

Sermon Transcript
July 4, 2021
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Ephesians 1:15-23 - Inclusive Bible Translation

15 From the time I first heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of the holy ones, 16 I have never stopped thanking God for you and remembering you in my prayers. 17 I pray that the God of our Savior Jesus Christ, the God of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, to bring you to a rich knowledge of the Creator. 18 I pray that God will enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see the hope this call holds for you—the promised glories that God’s holy ones will inherit, 19 and the infinitely great power that is exercised for us who believe. You can tell this from the strength of God’s power at work in Jesus, 20 the power used to raise Christ from the dead and to seat Christ in heaven at God’s right hand, 21 far above every sovereignty, authority, power or dominion, and above any other name that can be named—not only in this age, but also in the age to come. 22 God has put all things under Christ’s feet and made Christ, as the ruler of everything, the head of the church, 23 and the church is Christ’s body; it’s the fullness of the One who fills all of creation.

Grace and peace to you from a risen Christ that invites us into a spirit of wisdom and revelation to know God more fully and with our whole being. Amen.

Before I begin to share my meditation on these passages from Ephesians, I want to thank the pastoral team for this unique and humbling opportunity to preach for you on my second to last Sunday at Seattle First Baptist Church. As many of you know, I'm entering my third of four years at Luther Theological Seminary, working towards a Masters of Divinity, and hopefully ordained a deacon in the ELCA church. This will allow me to continue my music ministry, administer the sacraments (communion and baptism for the Lutherans), give pastoral care, and, yes, preach from time to time.

I want to emphasize humbleness in my time with you today because if you've had the pleasure of witnessing these three preachers preach, you'd know that we are beyond honored to have such wisdom and spirit-filled prophetic words forming our faith community.

So thank you, Pastor Patricia, Pastor Anita, and Pastor Tim.

Over the next several Sundays, you will hear more or less the entire letter to the Ephesians. It's a small but excellent letter full of biblely language written centuries ago. It's small in that you could sit down in about 30 minutes or so and read the entire letter. However, you'll spend your entire life trying to

understand short passages, let alone the whole thing. This is why every three years or so in our lectionary cycle, churches across the world will choose to read, study, meditate, pray, and preach on it.

The author of this letter is Paul. You may have heard of the guy. He's known for more or less establishing the early Christian church. He is writing this letter to the people of Ephesus, modern-day Turkey, to new Jesus followers. In the Book of Acts, chapter 19, we learn that Ephesus was a large city and the epicenter for the worship of the Greek gods. Paul had a lot of success establishing churches in this region, and he's checking up on them and giving them a bit of encouragement. Most of Paul's letters like 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Galatians, or others you might have read in the Christian Scriptures are specific in nature. He is most often responding to a need or a challenge that a particular community was facing at that time. Ephesians is different.

More significantly, Paul's sharing his summary of the whole gospel story and how it should reshape every part of *our* story. So as you are being shown more and more of this letter over the coming weeks, I want you to think about the gospel story, and our story, all integrated together. Paul explains how the good news should create ethnically diverse communities unified by the commitment to Jesus and his teachings. Paul communicates how the gospel story should be affecting believer's everyday lives. He also believed that God purposed throughout all of history for the Jesus movement to evolve into an extensive multi-ethnic community of followers. This multi-ethnic community would comprise Jews and non-Jews (gentiles), which was a unique concept for that time. Paul proclaimed that this new covenant family should find their identity through the belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These new, all-encompassing Jesus followers would be a part of the covenant family, God first promised to Abraham, one of our earliest desert ancestors. We now know this as the Christian faith.

In these few verses that lead into chapter 2, Paul prays an extraordinary prayer to the Jesus followers in Ephesus. I want to emphasize that Paul doesn't pray for healing or pray for things to get better; things are actually going pretty well for these people! Paul oddly prays for the Ephesians to have wisdom and awareness of God's presence, which Paul wants them to know is right in front of them. The other odd thing he prays for is power.

