

Small Community Notes – Part 2

Overview of the term – Ephesians: The Confident Christian Life

Date	Passage	Title	Notes
Apr 14	Ephesians 1:1-14	Introduction & overview	Holy Communion
Apr 21	Ephesians 1:1-14	Confident of purpose	
Apr 28	Ephesians 1:15-23	Confident of authority	
May 5	Ephesians 2:1-10	Confident of destiny	
May 12	Ephesians 2:11-22	Confident of family	Generosity Sunday Holy Communion
May 19	Ephesians 3:1-13	Confident of inheritance	Pentecost Annual Church Family Meeting
May 26	Ephesians 3:14-21	Confident of love	1 st Sunday half term
Jun 2	All In – Gathering led by Emelye and youth		2 nd Sunday half term Child Baptism / Dedication
Jun 9	Ephesians 4:1-16	Confident of calling	Holy Communion
Jun 16	Ephesians 4:1-16	Confident of equipping	
Jun 23	Ephesians 4:17-32	Confident of victory	
Jun 30	Ephesians 5:1-20	Confident in the Spirit	
Jul 7	Ephesians 5:21-33	Confident in relationships	Adult Baptisms
Jul 14	Ephesians 6:1-9	Confident in relationships	Holy Communion
Jul 21	Ephesians 6:10-24	Confident in battle	

An Introduction to this letter – and the city of Ephesus – was included in Part One of these notes.

*Throughout these notes, I have provided each week's passage in my own translation. I suggest you use your usual bible to study the passage – my notes are based on the NIV (UK) – and then my retelling in the same way that you might use *The Message*, to approach it with fresh eyes.*

Please remember that we have three Going Deeper sessions in this second half of term

- June 9 Ephesians 4 – What role do Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers play in today's church?
- June 16 Ephesians 5 – What is the status and role of women in the church?
- June 23 Ephesians 6 – What is spiritual warfare?

Week Eight – 9 to 15 June Confident of calling

Ephesians 4:1-16

Chapter 4

¹ Grab the new life he's offering with both hands. ² See yourself as God sees you, no more and no less: no airs and graces, but no false humility either. Soften your hearts towards one another and be patient with your brothers and sisters in Jesus. ³ The Holy Spirit comes to unite the Church in heart and mind: eagerly guard this unity and let his peace bind you together in harmony – ⁴ one body born of one Spirit who has given us all the same hope of eternal life, ⁵ serving one Lord, united in belief through one baptism, ⁶ acknowledging the one God who is Father to us all. He's above and beyond everything and yet in everything. Disunity between us denies this truth.

⁷ But Jesus gives each one of us specific gifts and tasks ⁸ as predicted in one of the psalms:

*He ascended high above all earthly realms,
leading those he had set free
and showering his gifts on those who follow him.*

⁹⁻¹⁰ (The implication, of course, is that he also plumbed the depths before ascending higher than the heavens, to fill the whole cosmos.)

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¹² These roles are designed to equip, empower and mobilise every member of the church, making it strong, ¹³ propelling it towards unity in belief, giving it deeper understanding of Jesus and helping us grow up in our faith as we pursue our God-given destiny of being fully Christ-like.

¹⁴ God doesn't want us to be like children who are easily distracted by whatever catches their attention, or like ships drifting wherever the wind and tides carry them. We must be on our guard against those who try to trick us into following false teaching.

¹⁵ So hold fast to the truth and speak it lovingly. Christian maturity means becoming more and more like Jesus himself. ¹⁶ He's the head of the body and every other part is joined to him, just as in a physical body. When each part does what the head directs, the whole body grows strong.

extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

Sit, Walk, Stand ...

That was the title of a commentary on Ephesians by Watchman Nee, a Chinese church leader who spent decades in one of Mao Zedong's prisons. He uses those three words to give structure to Paul's letter.

He sees the key verse of the first three chapters as 2:6: *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*

It's humbling to acknowledge that we cannot place ourselves (earn our salvation) but only sit where God places us.

Most Christians make the mistake of trying to walk in order to be able to sit, but that is a reversal of the true order. Our natural reason says, "If we do not walk, how can we ever reach the goal? What can we

attain without effort? How can we ever get anywhere if we do not move?" But Christianity does not work like that. If at the outset we try to do anything, we get nothing. If we try to attain something, we miss everything. For Christianity begins not with a big DO, but with a big DONE. Thus Ephesians opens with the statement that God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. We are invited at the very outset to sit down and enjoy what God has done for us; not to set out to attain it for ourselves. (Watchman Nee)

As we continue in our exploration of Ephesians, we enter a section which Nee claims flows from what Paul says in 4:1

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called (NASB)

Paul's letters to churches follow a familiar pattern, moving from theology / doctrine to application / behaviour. Of all Paul's letters, Ephesians has perhaps the clearest such movement, a 'hinge' between chapters 3 & 4. At the end of chapter 3, Paul points us to the God whose power and ability is beyond our imagining, and reminds us that our aim is to bring him glory in the church.

Everything that follows in chapters 4 – 6 is to that end.

a prisoner for the Lord (1)

Paul is under house arrest in Rome as he writes (Acts 28:16).

He regularly uses the language of being a prisoner, a slave, a servant, all of which states have certain things in common

- a restriction on freedom (paradoxically, for Paul – and us – offering our lives to God is the pathway to true freedom)
- an end to self
- an end to ownership – property, time, money

In what sense is this true of us?

walk in a manner worthy of the calling (1)

What is this calling?

¹⁸ *Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'* Matthew 28

Our calling as individual Christians is to reproduce the life and ministry of Jesus – sent into the world by him, just as he was sent by his Father. God sends his Holy Spirit to reproduce in and through us the character of Jesus (the fruit of the Spirit) and the competence of Jesus (the gifts of the Spirit). As individual Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit and live out their corporate life together, the life, character and impact of the early church results in the heavenly transformation of culture and people.

