

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY in CHRIST

A PATTERN OF PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD
(PART 2)

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

18 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, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 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. 22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. Ephesians 1:18-23 NIV

This past week I performed another funeral, the fifth one since last December – including the funeral of my Mom and oldest son. And every time I perform a funeral, every time I meet with those family members, every time I stand at the head of that casket at the cemetery, every time I look out into those grieving faces, and every time I think of my own family members now with the Lord...I'm reminded of the need for hope.

Hope. It's a word that is often used in the Bible. And a word that is just as often misunderstood. Often stereotyped as mere wishful thinking, an adult says, "I hope I win the lottery!" or a teen-age girl says, "I hope he'll ask me out!" or my youngest son says, "I hope I don't have to go to another meeting with Mom and Dad!" Yesterday, one of our neighbors, having heard of our boy's death, said "I hope he's in a better place."

But let's get this straight. Hope as used in the Bible doesn't mean mere wishful thinking. Biblical hope is better by far. Hope as used in the Bible means *certain anticipation*.¹ And it is this sense of certain anticipation that can carry you and me through the most intense suffering – physical, emotional or otherwise – and bring us out on the other side all the stronger.

In Ephesians 1:15-23, Paul is praying for believers. He has moved from *benediction*, praising God for all that we have in Christ (verses 3-14) to *intercession*, praying these truths will be actually experienced by these believers (verses 15-23). But there are two things we should remember. First, Paul is praying not just for the Ephesians, but for you and me. Given the character of this letter and its application to the universal church, I believe it is fair to say that his prayer has you and me in mind also. Even as Jesus prayed in John 17 for those sheep who would be added to the fold, so Paul prays for believers down through the centuries. Secondly, Paul here leaves you and me a pattern of prayer for the people of God. And from this pattern we can learn important lessons about our life of prayer for one another.

We saw last week the answer to the questions: “Why are we to pray for one another?” and “How are we to pray for one another?” We also began to look at the question “What are we to pray for one another?” The first answer to that last question is found in verse 17 – we are to pray that we might know God better.

But now in verse 18 Paul turns from praying for the believers to know God better, to praying that they might know themselves better, i.e. that they might better understand what God has in store for them in the future. Apparently, Paul had heard about the faith and love that marked these believers; he now continues his prayer, asking God to strengthen their sense of hope.

Before looking specifically at what Paul’s requests are, notice that he makes first a general request: *I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.*ⁱⁱ We all have physical eyes, with which we see (some more easily than others) what is around us. We also have mental eyes, with which we perceive and process information. But we also have “heart eyes” with which we grasp spiritual truth. That’s why Paul continues in verse 18 saying, “...*that you might know...*” Interestingly, the word for “know” here is also the word for “see.” It has to do with seeing with the eyes of the heart.

I’m reminded of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Remember that story in Luke 24? With their physical eyes they saw the path ahead and the beauty around. With their mental eyes they were processing the disturbing events of recent days – Jesus’ betrayal, crucifixion and death. Suddenly, Jesus comes along and walks alongside of them. But the text says, “They were kept from

recognizing him.” But then, as Jesus begins to explain the OT prophecies of his coming and suffering, and then as he takes the bread and breaks it in front of the disciples, suddenly, their “eyes were opened” (the account says) and they saw...not just with physical eyes, and not just with mental eyes, but with the eyes of the heart.

As Paul prays for the Ephesians, he recognizes the need for the truth of these verses to drop down about 12 inches – from our head to our heart. And this is my prayer for each one of us. That even as the disciples with Jesus said, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked to us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”... that our hearts would also burn with these truths of our future hope. It is this hope that Paul speaks of first in his prayer.

OUR WONDERFUL FUTURE (18A)

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has calledⁱⁱⁱ you...

Faith looks upward. Love looks outward. But hope looks forward. And it is this forward look that Paul now prays into the lives of these believers.

I like how the New Living Translation puts this verse: “*I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the wonderful future he has promised to those he called.*”

Have you ever noticed how anticipation infuses into our being excitement, vitality and even perseverance through uninvited circumstances? I remember well our long furlough trips, moving from one part of the country to the other. Often, after being gone on a long trip, the simple thought of being home again pulled me through the long, tedious hours of traveling in a car with three or four impatient kids bouncing off the back seat, incessantly asking, “Dad, are we there yet?”

The biblical writers understood the transforming power of having our eyes fixed on our future hope. No wonder they talk so much about it –

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ... Philippians 3:20

I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:14

Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, ... Hebrews 3:1

Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one...
Hebrews 11:16

And yet few of us live each day with that excited anticipation of going home...really going home. Do you? Friend, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the day you die will be the best day you *have ever* lived. No wonder Paul can elsewhere say, “*I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far*” (Philippians 1:23).

