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RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING



A WHISTLE-STOP TOUR OF EPHESIANS

By: Prof. N.T. Wright

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N.T. Wright is a prolific author for both academic and popular readers. He is author of *Simply Jesus*, *Surprised by Hope*, *The Day the Revolution Began*, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, and *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. He is also the author of the *For Everyone Series* of New Testament Commentaries.

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He writes often for newspapers in England, including the Times, the Independent, and the Guardian. He has been interviewed numerous times by radio and television broadcasters on both sides of the Atlantic, including ABC, NBC, CNN, PBS, FOX, and NPR.

N.T. Wright Online provides courses developed by Professor N.T. Wright of St. Andrews University, Scotland, such as *Simply Jesus* and *Paul and His Letter to the Ephesians*. You can sign up for a free course at ntwrightonline.org/philemon.

Let me give you a quick whistle-stop tour through the letter to the Ephesians. In this tour we'll be picking out six verses -- one from each chapter of the letter. These verses are easy to remember because in the first half of the letter they are: 1:10, 2:10, and 3:10. I will get to the fourth, fifth, and sixth verses in just a moment.

First Stop: Ephesians 1:10

Chapter 1 verse 10 is a verse that the church in the Western world has studiously ignored. 'Please do not do this!' Rather note carefully what Paul says in verse 10, 'God's plan for the fullness of time was to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth'.

We have lived in a culture that has long separated heaven and earth, which thinks of heaven as 'somewhere up there a long way away'. In this view, heaven is a place that maybe we'll go one day but has not got much to do with who we are down here. We don't get that message when we read the Bible. We inherited our view from a Western philosophical and intellectual tradition. Two hundred years ago, this tradition decided that we would send God away into His 'heaven', out of sight. This was ultimately for our own convenience, so that we could run the world the way we wanted without interference.

We have seen not only the world, but also (heaven help us!) God himself, Jesus, the Bible, and even ourselves as praying Christians, in light of this view. We have lived split-level lives; as a result, we have a split-level eschatology about where we will go after death. This eschatology states that we will leave this world before we go to heaven, but the Bible puts it back the other way around. In the last great scene in the Bible, what we see is not people being taken away from earth to go to heaven; instead, it is the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth so that God's world will be one.

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The good news? In Jesus Christ, this has already happened. In Jesus, the twin halves of God's good creation have already been joined. We as followers of Jesus Christ are called to live in a world in which heaven and earth have already come together once, for all, and forever.

It may not look like that when you read the newspapers, when you see what's on the television. Often you say, 'If this is what heaven on earth looks like, then something has gone badly wrong'. And that is true. But through the power of Jesus Christ, in the strength of His Spirit, we are enabled to be people through whom Jesus' reality can be launched fully. We are to be people, as this first chapter of Ephesians tell us, through whom the same power which raised Jesus from the dead will be at work. When this happens, signs and elements of that heaven-on-earth reality will come to birth in our midst.

Many of us (including myself) have grown up in a world and church that didn't look at reality like this. For some of us, heaven was always a long way off, and we had to muddle along on earth as best we could in hopes of arriving at heaven eventually. We have been robbed of a central bit of our inheritance. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'. Jesus launched the heaven-and-earth project, and it's not going away until that day when God's work is fully done.

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Second Stop: Ephesians 2:10

So where do we come in? In Ephesians 2 verse 10, we learn there is nothing we can do to earn or merit our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith. Then Paul says, 'We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life'.

Now you may well feel that phrase 'good works' is a bit ho-hum, a bit 'oh dear, here we go, we've got to behave ourselves' and all that sort of thing. But it's not like that at all. The word in the Greek for 'what He has made us' means we are God's poem; we are God's artwork. God has given us many, many gifts. The good works that we are to do are not simply referring to moral behavior. God wants us to be fruitful. God wants us to be experimental. God wants us to be innovative. God wants us to be His poem, in and for the world. Artists, musicians, poets, and dancers: this is your chance.

The post-Enlightenment world tended to see art as either a commodity or as something frilly -- pretty little bits around the edge of reality to be discarded if we want to get to reality itself. That's not true. In God's glorious creation, God made sunlight. God made the music of the waves of the sea.

We are co-creators when we are artists, writers, and musicians. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. And it's not that we necessarily make His world a glorious place as much as we remind the world that it is a glorious place. We enhance the beauty around us by our God-given gifts. We are His artwork, created in Christ Jesus for those good works that God prepared beforehand for us to walk in.

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Now don't mistake what I'm saying. Jesus did not say to his disciples, 'Yeah, I've got a great plan for your life'. He said, 'If anyone wants to come after me, let them deny themselves, take up the cross and follow me'. Whenever God is at work, there is a cost. Whenever we are called to follow Jesus, there will be a cross. Whenever we discover that we are gifted in particular ways and want to use those gifts for the glory of God rather than for our own glory, there will be something which causes us pain. Paul talked about a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being too elated by the abundance of revelations.