Now, if you just cringed a little, don't worry, I did too when I first read this because it sounds like victorious righteous Christian living-follow Jesus. You will have a life of power and victory! But the kind of power Paul believes the followers of Jesus have access to is a different concept of power. This is an upside-down idea of the power that came and was expressed when Jesus gave up his life and became powerLESS on the cross. Jesus' passion story is distinct because *this* kind of power came into being in our world *because* of his love and self-sacrifice. This lens of a resurrected Christ is how I'd like to view and journey with you today.

Paul's letter is all about making things new and creating a new people for God's self. What opens this letter is this beautiful and densely packed poem of praise to the Triune God. Hear verse 3 again, "Praised be the Maker of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens!"

God the Maker, God the Son, and God the Spirit mediates Christ's blessings to all of creation. Paul continues to explain that this Three-in-One is a community in God's own self, who has created, invited, and redeemed a people for God's self amid a broken world. I find these passages written in exquisite language and theology and so characteristic of Paul's writing. Great. Good. It's also really biblely, so don't worry if you're getting that glazed-over feeling.

Prayer may be a new or old practice for you. But what really is the purpose of prayer for each other in this new family that Jesus is creating as described by Paul?

Okay, time out.

Church, confession time. I have doubts about prayer. Can I get an amen? I confess that I don't really understand it or fundamentally believe in prayer. I struggle with its language, form, and purpose. What seems even more problematic and cruel is for me to believe in a god that would choose to intervene *this* time and not *that* time. It's inconsistent. And so, why would I ever want to believe in a god that shows up for my selfish and privileged reasons but couldn't show up for any number of other human-caused horrors in this world? Or worse, because I believe my faith is stronger or more favored; thus, I feel entitled to receive God's blessing more than someone else. Some are more chosen than others? This goes against everything I believe in God, and so I struggle with finding purpose for prayer. There, I've confessed.

Typically, these doubts wouldn't be that big of a problem, but I'm kind of investing in a vocation that expects me to pray with and for people a lot. But this is when I read verses 15-23. Hear verse 17, "I pray that the God of our Savior Jesus Christ, the God of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, to bring you to a rich knowledge of the Creator."

Now, say what you want about Paul. Believe me, I have many problems with Paul, his writings, and his theology; just wait until we get to chapters 4 through 6, yikes, but this verse taught me something profound about prayer. Hear verses 18 and 19, "I pray that God will enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see the hope this call holds for you—the promised glories that God's holy ones will inherit, and the infinitely great power that is exercised for us who believe."

I know more biblely language. Hang in there.

There are three things Paul is praying for here. Enlightened eyes, continuous hope, and power to those that believe.

Now church, we have a problem with thinking that prayer is crisis management. Prayer is what you turn to when things go wrong. So and so needs your prayers because something terrible happened, or they're sick, or a tragedy occurred. And this is true; we need prayer in these times to help us grasp the hardships of life. But we almost always go radio silent when things are going well and fabulous. Paul is

attesting to this notion that when things are going great, we should pray *more*; we should never stop. Whether the fire is about to go out or when it's raging, people always need prayer. Paul never stopped praying for their hearts to be opened.

This is a unique insight into prayer. This is a prayer I can get behind. Whether I'm experiencing momentary tragedy or joy, no matter any circumstance in my life, I pray that I will have enlightened eyes to see the work and wisdom of God so that I may continue to know the work of an infinite Creator. This isn't praying for Mary's hip to be healed, John to find a job, or Alex dealing with a breakup but instead praying that in those experiences of Mary, John, and Alex, God's presence would enlighten something inside them. And I pray that in God's presence, the Spirit, that our eyes will be opened to see God right in front of us, with us, walking with us, suffering with us; healing with us. This is an opportunity for Jesus to be with me so that I can understand his grace and presence more deeply than before. I repeat, this is not praying for the situation, but that the situation would give me new growth and new life.

Let's go further. The second thing Paul prays for is continuous hope.

"I pray that you can see the hope." Hope is about having the conviction that my present circumstances don't determine the meaning of my life. I believe Christian hope is considering that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that something so surprising happened, something so counterintuitive, so strange, and yet, extraordinary. I'm being asked to lean into this and church; it's not an easy task. But as a follower of Jesus, I have to understand and accept that my life may suck, and the state of the world may be horrible. Still, I believe in a God who brings life out of death, who came among us to personally bear the result of all the stupid, selfish things I do, carry a cross, and die, and yet, transpose that into new life. To hope is one of the core Christian disciplines, and Paul is beseeching that we lean into that continuous calling from God. God is making all things new. God is doing that right here in this broken world.