Be completely humble and gentle (2)

humility = seeing yourself as God sees you, no more and no less

Paul makes reference in this passage to 4 of the 9 fruits of the Spirit

- gentleness
- patience
- love
- peace

Gentleness is not weakness. In fact it's a strength of character in contrast to the self-promoting, thrusting posture encouraged by our world.

be patient, bearing with one another in love (2)

The word translated patient here literally means *long passion* or *long-suffering* – only the Lord can produce true patience (long suffering) in us and so it is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Bearing with = enduring, persisting, not giving up, keeping going even when relationships are difficult. Agape love is the key, the self-sacrificing love of Jesus for us all.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (3)

The bible says some very important things about unity

¹ *How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! Psalm 133:1*

²² *I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – ²³ I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. John 17:22-24*

¹² *Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 1 Corinthians 12:12-13*

- The unity which God desires is a creation of his Spirit
- This is not something which can be achieved through human will
- We are simply bidden to keep (literally, *to guard*) what the Holy Spirit creates

Some things, writes Paul, are simply given: *one body ... Spirit ... hope ... Lord ... faith ... baptism* (4, 5)

One body – despite all our different expressions of church, God's people on earth are one

One Spirit – without him there is no **hope**.

One Lord – our theological posture towards Jesus is one of submission to his Will, his Purpose, his Plan for us and his church.

One faith – we cannot pick and choose what we believe.

One baptism – there is one symbolic point of entry to the world-wide body of Christ

Paul sums up in the phrase – *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all* (6)

The phrase *ta panta* (all) signifies God's almighty power and pre-eminence over the entire cosmos – a God worthy of our praise!

Questions

What does it mean to be a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of others? To what extent could that be said of us?

Have you understood the calling to which Paul points us? How are you co-operating with God in asking his Spirit to help you reproduce the life and ministry of Jesus?

How do the following characteristics manifest themselves in your life, and the life of our church?

- humility
- gentleness
- patience
- long-suffering

What is the bible's understanding of church unity?

What does it look like for your life to be submitted to Christ as Lord?

How are we exercising the bond of peace at the moment?

- in the way we are speaking to and about others?
- in the way we think about our church?
- in the way we act towards others?

How does the fact that the God we worship is the almighty king of heaven and earth influence our approach to worship?

Application

The challenge this week is to write a brief statement of your personal calling.

Grab a piece of paper and write "I am called by the Lord to..." and then fill in the rest.

You may already be confident in your calling and will find this easy. But what if you have never thought about this before? The acronym SHAPE may help:

- **S**piritual Gifts – the unique gifts that God has given to you.
- **H**eat's desire - what motivates and excites you; what you most long to do.
- **A**bilities - your strengths, knowledge and skills.
- **P**ersonality - your character, style, preferences and personal qualities.
- **E**xperiences - your life experiences – both good and bad

How would you describe the unique calling God has given you?

Once you have a first draft share it with someone in your Small Community. Pray over it, refine it, amend it until you are confident in the call God has given you.

Week Nine – 16 to 22 June Confident of equipping

Ephesians 4:1-16

Chapter 4

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extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

Last week we saw (in vv 1-6) Paul underscoring both the unity and the given-ness of what we believe. There is no room for manoeuvre. Christian preachers have no freedom to proclaim anything other than what is in God's word.

As believers, we do not get to choose

- our brothers and sisters in Christ (there is one body)
- the means by which grace is mediated to us (there is one Spirit)
- the future for which we long (there is one hope)
- whether to submit or to whom (there is one Lord)
- what we believe (there is one faith)
- the sign of belonging (there is one baptism)

Ephesians 4:7-16

Having established the essential unity which binds Christians together, Paul shifts emphasis, and goes on to explain that God has established order in his church, through Jesus. Jesus has given grace to all believers. This grace is the primary means by which the church of Jesus Christ is to be shaped.

Who is this Jesus? The one who was crucified, descended to the dead (grave), rose again and *who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.* (9, 10)

The word for *fill* here is the same as that in v. 13 about our being filled with the full measure of Christ. Christ fills everything, including the believer.

The grace (charism) Jesus gives is to each believer, some of whom are called to exercise their gift in specific offices; often referred to as the 'five-fold' or 'four-fold' ministry, depending on whether pastor and teacher are taken as two separate offices or one and the same

Paul outlines this in two phases

- the five-fold (or four-fold – see below) expression of ministry within the church
- the consequences for the whole church

Ephesians 4:11 – a hotly debated verse!

Theologians, churches and Christians are not in agreement about how this verse should be interpreted for and applied to the present-day church. It would be fair to say that, for centuries, the church has largely ignored the first two offices on the list, had an on-off relationship with the third, and fully welcomed only the fourth and fifth. (Scholars also debate whether Paul's list details 5 or 4 offices – some believe that of pastor and teacher are one office. So people speak of the 5-fold or 4-fold ministry.)

Five-fold ministry – APEST	Four-fold ministry
Apostle (A)	Apostle
Prophet (P)	Prophet
Evangelist (E)	Evangelist
Shepherd (pastor) (S)	Shepherd (pastor) & Teacher
Teacher (T)	

However, there has been a reawakening of interest in and serious scholarly research into the church 'offices' described here by Paul over recent years. In part, this has been driven by the fact that many churches around the world have returned to this passage in order to shape their own ministries – often with very significant results. One example is Rick Warren, Senior Pastor of Saddleback Community Church and author of *The Purpose-driven life*.

So who's right?

In essence, at its most stark, the options are

- that apostles and prophets are no longer operational in the life of the Christian church, having effectively died out at the end of the first century or thereabouts – churches which attempt to resurrect them are following a dangerous path into deception
- that the church has been negligent of scriptural truth, and needs to allow God to recover that truth to its modern-day shape and ministry, in order to become the church as described in vv 12-16 of today's reading.

