

On Our Knees: Praying For God's Resources (Eph. 1:15-23) Jan. 3, 2010

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On the day after Christmas Highland lost a wonderful saint named Mike Davidson. I was privileged to be with his family and friends in his home as Mike breathed his last. Just before Christmas we lost another godly person: Dorothy Jean Gooch. I was honored to be part of the memorial service in which we celebrated her life. These two transitions, happening close together, and towards the end of the year, have caused me to reflect much on life. I've been thinking a lot about my past, my present, and my future.

As the New Year begins, many of you may be doing the same. We look back over the *past* year and experience gratitude for the bright spots and regret for the dark spots. We look into the *future* of the New Year and consider goals related to our health, our relationships, our careers, and our spirituality. And we take stock of the *present*—where we are right now, what we have or haven't attained, who we are or aren't in the present. This is a time of year when many of us reflect on past, present, and future.

We find Paul doing this in Ephesians 1. After a brief introduction, Paul writes two sentences. The first sentence takes up 12 verses. The second sentence takes up 9 verses. Our English translations have divided these run on sentences into multiple sentences. But when Paul originally wrote Ephesians, these were just two very long sentences. Both sentences reflect on our past, present, and future.

Paul's first sentence, Eph. 1:3-14, is a sentence of praise: 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. 11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:3-14 TNIV).

The sentence begins by explaining how God has blessed us “with every spiritual blessing.” Paul calls them “spiritual” blessings to distinguish them from material blessings.¹ And with the rest of the sentence, Paul lays out these spiritual blessings. Some scholars suggest Paul writes here of spiritual blessings from our past, spiritual blessings in our present, and spiritual blessings that

will be fulfilled in the future. There's the past blessing of election (Eph. 1:4-6)—at some point in our past, before God even created us, God chose us. It's a blessing rooted in our past. Then there's the present blessing of adoption (Eph. 1:5-8)—we currently live out the blessing of being called God's family. Right now we are God's sons and daughters. And finally, there's the future blessing of unification (Eph. 1:9-10)—at some point in the future we will experience fully a blessing that we only partly experience now; true togetherness in Christ.² Paul's one-sentence praise focuses on past, present, and future.

But Paul moves immediately from the long sentence of praise to another long sentence. *The second long sentence focuses on prayer: 15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all his people, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 17 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. 18 I pray 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 his people, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 he exerted when he raised Christ 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 name that can be invoked, 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.* (Eph. 1:15-23 TNIV).

The heart of Paul's one-sentence prayer is that we would "know"-- *17 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. 18 I pray 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 his people, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.* Paul's ultimate prayer is that we would grow in our spiritual knowledge. Literally, in Eph. 1:18-19 Paul prays that we would know three things, each indicated by the phrase "what is": "*what is the hope of your calling, what is the glorious wealth of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power in us.*"³

These three things Paul prays for us to know focus on past, present, and future.⁴ *Specifically, Paul prays we would know God's possession of us (which happened in our past), God's purpose for us (as it unfolds in the future), and God's power in us (which enables us to live in the present). First, Paul prays regarding our past. Paul prays we would know God's possession of us: "what is the glorious wealth of his inheritance in the saints."* We might be tempted to see "inheritance" here as a reference to heaven. *Our* inheritance is heaven. But Paul prays here about *God's* inheritance, not *our* inheritance: *what is the glorious wealth of his inheritance in the saints.* There is a strong theme in the Old Testament of God's people being God's inheritance or more simply God's possession.⁵ That seems to be how Paul is using "inheritance" here. Paul prays we would understand more and more what it means for us to be God's possession, God's chosen, God's own people. For each of us who are Christians, at some

point in our past we became God's possession. Paul prays that we would know more and more of the significance that past event.

