

August 27, 2023

A PRAYER TO KNOW GOD AND HIS BLESSINGS

Ephesians 1:15-23

(2 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

If you read the Bible, there is much that is shocking to you. Of course, you read some amazing miracles, like Israel passing through the Red Sea or Elijah raising the widow's son to life, or the believers on the day of Pentecost preaching and every person there hearing their preaching in his own language. If we lived through any one of these events, we'd find it seeping into our conversations all the time. I mean, can you imagine if you'd experienced the crossing of the Red Sea? We'd be sitting around the dinner table, and someone would say, "The most amazing thing happened to me the other day . . ." And we'd look like we're listening as they were telling their story, but really we'd just be nodding along thinking, "Get done with your inferior story so that I can tell you about when we crossed through the Red Sea and there were walls of water on either side of us."

But what is even more shocking in the Bible than miraculous stories like the crossing of the Red Sea or any of Elijah's miracles is the fact that the God who created the world and everything in it shows repeatedly throughout the Bible how much he wants us to know him, to know how much he loves us, and to know how much he's blessed us and intends to bless us.¹ It's overwhelming. And there may be no place in Scripture we see that gracious heart of God more clearly than in this first chapter of Ephesians.

Last week we saw in Ephesians 1:1-14 that the Lord moved Paul to show us how the Lord has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. He chose us to be his holy and blameless children. He sent his Son to live, die, and be raised so that we might be redeemed and forgiven of our sins. He opened our eyes to his glorious plan to unite all things under the reign of his beloved Son. He sealed us with his Holy Spirit, protecting and preserving us until the day when he claims us as his own to be with him forever. Do you see the grace of God in that? Our Heavenly Father wanted us to know all the ways he blessed us in his love for us and by his grace, and so the Holy Spirit moved Paul to write it down in those verses so that we might read it and know how beloved and blessed we are by our God.

But what's amazing is the Spirit didn't stop there. According to verses 15-23 the Spirit then moved Paul to pray for these believers to have the ability—by the Spirit—to know all that God

¹ Just think through the Bible. God calls Abraham to himself, reveals who he is, declares that he is going to make Abraham and his offspring his special people, and then declares all the ways that he's going to bless them. By the time you get to Moses the Lord is revealing himself—so that he wants us to know him—as the one who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exod 34:6-7). To Joshua he calls to himself in order to tell him, "I will be with you; I will not leave you nor forsake you" (Deut 31:8).

has purposed for them and has for them as his children. That is, God not only wanted Paul to tell them how he blessed them, he wanted Paul to pray that they'd get it—that their hearts would be opened to see his grace to them, receive it, and live in it.

And that's not all, the Spirit also moved Paul to write down the content of his prayers for the Ephesian believers so that we (2,000 years later) might read what Paul prays and know that this is a picture of what our Father wants us to know as well. Our Father wants us our hearts to be opened to see his grace toward us, receive it, and live in it as well. That's what I want to show us this morning.

Let me start with the bit of the structure of the text that will reveal three realities I want to hold up for us this morning. Paul spent some time in Ephesus, but he would not have known many of the believers. But he heard of their faith in Christ and of their love for the saints, so he begins by telling them that from the time he heard of this he has not stopped thanking God for them in his prayers.² The reason he thanks *God* for *their* faith and love is because of what he's just noted in verses 3-14. If they believe and love because God chose them, redeemed them, and sealed them by his Spirit, it makes good sense that Paul would thank *God* for what's going on in *their* lives. After all, they're simply a product of God's grace. Additionally, when Paul says he does not cease to give thanks for them in prayer, he doesn't mean that he is constantly praying every second of his life. He means that when he pauses to pray, he thinks of them, and as he does he thanks God, every time.

But it's not just that Paul thanks God for their faith and love; he also tells us that he asks God in prayer to do something for them. He makes two requests of God for them. The first request leads to the second. You can see them both with the word "that" in the text. The first is at the beginning of verse 17. Starting in verse 16 we read: "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, *that* the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened" (vv. 16-18).

That's Paul's first prayer request. He asks that the Lord would pour out the Spirit on the Ephesian believers so that they'll have the wisdom, insight, and understanding (by "revelation" Paul most likely means what we call "illumination") to be able to see clearly and grasp in their hearts who God is and what he has done for them. Specifically he wants them to know three things about what God has for them. This brings us to the second "that" and the second request he makes. He writes in verse 18, "Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know . . ." And now he's going to list three things that he prays the Spirit would enable them to know, and each of these start with the word "what." He wants them to know: (1) "what is the hope to which he has called you," (2) "what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the

² I think the "because" in verse 15 is better understood not as causal but as temporal. Paul is saying "since" (or from the time that) he heard of their faith and love he has not stopped thanking God for them.

saints,” (3) “and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (vv. 18-19). Then he elaborates in verses 20-23 on the nature of this power.

