



MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: Ephesians 3:10; Deut. 32:7-9; Acts 17:26

The Church—Portent to Dark Cosmic Powers

“So that God’s...wisdom may now be made known *through the church* to the heavenly rulers & authorities” (Eph. 3:10)

“Any interpretation of Ephesians stands or falls with this verse.”—George Caird

Ephesians 3:10 “is *one of the NT’s most powerful statements of the reason for the church’s existence*”— T. Wright ? “The church is a sign to the evil spiritual powers...that...their dominion is coming to an end.” —Peter Williamson

SUMMARY:

The cosmic powers played a role in the nations’ dispersion after the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). God appointed ‘guardian angels’ over each people-group (Dt. 32:8). However, these ‘gods’ led the Gentile-nations astray into bondage, idolatry & immorality. Christ defeated them on the cross. Paul’s mission was to reverse the curse of Babel, proclaiming salvation to the Gentiles, producing multi-ethnic, multi-racial churches as portents—warning signs—to the evil spiritual forces. *This kind of church* displays God’s wisdom to the cosmos & fulfills God’s purpose. They are God’s ‘outposts,’ planted in ‘enemy territory,’ engaging in spiritual combat against the powers of darkness.

1. Who are these Dark Cosmic Powers?

- a. Where do we see evidence of Evil Spiritual Forces at work today?
 - John Piper asks: “Is it not...the case: that...cosmic forces of evil manage to get a handle on every human invention & every human institution & corrupt them & turn them for destruction? Nuclear power becomes the basis of international [bravado] & mutual threats of national suicide. Multipurpose

petroleum [oil] becomes the currency of international blackmail. Painrelieving drugs become a multi-billion dollar market in life-destroying narcotics. Free market enterprise degenerates into money-loving greed & exploitation of third world countries. And the grand institution of the university sinks into a Babel normlessness. Are we really so advanced that we can do without the biblical doctrine of demons?" [J. Piper, *Cosmic Church*]

b. The Fallen Angels ('gods') who oversee the Gentile Nations after Babel (Dt. 32:8; 4:19b-20; Acts 17:26)

- Moses said: "Recall the days of old...⁸ When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples *according to the number of the sons of God*.⁹ But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob [Israel] his allotted heritage." (Dt. 32:7-9 ESV) **Note:** nations allocated to 'sons of God'/'gods'; Israel is the LORD's cf. Dt. 4
- "Dt. 32:8-9 is *foundational* for understanding the remainder of the OT." [Michael Heiser, *Angels: What the Bible...Says*, p.]
- "When God Most High divided up the nations...he decided the...boundaries based on *the number of the gods*." (Dt. 32:8 CEB)
- Moses told Israel, 'Don't worship "the whole heavenly host...*These the LORD, your God...apportioned to all the other nations under the heavens; but you the LORD has taken...[as] his people, his heritage*" (Dt. 4:19-20 NABRE) 'heavenly host' = 'gods'
- "The Most High...set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of *the sons of Israel*" (Dt. 32:8 NIV, KJV, CSB) **Note:** This "is unintelligible... 'according to the sons of [E] God' makes much more sense" [*Jewish Study Bible*, p. 441]
- "When the Most High...divided mankind, according to the number of the *sons of God*." (Dt. 32:8 ESV, DSS, LXX: Greek OT)
- "The point Dt. 32:8-9 is that *sometime after* God separated the people...at *Babel*...he then *assigned each of the 70 nations to the fallen sons of God* (...also 70 in number)" [Michael S. Heiser, "32:8 & the Sons of God," BIBLIO. SACRA, #158 p. 71]
- "...God Most High gave land to every nation. He assigned a *guardian angel* to each of them" (Dt. 32:8 CEV) **Note:** 32:8 and Acts 17:26 imply that, even in their dispersion, "God is interested in all people[s,] [nations] in their own right. Their locations & movements were all governed by divine will (Dt. 32:8; Acts 17:26)." [J. E. Smith, *Gen.*, p. 246] God's "singling out of Abraham from the nations [Gen. 12] is *not at all* to be understood as God's giving up on the nations."—R. Bauckham.

c. Dispersion of Nations at Babel—Curse & 'Blessing in disguise' (Gen. 10-11)