This is clearly a vital issue facing all churches which long to conform to the pattern of God's word. Can we hope to do so without these offices?

Paul claims that these 'offices' are given by Jesus for very significant reasons

- equipping the saints
- building up the church
- enabling us to reach unity
- enabling us to excel in knowledge of Christ
- bringing us to maturity
- enabling us to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ

Is the church of today as described by those bullet points? Might the reason why it is not be in part precisely because we have neglected 40% of the leadership offices which Christ himself has given us? Might this passage present not only a blue-print for how church should be shaped, but also a diagnostic tool for why it is as it is?

One of the more interesting scholarly explorations of this passage has been the work of Alan Hirsch, who suggests that every Christian is wired primarily in line with the pattern of 4:11

Apostolic-Apostle correlates to the missionary *sentness* of the church. As Hirsch says: *The driving logic of the apostolicity is the extension of the Jesus movement in and through the lives of the adherents, as well as establishing the church onto new ground.* The apostolic stimulates movement and seeks to lead a community into places where it needs to go but hasn't.

The apostolic is at the heart of *movement* but doesn't usually generate it by being out in front, but primarily through *covering* and *parenting*. Come close to the apostolic and you find yourself connected in worship to the fathering heart of God. The apostle lives a life poured out for the sake of the body. Paul is a definitive example.

Prophetic-Prophet is associated with the call to holistic worship, so that *as his people, we are to be the one place where God, and everything he stands for, is revered, cherished, and obeyed.* Hirsch observes a *vertically* orientated prophetic that feels what God feels and brings about an encounter with him; and a *horizontally* orientated prophetic that calls people to covenant obligations of justice, holiness, right worship, and right living. There is both a *mystical-charismatic* and *social justice* aspect of the prophetic.

Prophets are often agitators for change

The prophetic vocation is likely the most difficult of all the APEST callings, partly because of the personal vulnerability involved (God is dangerous: he is a consuming fire) but also because the prophetic word, like the Word of God that the prophet seeks to represent, is often rejected by people who prefer their own ways. The prophet is likely the loneliest of all the vocations and the one most open to misunderstanding. I think this is why Jesus calls us to especially respect the prophets in our midst. (Alan Hirsch)

Evangelistic-Evangelist Hirsch moves our understanding of evangelist beyond the Billy Graham caricature. Yes, evangelism is about communication and *getting the message out* but it's also about *the infectious sharing of the movement's core message* and *the demonstration of good news in word, sign, and deed.*

Hirsch suggest there's a *priestliness* in the evangelistic calling: *They have a capacity to make connections with people in a way that demonstrates social as well as emotional intelligence... their*

function is genuinely priestly in that they mediate between God and people as well as between people and people.

Shepherding-Shepherd The pastoral shepherding image is common in Scripture and Hirsch draws upon it to demonstrate a function and calling that emphasises *social connectivity*, healing and protection. They *champion inclusion and embrace* and desire formation in disciple-making that *lives locally and communally*.

The use of *shepherd* instead of *pastor* is not just about having a better acrostic at this point. *Pastor* has become a title, the stuff of name plaques on office doors. *Shepherd* re-engages with the necessary empathy and sharing of life that *knows the personal details of the particular people in one's orbit*. All of the functions bring pain when they are done distantly and dispassionately, but shepherding that is merely theoretical and formulaic, or done without any self-giving, is the harshest dysfunction.

Teaching-Teacher This function is also commonly understood. Hirsch draws us to the rabbinical tradition and the Wisdom Literature of the Scriptures to describe it. The emphasis here is not just on the heady and intellectual love of the abstract truth (the development of a *biblical mind* that means *seeing the world as God sees it, as described in the Scriptures*) but also on the application in real life.

In many ways, teachers are similar to prophets and apostles in that they deal with ideas that shape life. From a biblical perspective, teaching is not about speculation in and of itself (idealism); rather, it is about the ministry of ideas in action (ethos): that is, discipleship or formation. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know, and they cannot lead where they will not themselves go. Therefore, biblical teachers must have real participation in the ideas they propose. (Alan Hirsch)

Questions

- How do you respond to the teaching on the 5- or 4-fold ministry as outlined by Paul in this passage and in 1 Corinthians 12? How should this be expressed in the life of today's church?
- Do you recognise yourself in any of the descriptions above?
- With which do you most readily identify?

Application

The challenge this week is to find the 5-fold ministries within your Small Community.

Read the descriptions of the 5-fold ministries on pages 8-9 of the notes.

Give each member of your Small Community a piece of paper and ask them to write down the names of everyone in your group on it – include everyone, even people who might be absent this week.

Now consider each person in turn – are they “wired” as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher? Choose one ministry for each person. Don't think too hard – trust your instinct!

When you have all finished, be brave and compare notes with one another. Do you agree as a group? Do you agree with what others think about you? Do you cover all 5 ministries in your group or are any missing?

Week Ten – 23 to 29 June Confident of victory

Ephesians 4:17-32

Chapter 4

¹⁷ It's essential to leave our old way of life, which was like driving a car at night without headlights – a dangerous business. ¹⁸ What were we thinking? We were blind to the reality of God, utterly unaware of him, because our hearts had become callused. ¹⁹ De-sensitised, we sought meaning through indulging our bodies. Rather than satisfying us, this way of life only led us into further, darker cravings.

²⁰⁻²¹ Finding Jesus – or, rather, being found by him – marks a complete change of life. ²² A makeover for the inner 'you', it's like having a whole new wardrobe of attitudes, values and beliefs. What a relief to be able to ditch your old 'clothes', moth-eaten and worn away by desires which promise so much but fail to deliver. ²³ God wants to renew you from the inside out, beginning with the way you think. ²⁴ His aim is nothing less than a completely new you, designed to be perfect.

