

Paul's Powerful Prayer

Ephesians 1:15-23

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I'm first going to read Ephesians 1:15-16. Paul says, "Therefore..."—or "for this reason"—"...I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers."

From verse 3 down to verse 14, Paul the Apostle has given us a list of the blessings that are ours in Christ. Someone packaged it like this: "He blessed us immensely, He chose us unconditionally, He adopted us adorningly, He redeemed us graciously, He forgave us completely, He showed us grace lavishly, He revealed His mystery wisely, He granted us an inheritance eternally, He sealed us permanently and He guaranteed our salvation personally." Those are all the blessings—the top-ten blessings—that God has given to us because of our position in Christ.

Paul now moves from the praise for the blessings that God has given us to the prayer that "the eyes of your understanding..."—or "heart"—"...being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe." Paul was in prison, but his preaching and his pen and even more powerfully, his prayers had great effect.

In verses 15-16, we will see the purpose of Paul's prayer. In verses 17-19, we will see the actual petitions that Paul prayed. There is actually only one petition, but he breaks it down into three aspects. Then in verses 20-23, we will see the proof of God's power.

Let's look, first of all, in verses 15-16, at the reason for or the purpose of Paul's prayer. Paul says, "Therefore I also after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints..."—here's what Paul did in light of that—"...do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers." So Paul is thankful to God, and he is praying to God.

When you think of others in the family of God, do you thank God for them and do you pray for them? When God brings someone to mind, we should give thanks for them and intercede for them in prayer. So Paul is praying for them for the following reasons, verse 15: because they had "faith in the Lord Jesus" and they had "love for all the saints." Faith and love; because they trusted the Savior and because of how they treated the saints.

This is kind of the dynamic duo, the identifying mark of a true believer. What is a true believer? A true believer is one who has put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We sing:

"Nothing in my hands I bring,

But simply to Thy Cross I cling."

That is what we do: we stand alone in faith and trust in Jesus. How are we saved? "By grace... through faith," Ephesians 2:8-9.

That is the initial faith of salvation. But once you have been born again, by faith, then you start living a life of faith, a sanctifying life of trusting God, believing in God, hoping in God for your daily needs. You must put your faith, your hope and your trust in God. The Bible says, "The just shall live by faith." It is one of the greatest verses in the Bible from Habakkuk. So Paul is saying that he's so glad that they have faith.

Now let's look at the object of their faith. It's "the Lord Jesus." Paul said, "I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus." When we get to verse 17, he mentions "our Lord Jesus Christ." So they put their faith in Jesus Christ, who is Savior and Lord. They are trusting in Him, they are walking in Him and they are believing in Him. That's the mark of a true believer.

So then if you have authentic, genuine faith in Jesus, you have love for all the saints. That word "all" in the Greek means "all." It doesn't just mean a few or only those you like.

"To live above with the saints in love,

That will be glory.

But to dwell below with the saints I know,

Brother, that's another story."

We don't always get along in the body of Christ, but we are to love one another. Every believer has love as a birthmark. Jesus said, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Love is the identifying mark of a true believer. These are the two aspects: we have faith in Jesus Christ, and we have love to all the saints. So we look up to God in faith, and we look out to the body of Christ in love. We are to love one another. When "the love of God is shed abroad Holy in our hearts by the Holy Spirit," we love all people. That's one of the indications that you have been born again: you love like God. If God is love, God's children should be practicing love as well. So for these two reasons: They trusted the Savior and they treated the saints with love.

By the way, when you get to Revelation 2, where the Lord has a message for the church at Ephesus, sadly they had lost their first love. This same church at Ephesus where Paul said that he was thankful for their faith and love, when the Lord spoke to them in Revelation, He said, "You have left your first love." It's important that we stay in His Word, trusting Him and continue to love one another. So Paul was thankful and he was prayerful.