Calvin Miller, in his book *The Divine Symphony*, puts it this way:

*I once scorned ev'ry fearful thought of death,
When it was but the end of pulse and breath,
But now my eyes have seen that past the pain
There is a world that's waiting to be claimed.
Earthmaker, Holy, let me now depart,
For living's such a temporary art.
And dying is but getting dressed for God,
Our graves are merely doorways cut in sod.^{iv}*

The day you die will be the best day you *have ever* lived. But it will not be the best day you will *ever* live. The day of your resurrection will be even better. But in the meantime, you and I need to cultivate a passion for heaven. We need to be overwhelmed with the spell of going home. And that is what Paul prays for these believers. And that is what you and I should be praying for one another.

OUR RICH INHERITANCE (18C)

But Paul is not content to talk about our wonderful future, the objective hope to which God has called you and me. He gets more specific. He prays also that these believers might understand their rich inheritance. Again, I'm reading from the New Living Translation:

I want you to realize what a rich and glorious inheritance he has given to his people.

Paul's request here has been translated in two different ways, both of which can be supported by other biblical passages. For example, some understand Paul to be saying, "I want you to understand how rich God's portion in his people is" (Williams' translation). Taken in this sense, Paul is praying that we would understand that we are God's inheritance.

Elsewhere in the Bible we discover that believers *are* God's inheritance. Peter tells us that we are a "*people for God's own possession*" (1 Peter 2:9), borrowing terminology from the Old Testament where Israel is seen to be God's "portion" or inheritance (Deuteronomy 7:6-8; 32:8, 9). Even in verse 13 of this chapter Paul says that the Holy Spirit is "*a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-...*" (Ephesians 1:14). The word "possession" is very interesting. It literally means God's "walk-around." In ancient times one would walk around a piece of property, claiming it as his own. So too, God has marked out or "walked around" those who believe. We are his. We are his inheritance!

Though this concept of believers being God's inheritance is true and supported by verse 13, I believe that the translation of the NLT best conveys Paul's thought here. He is praying that you and I might understand the rich inheritance that God has given *us* who believe. And believe me, this inheritance is rich!

- It is the very kingdom of God, prepared for us from the creation of the world. Jesus said, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world*" (Matthew 25:34).
- It is an inheritance that is guaranteed: "*he has given us new birth...into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-kept in heaven for you*" (1 Peter 1:4-5).
- It's an inheritance that will last forever: "*The days of the blameless are known to the Lord, and their inheritance will endure forever*" (Psalm 37:18).
- We will share this inheritance with Jesus Christ himself: "*...we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his*

sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:16-17).

- It is an inheritance of the earth itself, over which we will reign with Christ: *“You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10)*

When I think of all that you and I have to look forward to, I realize how trite and transient the rewards of this life really are. When we are overcome by the “spell” of heaven and begin to shift our priorities so that they line up with what awaits us, then many of the material items that grab our attention day by day begin to fade into insignificance.

Soon after my mother died on Thanksgiving eve, I was informed that we would be receiving a certain inheritance that my Dad had wisely laid aside over the years. For Mary Alice and me, that was an encouragement in the midst of the grief of losing my Mom. We breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that now we could help our children in ways that we were previously unable. We could help pay for college, we could take care of some needed repairs around the house, we could give more generously. We awaited this inheritance in excited anticipation. And then four days later, Jonathan died. Suddenly, that material inheritance took on a new perspective. I began to see with the “eyes of my heart” aspects of my true inheritance in Christ that were previously ignored. At first disappointed that I couldn’t call Jonathan up in Korea and say, “Hey, guess what...I can help with next year’s college expenses” ... I then began to better see (with the “eyes of my heart”) the true inheritance that he had already come into and what awaits you and me.

GOD’S GREAT POWER TO MAKE IT ALL HAPPEN (19-23)

So far Paul prays that we can understand, with the “eyes of our heart,” the wonderful future and the rich inheritance that awaits us in Christ. But I think that Paul knew that the Ephesians (and we) might have a rather disturbing question about all of this. How can we be certain about this? Will it all really happen? And so in verses 19-23 we find a picture of God’s great power which is able to make it all happen. Notice what Paul says:

[I pray also that you might know...] his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and

seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 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. 22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Before coming to know Christ, these Ephesians believer's lives were marked by much anxiety about their "fate," thought to be determined by the stars and cosmic powers. Even a cursory reading of Acts 19, which tells of the conversion of many of these believers, clues us into the sorcery and magic that influenced their lives and world-view. In Ephesus, the great goddess Diana, also known as Artemis, was worshipped as supreme in divine power and position. The signs of the zodiac around her neck assured the devotee that she possessed authority superior to that of astrological fate.

