

**Ephesians: Mystery & Clarity, Msg. #14: "Reverse the Curse"**  
**Ephesians 6:17-24**  
**May 30, 2010**  
**The Summit Church (BCAM Campus)**

**Slide: Danny Franks, Brier Creek Campus Pastor**

Well good morning Summit Church, happy Memorial Day weekend to you. If you're new, my name is Danny and I'm one of the pastors here at the Brier Creek Campus. Just so you know how this works, about 40 weekends out of the year you hear from Pastor J.D., who is our lead pastor. Then there are about six Sundays where the campus pastors of each of our five campuses will preach. Some of you ask, "Well how do you decide when that happens? Do you have a formula or something?" YES. The Sunday that you bring your friends to hear J.D. is usually the Sunday that we all preach. That's the formula.

**Slide: Sermon title slide**

Back in January we started a series through the book of Ephesians. And many of you are really ADD and you're saying, "Yes, Mystery and Clarity. The real mystery is: when will this be over?" For those of you in that camp I bring good news: this is it. Today we wrap up 14 weeks in one of the most powerful books in the New Testament. Later this summer we'll roll out the DVD series with director's commentary and blooper reels and alternate endings to Ephesians where instead of staying in prison, Paul lies down in a bamboo field and his yellow lab comes over and licks him on the face. But for today, the mystery and clarity series ends. So, if you'll turn to Ephesians 6:17, that's where we're going to spend our time today.

While you're getting there, let me ask you a question: How many of you men have been working through your honey-do list this spring? How many of you, that was bringing up a very sensitive subject around your house? For the last few weekends I've been working through my own honey do's. We've lived in our house for about six years have haven't done a thing to our porch except walk across it and drip garbage on it on the way to the trash can. So last Saturday after lots of suggestions and hints and reminders, I borrowed a pressure washer and decided, "today is the day the porch comes clean." Now, I already had a lot going on that day...I was speaking somewhere early that afternoon, we had friends coming over that night, but I've seen pressure washers work, and I

knew this would be a job that would take a couple of hours, max. Right? Wrong.

I got out there with my pressure washer, feeling like Bob Vila without the creepy beard, and fully intended to blast the slime right off that sucker. And after spraying the whole porch, it looked exactly like a dirty, wet porch should look like.

It was as that point that I decided I was going to adhere to the "good enough" principle. I had done a great job with borrowing the pressure washer, cleaning the siding, and my bride had seen me out there laboring and sweating and cleaning the porch for a good seven or eight minutes, so that was good enough.

Only it wasn't good enough. Merriem came out at one point and looked at the fruits of my labors and said, "Do you think you're doing it right?" Well OF COURSE I'm not doing it right, or it would be clean. "Do you have it turned up high enough?" If I turned it up any higher there would be 2x4s shooting through the neighbors' backyard. "Should you scrub the porch with something?" NO, that's why they call it a pressure washer...they don't intend for you to scrub. And then she pulled out the big guns: "Well maybe you should call my daddy and ask him." Oh NO you didn't.

Now I dig my father in law, but he knows how to do everything and I don't know how to do anything and every time I call him in the middle of a household project, I remind myself of that fact. So rather than swallowing my pride, I went to Wal Mart and bought some sort of chemical that I'm sure gave me a skin disorder, but doggone it that junk worked. And after hours and hours over not one, but TWO Saturdays of being on my hands and knees in the hot sun scrubbing that stuff, I have myself a porch that could make the cut on the DIY Network. And the next step obviously is to by some more chemical that will give me a further disorder that will also seal the porch to keep the slime and grime from coming back in.

Believe it or not, that's a good picture of what we're studying in Ephesians. In case you missed last week, let me give you one key statement from the message. We said that **the gospel is God's method of reversing Satan's corruption**. In other words, it is only through the truth of the gospel that we can undo years of lies and damage and wrong thinking about who we are, what we've been created to be, and replace it with what we've been promised through Christ.