- "The Bible is clear...humanity is a unity...(Gen. 10; Acts 17:26) & that the diversity of nations is God-given, however much... distorted. Although...the scattering of...peoples was a consequence of their... conspiracy at Babel, it was *also a blessing in disguise*. It fulfills...Gen. 1:28...as portrayed...in the Table of Nations in Gen. 10 [with its] 70 nations. Compare [this] with...Pentecost in Acts 2...[where via a] miracle *God's judgment at Babel is reversed*." [R Bauckham, *Bible in Politics*, 2nd ed. p xvi]

d. These 'gods' led the Gentile nations into idolatry, immorality, conflict & chaos (Eph. 2:1-4)

- "These angelic overseers were to maintain the separation between the various people groups...[But,] instead of ruling well on God's behalf [these] corrupt angels usurped their God-given authority & sought to be...the source of power & authority. [Hence: 'heavenly rulers & authorities'] The OT conception of (dis)unity [among peoples/nations] has a direct bearing on...Ephesians, especially Paul's articulation of 'rulers & authorities' in Eph. 3:10. He feels compelled to proclaim this mystery 'to heavenly rulers & authorities' (Eph. 3:10)." [Benjamin L Gladd, *Adam, Israel...Church: Theology...People of God*, p. 150]
- "The universal dimensions of evil [relate to] the fallen angelic powers which in...control the social order...[led] by the 'ruler of the power of the air' (Eph. 2:2, Satan, the Devil)...The background for *these supernatural 'principalities & powers'*...is found in the *universal care of angels over creation* (Dt. 32:8) *who are now fallen*...[This] gives a cosmic and universal dimension to evil...[Our] struggle against evil [is] grounded in Christ's conquest of these powers [at the cross] (Col. 2:15) [Yet,] the victory won't be completed...until the end of history (1 Cor. 15:24). *In Ephesians the church is pivotal in the struggle against the powers of evil* (Eph 3:10...)." [S. C. Mott, in G. Hawthorne (ed.) *Dictionary of Paul & Letters*, p.]

e. The Cosmic 'Princes' seeking to frustrate God's plan (Dan. 10:12-13, 20)

- The angel told Daniel: “from the first day you...humbled yourself...your prayers were heard. I have come because of your prayers. ¹³ But *the prince...of Persia opposed me for 21 days...[later] the prince of Greece will come.*” (Dan. 10:12-13, 20)
- “The princes of Persia & Greece in Dan. 10 [are] traditionally understood [as] angelic beings of the unseen world [that] engage in warfare against God’s angel, to prevent Gabriel from reaching Daniel on earth with a heavenly message.” [Tony Siew, *War Between the 2 Beasts & the 2 Witnesses*, 78 #34]

f. The LORD, Israel’s God, judges the gods (Ps. 82:1, 6-8; Isa. 24:21)

- Scholars suggest Ps. 82 “looks back to Dt. 32:8-9...[declaring] the gods of the nations...have proven themselves unworthy of their delegated responsibilities to the detriment of the people on earth.” [Matthew L. Walsh, *Angels ass. w/ Israel*, 44-5] ? “God stands in the divine assembly; he pronounces judgment among the gods” (Ps. 82:1) “The Psalm [82]...describes the LORD’s judgment on the other gods...Israel’s God is the king...of all the other gods.” [Beth L. Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, p. 641]
- “In that day the LORD will punish *the powers in the heavens* above & the kings on the earth below” (Isa. 24:21 NIV)