²⁵ Your change of wardrobe must be complete. Drop every stitch of falsehood. From now on, every word you speak to one another must be pure truth. Nothing else will do, if you're going to be one with each other. ²⁶ Be careful that anger doesn't lead to sin. As a rule of thumb, if you're still feeling furious about something by bedtime, there's something wrong. ²⁷ You would never leave the back door open for burglars at night, would you? But allowing anger to fester leaves the door wide open for the Enemy to walk into your life. ²⁸ Some of you have been converted from a life of crime. That life is dead and buried! Put in an honest day's work and you'll have enough for your own needs and some left to share with others.

²⁹ How would you feel if you had to share your house with tenants who were selfish and foul-mouthed, using words as weapons to tear people apart? Or people who were bitter, liable to fly off the handle without warning, even turning violent? Who would want to live like that? ³⁰ So how do you think the Holy Spirit feels when he has to share our hearts with such characters? He's our most valuable tenant, our guarantee of salvation. Don't you realise how much it upsets him to have to share his home with darkness?

³¹ So keep a tight rein on your tongue. Nip bad words in the bud before they pass your lips. Censor your own speech and choose words that will most encourage others. When bitterness, raging temper, slander or spite claim squatters' rights to your heart, evict the lot of them! ³² Turn over their rooms to kindness and compassion. The bedrock of all Christian living is forgiveness. Never forget what it cost God to forgive you.

extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

vv 17-24

Paul draws a stark distinction between the old self and the new self:

- The old is *being corrupted by its deceitful desires* (22)
- The new is *created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness* (24)

Note that hardening of heart leads both to ignorance and a desensitising which fosters the pursuit of impurity and greed (18, 19)

Note too the call to be made new in the attitude of your minds (23) – note the emphasis on learned, taught (twice) and truth in vv. 20-22

vv 25-32

3 great themes are nestled together in this passage

- Giving the devil a foothold
- Avoiding grieving the Holy Spirit
- Imitating God in the way we forgive one another

They are tightly interwoven, and our success or failure in understanding and applying the lessons they contain is demonstrated in the outworking of our lives

1 The way we use our tongue (vv. 25, 26, 29, 31)

- choosing honesty & openness over deception & secrecy (25)

¹ Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: 'Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. ² There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ³ What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. Luke 12:1-3

- the speaking of truth – why? Because we are one body (25)
- anger (26) is most commonly revealed through the tongue
- cutting unwholesome talk off at the source (29)

⁴⁴ A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thornbushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. ⁴⁵ A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart. Luke 6:44-45 (NLT)

This should be an arresting statement. If I speak in ways I shouldn't, ways that are inconsistent with my claim to follow Jesus, I cannot blame whatever provocation or external circumstances may have triggered my outburst. We can't say, 'I wonder where that came from.' That's why it's called an 'outburst'! By definition, nothing can burst out that isn't already inside.

Gossip is one of the most corrosive forms of unwholesome talk to come out of our mouths. Can I give you the simplest tip, which, if we applied it consistently, would wipe gossip from our church family life? People only gossip to those they know will listen. So, all you have to do, as soon as someone starts to gossip, is make it clear that you are not going to listen. The most effective response is to say, 'Why don't we pray the Lord's blessing on that person right now?'

How intentional are we at speaking *only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen?* (29)

2 Our willingness to be open, honest and vulnerable (25)

Paul tells us to *put off falsehood* – the Greek here is *pseudos* (a lie), which in today's English still indicates something that isn't what it purports to be. Instead, we're to speak truth – in ancient Greek, this word stood for reality as opposed to fantasy. We're called to speak it as it is, rather than as we – or those to whom we speak – wish it to be. Why? *Because we are all members of one body.* As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, to mistreat another Christian in any way is like deliberately damaging my own body.

3 The way we control our emotions (26, 27) and our actions (31)

You may be feeling angry right now – it may be obvious to people around you, or it may be buried deep within you. It may be related to something recent, or something in the past.

There is nothing inherently wrong with anger as an emotion – it can be right to be angry about many things, including sin (although it's a healthy sign to be far more angry about your own sin than someone else's: remember Jesus' teaching on the speck and the plank – Matthew 7:3)

But anger which continues to rage, is not contained, marshaled and channeled, never flows with God's purpose for our lives

¹⁹ Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. ²⁰ Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. ²¹ So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. James 1:19-20 (NLT)

The majority of behaviours listed in v. 31 are ones characterised by an absence of control, which is the opposite of the spiritual fruit of self-control. If I am aware that my response to any situation is 'out of control', I am most unlikely to be imitating Christ

4 Our willingness to pursue a change of life with intention and resolve (28)

what we can helpfully call 'walking in the opposite spirit'

the example here is stealing

- the opposite spirit to theft is gift
- the opposite spirit to criticism is blessing
- the opposite spirit to judgment is mercy

5 Our intentional pursuit of the Holy Spirit and what pleases him (29-32)

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This takes work – it's labour, it's intentional, it's radical discipleship

THE COMMAND TO FORGIVE (32)

The warning about giving the devil a foothold, grieving the Holy Spirit, and the call to forgiveness are all part of one piece, unfolding to us the very heart of what it is to live lives of victory and breakthrough.

Anger is a critical element here

- it is specifically detailed as one way of allowing the devil to get his foot in the door (26, 27)
- it is therefore implicated in grieving the Holy Spirit (30)

- it is most commonly the key driver behind unforgiveness: it is mentioned in the list of negative behaviours (31) to be replaced with kindness, compassion and forgiveness (32)

Paul is telling us that anything that works to replace kindness and compassion, and anything less than forgiveness grieves the Holy Spirit, and leaves the back door open for the Enemy to creep in to our lives.

