

11th July || 7th Sunday after

Join the Heavenly Prayer Meeting

Pentecost

Main Point:



In this season of heightened restrictions and isolation, it is easy to be overwhelmed by how much we CANNOT do. We can be tempted to use the restrictions as an excuse to relax and not do anything. Paul's letter to the Ephesians teaches that we sit in the realms of Christ's authority in the heavenlies. From this vantage point, we are called to do all we CAN, praying for God to do what we CANNOT, in our community.

Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly... "

(Ephesians 1:15-16)

Intro |

In my recent meeting with Bishop Charlie, I was telling him how frustrating it was having set the date for an upcoming Alpha and arrived at a specific timeframe for our new Community Dinner Church to commence – now that all these plans have been thrown in the air.

When restrictions are announced and we hear the word 'lockdown' and 'self-isolation' it is so tempting to fall into a ditch of thinking – *'well there is nothing we can do now, we might as well just wait it out.'* It's a strategy my cat, Lilly, is quite skilled at – *'it's a few hours until I get fed, I may as well just sleep until its supper time.'*

So, we search for a project to keep us entertained while we are stuck at home, filling our lives with jobs and games to distract us from the frustration of being unable to do the things we really want to be doing.

I hear all around me: You can't eat morning tea together. You can't sing together. You can't sit together. You can't shake hands. You can't make your services too long. So many 'cannots' hover around my head like pesky, buzzing bees.

But, deep within my heart, there is a question that has been bubbling up for weeks now. It pulsed through my heart all through the lockdown months of 2020. And lately it seems to have become louder.

The question is: What CAN you do?

When I start answering that question, it changes my whole perspective. No longer am I weighed down by all the CANNOTs – rather the question pulls me upward to a higher place, giving me a vantage point, which enables me to see there is an enormous amount we CAN do – even during lockdown.

Today we start a new series on Paul's letter to the believers who lived at Ephesus.

Paul wrote this letter from his prison cell. Talk about isolation and lockdown! But, Paul would not allow imprisonment silence him from preaching the Gospel, nor did he allow his chains to stop him from regarding himself as God's ambassador (Ephesians 6:20).

Rather, he wrote this letter to a group of believers who were feeling like they were living in evil days (see 5:16), being tossed about by supernatural, unseen forces, and battered by evil spiritual powers who seemed to dominate every facet of their lives. Paul wrote to urge them to recognise the enormous spiritual authority they now possess, because of the higher vantage point – Jesus Christ had granted as they sit with him in heavenly places.

He wrote to remind them that *from* this heavenly position – they had enormous power.

Point 1 | Context of Paul's circular letter: Ephesian culture was vividly aware of the power the spiritual, unseen realm has on the natural, seen realm.

Ephesus was one of the largest and most important cities in the Roman Empire. A little bit like Corinth. It was a bustling hub of business and trade, attracting immigrants from many different places who brought their cultures and religious worldviews with them.

Ephesus had become a melting pot where at least 50 different gods and goddesses were worshipped. Although, the Ephesians believed each person could worship any of these gods and goddesses, one goddess was celebrated above all others. Artemis of the Ephesians was worshipped as both a fertility goddess and a goddess of protection.

Her temple was huge and elaborate and was honoured as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Thousands of people would make pilgrimages to worship her every year, making her an important income source for the city.

All this worship of different gods and goddesses came a hyper awareness of the spiritual world. The Ephesians viewed this world as full of demons and dark powers that were intent on bringing them harm. To protect themselves, they practiced superstitions and magical rituals they hoped would impress their gods and draw to themselves spiritual power. Yet they still lived in constant fear never knowing whether their sacrifices and rituals were enough.

In the midst of all of this religious diversity Ephesus had a large Jewish population. Rather than worshipping a whole host of different gods and goddesses like everyone else, Jews would only worship one invisible God.

So, they kept themselves separate from all of the sacrifices and festivals to the many gods throughout the city. Because of this people viewed them as intolerant and much of the population held animosity towards the Jews having little to do with them.

When Paul came to Ephesus he came with the power of the Holy Spirit. For three years God used Paul to break through the darkness and the fear of the spirit world that gripped so many. Thousands of people in Ephesus and throughout the surrounding Roman province of Asia recognized that it was only through the authority of Jesus that they could stand against all the demons and dark powers that threatened them.

So many became followers of Jesus that there was a noticeable drop-off in the number of people making pilgrimages to visit Artemis.

When Paul wrote this letter, about six years had passed since he left Ephesus. During that time the church continued to grow throughout the entire region amongst the Jews but even more so amongst the Gentiles.

Point 2 | The messages of the surrounding culture infiltrated the church. They remained fearful of the power of unseen spiritual powers.