Before we look at the petitions of the prayer, I want to remind you that you can use Paul's prayer to pray for yourself and to pray for one another. Have you ever gotten down to pray, and you don't really know what to say? "Lord, bless my wife. Bless my children. Bless my grandchildren. And bless my pastor." (You can pray that every day. I need all the help I can

get.) We really don't know how to pray specifically.

I'm going to give you a pattern for prayer, in verses 17-19, where Paul describes the petitions for which he is praying. So we now move from the purpose of prayer to the petitions of prayer. Paul says, "...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory..." No problem there; he refers to the Father as "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ." Remember when Jesus hung on the Cross? He said, "My God, My God; why hast Thou forsaken Me?" In His humanity, sometimes Jesus referred to His Father as "My God." After Jesus' Resurrection, He said, "I am ascending...to My God and your God." So Jesus referred to the Father as His God. So the Person who Paul is praying to is God the Father. And He is the Person we address our prayers to.

I love that title: the person Paul addresses his prayer to is "the Father of glory." Paul then says that He "...may give to you..."—and here is the petition, verses 17-18, in which he takes two ways to describe this one petition—"...the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know..."

I want you to understand this passage. I'm convinced, after studying it for many years, that Paul basically has one petition. And this one petition is that you would have "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him." Then he uses different phrases to say the same thing. He wants "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened."

Basically, Paul is praying here that they would experience what they already have; that they would come to a fuller, richer, more intimate, powerful, more personal relationship with God. Notice that Paul does not pray for their material needs; he doesn't pray for their marital problems or for their physical ailments. It's not wrong to do that, and when we have needs, we should pray. But many times that's all we pray for. "Lord, I need more money. Lord, I need a new car. Lord, I need a new house." It's like a shopping list. "...in Jesus' name, Amen—and I need it by 3 o'clock." I know we should pray for these things, but they should not be the priority of our prayers. They should not be the passion of our hearts.

When Jesus taught us how to pray in The Lord's Prayer (which actually is the disciples' prayer), He started with "Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name." It starts with praise. "Praise your holy name." Praise should be the priority in prayer. And then it moves to petition. But even then, the first petition is "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." Before we even ask God for "daily bread," we should ask God for His will to be done. The child of God should never be afraid of the will of God; it is good, acceptable and perfect. We should want God's will in every area of our lives. So we start with praise, we make our priority God's kingdom. That's where Paul started in his prayer.

There is a truth here that we need to catch. When we get right with God and the eyes of our understanding are opened, when our heart is opened and we understand who we are in Christ, we experience God's blessings and power; our marriage will be what it should be, our health will not be an issue, our finances, our jobs and our careers will pale in contrast to our

relationship to God. Many times we're trying to treat symptoms, and we want answers to our problems. But our problem is that we need to be right with God; we need to "know Him and the power of His Resurrection." We need to be in fellowship with Him. We need to be in relationship with Him.

It's so important to get that vertical perspective; that my relationship to God is the priority. My horizontal relationships will come into play and in balance when I am right with God. If you are working on a problem in your marriage right now, get on your knees, pray and spend time in His Word, yielding to the Holy Spirit. That's my marriage counsel to you today. Ask God to soften your heart, open your heart, change your heart, be willing to repent of any sin and turn to God. Then God will work in your marriage. God will heal and work in your situation. But you need to get your focus right—on God.

So what is Paul praying for? He prays that they would know by experience what they already have. Paul prays that they might know God personally, intimately and powerfully. The word "knowledge" in verse 17 is an interesting Greek word. It's not just the word "gnósis"; it's the word "epignósis." Epignosis, with that prefix, means an "overflowing, experiential, personal knowledge." So you don't just come to know God in salvation, but it's a whole, life-long pursuit in sanctification; in knowing Him better.

That's why Paul said, in Philippians 3:10, "...that I may know Him," thirty years after his conversion on the road to Damascus. He's writing to the church in Philippi and said, "...that I may know Him." You think, Paul, you've known Him for 30 years! But he wanted to know Him better. He wanted to know Him experientially, more powerfully and more intimately.