Those three things that Paul prays for will shape this sermon because these are things our Father wants us to know as well. After all, he is the one who moved Paul to write this down so that we might read it and see what our Father wants for us and wants us to know. So let’s take these three things in turn. First, our Father wants us to know the eternal hope that awaits us.

The eternal hope that awaits us

This was the first “what” statement in verse 18. Paul prayed that the Spirit would enable these believers to know “what is the hope to which he has called you.” Now, in one sense, this “hope to which he has called [us]” is represented in all of verses 3-14. When Paul speaks of God *calling* individuals, he is referring to God *saving* those individuals. So, when he notes that God works all things together for the good of those who love God and who are called according to God’s purpose (Rom 8:28), he’s not talking about a select group of believers who are called by God but all of us. He means that he works all things for good for those whom he has saved. And I could give many other examples, but suffice it say that when Paul speaks of God calling us or of us being called he means “saved.” Therefore, here Paul is saying that he wants us to know what is the hope of our salvation. That’s why I say that in one sense all of verses 3-14 is wrapped up in that word “hope.” The hope of God’s calling is all that he has for us in his eternal purpose to bless us with every spiritual blessing. So Paul wants us to grasp in our hearts the glory and beauty of what is ours in being chosen to be God’s holy and blameless children, in being redeemed by Christ and forgiven of our sins, in being given insight into God’s plan to unite all things under the reign of Christ, and in being sealed by the Spirit so that we are protected until the day our God takes possession of us.

But typically “hope” in Paul’s letters especially points to those aspects of our salvation that still await us. This is why in Romans 8:18-30, as Paul speaks of us groaning for the resurrection and all of creation groaning with us as it longs to share in our freedom from the bondage to decay, Paul writes, “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (8:24-25).

Therefore, when Paul prays that we would know what is the hope of to which God has called us, he is praying that the Spirit would help us to grasp the glory of what is ours in eternity. He wants us to be overwhelmed with the reality that one day our Father will send his Son to come and get those whom he’s sealed for himself by his Spirit. He wants us to be in awe of the glorious reality that we’ll be raised from our graves and reign with Christ over a new heavens and a new earth where everything will be glorious with no taint of sin or death. He wants us to be overcome that one day we’ll enjoy such glorious, eternal blessings in our Lord’s presence that it will have been billions of years since we last knew what it felt like to sin, to mourn, or to suffer and die. That’s what Paul prays for and what God wants for us. He wants us to know that hope that awaits us as a result of God calling us to himself.

But why? Why is it so crucial that we would know the glory of something that is in the future, that we can't see, and that we do not now have? Wouldn't it be more important to know what is now and what we can see rather than what awaits us and what we can't see? Well, the answer, I believe, is because it's only when we grasp the eternal hope that awaits us and really believe that it is real that we will live godly, sacrificially obedient lives now. Why give or serve or suffer now if this is all there is? You shouldn't. If we close our eyes in death and that is it, then don't waste your life giving, serving, or sacrificing. But if there's a glorious hope to come, then you'll give because you can store up eternal treasure (Matt 6:19-20). You'll be willing to suffer because you know that the suffering of this age isn't worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us (Rom 8:18). You'll be willing to serve—even without reward here—because you know that your Father who sees you will reward you (Matt 6:6). So Paul prays that the Spirit would enable us to know the hope to which God has called us. But he also prays that we'd know the treasure we are to our Father

The treasure we are to our Father

As Paul continues his requests, he writes in the end of verse 18 that he prays that we might know “what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” I mentioned last week as we looked at verses 11-14 that the text could be speaking of our inheritance as we are heirs with Christ or it could speak of us as God's inheritance, and I opted for the latter. The same is true here where Paul could be praying that the Spirit would enable us to see the riches of the eternal inheritance that awaits us or that we would see the glorious inheritance God has in us as his saints. And, again, I think it's the latter.

In other words, the God who chose us to be his holy, blameless adopted sons and sealed us so that nothing will get in the way of him claiming us for himself moved Paul to pray that his people would know how gloriously rich (or treasured) God sees us as his heritage, or inheritance.

Now, I noted last week how the Bible speaks of God's people as his treasured possession (Deut 7:6). But here is Paul praying that we'll realized how treasured we are. This prayer is for us to know how valued, cherished, and treasured we are. And Paul prays that and writes down what he prays because our Father wants us to see these words, read them, take them in, and know them. He wants us to know how much he loves and cherishes us.

Again, why is this important? It's important for the same reason as noted before. Just as we need to fix our eyes on eternity if we're going to live holy, sacrificial lives now, so we need to know that we are loved and cherished by our Heavenly Father if we're going to truly love and obey him. Scripture tells us that if we love him we'll obey him, and we love him because he first loved us. Therefore, as we grasp his love for us it moves our heart to love him which leads us to obey his commands. So, one of the most important things we can do is meditate on God's love for us. After all, he loves us as he loves his own Son since we are united with Christ. Paul prays that we would know this. Finally, he prays that we would know the greatness of God's power toward us.