Unfortunately, even though they became followers of Jesus many of these new Gentile Christians carried with them some of the unhealthy world views of their past. They continued to fear the darkness of the spiritual world around them. They had a hard time letting go of their old identity as people who were insignificant pawns of uncaring gods and victims of evil spirits.

Point 3 | Paul wrote to remind them of the spiritual authority they now possess as members of God's family united in Christ in heavenly places.

Right at the beginning of Paul's letter, he teaches these fearful believers about their new identity in Christ.

"All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united Christ."
(Ephesians 1:3)

And in just the next chapter, which we'll look at next week, we read,

"[God] loved us so much ... he raised us from the dead and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:6)

It becomes important for us to really understand what Paul meant when he referred to us being seated in 'heavenly realms' with Christ.

Christ is seated in the highest heaven. We could call this the third heaven, as the Apostle Paul did (2 Corinthians 12:2).

The devil and his evil spirits are bound to operate within the first heaven – the unseen atmosphere that is all around us. (For further explanation see Ephesians 2:2). And, the second heaven is the stars, planets and space (see 1 Corinthians 15:40-50).

So, when Paul says we are seated with Christ in the heavens, he means we have been granted a tremendously powerful vantage point.

No longer do we operate under the clouds of darkness and despair, filled with worries about what is happening in our world, and how effective the devil seems to be – messing up all our wonderful plans.

No! Paul says. **"For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins"** (Colossians 1:13-14)

The purpose of this letter is to teach us about the spiritual authority we have been given in Christ, **over** the powers in the unseen realm.

When we know this spiritual authority, we will no longer feel powerless against the influences of unseen spiritual powers lurking in our world.

Application | Our adoption into the family of God has granted us: the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our future inheritance and spiritual wisdom and understanding of God's mysterious plan.

Do you remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians?

"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God." (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

This letter written to the Ephesians is the fulfillment of this. We have had revealed to us the things God has prepared for those who love Him.

So, knowing that God has raised us up and seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms, Paul immediately turns to sharing his primary strategy for what we CAN do while we live in this world in which evil powers are scheming against us.

He writes,

"Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly..." (Ephesians 1:15-16)

Remember, at the beginning of my message when I spoke of the feeling of frustration over all that we CANNOT do ...

What CAN we do? We can pray!

And catch yourself if you're tempted to say, 'well I guess we'll just have to pray' – as if it's our last resort strategy!

Rather, ... let Paul rebuke us! He tell us, **"Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think."** (Ephesians 3:20).

Let us do that we CAN do and trust God to do what we CANNOT do.

What CAN we do? We CAN do what is the most important spiritually powerful activity known to humanity – WE CAN PRAY!

- We CAN pray from the highest vantage point of the heavenlies.
- We CAN pray that God's spiritual wisdom and understanding will abound in our lives.
- We CAN pray that God will open the eyes of those in our community to receive the good news of the Gospel.

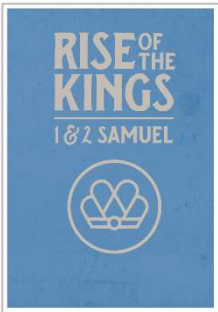
In just a few moments we are going to pray – the same prayer which Paul taught the believers at Ephesus to pray.

I leave you with a challenge – the same challenge I place on myself:

Are you doing what you CAN do, and trusting God to do what only God can do?

Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Our call to be God's ambassadors in Southlakes does not stop when we go into lockdown, or suddenly have new restrictions placed upon us. Have you been tempted to think, 'well it is all too hard, I'll just stay at home and have a little rest?'
2. Read the last few verses of Ephesians 6:10-20 – notice all that Paul asked for prayer for:
 - V18 _____
 - V20 _____
3. Paul didn't let his imprisonment, or his chains become excuses for failing to continue to be God's servant, fulfilling the work God had called him to fulfil. What excuses are tempting you?
4. When you pray do you imagine yourself sitting in heavenly places with saints from all the ages praying for God's people to be strengthened with spiritual wisdom and knowledge? Intentionally imagine this and pray the prayers Paul wrote. (see Ephesians 1:15-23, 3:14-21)
5. Have you been tempted to feel you're being tossed around by the evil powers which lurk in the world? Ask the Lord Jesus to give you a revelation of your spiritual authority you now enjoy in Christ because God has included you in the kingdom of his dear Son. (Colossians 1:13-14)



Pentecost Devotional: The Rise of the Kings | 1 & 2 Samuel

As we are giving attention to the New Testament series of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth our devotional will focus on the Old Testament lectionary passages which journey through 1 and 2 Samuel.

New Devotional: Ephesians

As we study Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a daily devotional has been made available for your use. While this daily devotional does not follow the lectionary readings exactly, it will enable you to progressively work through the entire letter within the same period of time.

