

## **A Prayer for the Church** Ephesians 1:15-23

A small town had three churches, each with a serious squirrel infestation. The Presbyterians decided that it was predestined and opted just to bear with the squirrels. The Methodists chose to model the loving style of Charles Wesley. They humanely trapped the squirrels and released them in a park, but within 3 days, the squirrels were back. The Baptists had the best solution. They voted the squirrels in as members. Now they only see them at Christmas and Easter.

Local churches each have their own distinct flavors, and we get a glimpse of that in most of Paul's letters. But, many Bible students suggest that Ephesians was not originally intended for one specific local church, but to be circulated among several churches. Your Bible may have a footnote on verse 1 noting that the words, "in Ephesus," do not appear in the earliest manuscripts. They may have been added to a copy of the letter intended for Ephesus. Without those two words, there is not one other internal clue in the letter to indicate that it was intended for any particular city.

Paul usually greeted some of his readers by name, but it is not clear that he even knew the recipients of this letter. In verse 15 he writes, "ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus..." . This seems strange, for Paul spent at least three years in Ephesus. Typically, he addressed specific church problems in his letters. In Ephesians, we learn nothing of any unique Ephesian heresies, feuds or virtues. Indeed, we learn nothing unique at all about the Ephesian church from this letter. Whether the letter was only intended for Ephesus or for multiple churches, it is very general in its content.

Because the letter is so general, Ephesians' lessons are easily applied to any church. Its themes are grace, the church and the unifying power of Jesus. The letter could have been received, as is, by any church in Asia Minor, Greece, Italy or Egypt. Even a church somewhere in twenty-first century Lancaster County, Pennsylvania could embrace this letter without having to muddle through questions of historical context, cultural sensitivities or local church conflicts. Early in the letter, Paul shares the content of a prayer he has consistently voiced for the readers of his letter:

<sup>15</sup>For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, <sup>16</sup>I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers – verses 15, 16

Paul could have been praying for this church. In a divinely inspired sense, perhaps, he was. Certainly, every petition he utters reflects the will of God for every church. So first, let us ask ourselves if we bear the marks of the New Testament church, which are "faith in the Lord Jesus" and "love for all the saints."

After all, one cannot exist without the other. Love for the saints is impossible without faith in the Lord, and any profession of faith in Jesus is proven a sham if it is not accompanied by love for His people. If, in fact, we are committed to these things, then we are encouraged by Paul's prayer, for if it reflects God's will for our ancient brothers, we know it reflects the will of God for us.

### **I. A Prayer for Our Further Growth in the Knowledge of Jesus (17)**

<sup>17</sup>I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

## **A. This Knowledge Is Illumined by the Holy Spirit**

Here the Spirit is called the “spirit of wisdom and revelation”. “Wisdom” refers to the knowledge of first facts, in this context, the truths of Jesus. In verse 8, wisdom was paired with “understanding”, which is practical, sound sense. Truth must be properly applied if Christians are to bear fruit in this world. We’ve all known extremely intelligent people without a lick of common sense. The balance of factual soundness and good sense is just as useful in the kingdom of God as it is in the world.

Now, in *verse 17*, wisdom is paired with “revelation”. *Apokalypseos* means “an unveiling”. The Apocalypse, from this same word, is an alternate name for the book of Revelation. Here, revelation has a less heady emphasis the more practical understanding. Revelation is a more “spiritual” kind of a discovery. W.E. Vine calls it “the communication of the knowledge of God to the soul.”

Paul’s prayer for our knowledge of Jesus through wisdom reminds me that we are to be a people of the book. The Scriptures must be the starting point for our practical understanding. They are also the boundary for that which speaks to the heart, or revelation. But when Paul couples wisdom with revelation, I am also reminded that God’s Word must penetrate deeper than our intellect and common sense. A growing knowledge of Jesus touches the heart. It satisfies our emotional and spiritual dimensions as well as our intellectual and practical ones. Otherwise, it becomes cold orthodoxy.

Why is it that you can read the same passage of Scripture fifty times, but on the fifty-first reading, when you are in the throes of something you’ve never experienced, it speaks an altogether new dimension of peace, joy or direction to your heart? It is because a living and vibrant Holy Spirit ministers to and touches human hearts in perfect harmony with the recorded Scriptures.