The third thing Paul prays for, power.

"...the infinitely great power that is exercised for us who believe." Paul is revealing that the resource of power is available to us if we would open our eyes, see it, and believe it. Now, our current cultural understanding of power is not a positive one. This comes from centuries of oppression and injustice of gender and racial minorities. We believe power is might and strength vs. meek and weak, holding the entitled belief that you can do whatever you want and say what you want with abandonment. And many branches of Christianity uplift this as gospel, "in Jesus' resurrection, you have power, we should all be powerful, and God will give you all the riches of heaven and earth." Victory power in Jesus!

But that is NOT what Paul is praying for. This is a particular kind of power, and he immediately tries to cut off any other notions if you just read a little further.

"You can tell this from the strength of God's power at work in Jesus, the power used to raise Christ from the dead and to seat Christ in heaven at God's right hand, far above every sovereignty, authority, power

or dominion, and above any other name that can be named—not only in this age, but also in the age to come."

Got all that? Great. I know, biblely language. But again, Paul is being super profound in this statement. He's not talking about victory or being an influencer for Jesus. He's talking about the kind of power that transformed the death of Jesus into resurrected life. This is the new age to come, the future has come crashing into the present through Jesus. Jesus is the one human not compromised by sin and the one human being God intended all human beings to strive for. Jesus lives on our behalf, dies on our behalf, and absorbs the collected mess we've made. Through the resurrection story, God exerts God's power. Not the power to do whatever God wants to do or commands of us, but the kind of power that gives up status and authority, absorbs and takes the hit on behalf of others, recognizing human sin will crush God's son. Still, because God's commitment to humanity is so strong, God has the power to invert death into life. And that's what the resurrection story is about. It's about taking the most sinful, selfish, and tragic human beings and transforming them into something that gives life. I believe that our Christian identity is in the belief that physical death does not get the final word.

God's devotion to humanity is so intense, can I get an amen?

Do you have hope that the present state of your life does not get to determine the meaning of your life? Do you believe the current state of your character, the addiction, the broken state of the relationships in your life is all that will ever be? Paul prays, and I pray that you have the faith to entertain the idea that God has the power to reshape your death moments into life. God is making all things new. This is the power to heal and transform sinful human beings into something more. And I know what you're thinking, "yeah, right, Jesus has the power to take away my addiction, heal my cancer, mend my broken relationship; you don't know my story and how much I've struggled." And you're right, I don't, but I'll pray for you. I'll pray that you see the wisdom in your current situation; I pray that you will see God moving in, around, and through you. I'll pray that you hold onto the hope that this too shall pass and that all death brings forth life. That, I can do. I believe that God can invert sin and death into life, and I pray that you and I can have our eyes opened to see it.

I can think of some very recent traumas in my life that caused me to ask, Jesus, where are you? Why have you abandoned me? But I hear Paul speaking to me, saying, "Be kind to yourself. Work on your own timeline to understand what this moment means for you and what life, growth, and understandings you can carry forward. Don't listen to the voices saying that you should be grateful for this pain. Don't listen to those who write your story and tell you what you should be experiencing or learning. This is your work. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in your life."

And when I'm ready, the fear, anxiety, and fragility, may become a moment of growth and resurrection. Think about the shift Paul's prayer causes. God has not been and never will be the intercessor of our human shit; we are, and it's on us to stop it, not God. God is and has always been there to show us another way of being in the world. A world where love and self-sacrifice are the true power. That is the prayer of wisdom and revelation. This is hard work, church. This is work that takes a lifetime of practice,

belief, and hope. But it can start now. And remember, God's devotion to humanity, to you, is so relentless.

So church, my siblings in Christ, whatever your current life circumstances are, I pray that you will always see the wisdom and revelation to bring you to a deep awareness of God. I pray that God will open your eyes to see hope that will always be available, realized in the extraordinary possibility of the Christ's resurrection, and made known through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Believe this, my beloveds, I will never stop praying for you, no matter what. Amen.