Questions

- Is our church a safe place in which to be open – how easy do we find it to choose honesty and openness?
- Can we speak truth to one another? What impact is there for the Body of Christ if we do not?
- Read Luke 6:44-45. Do we accept Jesus' teaching that whatever comes out of our mouths is what is already in our hearts? How does that change the way we think of our speech, anger or any other strong response?
- When is anger justified? How can we allow the Lord to channel it appropriately?
- Are you more angry at your own sin than someone else's?
- In what ways does anger 'leave the door open' for the Enemy?
- In what areas of life do you need to 'walk in the opposite spirit'?
- In what ways do you need to pursue the Holy Spirit so as not to grieve him?
- Is your attitude to others characterized more by a desire for justice or for mercy?
- In what way are you a 'bookkeeper' when it comes to other people's faults?

Application

In Christ, God forgave you.

The challenge this week is to become better at forgiving.

You may find it helpful to split into pairs within your Small Community so that you can share together more personally.

Is there someone you need to forgive? Share within your pair what is holding you back and pray for one another for grace and breakthrough.

What practical steps can you take this week to put forgiveness into action? Share them with the other person in your pair and ask them to hold you accountable to these actions.

Pray together for an opportunity to practice forgiveness in the coming week.

Week Eleven – 30 June to 6 July Confident in the Spirit

Ephesians 5:1-20

Chapter 5

¹ I love watching a little boy with his dad. All he wants to do is be like him and copy what he's doing. We need to learn to copy God, ² and the best way to do that is to devote ourselves to being like his Son, Jesus, who loved us so much that he sacrificed his life for us.

³ There are so many squatters looking for a heart to call home: immorality, impurity, greed, ⁴ carelessly obscene words and thoughtless humour. ⁵ Bar the doors! Change all your locks! Gratitude is the best security system against all these intruders. Allowing them in means worshipping something other than God himself. ⁶ Don't fall for any fine-sounding but foolish arguments that say how we live doesn't matter. God will judge those who flout his principles, barring them from his Kingdom. ⁷ Make sure you don't get locked out with them.

⁸ Life with Jesus and life without him is like light compared with darkness. ⁹ Now you're children of light, your lives should radiate goodness, justice and truth. ¹⁰ Make pleasing God your life's goal. ¹¹ Foul things grow in dark, dank places. Drag them out into the light and the air. ¹² Put an end to shameful secrets. ¹³ Live life out in the open, in the light of God's love. As God's word says,

¹⁴ Wake up! Shake off the living death of sin and step into the light of Jesus.

¹⁵ Step carefully along life's way. Be wise rather than foolish. ¹⁶ Never miss the chance to shine light into these dark days. ¹⁷ Be clear what Jesus wants you to do. ¹⁸ Why get drunk and lose control of yourself when you can be filled with the very Spirit of God? ¹⁹ Speak words and sing songs from the heart to one another and to the Lord; ²⁰ and never stop thanking God for everything he has given us in Jesus.

extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

v. 1 literally 'mimic' God. How do we do that? By modelling ourselves on Jesus, literally *walk agape* (*agape* is the word for self-sacrificing love) just as Jesus *agape'd* us and gave himself up for us ... a sacrifice. This is why Paul talks of our being 'living sacrifices' in Romans 12.

vv. 3-7 Paul argues that the unsavoury things he lists are all in fact idols, replacing God at the centre of our lives. 'Who are you in partnership with?' Jesus once made a similar challenge – *You cannot serve both God and money* (Matthew 6:24)

vv. 8-20 – Paul sets up a number of contrasts – which will we choose?

- darkness / light
- fruitful / fruitless
- impurity / holiness
- secret / visible
- sleep / wakefulness
- death / life
- wise / foolish
- drunk / full of Spirit
- use of tongue – coarse / praise

Paul suggests that gratitude is the best antidote to things of darkness

Christ will shine on you – everything illuminated becomes a light: the moon produces no light itself, but wonderfully reflects the light of the sun; so we can reflect the light of Jesus day by day, in effect becoming a light

Never miss the chance to shine light into these dark days (5:16, Who?)

Questions

- In what ways do you already mimic God?
- What have you learnt about living a life worthy?
- What does it mean in daily life to walk *agape*?
- Are there idols in your life? Anything which takes the proper place of God at the centre of your focus and worship?
- With whom or what are you in partnership?
- Of the choices Paul lists in 5:8-20, which are the most challenging for you?

Application

The challenge this week is to seek a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit

This week's passage ends with these words –

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Spend some time as a group praying for one another to be filled with the Spirit.

You might like to start by listening to "Rest On Us" by Maverick City
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8MZbl-GRdY>)

Then simply pray for each person in turn – "Come Holy Spirit".

Have one person stand or sit in the centre of the group while you pray for them. Watch and wait and see what the Lord does.

Week Twelve – 7 to 13 July Confident in relationships

Ephesians 5:21-33

Chapter 5

²¹ Your life together should be marked by a constant willingness to put others ahead of yourselves, for mutual submission is a true hallmark of Christian community.

²²⁻²⁴ Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Jesus and his Church. For a marriage to be the blessing God has designed it to be, both husband and wife must give themselves to the service of the other.

Wives, honour your husbands as you would king Jesus himself, because your husbands have responsibility to care for you, just as Jesus cares for the Church, his body here on earth.

²⁵ Husbands, consider the sacrifice Jesus was willing to make for his Church, his bride for whom he paid the ultimate price. ²⁶ He has devoted himself to her restoration, ²⁷ so that she can stand beside him on the 'Big Day', glowing with joy, a picture of perfection. Jesus is one with his body the Church and was willing to die for it. ²⁸ Take him as your model for how much you should love your wives. ²⁹ We don't hate our bodies but cherish them – and Jesus cherishes use, ³⁰ because we are his body on earth.

³¹ At the very beginning of the human story, we read how

the timeless pattern of human relationship was established. Generation after generation, men and women leave their childhood homes, commit themselves to one another and become one.