Is that the passion of your heart? Pursuing God? Knowing God? That's what Paul is praying for.

Notice in verse 17, Paul wanted them to have "the Spirit of wisdom." I believe that is the Holy Spirit, who gives us wisdom in God's Word, reveals Christ to us, changes us into His image and gives us a knowledge of Him through His Word. Then in verse 18, Paul said that he wanted "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened." Some translations render this "the eyes of your heart." I like that.

Many times before I preach, I pray, "God, open our hearts, open our eyes and open our ears." I'm not talking physically but spiritually. A lot of people don't hear the Word of God. They don't receive the Word. They don't see the truths of God. That's because their eyes, heart and ears aren't open. So even as believers, we need to have receptivity, that we would have knowledge of Him and overflow in experiential knowledge. So we ask for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation.

I believe that the mind or heart being opened is referring to our mind, emotions and our will. How does that happen? We know God personally in salvation, we know God increasingly in sanctification and we will know God perfectly in glorification. We first are saved, then we grow

in sanctification and then one day we will see Him face to face and will know Him perfectly.

So I believe that as far as the text is concerned, that's the petition: Paul wants them to have the Spirit of wisdom, revelation and knowledge of Him. He wanted their eyes to be open so they would be enlightened.

Now Paul breaks this down for us and amplifies it. It's kind of a Greek pattern of stating the premise and then going deeper and explaining it. There are three key words, all of them the same word—"what." He said, "what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe." Three times, in verses 18-19, he uses the word "what." These are the three things that Paul amplifies and wants us to understand.

First, in verse 18, Paul wants us to know "what is the hope of His calling." Our "calling" reaches back into eternity past, and "the hope" goes forward into eternity future. We look back—God called us by His grace. In chapter 1 it says, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." To think that God chose me and called me by His grace! What has He called me to? He has called me to heaven.

Throughout the Bible it uses this concept of being called by God. 2 Timothy 1:9 says, "...who has saved us and called us with a holy calling." Galatians 1:15 says that God "called me through His grace." In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter says that He "called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

The church, in the Greek, is called the "ekklésia," the "called out assembly." So we, the people, are called by God "out of darkness into...light," called into fellowship, called to worship, called to evangelize, called to reach out to the world around us and then one day, we will be called up to heaven. To hear the trumpet sound, then the dead in Christ rise first, then the dead in Christ who "remain" are going to be "caught up...to meet the Lord in the air." What a glorious truth that is! We of the church are the called of Jesus Christ.

That's why we have a "living hope," 1 Peter 1:3. That's why we have a "blessed hope," Titus 2:13. That's why we have a sure hope. So we are called to a "living hope," a "blessed hope" and a sure hope. Titus 2:13-14 says that we are "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works." That call of good to the blessed hope of heaven should motivate us to live pure lives and to work zealously for the Lord.

If I were to summarize this first petition, "the hope of His calling," basically it is that you, as a believer, could have assurance. I believe the Bible wants us to have assurance; that we should know that we are saved, that we can know that we are God's children, that we can know who we are in Christ. You can't live the Christian life if you don't know you're a Christian. So you need to have that blessed assurance.

"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!

Heir of salvation, purchase of God.

Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood."

We are looking for that blessed hope on the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. So basically, Paul is saying that he wants us to understand that you are saved and you're on your way to heaven.

The second part of this petition, in verse 18, is that Paul wants us to know "what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints." There are two different ways this could be interpreted. The statement could mean that we are God's inheritance, and that is taught in the first chapter of Ephesians and is true. It could also mean—in context this is more likely—referring to our inheritance; that we have laid up for us "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you."

Remember that he told us that one of the blessings that was given to us is the earnest of the Holy Spirit. That earnest is a down payment, an "engagement ring," a foretaste of heaven right now on earth. So he's actually saying two things: "I want you to know that you are saved and you're going to heaven, and I want you to realize how glorious and wonderful heaven is going to be."

