our commitment to doing what's right, even when nobody's watching. Absolutely.

And what about the shoes of peace, you know, like how often do we rush to judgment or escalate conflict or spread gossip, like choosing peace, seeking reconciliation, building bridges instead of walls. Those are all ways that we can, like, engage in this cosmic battle for good. Yeah, I love that image of the shoes, you know, like they're giving us the grounding we need to stay calm, to approach conflict with humility and compassion, and to really be those agents of peace in a world that so desperately needs it.

Exactly. And what about the shield of faith? Right. Like, how often do we give in to fear or worry or anxiety, choosing to trust God, believing in his promises, even when we don't see the full picture? You know, that's a powerful act of defiance against those forces of darkness.

Yeah, because those negative thoughts, you know, those doubts and fears, they can really, like, cripple us, can't they? They can prevent us from really living fully and stepping into, you know, the calling that God has for us. But the shield of faith, it's like it protects us from those attacks, you know, and helps us stay grounded in truth and hope. It really does.

And then there's the helmet of salvation, guarding our minds from, you know, from those lies that tell us we're not good enough or not worthy enough or not loved enough, like standing firm in our identity as God's beloved children. That's a victory in itself, you know. It's like that helmet silences those like those negative voices, you know, those inner critics that are always trying to hold us back.

And it reminds us of who we truly are and whose we are. That's beautifully said. And finally, we have the sword of the Spirit, you know, the word of God.

And it's not just about, like, reading the Bible, you know; it's about allowing it to, like, penetrate our hearts, to shape our thinking, to inform our decisions, to empower our words and our actions. Yeah, it's about using those truths that we find in scripture to challenge injustice, to speak up for the marginalized, to spread love and compassion wherever we go. It's powerful stuff.

Exactly. The sword of the Spirit is not, you know, a weapon of aggression. It's a tool of truth, a way to dismantle lies, to expose darkness, and to bring hope and healing to a broken world.

Wow. This has been such an eye-opening conversation, really seeing Ephesians in a whole new light. You know, it's not just a book of ancient wisdom.

It's like a battle plan for how to live out our faith in a world that's still grappling with those consequences of sin and brokenness. It really is. And the best part is, you know, we don't have to fight this battle alone.

We have the power of the Holy Spirit within us, and we have each other. You know, we're part of a community, a body of believers who are all like fighting for the same cause, working together to advance God's kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven. So as we like go

about our day to day, you know, let's remember that we're not just, you know, going to work or school or running errands.

We're stepping onto a battlefield where we're engaging in this cosmic struggle between, you know, good and evil. But we're equipped, we're empowered, we're victorious in Christ. Yes.

Amen to that. So let's go out there and live like it. Let's put on the full armor of God and be agents of reconciliation, beacons of hope, and warriors of light in a world that so desperately needs it.

Well said. Thanks for joining us on this incredible deep dive into Ephesians. We hope it's challenged you to see this, you know, familiar book with fresh eyes and to really step into your calling as a participant in God's grand story of cosmic reconciliation.

And remember, the battle's already won. You know, victory is ours in Christ. So let's go out there and live like the overcomers that we truly are.

Thanks for listening, everyone.