³² We'll never fully fathom this, but marriage is a picture of Jesus' relationship with his Church. ³³ The intimacy, respect, love and absolute commitment which Jesus shows his Church should be the model for every marriage.

extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

As we turn now to Paul's practical teaching on the home and the workplace, we remember that it flows from his desire for us to live and walk *in the light of Christ*.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (21)

It's almost impossible for us to hear the word *submit* in anything other than a negative way. The simple truth is that men have oppressed women since the beginning of the human story. These verses have been used to excuse and bolster that, which is so wrong.

That's why it's so important that we start at v. 21 and not v.22. Submission is to be a hallmark of the way Christians treat one another

So what is Paul saying here in Ephesians 5?

The first thing to note is that marriage is not an easy subject for many of us – some would love to be married and can't understand why God hasn't blessed them in that way. Some are married but the relationship has turned sour. Others have experienced or are experiencing the pain of separation or divorce. Some grieve the loss through death of their life partner. Some, who would love to marry someone of the same sex, and yet believe that scripture declares marriage to be a state reserved for those of the opposite sex, grieve the loss of that for which they long. How all these dear people – for whom Jesus died – need the understanding, compassion and companionship of His body.

So the church needs to teach on this subject with deep sensitivity – but teach on it we must, as Paul wishes to reveal to us something profound about the relationship between Jesus and the church.

The word *submit* means to *arrange in order* (it was used of military formations and rank) and is a mark of health. Most Christians understand and accept the call to submit to Jesus as Lord (it's fulfilling it that's the hard part!) – this is mainly because we take Jesus at his word when he says that serving him sets us free.

Husbands and wives

In this passage

- 3 verses are addressed to wives (22-24)
- 7 verses are addressed to husbands (25-31)
- 2 verses are addressed to both (21, 33)
- 1 verse takes the whole subject to a different level (32) – and once we've read that, we realise that the whole passage is actually *also* about Jesus and the church: Paul's language addressed to the human *offices* of husband and wife

Husbands, love your wives (25)

Let's start with husbands. Paul tells husbands to love (*agape*) their wives, and uses two interlinking images to explain the high calling he is issuing:

just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. That is a high bar, when we remember that Jesus' love took him to his death. In other words, a husband must be willing to die for his wife

husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. In other words, says Paul, *He who loves his wife loves himself.*

It's hard for us to comprehend just how radical this teaching was in Paul's day. Both Roman and Jewish society was deeply patriarchal. For Paul to affirm the dignity of women by commanding that husbands lay down their lives for their wives with the same radical, sacrificial love of Christ was revolutionary.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands (22)

Now, would anyone, on the basis that in this passage Paul addresses the call to love only to husbands, suggest that wives do not need to love their husbands? Of course not! In John 13, Jesus twice gives an overarching command: *Love one another.* Similarly, in the verse immediately before he tells wives to submit to their husbands, Paul instructs us to *submit to one another* (21).

Again, note that Paul grounds this in relation to Jesus – *as you do to the Lord.* He goes on to explain that the husband is *the head of the wife.* In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul declares that

the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the wife is the husband, and the head of Christ is God

In which case, head cannot mean superior or oppressor – we believe Jesus is equal with God. This is complex stuff, and it's possible that Paul is referencing the Genesis account of human creation, when Eve was *taken out of* Adam. So the term head here may be better understood as source, as in the head of a river. It's also worth remembering that, as a result of God's design in creation, every man after Adam has been *taken out of* a woman.

So what do we make of all this?

It is very possible that in the early church, as a result of the legacy of the prevailing culture, there was an issue around wives honouring and respecting their husbands, and around husbands loving their wives as fully as they are designed to do.

One thing this passage cannot be used to support is the oppression of women within marriage. If we consider the early chapters of Genesis, we see man and woman created equal: only after their disobedience did the relationship between male and female become one of oppression and domination. *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work (1 John 3:8).*

Paul's charge to the husband is by far the most challenging – he uses the language from the beginning of the chapter, calling husbands to sacrifice themselves for their wives, *giving themselves up* for them, loving them as their own bodies.

²⁵ Husbands, consider the sacrifice Jesus was willing to make for his Church, his bride for whom he paid the ultimate price. ²⁶ He has devoted himself to her restoration, ²⁷ so that she can stand beside him on the 'Big Day', glowing with joy, a picture of perfection. Jesus is one with his body the Church and was willing to die for it. ²⁸ Take him as your model for how much you should love your wives.

³² We'll never fully fathom this, but marriage is a picture of Jesus' relationship with his Church. ³³ The intimacy, respect, love and absolute commitment which Jesus shows his Church should be the model for every marriage. (Who?)

The Bride of Christ

One of the reasons that marriage is so significant – and such a key part of God's created order – is that it stands as an image of God's love and desire for his people. Throughout the Old Testament, we're presented with images of God wooing his people:

*⁵ As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you. Isaiah 62*

Israel's unfaithfulness is termed adultery.

The entire narrative of scripture draws towards a close with an extraordinary series of images

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'

⁹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹ It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. Revelation 21

When we have a wedding here at Christ Church, traffic slows and passers-by stop to watch the bride arrive in all her splendour. It's a universal truth: brides turn heads – all except one: the Bride of Christ.

Brides turn heads because of the way they are dressed and adorned. The church has turned heads in the past, when she was dressed differently from everyone else. But now, she all too often blends in. Our distinctiveness comes from the way we live; and it's high time we started turning heads again – we will do this is when we live lives worthy of the calling we've received, when we mimic God by walking *agape* ...

Questions

1. How are you living out the double call to 'Love one another' (John 13) and to 'submit to one another' (Ephesians 5)?
2. If marriage is a challenge to you – in any of the ways mentioned above – please do ask for some pastoral help

Application

The challenge this week is to pray for the strength of the marriages, families and relationships within our church.

You may find it easier to do this in single-sex groups. If this is appropriate for your group and space allows, gather in two separate rooms to pray.