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Don't be afraid. God is calling you to be who you uniquely can be. That's the wonderful thing about being Christians: from one point of view, we are all the same because we are all in Christ, but from another point of view each one of us is absolutely unique. You are created in Christ Jesus to bring into the world that which only you can bring.

In the past when I have counselled people about vocation, I have said that there may be many things that you could do, but only one thing (or perhaps, if you're lucky, two or three things) that only you can do. You must prayerfully discern what this means for you.

There may be things that you enjoy doing, but perhaps these are tasks for other people. You've got to identify the things you can do to be God's artwork, created in Christ Jesus for those good works which God prepared beforehand for you and you alone.

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Third Stop: Ephesians 3:10

So in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 10, heaven and earth are coming together. In Ephesians chapter 2 verse 10, this joining of heaven and earth becomes a reality, not only in you but also through you. What is the result?

As you may have guessed, it's found in Ephesians 3 verse 10. It is here that Paul says: 'Through the church, the manifold wisdom of God, the wisdom of God in its rich variety, will be made known to the rulers and authorities in their heavenly places'.

You see, the principalities and powers that carve up this world to suit their own ends, the powers that use money, sex, and power for their own gain... these political and sociological structures, they want to force us into their mold. They want to make us live in their way.

Through Jesus Christ and in the power of His Spirit, the church can be the sort of family through whose mere existence the principalities and powers of this world know that Jesus is Lord. To return briefly to Ephesians 2, Paul writes that the entire human race, Jews and Gentiles alike, come together in Jesus Christ – just as heaven and earth do in Ephesians 1. The only way it can happen is through Jesus.

The church is a family that the world could not possibly create, consisting of people who love one another in a new way. As Christians, we are meant to be a sign of hope as well as rebuke to the way that the world wants us to be. The world wants to carve us up, to keep us separate, to divide us from one another. But if we are being the church as Jesus intended for us to be, this is the sign to the powers of the world that they do not run this world and that Jesus Christ alone does. We must continue to live and pray for this.

The first half of Ephesians is, at its core, one long celebratory prayer. Pray it; live it; work at it; suffer for it; and celebrate it. You are part of that work.

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Final Destination: Ephesians 4, 5, and 6

Ephesians chapter 4 verse 15 says, ‘Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up every day into him who is the head, into Christ’. Ephesians 4 is all about the way in which God gives many different gifts to His people. He does this not in order they can go their different ways, but in order that they can be one rich, harmonious, multi-faceted body. That is the church’s vocation.

Discern in prayer and in counseling what your gifts are and then make sure that you use those gifts to the glory of God and for the building of the whole body of Christ. This is the way that Jesus' body works together. Ephesians chapter 5 verse 14 says, 'Sleepers awake, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.'

The power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the power that is unleashed despite what the world tells you, despite all the theories that say, 'Oh no, you can't resist this, you've got to live like that, everybody does it'. This is the power to change your way of life. In Ephesians 5, we see this change comes upon our lives because of Jesus Christ.

The world will try to tell you that these changes are stultifying and dehumanizing, that they will diminish what it means to be fully flourishing as a human being. That is one of the great lies of our day. Rather, you are called to come alive in new ways. The trouble with sin is not only that we do things we shouldn't do, but that we miss out on the opportunity to come alive in new ways because sin holds us back.

Ephesians 5 is a bracing challenge to live the risen life; at the heart of that challenge, we find the relationship of man and woman in marriage. The most glorious passage on marriage in the whole New Testament is here in Ephesians 5. In it, we see again the joining of two things once separate.

In Ephesians 1, Paul describes heaven and earth coming together. In Ephesians 2, he envisions Jews and Gentiles coming together. In Ephesians 5, he sees man and woman coming together. This act of joining is a sign that the creator God is at work. It is where His power is unleashed.

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The challenge of marriage in the next generation is the challenge of that hard, high calling, to be faithful. This call to faithfulness does not simply exist because the Christian ethic declares that this is how it ought to be. It exists because marriage, the faithful lifelong union of a man and a woman, is part of the creational symbol which points back to Genesis 1 and 2, and with that to the union of heaven and earth themselves.

In Ephesians 6 verse 13, Paul declares, 'Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.' If you are going to face this challenge, you're going to be in a battlefield. You are going to be in spiritual warfare.

Ephesians presents a marvelously holistic vision of the Christian life. I commend it to you. I commend it to your learning, to your prayer, to our living in the days to come.

May Almighty God make you faithful to His calling, cheerful in His service, and fruitful for His kingdom. May the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and through you with all those to whom He sends you. Now and always, Amen.

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