So much of modern Christianity seems to be one or the other; wholly objective to the point of being nearly lifeless, wholly practical to the point of dismissing the literal truthfulness of the Bible, or wholly subjective to the point that life is warm, fuzzy, adventure with little foundation in truth. Jesus Christ became a real man with intellect, common sense, emotion and spirit. He came to redeem the whole man. It makes perfect sense to me that the Bible should speak to the whole man.

## **B. This Is a Knowledge That Must Grow**

Paul’s readers know Jesus. They are believers with faith in Christ and love for the saints, but Paul’s prayer is that they “may know him better.” A Christian must never be content to stand still in his knowledge of Jesus. Knowledge must grow. That is, after all, the nature of any relationship.

Husbands and wives learn more about one another every year they live together. I was married for a quarter of a century before I realized my wife had a latent affection for country music. I don’t know where it came from. Maybe, the local soft-rock and easy-listening stations quit coming in clearly one day. Perhaps, it is my punishment for listening to too much talk radio. All I know is that one day, from out of the blue, it was all around me. It’s been painful, but we’re working through it.

No relationship stands still, and we must not stand still in our relationship with Christ. We learn one thing and become proud of our spiritual enlightenment, but unless we continue in the disciplines that build our fellowship with Him, we are wholly unprepared for the next trial. These disciplines are worship, learning God’s word, service to Christ, prayer and fellowship with the church and privately. If a relationship is not growing deeper and stronger, it is probably growing more fragile.

## **II. A Prayer for Our Clearer Understanding of Christian Hope (18)**

<sup>18</sup>I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints ...

### **A. We Need the Light of Christ to Grasp What Lays Ahead**

Only God's light can dispel the darkness of this fallen world. We can grasp the notion of a heavenly reward for following Jesus, but I am not sure that we can fully grasp the glorious hope to which we have been called until our eyes are filled with Jesus, Who is God's light. Perhaps, that is why a growing knowledge of Jesus was so important to Paul. The more we know Jesus, the more vibrant our hope. The more we know His mind, the easier we place in perspective the temporary things of this world whether they be pleasurable blessings for our enjoyment or trying ordeals for our growth.

I need more than just my mind and imagination to grasp the certainty of heaven. I need God's light. Biblical hope sustains me through this life, because it is not the same as the wishful human hope we might put in new ideas, new leaders, new religious pursuits or in a change of scenery. The hope of which Paul writes is a confident expectation. It is not wishful thinking. It is the certain anticipation that God will bring His promise to pass based on His history of keeping His promises.

### **B. Our Hope Is an Inheritance of Glory**

As the New Testament develops the theme of glory, the distinction between human glory and divine glory becomes staggering. Human glory is fleeting. The same man who basks in glory one day may bask in a trash heap tomorrow. Last year, Grady Little was on the verge of leading the Boston Red Sox to an American League championship over their nemesis, the New York Yankees. He left a starting pitcher in a couple of batters too long. He was out the door in days.

Human glory is fickle. God's glory is inherent to his Person. He never changes, and His glory never fades. It is into unfading glory that we will one day be ushered. It is a given that the shine will never tarnish from how the saints view God, but is it not a bit staggering to know that the shine will never tarnish in regard to how God views men? We anticipate such glory because we have trusted Jesus. Our hope is that heaven will be eternally glorious. Elsewhere Paul writes:

<sup>1</sup>Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup>For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. – Colossians 3:1-4

## **III. A Prayer for Our Greater Appropriation of Divine Power (19-21)**

... <sup>19</sup>and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, <sup>20</sup>which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

## **A. We Need God's Power to Fit Us for God's Glory**

What Paul has in mind is God's power to transform us. We know we are forgiven. We believe that heaven awaits us. We know that we will appear as righteous in God's eyes because we will stand clothed in a righteousness not our own. We trust that we will enter our reward. But, we also know that in practice, we are bound to an old sinful nature. We still sin. So, how can we be fit for heaven once we are there? What will keep us from sullyng the place up because of our practical sinfulness?