Share together and pray for each other that we may *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Then pray for Christ Church that we may more and more become *a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*

Week Thirteen – 14 to 20 July Confident in relationships

Ephesians 6:1-9

Chapter 6

¹ Children, please God by doing what your parents tell you. ² One of God's 'Ten Commandments' promises that if we honour our parents ³ God will bless us with long life. ⁴ Dads, don't drive your children up the wall but introduce them to Jesus and train them to follow him.

⁵ Workers, always give of your very best and show your employers genuine respect, ⁶ not only when they're watching or to get into their good books. ⁷ Put your heart into every job as if you were doing it for Jesus himself. ⁸ If you do that, you can look forward to his reward on top of your pay packet.

⁹ Employers, look after your workforce. Don't bully them because God is their Lord every bit as much as yours. The God of heaven has no favourites.

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Children and Parents (1-4)

When Paul tells children to obey their parents, he uses a different word from that translated *submit* in the previous chapter. This one means to listen, to attend to.

He points out that the fifth commandment isn't just a divine order but a divine promise. God the Father promises to bless the child who honours their parents.

Again, we miss how revolutionary it was for instruction to be given to parents (and fathers in particular) about how to care for their children: in Roman culture, fathers had absolute power over their children. Paul reminds men in particular that it is no small thing to be the only person besides God who is addressed as *father*. How parents raise their children is a major factor in how they learn to relate to God.

Paul's teaching was controversial then and it is today. Many around us belittle the significance of parenting as much as of marriage. Some have been taught that love equals license and that discipline is the opposite of love. In fact, the opposite of love is neglect. Children need and thrive when they are given safe, fair and clear boundaries in which to explore and grow. Those boundaries need to expand as children age. We certainly discovered that, as our children grew, it was important to discern which battles were truly worth it. Did it really matter if a child was determined to head out of the door looking like Cap'n Jack Sparrow from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films?

Paul's essential point is that following Jesus begins at home and in our earliest years. Again, we need to recognise that not everyone can look back fondly to their childhood or family. Some people struggle with the idea of God as father because of their experience of an earthly father who mistreated them in some way. In my pastoral experience, this pain is increased by the instinctive understanding that this was not supposed to be there; that they have been denied what should have been a far different experience.

For those of us who are parents, we can all resolve to make our families the best reflection of the life of Jesus. The evangelist D.L. Moody wrote: *The family was established long before the church, and my duty is to my family first; I am not to neglect my family.*

It is in our families that we get to share the name *father* with God, the name *son* with Jesus, and the names *husband* and *wife* with Jesus and his church. Our worship begins at home and our

home life is the bedrock of our Christian witness. The church is uniquely placed to teach the world how to build healthy marriages and how to raise healthy children.

Masters and slaves (5-9)

Paul has been criticised for not assaulting slavery head on (it is believed that as many as 2/3rds of the Empire's population was owned by the other 1/3rd). But when he says

masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

he is sowing a seed of equality that would one day bring slavery to an end.

As Christians, we are rightly concerned with issues of justice – after all, God is a God of justice. So we work to alleviate poverty, to counter discrimination based on race, to end oppression. But we must beware the lure of becoming just another social agency. The most powerful tool against all forms of injustice and oppression is the gospel which, as we have seen, calls us to treat every human being as our equal, and to put others' needs ahead of our own.

At some stage when Paul was in prison – very possibly around the time he wrote Ephesians, he came into contact with a runaway slave called Onesimus. Paul wrote to his owner, a wealthy man named Philemon, a church leader in Colossae, telling him he was sending Onesimus back to him, and urging him to receive him

no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. Philemon 16

Faith at Work

Although modern slavery is an unspeakable – and growing – cruelty today, most of us aren't slaves; and (I hope) none of us owns another human being! But many of us are in work, and therefore relate to one another as employers & employees, as bosses and workers.

Many people enjoy their work. Many do not. For most of us work is a mixture of reward and service, of success and struggle, of fulfilment and cost. Without the world of work our society would collapse. All of us depend on industry, commerce and the services offered to us by government, financial institutions, health, education, the voluntary sector and a host of others.

The majority of people spend most of their adult life in some sort of work. We consider full employment to be one of the measures of a healthy society – although the unhealthy result is so often that those who have no work can be seen as lesser, and be disadvantaged. And paid work is not the only form of work. Many people offer their time and energy in unpaid roles, in the home, in the church, and in wider society.

Yet this world which affects us all is rarely talked about in church. It's rare to find direct connections made between the life of work and the life of the Spirit, between the things which occupy our time and energy for much of the week and the worship we offer God on Sunday.

Yet the church is also embedded in the world of work – the church as the people of God, worshipping together week by week, is dispersed in many diverse working environments. Members of our church family strive to live and work as followers of Jesus in challenging and demanding situations.

For those wishing to explore this area more fully, I commend the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity: <https://licc.org.uk/> Founded by John Stott, it has incredible resources to support Christians in the workplace.

Questions

How easy do you find it to pray for your work-place, whether that's your home, your college, your office or wherever? If you travel to work, do you use the time to pray for your colleagues, and to ask that you might be a blessing to them?

What ways have you found to let your colleagues and those you meet regularly know that you're a Christian?

What opportunities have arisen which enabled you to encourage, listen to or pastor your colleagues and those around you? How easy do you find it to say to someone who's confided in you, 'I'll pray for you'?

What are the most natural opportunities to witness to Jesus for you?

Do you know of other Christians in your work-place, or among your friends? Have you talked with them about praying together, so that the '2 or 3' dynamic of Matthew 18:20 can begin to get going?

What events do you / would you find easiest to invite colleagues or friends? e.g a SPEAR Celebration. Does your small community organise occasional 'open' evenings where non-believers can meet Christians over a meal?

How important is to be with people about your struggles, as well as your joys, your failures as well as your successes?

Application

The challenge this week is to speak to someone in your workplace (or home, college, office, commute etc) about your Christian faith.

Split into smaller groups within your Small Community and share together your work/daily context.