Second, Paul prays regarding our future. Paul prays we would know God's purpose for us: "what is the hope of your calling." Paul will write again of "calling" in Eph. 4. The call and the hope it generates has to do with the future. Both the praise sentence and the prayer sentence contain statements about the future toward which God is working. The praise sentence speaks of a future when all things in heaven and on earth are united under Christ: With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. Similarly, the prayer sentence speaks of a future when Jesus fills everything in every way: 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. The implication of both of these statements is that God has taken possession of us so that we might participate in this larger purpose. As marvelous a blessing as it is to be owned by God, God has not taken possession of us merely so we can live in loving relationship with him and with each other. He's taken possession of us so that we might participate with him in this cosmic purpose of uniting all things under Christ and of seeing all things filled with Christ. That's the purpose to which we've been called. Paul prays that we would understand this future toward which God is working and which gives our lives purpose.

But third, Paul prays about our present. Paul prays we would know God's power: what is the surpassing greatness of his power in us. Paul goes on to illustrate this power: That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 he exerted when he raised Christ 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 name that can be invoked, 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." Paul illustrates God's power in three ways: Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Jesus' enthronement over evil, and Jesus' headship over the church.⁶ All three express the power which is God's and which God now makes available to us in the present.

That's one way to unpack these very dense and long sentences. But what I'm ultimately interested in this morning is what this prayer sentence teaches us about prayer. Here we have one of the longest recorded prayers of Paul. It focuses on past, present, and future. But what does it teach us about prayer? It teaches many things. But above all, I believe Paul makes this critical connection between prayer and power: *Prayer unleashes God's power so that we might fulfill our purpose as God's possession.* God has taken possession of us—prayer is one way in which we better understand this and experience it. The more we pray, the more we experience the blessing of belonging to God, of being God's treasured possession. But God has taken possession of us so that we might pursue his purpose of driving out the darkness and filling the universe with the light of Christ. Prayer is one way in which we have greater insight into this purpose. The more we pray, the more we catch this grand purpose. But most importantly, God

has power available to us. And prayer is the way in which we experience that power and unleash that power so that we might fulfill the purpose for which God has taken possession of us. God has a cosmic power greater than all known and unknown powers. And God makes available that power, through prayer, so that his cosmic purposes might be fulfilled.

Paul's prayer here calls us back to what writer Lee Eclov calls "*large asking*."⁷ Eclov tells a legend associated with John Newton, the slave-trader-turned-preacher and hymn writer. Newton is said to have often shared a story. The story is of a man who asked Alexander the Great to give him a huge sum of money in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage. Alexander agreed, and told the man to ask of Alexander's treasurer whatever he wished. So, the father of the bride approached the treasurer and asked for an enormous sum of money. The treasurer was startled and said he could not grant this request. Going to Alexander, the treasurer argued that even a small fraction of the money the father had requested would be more than generous. "*No,*" replied Alexander, "*let him have it all. I like that fellow. He does me honor. He treats me like a king and proves by what he asks that he believes me to be both rich and generous.*" What Paul is doing in his prayer-sentence is teaching us to once again prove by our prayers that we believe God to be both rich and generous. Paul is urging us to honor God by treating him like a king and asking for what only a rich and generous king can give. Paul is urging us to pray about the greatest and grandest purposes of our lives and through prayer to unleash God's power to fulfill those purposes.

In his book *The Divine Commodity*, Skye Jethani shares a story from a trip he took to India with his father.⁸ While walking the streets of New Delhi, Jethani and his father were approached by a little boy. The boy was skinny, almost naked, and walked stiffly. He was clearly very poor. As he approached Jethani and his father, the boy cried, out, "One rupee, please! One rupee!" But Jethani's father laughed: "*How about I give you five rupees?*" he said. The boy's countenance fell. He dropped his hand and stared at the father. The boy thought Jethani's father was joking. After all, no one would give five rupees to a boy. The boy started shuffling away. But Jethani's father reached into his pocket and jingled his change. Hearing the jingle, the boy looked back over his shoulder. Jethani's father held out a five-rupee coin. He placed the coin in the boy's hand. The boy didn't move or speak. He just stared at the coin in his hand. Jethani and his father walked on. And a moment later they heard the boy exclaiming: "*Thank you! Thank you, sir! Bless you!*" Jethani writes: *This, I imagine, is how our God sees us—as miserable creatures in desperate need of his help. But rather than asking for what we truly need, rather than desiring what he is able and willing to give, we settle for lesser things.* Paul's prayer sentence urges us to stop settling for lesser things in prayer. Paul calls us to begin praying for what we truly need, what God alone is capable of providing—the power to fulfill the grandest purpose for which we've been possessed.