Today we will discover that in many ways, the word of God and prayer are the sealants that protect and preserve us. It's not enough to *remove* grime, we have to *replace* it with truth.

This is the truth that Paul reminds us of over and over again in this book. In chapter 1 he said that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing, that we have obtained an inheritance and are predestined according to his purpose and that we may know the hope to which he's called us. In chapter 2 he says that God has made us alive in Christ, that we are his workmanship, created for good works, that we've been reconciled to God and brought near to his kingdom. Chapter 3 reminds us that we can have boldness and access with confidence the throne of God, and that Christ actually dwells in *us* when we place our faith in *him*. In 4 he talks about how we've been equipped to serve according to our gifts and to teach and encourage according to the gospel. He tells us to put off the old self and put on the new. Chapter 5 reminds us that we once walked in darkness but now walk in the light and encourages us to live wisely in our every day relationships.

And all of those things are great. That's solid biblical truth that you can put on coffee mugs and sell 'em at LifeWay along with companion salt shakers and pot holders. That's warm and fuzzy and makes people get Holy Spirit goose bumps.

But let's face reality: that's not where many of us live. There's a difference between *reading* that truth and *feeling* that truth. And the question we keep coming back to - or at least I do - is this:

### **If God is in control, why is life so hard?**

I think that's why Paul ends Ephesians the way he does. In chapter 6, Paul ends the letter by reminding the Ephesians - and also reminding us - that we're at war. We are at war. If you are a Christian, you are constantly in a battle. You're surrounded by broken people, broken promises, and broken lives. You may be sitting here this morning as a victim of other people's actions against you or of your own poor choices.

Maybe you still have a painful conversation ringing in your ears from weeks ago. Maybe you've been passed over for a promotion at work because you wouldn't play according to someone's unethical rules. Maybe you have a spouse that you've prayed for for years that still wants nothing to do with your brand of faith. Maybe you have a habitual sin that you just can't kick and it came back with force this week. We are at war.

Maybe you have the spiritual gift of cynicism like I do, but I hope the fact that we're at war doesn't come as a surprise to you. I hope you weren't surprised when you came to chapter 6 because you believed the Christian life is supposed to be easy. That when Jesus is a part of your life, he fixes everything and smites your enemies and gives you your best life now. No, Jesus himself *promised* a life of trouble, of persecution, and of pain. In Matthew 10 he told his disciples that there would come a day when brothers would turn one another over to the authorities and children would have their parents put to death and they would be hated by *all* for the sake of Jesus. Put *that* on a coffee mug and sell it at LifeWay.

That's why I love Paul's analogy of putting on spiritual armor. If we're not at war, Paul would have chosen something different. He would have instructed us to put on the bunny slippers of peace and the Snuggie of righteousness. But if you show up to a battle in a Snuggie, you look like an idiot. Let's face it - if you show up in your living room in a Snuggie, you look like an idiot. Just so you know.

Since we covered part of this passage last week, we'll pick up in v. 17 where he hands over the final piece of armor. Here's what Paul says:

**“and take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.” (Eph. 6:17b-20)**

The last piece of armor Paul describes is the sword of the Spirit, which represents the word of God which fuels the role of prayer in the life of a believer. There are **five things Paul tells us about prayer:**

### **1. Prayer engages a spiritual battle in a physical world**

What I don't want you to hear in these examples I've laid out is that we are at war with other people. That flies in the face of what Jesus commanded us in Luke 6 when he said to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. As much as you want to believe it, your war is not with your mother in law. I know you think she looks like evil incarnate, but she's not the enemy.

Paul is clear in v. 12 that our war isn't against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. The problem is not your mother in law. The problem is not your boss or your kids or your bad report from your doctor. The problem is that we live in a world that has been infected and damaged and broken by sin.

And when Paul prays, you see him praying not for physical things, but for spiritual things. He doesn't pray that the Ephesians will be healthy and that they'll make lots of money and their kids will do well on the SATs. He prays that - whatever the circumstances - they will recognize the identity they have in Christ.