But in stark contrast to such supposed power, nothing is like the divine power made available to us as believers and which assures you and me that what God has promised us He is perfectly capable of bringing about. Paul piles one word upon another in verses 19-20 to get his point across: "incomparably great power" and "the working of his mighty strength."^v All of this, he says, was "exerted in Christ."

Our attention has recently been redirected to Mt. St. Helens. I stood on our parking lot this last Tuesday watching the show at about 5:30 PM. Of course, nearly 25 years ago, St. Helens exploded with what is probably the most visible indication of the power of nature that the modern world has ever seen. At 8:32 AM that morning, the explosion ripped 1300 feet off the mountain, with a force of 10 million tons of TNT, or the rough equivalent of 500 Hiroshimas. A blast of 300 degree heat traveling at 200 miles an hour killed 60 people, some as far as 16 miles away. The blast leveled 150 foot Douglas firs as far as 17 miles away, destroying a total of 3.2 billion feet of lumber, enough to build 200,000 3 bedroom homes.^{vi}

My friend, that's power, but nothing compared to the awesome power of God demonstrated in Christ. Now I want you to notice four things that God did for his Son in these verses as a demonstration of his power.

First, he raises him from the dead (v. 20). In the resurrection, God did not simply reverse the process of death and mortality; he superseded it! Jesus

was raised with an altogether new body, a transformed, immortal body! That's why Thomas Goodwin says, "His resurrection has the power of all resurrections contracted in it."

Secondly, God's power gave Christ the seat of kingly authority at His right hand (v. 20). In this position, every demonic power that could possibly come against Christ or against you and me – threatening the fulfillment of God's promises in our lives and the inheritance which is ours – has been placed under Christ's authority. This includes every "*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*" (verse 21).^{vii}

Thirdly, everything in the universe will be ultimately in subjection to Christ. Here Paul makes allusion to Psalm 8 and Psalm 110 which look forward to Christ's ultimate rule over the earth and universe. As the writer to the Hebrews says, "At present we do not see everything subject to him." But someday we will.

In the meantime, God is exercising this authority through the Church And this leads to the next statement. Fourthly, God gives his Son, with all that universal power and authority, to the church as head. As believers, we are part of the Body, and every body has a head. The head of the Body of Christ, the Church, is Jesus himself. God did not raise Jesus from the dead, exalt him as King, and place all things in subjection to him and then say, "Now go ahead and fill the earth and universe with your glory; do it yourself." No, even as Jesus had a physical body while on this earth, through which he carried out his ministry, so today he has a "body," the church, through which his authority to rule is carried out. Christ was united to his body then as he is united to his body now. Christ as head and the church as the body are inseparable...just as inseparable as your body is to your head. And according to Paul's words, it is through this Body – the Body of Christ – that God is filling everything in every way (cf. Ephesians 4:11-17; Matthew 28:19-20)^{viii}.

So the next time that you are facing the stark realities of life and death, of loss and failure, of sickness and difficulty, remember: God has promised you and me a wonderful future, a rich inheritance, and his great power to make it all happen.

TESTIMONY (Joanie Militich and Mary Alice Stevens)

Among the many opportunities here at CB to pray together, our prayer Sunday School class is also on that journey of the Spirit teaching us about WHY the need to pray together... why HE is so insistently calling us to it... why WE need it so much.

Even in isolating the Apostle Paul's writings alone, we see an almost shocking emphasis, not on the individual believer, but on our existence as a Body... a **community** relationship to Christ... a unified organism.

What is the huge importance to God and to the world of living-out our being part of a Body? What does it look like? What differences will come about from seeing ourselves this way as God sees us? And what role does prayer play in any of this?

As we've been **praying together**, we are being taught about **being Body**. If Paul prayed that the Body would grow into being Body, we learn that 1) we should pray about this too, and 2) it is the Spirit who helps believers find their way to **become Body**.

We each bring to CB what we've gained growing up in the world: information, expertise, experience, plus the bonus of spiritual gifts... excited to put it all together and make something, do something. But to our surprise, the very strengths we bring can be blocks to each other and barriers to the Spirit of God. Truly a whole group of people trying to think and move as one is impossible apart from the Spirit of God.

So He calls us to lay down all that information, the degrees, the experience and to wait on Him together - in prayer - for the Head, Christ, to say who is to do what, when, how. Only He knows the time to call each of us forward with our idea, or experience, or gift to bring to Him. Only in the humility of Christ can we be united in prayer that releases our desires in order to embrace His.

We express our utter dependence in prayer... and desperation, really, that says, "We will *never* get anything done or know which way to go without You." Collected, in this spirit of prayer, we wait in mutual submission for Him alone. And Christ, who is the Head, answers, and the Body responds in proper coordination.