We used to sing:

"Heaven is a wonderful place,

Filled with glory and grace.

I want to see my Savior's face."

What a blessed song! And when we get to heaven, the first thing we are going to do is look upon the face of Jesus Christ, who called us by His grace, saved us and washed us in His blood. Faith becomes sight. And you're going to be able to actually reach out and touch the face of Jesus Christ. What a glorious day!

Have you ever had a near-death experience? I had one. I was kidnapped at gunpoint. For a couple of hours, I had a gun held to my head. I thought for sure he would pull the trigger, and I would be dead. But I can't tell you the peace that filled my heart—a sense that any moment now I would see the face of Jesus. What a blessed hope that is.

We know that we're going to go to heaven. And when we get to heaven, we're going to see Jesus. That's going to be glorious. And then we're going to be like Him; our bodies are going to

be transformed. There will be no more sickness, no more sin, no more sadness and no more sorrow. Heaven's been called "the land of no more." That's because all "the former things are passed away."

So here the key is the scope of your hope; you have the hope of heaven, and then the scope of your hope is that you will see Jesus, you will be like Him, no more sin, no more sickness, no more sadness and no more sorrow.

You ask, "Well, John, doesn't that mean that you're kind of heavenly minded, and you won't be any earthly good?" No; just the opposite. The problem with the church today is that we're so earthly minded that we're of no heavenly good. Paul's prayer is a prayer that our hearts and minds will be opened to the reality of our eternal home and the blessings that are ours right now in Christ and that we live in light of them. I believe that motivates us to purity and to good works.

The first part of this prayer is "what is the hope of His calling," the second is "what is the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints," and the third breakdown of this prayer, in verse 19, is "what is the exceeding greatness of His power..."—or "dunamis"—"...toward us who believe..."—God provides power for us believers—"...according to the working of His mighty power." Then in verses 20-23, he goes on to give the proof or a pattern in the person of Jesus Christ of God's power. So Paul wants us to know "the greatness of His power."

This is the way it would break down: God's calling looks back at salvation, God's inheritance looks forward to glorification and God's power looks around at our present sanctification. This is Paul's main focus in the petition: Paul wants us to know God's power. The child of God has the power of God to help them face the problems of life.

God provides you with power. If you're struggling with temptation or you're struggling with some besetting sin, God has provided you with the power. The Bible says, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

So don't tell me you couldn't help yourself. I know you can't help yourself; I can't either. But God can help us. Our problem is that we don't look to God. We don't hope in God. We don't trust in God. We don't rely upon God. We need to be filled with His Spirit, surrendering to Him as Lord. We can walk in victory and conquer those temptations. God will give you power.

Again, if you are struggling in your marriage, God opens "the eyes of your understanding," and you understand your position in Christ and the hope that you have. You rely upon God's power, and He brings healing to your home and healing to your heart. He brings healing to your situation. But it all starts with your relationship to God. The power is available to us in Christ. Christians have power.

In Ephesians 5:18, Paul says, "Be filled with the Spirit." I believe that's where the power lies.

You have the presence of the Spirit—you are indwelt by the Spirit, but you need to surrender to Him and have Him control your life.

Now notice how Paul breaks it down. This is our third and last section in verses 20-23. This is the proof of God's power. Paul talks about three things: the Resurrection of Christ, the exaltation of Christ and the headship of Christ. Verse 20 says, "...which He worked in Christ." He mentioned, at the end of verse 19, "His mighty power." Now he is going to give us a picture or pattern or proof of that mighty power "which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

Notice the proof of God's power as seen in the person of Jesus Christ. Number one, it is seen in His Resurrection. Verse 20 says, "He raised Him from the dead." That's the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. You talk about power! Jesus Christ went to the Cross, died physically, suffered in agony, felt your pain, took your shame, took your sin and died on the Cross. Then He was buried in a tomb. Three days later He rose from the dead. He conquered sin, death and the grave.