A couple of weeks ago was a rough few days here at the Brier Creek Campus. In the span of about nine days we had no fewer than seven people in this congregation who lost a parent or a grandparent, and in one case, an unborn child. Every situation was sudden, unexpected, and untimely. Now I'm a pastor...coming alongside people in times of crisis is what I do, it's one of the ways God has wired me. But I have to tell you after about the third or fourth conversation that week with hurting people, I was spiritually wiped. One night at home I was recapping the week for Merriem and telling her about those of you who had lost someone, and I said, "I'm not sure I can handle another phone call." And seriously, within two minutes the phone rang again. One of my dearest friends here at the Summit was dealing with a very painful situation, and as I sat in my bedroom talking to him, I had to remind myself of what the truth of the gospel was because in that moment it was hard to feel it. I wanted to encourage him, but before I could I had to encourage myself with the truth of the Gospel.

I've gotten to the point where I don't pray for Jesus to heal our boo-boos. Those sorts of prayers do very little for someone and it's the spiritual equivalent of going to a funeral and saying, "Everything's going to be okay." Everything's *not* going to be okay...not for a long time, anyway. No, instead of praying for Jesus to fix it, I pray for him to gird us for battle, to use us in the midst of grief, to use us to point others towards the comfort that only he can give. Piper says that prayer is not a domestic intercom, but a wartime walkie talkie. It's used not to ask for more creature comforts, but to yell for assistance and give direction in battle.

When we pray, we are asking Jesus to bring the spiritual realm to bear on the physical realm. We are asking for him to reverse the curse of Satan and to take what Satan meant for evil and use it for

God's good. We're not asking for our circumstances to change, but we're asking for the grace to make it through our circumstances.

## 2. **Prayer intersects our lives with the Gospel and the Holy Spirit (v. 17-18)**

**“and take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...”**

You realize that when it comes to prayer, most of us are very bad at it, right? Most of the time we pray these very generic, wimpy, passive prayers that either show we don't believe God can deliver or that we don't know what we want. We pray things like "God bless all of the people in the world" or "forgive me of all my many sins" or "Be with those who are sick." If this is the way we pray, we don't have a prayer problem; we have a Jesus problem, because we don't believe he really has the power that he claims.

Now God is a big God, and I believe that if God chooses to bless all of the people or forgive all your many sins or be with those people who are sick, he can and he will. But how much better would it be if you drilled down in your prayer life and got really specific? How much better if you kept a list of specific people or specific sins or specific needs and kept presenting *those* to God?

I think one of the things that throws us is that we don't really know how to pray. That's why I love what Paul says here. He gives us two very specific keys to prayer. He says that prayer is directly tied to the work of the Holy Spirit and to the word of God. You want to know how to jump start your prayer time? Pray through scripture. When you take a portion of scripture and you pray through that, you do several things: first, you keep yourself focused. Second, you're praying for what God wants anyway. If it's God's inspired word, why not pray his promises and his commands over your life specifically? That's an easy way to make sure you're not going off course and asking for stuff that you probably shouldn't ask for.

And then, praying through scripture gives you a way to pray when you don't feel like praying. Think about it: when you are most in need of talking to God, you usually don't feel like talking to God, do you? I mean - other than, "Help me God!" But when you are broken and at the end of your rope and desperate, sometimes it helps to have the prayers of historical biblical figures at your fingertips to guide you in your prayer time.

I'll put just a few examples up on the screen, and would encourage you to jot these down in your notes or in the front of your Bible. **When you can't get past your past**, when your sin seems overwhelming to you, you pray David's prayer of repentance in **Psalm 51**. **When you think God has forgotten you**, and you wonder if he's noticed your pain at all, you pray through **Lamentations 3**. And to use a prayer from our current series, **when you've forgotten who you are in Christ** and the inheritance you've been promised, you pray through **Ephesians 2**. Even in preparing for this message this morning, I prayed Ephesians 6:19 for myself many times: "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel."