That's one of the most remarkable things about the work of Christ. His power is remaking us. Now, we are holy in standing but sinners in practice. When the work of Christ is complete in us, we will be holy in every respect. The Bible seems to indicate that the most marked work of transformation will occur when we receive new bodies, but the actual work of transformation has already begun. There is power to say "No" to ungodliness. There is spiritual fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" produced in our lives as we yield to Christ even now.

God's power changes us and brings forth spiritual fruit. It strengthens us in our struggles with sin, but perhaps, as sweet as any benefit God's power produces in us, it frees us from yesterday's anger, guilt, regrets, bitterness and bad memories. And, finally, God's power sustains us. It binds us to Him.

## **B. God's Power for Us Was Proven by the Resurrection of Christ**

We know that God will destroy our sinfulness, because the resurrection of Jesus proves His power over sin and death. But that work of power was not exhausted in the Resurrection. Jesus was also exalted to the right hand of God, above "all rule and authority, power and dominion". Those were the typical words that the Jews used to describe hierarchies of angels and demons. That may be what Paul had in mind, but we do not need to understand how angels and demons are ranked to grasp Paul's point; if a power exists in this creation, Jesus is greater. And, if some other power appears with a new title in an age to come, rest assured that Christ has been exalted above that one as well.

God's power to transform us does not absolve us of our responsibility to pursue righteousness. We must still call our sin, "sin" and repent, but there are times when my strength against sin seems so futile. In such times, what I need far more than thoughts of self-condemnation is the encouragement of knowing that I have a powerful Savior Who loves me and Who picks me up when I fall. Though we must fight the battle and we must flee temptation, we can never render ourselves "non-sinners".

Thankfully, we have not been given the full burden of doing so. Rather, we participate in a work that God has promised to complete in us. Do you believe that Jesus won the battle at Calvary? Then, do your best in your struggle with sin, but be comforted in knowing that with Christ in you, the same power that raised Him from the dead will secure the same victory for you in your struggle against sin.

## **IV. A Prayer for Our Keener Sense of the Body of Christ (22, 23)**

<sup>22</sup>And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,  
<sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

## **A. Christ Is Head over Everything for the Church**

The theme of *Ephesians* is the work of God to reconcile a world shattered by sin to Himself. Usually, the metaphor of the Body of Christ is used to encourage believers to see how they belong to one another. Here, the emphasis is on the church's role as Christ's tool for accomplishing His redeeming work. We know that Jesus is the Head of the body, but that is not exactly what Paul says here. Rather, He says that Christ is the "head over everything for the church." Everything in creation is under His feet. In other words, in this harsh, divided and twisted world, we are not without resources in the work to which we have been called. Christ empowers the church to be the church. We serve Him, but we do not bear the burden for securing the final victory. A strong Lord bears that burden.

## **B. Still, Christ's Purposes Are Fulfilled by the Church**

Christ empowers the church, but Paul also says that the church is "the fulness of him". The church fills or completes Christ. That doesn't sound right. Christ needs the church to do be whole? Is He not equal to the task without us? For whatever divine reason, Jesus chose to work out the restoration of the world to Himself through the church. The Lord of the universe could have chosen to bring His purposes to pass without us, but He chose to accomplish them through us. Our purpose for being is clear.

As Christ's church, we confront many issues in this world that can blind us to what we are, Whose we are, and why we are. We are not in the fund-raising business. We are not in the programming business. We are not in the entertainment business. We are the Body of Christ and we exist to do His business. We are defined by our obedience. We are the hands and feet of Christ. Jesus came to "seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10), and He has commissioned us, His Body, to do the same.

Does Paul's prayer not reflect Christ's desire for this church as surely as it did any first-century church? Does He not want us to know Him better? Does He not desire for us the joy and assurance of being grounded in a vibrant hope? Does He not want us to be more tapped-in to His power so that we might cease wallowing in sin and get on with the business of bearing fruit for His kingdom? Does He not want us to grasp that we are His body, doing His work, but in His power and not our own?

All things are ours in Christ Jesus; not the selfish things that a carnal man desires, but all things conducive to a believer's assurance, fruitfulness and joy. All things are ours that pertain to the power and the equipping we need to accomplish the work of the Head of the body, Jesus Himself.

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