2. Paul’s ‘Gentile-centric’ View of the Nations—formed by God, misled by gods (Acts 17:26, cf. Acts 14:16)

- One “easily discerns God’s providential ordering...of the nations in *preparation for Pentecost*... [God’s original] blessing ‘be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth’ (Gen. 1:28) is reaffirmed in the [post-Flood] world in the Table of Nations (Gen. 10) & Babel (Gen. 11). Viewed from this ‘Gentile-centric’ perspective, God’s calling of Abraham [Gen. 12] is really the *original ‘detour’ of salvation history*...its deepest rationale [is] the blessing of the nations [Gen. 12:3]. Paul’s sermon in Athens [Acts 17:26-28] formulates the entirety of...*history from Adam to Christ from this ‘Gentile-centric’ point of view*...as God’s generous, even-handed providence of the *peoples* of God. From this vantage point...[the Bible ends] with ‘a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language...[who] cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to *our God!*’, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ (Rev. 7:9-10)...The Gentile [nations] adorn the [End-time] Temple of God with praise as only they can do by offering up the riches of language, culture [etc., from] the lives of all peoples, tribes & nations.” [R. Kendall Soulen, “*Trinity & Church...*,” in Stephen J. Wright (ed.) *Promise of Robert W. Jenson’s Theology*, pp. 124-125]
- “In the NT, Paul reflects...Hebrew thought when he [speaks of] the determinative role God... played in establishing all national-territorial associations: ‘From one man he...made every nationality to live over the whole earth &...determined their appointed times & the boundaries of where they live.’ (Acts 17:26 CSB) “ [Daniel I. Block, *Gods of the Nations*, 30]
- Paul alludes to Dt. 32:8 in his Athens’ speech (Acts 17:26) “What is particularly interesting about Paul’s speech...is that *his allusion to...Dt. 32:8* comes in the context of his preaching to the Gentiles.” [James M. Scott, *Paul & the Nations*, 179]
- Paul’s commission to seek “the obedience of faith among all the [Gentile] nations” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26) He says, ‘A partial hardening has come to Israel ‘til the *full number of the Gentile*... [nations] has come in.’ (Rom. 11:25) “Paul’s missionary strategy was to bring in ‘the full number of the nations’...This ‘*full number*’ probably refers to the 70 or 72 nations of the world according to Dt. 32:8 & the ‘Table of the Nations’ tradition [Gen. 10].” [James M. Scott, *Paul & the Nations*, 135]
- “Paul was well aware of...nations under lesser [gods] & [view]ed them a threat to believers.” [M. Heiser, *Unseen Realm*,]

3. Paul’s Goal—to Reverse the Curse of Babel (Rom. 11:25; 15:16; Eph. 2:11-13)

- “I serve as a priest...[to] bring the nations to God as an acceptable offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 15:16 GW)
- “Paul’s...work of reaching the Gentiles...is...an effort to *reclaim the nations* listed in Genesis 10 & scattered in Gen. 11:1-9... Their scattering at...Babel [is] a...backdrop for Paul’s work...” [J. Richardson, *Genesis 10 & 11: Framework for...Paul*, 5]
- “The nations were scattered at the Tower of Babel...Now Paul is participating in *the reclamation process by gathering* representative brothers *from all the nations as an offering to the Lord*...”

fulfilling the reversal of Babel... Paul declares that through Christ the nations are being reclaimed as God's possession once more... *Ephesians 2:11-13 calls upon the reversal of the Tower of Babel as an implication of salvation...* 'Remember... you Gentiles... were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel & strangers... But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near...'... Not only is *Babel being healed...* as seen in... Ephesians, but *all of creation is renewed & restored* once again through the death & resurrection of Christ." [Jackson Richardson, *Genesis 10 & 11: Framework for... Paul*, 49, 59-60]

4. What is God's Wisdom? Why 'through the church'? The Church testifies the Reversal of Babel

a. What is God's multi-faceted Wisdom?

- "What is the divine wisdom the church is to make known to the principalities & powers? I think the best way to answer this question is to see what has in fact been made known to the church. We can't display to others what has not been shown to us. There are 3 stages of revelation in Eph. 3:1-10. [1.] First, Paul receives revelation from God (Eph. 3:1-7). [2.] Second, the church receives revelation from Paul (Eph. 3:8, 9). [3.] Third, the church makes this known to the principalities & powers in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10)." [John Piper, *Cosmic Church*, March 22, 1981, DesiringGod.org] [Last Sunday's message]

b. Why 'through the church'?

- "Why is Paul so concerned [about] the church's...role [vis-à-vis] the demonic forces. The answer probably lies in the OT... role [of fallen angels] in maintaining separation between the nations... Angels...came to symbolize the lack of unity between the nations. If the OT views the nations as divided, the NT says the opposite. In Christ all nations find unity & total equality (Acts 2). [So,] Paul tells the Church in Ephesus to remain unified...to testify to the [dark cosmic] forces that God has now reversed his decree at Babel. Instead of...splintered people-groups, the church constitutes the restored [& united] people of God." [Benjamin L. Gladd, *From Adam & Israel to Church*, 150-151]

c. Paul's ministry provoked a reaction—"Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus..." (Eph. 3:1, cf. 3:13; 4:1)

- "I think Paul interpreted his imprisonment as the revenge of the [dark cosmic] powers into whose world he'd been making inroads. He was used to confronting [Jewish & Roman authorities]... But in this case he...sensed that something else was going on. The forces against him were not simply human. He had stirred up a hornets' nest with his powerful ministry..." [N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, pp. 266-267]
- **Q:** Does our church, in the sort of life we lead, pose a challenge to the [cosmic] powers of evil which provokes a reaction?