When you pray through the Holy Spirit and in conjunction with scripture, it keeps you anchored to truth. And truth is what we need to fight the battle we're in. **If we focus on the battle but not the truth, we'll be in despair. If we focus on the truth but not the battle, we'll be irrelevant. The mature Christian views the battle through the filter of truth.** The point is this: good prayers are a three legged stool: it means praying in conjunction with the Holy Spirit and fueled by the truth of scripture. You don't have to pray someone else's prayers for the rest of your life, and I don't want you to. I'm not encouraging a personal liturgy but a jumping off point to help you see how you most effectively pray.

#### **MEDIA TEAM: SKIP THE 3 STRANDS OF BIBLICAL PRAYER SLIDE**

3. The third thing we see is that **prayer sets captive people free**. v. 19, the verse I just read, says **"and [pray] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel..."**

Have you made the connection yet? Can you see that it's not about your mother in law, it's about what's holding your mother in law captive? Can you see that it's not about *you*, but about the spiritual forces that are at work in your life?

This is where this passage gives some people so much trouble. Earlier in Ephesians we're told that Jesus came to bring peace. But if he brought peace, why are we still at war? Here's the best way I know to explain that. You've seen the stories on the history channel or you read about them in school about what happened after World War II - weeks or months, or in some cases *years* after the war had ended, someone would discover a little band of Japanese soldiers on some island in the Pacific. They were still holding on to their guns and eating their rations and waiting for a

little skirmish to break out, and they had to be convinced that the war was over.

It works the same way here. We've already been set free. It happened at the cross. But now, we're called to join in the battle and to carry the message of freedom to others. What's the message? Paul says it's "the mystery of the gospel." I hope that you are looking for those same opportunities that Paul asked for. I hope that you don't waste chances to declare freedom over someone else's life. When a co worker is hurting, when a relative is dying, when a friend is suffering, you can say silly things like, "Well, you're in my thoughts and prayers." What does that even mean? That's not spiritual warfare, that's a Hallmark card. Or you can declare the freedom that's in the gospel.

Now I recognize you have to be sensitive here. I understand that when someone you're close to is diagnosed with cancer, you can't jump in there and say, "Well it's because of the fall of man and the curse of Satan and bless God, when Jesus comes back he's going to reverse the curse and put the natural order back in place." But you do have the opportunity to declare freedom. Tell your story. Explain that the power of the gospel is found in Jesus doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. That when he died on the cross not only did he take our sin and our shame, but he defeated death and the grave.

You see, without that truth of the gospel, there's no way I could do what I do. If this really is all there is, then what's the point? But if you can point people towards Jesus, then *there* is where the life change comes.

A good friend of mine became a Christian in the spring of 2009 here at the Summit. Over the last several months, one of his family members has been suffering through a particularly aggressive form of cancer. We were talking a couple of Sundays ago and he told me, "I don't know how the "old me" would have responded to this situation. But for some reason, since Jesus changed my heart he's helped me to look at this differently. It's just not as hopeless as you think."

When you pray, you are bringing freedom to captive people. You're asking God to open their eyes to the hope that is available. You're not asking him to take away the boo boos, but to give grace for whatever circumstance comes.

Number **4. Prayer brings clarity to our pain** (v. 20)

[“...opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,] **for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.**”

We can't forget that as Paul penned these words, his wrists were shackled together. His feet were attached to a chain that was attached to prison guard. Paul had every right and every reason to phrase this part of the letter differently. He could have asked the Ephesians to pray for his release. He could have given them instructions on how to bake a file into a cake so he could break out. He could have asked that the Roman jailer's heart would change and he would set him free.

But Paul didn't pray any of those things. Instead, he looked at the bigger picture - the bigger story surrounding his suffering.

Do you have that kind of clarity? Can you see what God is accomplishing in less-than-ideal life circumstances? Can you understand that even in pain there can be purpose? Theologically you know it, academically you know it, historically you know it...but in the midst of the circumstance and in the middle of your pain, how do you know it and believe it?