Who are the people in your workplace who are warm and open to the Christian faith?

Pray together for an opening this week to speak about your Christian faith.

During the week look out for opportunities to do just that. It may be as simple as responding to the question "what did you do at the weekend?" or caring for a colleague who is going through a hard time by offering to pray.

Come back next week and share what happened.

Week Fourteen – 21 to 27 July Confident in spiritual warfare

Ephesians 6:10-24

Chapter 6

¹⁰ Finally, look to Jesus to strengthen and empower you. ¹¹⁻¹³ Remember that we're at war, not against other human beings, but against the dark spiritual forces which influence, rule and corrupt our world. God provides full body armour for all his troops, so that we can stand our ground against the Enemy's assault. Wear it daily and you'll still be standing whatever he throws at you.

¹⁴ Be a soldier, then, put your armour on and hold your ground. First, truth – strap it on tight! Knowing that Jesus has set you right with God will protect your heart better than any bullet-proof vest. ¹⁵ Next, get your marching boots on – you're going on patrol to proclaim the good news of peace with God. ¹⁶ Your unshakeable faith in Jesus will be a shield against which the Enemy's weapons will shatter like matchwood. ¹⁷ Knowing you're safe for all eternity will be your helmet, protecting your mind against the Enemy's lies. The Word of God will be your sword, which the Holy Spirit will train you to use. Go on the attack with it, carving open the lies and deceit of the Enemy, just as Jesus did when he was tempted.

¹⁸ Prayer is a duet with the Holy Spirit, so tune yourself to him and he will lead and inspire your prayers. Practise until praying becomes second nature, and keep it fresh with variety. No soldier can afford to fall asleep on duty, so stay focused and pray for your fellow Christians all the time.

¹⁹ Please pray for me too, that God will help me explain the good news of his love to everyone, clearly and boldly. ²⁰ Even here in prison I'm God's ambassador.

²¹ I'm sending Tychicus, my dear, faithful brother in Jesus, to visit you. ²² He'll fill you in on all my news and encourage you. ²³ Peace to you all, as you experience more and more of God our Father's amazing and undeserved love through faith in Jesus. ²⁴ May your love for him burn ever more fiercely.

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Stand ...

The full armour of God (vv 10 & 13)

It's poignant to think that Paul may have developed this imagery from his long familiarity with Roman centurions, who guarded him at various times of imprisonment – at times he would have been shackled to two, one on each side.

- all 6 pieces
- what's missing?
- who are we fighting (v 12)?

... but note: *Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. 2 Timothy 4:14.* While always acknowledging that spiritual warfare is ultimately against the Enemy of our souls, we shouldn't be blind to the damage of which human beings are capable – we all have free will.

the devil's schemes (vv 11 & 16 – 'arrows of the evil one')

The word 'schemes' occurs only 20 times in the bible, 18 of those in the OT, where each reference is to human schemes. The two occurrences in the NT are about the Enemy, once here and the other in 2 Corinthians 2:11:

in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (context – forgiveness)

What are the devil's schemes?

There are of course many – but all have one thing in common. They are all designed to make us doubt God's Word / God's truth

- Genesis 3:1 – *Did God **really** say ...?*
- Luke 4:3 – ***If** you are the Son of God ...*

What truths does the devil want to make us doubt?

- truth about God – that God is good & loves us
- truth about us – that we need salvation & each other
- truth about church – that it is the ark of salvation

Stand firm

- *be strong (10)*
- *take your stand (11)*
- *stand your ground (13)*
- *stand' (13)*
- *all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love(23)*

... it is by faith you stand firm (2 Corinthians 1:24)

Note Paul's prayer in vv. 19 & 20

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

See also

I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. (Romans 15:30)

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. (Colossians 4:3)

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. (2 Thessalonians 3:1,2)

How can we defeat the devil's schemes?

1 by resisting

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)

2 by removing ourselves from the place of temptation

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. (1 Corinthians 6:18)

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. (1 Corinthians 10:14)

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. (1 Timothy 6:11)

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. (2 Timothy 2:22)

3 by gathering

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

Just as in a wildlife documentary, where lions don't attack the herd but seek to isolate its weak members, so the devil can make easy pickings of those who are isolated from Christian fellowship.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25)

And finally ...

Did you notice there is no armour listed for the back? Roman centurions had no armour for the back, for two reasons

- it reduced the incentive to turn and run
- it encouraged them, when the warfare was fierce, to fight back to back, each protecting the other

We too are called to guard one another's backs ...

Brothers & sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

... but how can you do that if you are absent?

Questions

Work through the list of the armour given in this passage? Are there any pieces missing in your personal armoury?

In what ways are you actively and intentionally guarding someone else's back? Is there someone you have noticed who hasn't been in church or small group for a while? Why not get in touch this week?

Do you know who you're fighting? Ask the Lord to reveal to you if you are inadvertently fighting 'flesh & blood' rather than principalities and powers.

List what you believe are the devil's schemes against you. Ask a friend to join you in battling against them in prayer.

List what you believe are the devil's schemes against our church. If you are in a small community, join in prayer to block those schemes. Or, ask a friend to join you in battling against them in prayer.

Talk about standing firm. How good are you at removing yourself from the place of temptation?

What is working against you being a regular worshipper or member of a small community? Why does the bible urge us to gather regularly?

How would you explain the truth of God's love to a non-believing friend, neighbour, colleague or classmate?

Application

The challenge this week is to practice standing firm against the devil's schemes.

As a group, begin by listening to "Surrounded (Fight My Battles)" by Upper Room - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWmjpF613y4>

Now split into pairs.

Share with one another in your pairs where you need to *be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.*

Which parts of the Armour of God listed in Ephesians 6:10-16 would help you in the situation(s) you are facing this week?

Pray for one another to put on the full armour and to stand firm. Use Paul's encouragement to *pray in the Spirit* for each other.

Agree to check in with each other during the week for encouragement and support.