5. The Church as a Portent & Sign

- "Portent"— a sign or warning of a future event
- "The church is a sign to the evil spiritual powers...that...their dominion is coming to an end." — Peter Williamson

a. What is a "Sign"?

- The "Church is called to be a *sign*...A *sign* points beyond itself to something else of greater import." — Paul Dieterich
- "The church...is the sign...of the coming kingdom."—Robert Webber

b. The Church & the Cosmos—the Church has cosmic significance (Eph. 1:21-23; 3:10)

- "One [key point] of...Eph. 3:2-23 is...integrating some of the [*church-related*] & *cosmic perspectives* of the letter...In Eph. 1:21-23 Jesus Christ [is] the head above all [hostile cosmic] powers [for the benefit] of the church. Now...'through the church' the wisdom of God is made known to these powers (Eph. 3:10)...Church & cosmos...intersect, their paths coincide..." [Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians: Theological Commentary*, 94]

c. The Church as a Portent, a Sign (Eph. 3:10)

- "Paul sees *the church itself as the powerful sign...to the watching principalities & powers* that a new way of being human has been launched...& that there is a new Lord." [N. T. Wright, "Paul &... *Hermeneutics*," in S. McKnight, *Apostle Paul*,]

a. God's wisdom is displayed, not via apostolic ministry or gospel-preaching *per se*, but via *the Church* (Eph. 3:10a)

- "God...[will] use *the church to display his wisdom*...to all the unseen rulers & authorities in...heavenly places." (NLT)

- “We show the wisdom of God to the cosmic powers...*by being the church* Christ died to create.”—John Piper
- “Some interpreters [take] Paul to mean...the principalities & powers learn God’s plan through the apostolic preaching [e.g. via Paul’s ministry]. But *that* meaning would be more clearly conveyed without the [key] phrase ‘*through the church*,’ which points to the Church’s [role] in somehow revealing [God’s wisdom].” [P. Williamson, *Ephesians*, 93]
- “Paul’s mission...activity is ultimately in the service of the church’s role in God’s mystery & mission: what the apostle does is ‘*so that*’...the church can be what it is called to be...” [Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of Crucified Lord*, p. 587]
- Paul “feels compelled to proclaim this mystery ‘to the rulers & authorities in the heavenly realms’ (Eph. 3:10). But notice how *the church plays a direct role* in the proclamation...: ‘that now *through the church* the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers & authorities’ (Eph. 3:10). Paul preaches the mystery to the *church, who in turn proclaim it to the world and the rulers & authorities*.’” [Benjamin L. Gladd, ...*Adam & Israel to Church*, 150]
- “The church created by the mystery...displays God’s wisdom...God’s wisdom is exhibited *not simply through the proclamation of the gospel* by the church, *but through the reality of the church herself*...*The...Church*...in its existence & its living development, [*is*] *the medium de facto for the divine wisdom to become known*. The church is...the mirror, [it’s] God’s display, picture window.” [Richard L. Saucy, in C. Blaising, *Dispensationalism...& the Church*, pp. 152-153]
- “Paul stresses that God’s mystery...*centers on the church, not merely individuals*...*The church has a mission*...to make known the wisdom of God...to rulers & authorities. The church can fulfill its...mission only as it embodies the...‘rich variety’ of divine wisdom...in a diverse, but reconciled new humanity.” [M. J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, p 194]

b. The church *itself* is a sign

- “So that God’s...wisdom may...be made known *through the church* to...heavenly rulers & authorities” (Eph. 3:10)
- “The church is a sign to the evil spiritual powers...that...their dominion is coming to an end.”—Peter Williamson
- “Paul sees *the church itself* as the powerful sign...to the watching principalities & powers...”—N. T. Wright
- Eph. 3:10 “is *one of the NT’s most powerful statements of the reason for the church’s existence*: the rulers and authorities must be confronted with God’s wisdom...& this...happen[s] *through the church!* Not...through what the church says, [but] rather, *through what the church is*—the community in which men & women...of every race, color, social & cultural background come together in glad worship of the one true God.” [Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, p]

d. The Church is God’s ‘outpost’ in ‘enemy territory’ during the spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:12)