Paul had it. He knew that the story of the gospel was greater than the story of his shackles. Jesus knew it. In Mark 14 as he prayed before his arrest and crucifixion, he actually asked God to change his circumstances. He told his Father, “All things are possible for you. Please remove this suffering from me, but it's not about what I want, it's about what you want.” But yet we see in Isaiah 53 that it was *God's will* to crush him. Jesus knew that there was a greater story than his suffering, because his suffering would bring salvation. And he said, “If this is the only way, I'll gladly submit, not because it's what I would choose, but because of what you have chosen.”

When we pray, it **doesn't always change our circumstances, but it changes how we look at them.** It brings clarity to our pain and can bring sense to our suffering. It gives us a new filter through which to look at life.

Finally, I want you to see that **5. Prayer is courageous, not cowardly** (v. 20)

Paul says in verse 20 that he wants to **declare the gospel boldly.** Most of the time when we think about prayer warriors, what do we think about, honestly? We think about our blue haired old grandma with her cup of Earl Gray tea sitting in her recliner and

holding on to her Bible with the embroidered kittens on the front praying for some missionary in New Guinea.

That's not the picture that Paul gives us. You have to realize that the sword of the Spirit represents the word of God, and it's the only offensive weapon that's listed here. Every thing else - the belt, the shoes, the helmet, the breastplate, the shield - it's all defensive, meant to protect the warrior. But the sword is a game changer. The sword means that we're storming the gates. We're not called to curl up in the corner in a fetal position and suck our thumb and hang on to our Jesus blankie, we're called to invade Satan's territory and reclaim God's intended order.

Again, prayer is the natural outgrowth of the word of God, and the battle cry of freedom. It means we cannot insulate ourselves and we have to take a few risks. Prayer moves you from focusing on yourself and forces you to focus on others.

That's why we put such a huge emphasis on small groups around here. (Oh boy, he's gonna beat that drum again.) Yep, I'm gonna beat that drum again, because small groups facilitate environments where you break out of your cocoon and start thinking about other people. It's where people have the permission to speak truth into your life and declare freedom over you.

There are times in our lives where we simply have to hand the walkie talkie over...we can't pray, we're weary, we need someone to come alongside.

Last week I got together for lunch with a friend of mine from our small group. We had no agenda to discuss, we just got together. And in the middle of the conversation, he was talking about some particular circumstances he was facing. Nothing major, nothing life changing, just general life stuff with work and family.

And over a plate of barbecue, you know what I did? I reminded him of what he already knew to be true. I wasn't profound. I wasn't doing anything special. I was just making observations of how I saw God working in his life. That's one way that you declare freedom over people, but you can't do that if you show up for a sermon and then go home and never interact with other believers in a small group setting.

Some of you are miserable because you can only focus on what God is or isn't doing in your life. You need to recognize that he's given us relationships within the church as a two way street. Yes,

you need people to declare freedom to you, but you need to declare freedom to other people!

Let me go back to this morning's original question: **If God is in control, why is life so hard?** The difficulty in our life doesn't negate the truth of the gospel - it undergirds it. If our circumstances are an end to themselves, then we're the most to be pitied. But if we see the power of the gospel in the midst of our circumstances, if we see that prayer engages a spiritual battle in a physical world, if we see that prayer sets captive people free, that's when it begins to make sense. That's when our promised inheritance and our present reality begin to take shape.

If we ask, "why is life so hard?" we're asking the wrong question. It's better to ask, "If life is so hard, why am I not engaging the battle?" "If life is so hard, why have I ignored the tools that God has given me?" "If life is so hard, why have I not suited up in the full armor of God and relying on the gospel?"

If **the Gospel is God's method of reversing Satan's corruption**, then that has the potential to change a lot of things in our lives. It can change dysfunctional relationships, it can change the frustration with your job, it can change your regret over past mistakes, your fear about your current decisions, your attitude about your roommate or your spouse or your kids or even your mother in law. If the gospel is God's method of reversing Satan's corruption, then the gospel can change YOU. It can change me. It can change our church, and our city, and our world. Will you bow your heads?