A few weeks ago news agencies marked the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁹ National Public Radio told of the movement that toppled the East German government and how the movement began in the city of Leipzig and how that movement was powered by prayer. In Leipzig, a Lutheran pastor, the Reverend Christian Fuhrer started holding weekly prayers for peace at his church building. Those gatherings grew into nonviolent candlelit

protests. A professor at Abilene Christian University recently shared of being in Leipzig with a group of his student.¹⁰ He writes: *In the days and months leading up to the tearing down of the wall there were massive student protests throughout Germany. In Leipzig every Monday hundreds (and eventually thousands) of protesters would walk downtown to pray for peace at St. Nicholas Church...These protests were a part of what is called The Peaceful Revolution in the former East Germany. Much of the power of these protests was focused on Leipzig and what was going on at St. Nicholas Church. While touring the church the students found a brief history of the peace protests. In this history there was a quote from one of the leaders of the GDR (the Communist regime governing East Germany). Before his death the communist leader said: We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers.*

It seemed like only candles and prayers. But it was, in truth, the way in which the power of God was unleashed. Even a Communist leader confessed that Communist Germany fell because of prayers for peace uttered by thousands. When God's people humbly prayed for what only a rich and generous God could provide, when they refused to settle for lesser things, God's power was poured out and his purposes fulfilled.

What are some of the most significant needs in our community and world today? There is oppression and fear reigning in Iran. Mexico continues to experience record levels of murders as drug gangs take control of cities like Juarez. Al Qaeda proves a constant danger, with ties to the latest airplane bombing attempt. The summit at Copenhagen recently highlighted climate-related challenges experienced around the world. These are enormous issues. They appear to exceed our ability to do anything about them. But what if we refused to settle for less than the complete transformation of these issues? What if we decided to get on our knees and humbly ask for what the world truly needs, for what only God can provide? Paul's prayer-sentence states that we'd see the power of God unleashed and God's purposes fulfilled.

The latest report on children in Memphis from the Urban Child Institute brings this grim news:¹¹

- Almost 75,000 children in Memphis live in poverty. That's 1 of every 4.
- The number of babies born to mothers 17 years of age or younger continues to increase. In 2007 (the latest year for statistical data), the rate was twice the national average.
- The percentages of births to unmarried mothers increased to 59 percent.
- Tennessee has "epidemic proportions of childhood obesity, one of the highest rates of pediatric obesity and childhood type II diabetes, and one of the highest rates of heart disease in the United States" – and Memphis is among the worst.

These are enormous issues. They appear to exceed our ability to do anything about them. But what if we refused to settle for less than the complete transformation of these issues? What if we decided to get on our knees and humbly ask for what this city and county truly needs, for what only God can provide? Paul's prayer-sentence states that we'd see the power of God unleashed and God's purposes fulfilled.

¹ Walter L. Liefeld, Ephesians The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (IVP, 1997), 32.

² John R. W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians (IVP, 1979), 36-41.

³ F. F. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1984), 268.

⁴ Stott, 56-57.

⁵ Lincoln, 59.

⁶ Stott, 58-66.

⁷ Story submitted by Lee Eclov to PreachingToday.com.

⁸ Skye Jethani, The Divine Commodity (Zondervan, 2009), 113-114.

⁹ National Public Radio, All Things Considered, 11/9/09,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120251039>

¹⁰ <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2009/12/prayer-as-resistance.html>

¹¹ [http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2009/jun/02/statistics-bleak-for-countys-children/;](http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2009/jun/02/statistics-bleak-for-countys-children/)

[http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org.](http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org)