The greatness of God's power toward us

As Paul lists his last request, he adds, "And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might" (v. 19). Now, this is a natural progression from Paul's first two requests. If we have an eternal hope and are treasured by our Heavenly Father, and these things move us to want to live obedient lives now, then we need to know that we indeed have the power to carry it out. That's what Paul prays we would know in verse 19. But Paul doesn't leave us to imagine how great this power is. He spells it out.

In verses 20-23 he notes four ways that we can see God's power. First, he says that the power at work in us is the power that God worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead (v. 20). The power that God exercised in raising Jesus from the dead is available to us who are indwelt by God's Spirit. But God's power didn't stop at the resurrection. Second, God seated him at his right hand far above every rule, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name that is named, and not only in this age but in the age to come. Paul couldn't be more comprehensive in saying that Christ reigns over everything. Then he adds that God put all things under his feet—a fulfillment of Psalm 8—as Christ reigns as the God-man over all. And finally he adds that God gave Christ as head over all things to the church, which is his body.

So, let's think through these. God's power was shown in that Jesus was raised to life on that Easter Sunday morning and walked out of the tomb alive. But it wasn't just that he was alive. Daniel has prophesied that one day one the Son of Man would come and be given an everlasting kingdom and an everlasting dominion (or authority), and that's what happened. This is why Jesus announces after his resurrection in Matthew 28:18 that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. And then he ascends to heaven to reign over all things forever until the day when he will return and demonstrate his kingdom fully and the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Christ (Rev 11:15) and every enemy will be judged. This is our Lord, the one who reigns over every atom of the universe.

However, Paul then takes Christ's universal reign and focuses it on his people. After saying that he put all things under his feet, he adds, "And gave him as the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (vv. 22-23). Now, that last phrase ("the fullness of him who fills all in all") is a bit tricky, and you can take it different ways. But instead of going through all the possibilities, I'm just going to tell you what I think it means and then we'll see how it all fits together.

When Paul refers to the church as Christ's body and then refers to it as "the fullness of [Christ]" we need to think of "fullness" there not as the contents that go into a container so that Paul is saying we fill up Christ³ but rather think of the church as the container. In other words, the

³ Although this is precisely how John Calvin took it. He wrote: "By this word 'fullness' he means that our Lord Jesus Christ and even God his Father account themselves imperfect, unless we are joined to him . . . as if a father should say, My house seems empty to me when I do not see my child in it. A husband will say, I seem to be only half a man when my wife is not with me. After the same manner God says that he does not consider himself

phrase “the fullness of him” means that we are filled by Christ (not that we fill him). But what does that mean? Well, immediately after this he notes that Christ “fills all in all,” and a very similar declaration is found in Jeremiah 23:24 as God says that he fills heaven and earth.

There, the Israelites were listening to false prophets telling them that all is well with them, even though they were sinning. And the Lord warns against thinking that by sinning in secret they aren’t seen by God. That’s when he reminds them that he fills heaven and earth. In other words, he tells them that he reigns as Lord in every square inch of creation. I think that’s what is being said about Jesus when Paul says he “fills all in all.”

Therefore what Paul is doing is creating a parallel. Jesus reigns over all the universe and he exercises his Lordship in all of it. And in the same way, he reigns over the church as its head, and he exercises his Lordship there. But why say that? Isn’t that like saying to my wife, “I love all women, therefore I love you as well since you’re a woman”? That won’t be received well. But it’s not like that. Rather, he’s saying that the one who reigns over all and exercises his Lordship in every square inch is especially focused on his church. We are most important to him, and he is ensuring that everything is for our good.

As Jesus reigns, we are his priority. How blessed are we in that the one who has power and control over all things is the very one who loves us and gave himself for us? Paul is telling us that the power that is toward us is nothing less than the power of the Son of God who is Lord over literally everything.

And again, this is helpful for us as we seek to walk in obedience, with the enemy telling us that we don’t have the power to walk away from that sin or we’ll never change or we’ll just not every love and obey Jesus like we long to do. It’s helpful when we’re struggling and the enemy says, “I think he’s forgotten you or neglected you.” Paul says, “No. Christ is King over all, he’s especially focused on you, his church.” But he does more than write that truth, he prays that we’ll believe it and live in it.

Brothers and sisters, we have an eternal hope of glory that is coming, so don’t live merely for the here and now. We are cherished by our Father as his treasured possession, so rest and delight in that and love and obey him with your life in response. And we have the power of the reigning Christ, focused on us, working all for our good, so walk in confident faith and trust.

But I want to say one other thing. Let’s pray this way for one another. What would happen if we made it a habit to pray for each other—even within our small groups—that we would grasp the hope that awaits us, the treasured possession we are to our Father, and the immeasurable greatness of God’s power toward us? I believe it would transform how we live. So let’s pray to that end now as we come to the table. Amen.

full and perfect, except by gathering us to himself and by making us all one with himself.” Quoted by John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 63.