Often our understanding of Body unity is the unity centered in truth: unity of doctrine, and there *are* essential truths that unite us. But only as these truths are companioned with submitting mutually to one another in love, are we energized by the Spirit of God for the ministry regardless of positions, programs, or approaches. So as Jesus chose to empty himself, we come, together in prayer, to join Him in that choice, again and again, that all things concerning CB may be in subjection under His feet, that He may truly be "Head over all things to the church, which is His Body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

Notes

ⁱ Faith and hope go hand in hand. That's why the writer to the Hebrews says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see..." (Hebrews 11:1).

ⁱⁱ There are various translations of this request. But I believe the best is seen in the King James Bible: "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened..." Elsewhere in this letter and in the New Testament it is clear that, for the believer, this "enlightenment" has already taken place. *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.* Ephesians 5:8 *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.* 2 Corinthians 4:6. Paul seems to be stating here the *reason* that believers can experience what Paul is about to pray for. The Holy Spirit has come into our lives, bringing with him this "light" and spiritual understanding.

ⁱⁱⁱ What is this calling?

- It is *past*. It's a holy call that has already taken place (2 Tim 1:9): "*who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace...*" God has called us to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom 8:30) and into the "fellowship of His son" (1 Cor. 1:9).
- It is *present*. "*so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who (is calling) you into His own Kingdom and glory.*" (1 Thess 2:12). We have been "called to freedom" (Gal 5:1,13). We have also been called to suffer (1 Pet. 2:21). We have been called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28,29).
- It is *future*. It's a heavenly call (Heb 3:1): "Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling..." It's an upward call (Phil 3:14): "the hope laid up for you in heaven" (Col. 1:5).

^{iv} Calvin Miller, *The Divine Symphony* as cited by Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 447.

^v Altogether Paul uses five different terms to describe this power. The words "surpassing greatness" refer to the unimaginable divine potency directed toward all who believe. Both of these terms were used extensively in magical papyri in Asia Minor. The word "power" means literally "ability, capacity" and is also found in Ephesians 3:20 ("to Him who is able"). In the magical writings of Paul's day it indicated the "substance obtained by chanting magical words or names" (cf. Rom 1:16; 2 Cor 4:7-12; Phil 3:10). But in contrast to the magical background of the Ephesians: (1) the power of God alone is sufficient and supreme; and (2) the power of God is personal – received through faith in a personal God and not by chanting magical words or names. The word "working" indicates the exercise of superhuman power. It is used in v. 20 ("brought about") to refer to the *realization* of God's power in raising Christ from the dead. In 3:7 it is the "working of His power" that gives God's grace. In the magical documents that the Ephesians were so familiar with, it always refers to a recipe, spell or charm that has been found to "work" and is therefore "effective." For the term "mighty strength" compare Ephesians 6:10 "be strong in the Lord and in the *strength of His might*". The two terms are synonyms. Clinton E. Arnold *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

^{vi} *National Geographic* January 1981.

^{vii} The term “*rule*” is used in Dan. 10 for the Princes of Greece and Persia. The term “*authority*” refers eight times to spiritual powers. The basic meaning is “official power” and so the term often refers also to human magistrates. The “*powers*” in the OT often translate the expression “Lord of powers” or “Lord of hosts” (Deut 4:19; 1 Sam. 4:4; Is. 42:13; 2 Kings 21:3). The term “*dominion*” is used only one other time in Col 1:16 and may be the equivalent of the “so-called gods” of 1 Cor. 8:5. Notice that these powers are contrasted to the five terms used to describe the power of God in v 19.

^{viii} “The church is the fullness of him...” What is the meaning of this concept? If taken in the *active* sense (“that which fills”), the church is the fullness (compliment) of the one (i.e. Christ) who is being completely filled.” In this sense, the church is the completion of Christ. But Paul has just finished talking about the supremacy of Christ. Why would he now talk about the church “completing” Christ? Taken in a *passive* sense (“that which is filled”), the church is filled by Christ, as a container is filled with water. Christ provides for the church and through the church fills all things. This is precisely what he is said to do in 4:10. Christ then who fills the church fills also the universe. In other passages where the same or similar expression is used (1:10, 23; 3:19; 4:13; Col. 1:19; 2:9; Rom 11:12,25; 13:10; 15:29; 1 Cor. 10:26; Gal. 4:4), it is always with a passive sense. This is especially clear in the phrase “the fullness of time” (1:10). “Fullness” here then suggests two things: (1) that which is *filled by Christ*; i.e., the church is filled by Christ not only with his own life and presence but also with the gifts and blessings he gives; and (2) that which is filled with Christ; i.e., the church contains the fullness of Christ. As the glory of God filled the OT temple (Ezek 44:4; Is 6:1), so Jesus Christ today fills us, his temple (2:21-22).