When Jesus came out of the grave, He came out of the grave in a glorified, eternal, immortal body. He came back in the same body, but it was now metamorphosized; it was transformed into a glorified body, never to die again. Jesus was the first—and so far, the only one who has ever been resurrected from the dead in a glorified body, never to die again. He is the first in a long line of what's called "the firstfruits of those who sleep." Our bodies will be resurrected looking like His.

You talk about power! He had been slain, and there is no medical science or medical assistance that could revive Him. He had been dead for three days. And not only does He come back to life, but to life in a glorified, immortal body, never to die again. That means He's alive right now. So Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

That leads to the next statement: His exaltation. Verses 20-21 say, "He...seated Him at His right hand..."—that's the place of exaltation—"...in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come." Whether you have good angels or bad angels, or kings or those who are in authority, Jesus Christ has been set up as the superior sovereign over them.

Then in verse 22, it says, "He put all things under His feet." David prophesized of this in Psalm 110:1: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" In Philippians 2:9-11, it says that "God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus Christ is the exalted Savior now sitting at the right hand of God the Father. It is the place

of authority and exaltation.

So we have His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, His Ascension and His exaltation. That's the power that is available to you. The same Christ who rose from the dead is living in you. It's interesting that the power that could raise Jesus from the dead is in us, but we can't get out of bed in the morning to pray. I thought about that this morning when the alarm went off. I prayed, "Lord, give me strength. Lord, get me out of bed. Lord, help me." How much power does it take to get you out of bed? The same power that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you to give you strength to be a loving husband, a submissive wife and an obedient child. The same power to live a life of godliness and purity and obedience to God.

I remember as a young Christian I was so discouraged. I thought, I can't live the Christian life. I can't live this way. It's too difficult. As I fell to my knees and cried out to God, I felt this new strength and power come into me. God's strength and power is the most manifest and evident in your weakness; not in your strength. When I see a self-confident Christian, who says, "I can do it. I am a good person. I can live for the Lord," I think, I don't want to watch. After the crash and the crying, the Lord comes to our rescue. Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong." The power of Christ may rest upon me in my weakness.

If you are experiencing weakness right now, that's the secret to strength: Rely upon God, look to God. Let Him strengthen you in your hour of need.

So we have the power of His Resurrection, we have the glory of His exaltation and we have His headship of the church, verses 22-23. Christ is the living head of the body, the church. Verse 22 says, "He...gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body..."—We're united to Him, the living Head, and He supplies everything we need—"...the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

No human being is the head of the church. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. He's both the foundation and the head of the church. By the way, Jesus is the Pastor of the church. Any man who calls himself a pastor is just an under-shepherd; we are under the shepherd, the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. You are his sheep. You're not my sheep. (I'm kind of glad you're not; sheep are messy and smelly.) I can commit them to God. "God, these are Your sheep; take care of them." And He does. He guides us as the Good Shepherd. He gave His life as the Good Shepherd of the sheep. So Jesus is the living Head.

Jesus rose from the dead—that's power, He is exalted at the right hand of God the Father—that's power, He's the living Head who we are united to and can draw from. The head speaks of care, guidance and protection. And we in the church are all united together and united to Him.

So to summarize this series, in light of this prayer, Paul wants us to know God experientially, he wants us to appropriate our riches fully and he wants us to experience His power victoriously.

How do we do that? Through the Scriptures, through prayer, through suffering and through the surrender of our lives to the power of the Holy Spirit.

What we read today was a pastor's prayer for his people. This is also my prayer for you, God's people. You can take the pattern of this prayer any day or time you want and pray it for me; that God would open up the eyes of my heart, the eyes of my understanding, that I might know "what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of" my inheritance and what is the power that is available to me in Christ.

Let's pray.