- “We are...fighting...against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, & spiritual powers of evil...” (Eph. 6:12 CEB)
- “God’s power is demonstrated by his ability to create the [church, his ‘outpost’] in the midst of enemy territory, thus confounding the evil powers...Far more than most Christians realize, the supernatural battle for the cosmos impinges upon the...mundane...lives of believers here on earth. [Yet,] God declares through Paul that these lives are crucial to the divine enterprise; it is not for naught that God maintained his ‘*outpost*’—*the church*—in this ‘plot of the cosmos’... [Church-members] are participants in the...glorious plan of God...Christians are the on-going...live evidence of divine victory & the pledge of ultimate triumph to all supernatural [cosmic powers].” [Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians*, 95]

6. What kind of Church is a Sign of God’s Wisdom?

- “In Ephesians the church is pivotal in the struggle against the powers of evil (Eph 3:10...)”—S. C. Mott
- What kind of Church? The multi-national, multi-ethnic Church is a Sign, a Portent, to the Dark Cosmic Powers
- “The Church reveals God’s secret in action...The [church’s] presence in the world [as] a community defined not by ethnicity, race or socio-economic status, [and] whose unity in Christ overcomes ancient hatreds...makes known to the rulers and authorities, [i.e.,] the powers—God’s wisdom...It is through...this witness to...gospel [reconciliation] that God’s triumph over the powers is...evident.” [J. Holloway, *Poetics of Grace*, pp. 219-220]

a. According to God’s eternal purpose (Eph. 3:11)

- “God’s wisdom...made known through the church to the rulers & authorities...¹¹ *This* [making-known via the church] is *according to his [God’s] eternal purpose...*” (Eph. 3:10-11)
- “Evidently, it was not a last-minute operation [a backup, ‘Plan B,'] conceived by God to salvage his cosmic plan from failure.” [Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians: Theological Commentary*, 95] The Church is part of God’s eternal plan. B. The Challenge—the Cosmic Powers are watching!
- “All the principalities & powers in the heavenly places are watching this week to see if we, the church, will live as if God is wise or as if he is foolish. Let’s show them by the way we live that God’s...plan is not failing!” —John Piper

QUESTIONS:

1. Paul writes about “rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of darkness, evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.” (Eph. 6:12; 1:21) Where do you see evidence of such ‘evil spiritual forces’ at work today—in the world, in society &/or in people’s lives?
2. How would you respond to Christians who dismiss such claims as ‘ancient superstitions from a pre-scientific age’?
3. Read Deut. 32:8-9. How do these Scriptures support the idea that ‘guardian angels’ were appointed over each people/group/nation? [Note that Moses is giving an historical review of Israel’s origins.] Why do Bible scholars link this statement back to the “Tower of Babel” & the dispersion of the nations (Gen. 11:1-9)?
4. Read Daniel 10:12-13, 20. Is the “Prince of Persia” portrayed as a human monarch/ruler or as supernatural? Does it appear that the “Prince of Persia” (Dan. 10:13, 20) is supporting or opposing God’s plan/purpose with Daniel? What does this suggest about the “Prince of Greece”?
5. Read Acts 17:26 and compare it with Deut. 32:8. What are the common elements? Note that Acts 17:26 is part of Paul’s message given in Athens—an intellectual center among the Gentile nations. Does Paul’s statement suggest that Paul has an OT/Hebrew view of the Gentile nations’ origin/history? How might Paul, the Apostle to the Gentile/Nations, have seen his mission, against that background?
6. Read the key verse: Eph. 3:10 “That God’s...wisdom may now be made known *through the church* to the heavenly rulers & authorities.” Why does Paul make a point that God’s wisdom is displayed to the cosmic powers ‘*through the church*’ (not directly through gospel-preaching or the apostles’ teaching)?
7. Against the background of the Scripture verses above, *what kind of church* will display God’s wisdom? Discuss.
8. John Piper says: “All the principalities & powers in the heavenly places are watching this week to see if we...will live as if God is wise or as if he is foolish. Let’s show them by the way we live that God’s...plan is not failing!” In view of this, how might you seek to adjust your living this week? Discuss.
9. Does our/your church (or your small group) pose a challenge to the [cosmic] powers of evil which provokes a reaction? Why or why not?