



The Immeasurable Greatness

Ephesians 1:15-23

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As Paul gives thanks to God for the Ephesians, I invite you to join me in giving thanks to God today.

We are thankful for pastors and musicians and audio-visual technicians and computer wizards for finding ways to provide meaningful worship week by week, as well as prayer services and Bible studies and other ways to help us stay together as the Church, even when we are physically distanced by the pandemic. We are thankful for children's ministry and youth ministry leaders who have found creative ways to stay in touch with the younger generations. We are grateful for Bible study leaders and Sunday School teachers and small group facilitators who have become ZOOM aficionados almost overnight. We are appreciative for the food pantry workers, for the mask-sewing crafters, for the card-making and card-sending caregivers, for the people who are checking in on one another through phone trees and delivering meals and shopping for groceries and taking meals to front-line workers and singing "Happy Birthday" from the driveway of your house when it is your birthday, and whatever other kinds of ministries we have been innovating and adapting in these difficult days.

And we do not want to stop there. We want to thank so many of the people in our churches as well as our neighbors who are doing so much in the life of our communities, to rise to the occasion in heroic ways. We thank the doctors and nurses and medical teams who have kept doing their healing work in the face of this dangerous and unfamiliar disease; we thank the grocery store workers and food supply chain workers from the fields to the processing plants to the truck drivers for keeping us provided with the basic commodity of food. We thank the teachers and school administrators who have kept classes going, or at least have tried to do so, and for students and learners who have adapted to going to school at home, or at least have tried to. We thank the cleaning crews who are working hard to keep so many places disinfected and safe day by day. We thank the staff of nursing homes, as well as the residents and their families who have had to bear extra burdens of fear and vulnerability and isolation. We are grateful to first responders, to ambulance workers, emergency medical technicians, police officers, fire fighters, for being out there to help keep us safe and cared for. We thank the National Guard who has filled the gaps in many places for unexpected needs. We are grateful to governmental leaders at the various levels of government for their roles in organizing and prioritizing and legislating and providing for the common good. We are appreciative of researchers who have re-focused their expertise on this emergency need to find remedies and vaccines as soon as we can. We are grateful for businesses that are adapting, and to businesses that are enduring, and to businesses that are struggling ... we are grateful for all you are doing

to keep your part of the economy going, as best you can. We are grateful to families, to moms and dads and children and teenagers and grandparents and even to our pets, for all the extra time and energy it has taken to be family 24/7 over these many weeks. We are grateful to citizens who have done their part by staying home and loving their neighbors in this unique way, by keeping our distance from them for this prolonged season.

As Paul has much to be thankful for with the Ephesians, so we have much to be thankful for today.

But there is more to Paul's prayer than thanksgiving. Much more. And we need all of that too. Paul is praying that God will open our eyes so that we can see that Jesus has this, and that we have Jesus, and that we have Jesus so that the world will know that Jesus has the world, that His saving love and power are sure.

Paul prays that God's Spirit of wisdom and of revelation will enlighten the eyes of our hearts. Paul is not talking here about the kind of enlightenment we get by researching a subject or by using our analytical reasoning or our scientific inquiry. He is not talking about the kind of enlightenment we get by watching the news or reading all about current events or scanning our newsfeed for the latest punditry. He is not even talking here about emotional or social intelligence that we get from relationships and experiences in the world.

Paul is talking here about the Spirit that comes from God, that reveals things to us that are more mysterious than mundane, more supernatural than natural, more revelation than reasoning. He uses this language to try to describe it: that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened. Say what? The eyes of our hearts? What is that? Really? Yes, really. The eyes of our hearts – our spiritual sight – will be enlightened. Like the lightbulb in our soul turns on, and we sense the clear reality of God, alive to us, with us, for us. God's Spirit connects with our spirit and we know God! Our consciousness is awakened to God's reality, and we see the world in a whole new way.

We see that Jesus has this, and that we have Jesus; we can trust Him, rely on Him as our Savior and Lord; and through us Jesus will make known to the world that Jesus has the world too. His saving love and power are sure.

Notice that this is all done in prayer. Paul is praying all of this, because Paul knows how to connect with God's revelation. He also quotes scripture in this passage, which is also key. We don't expect God to reveal things to us just out of the blue, out of nowhere. That could happen. But it is much more likely that God will reveal things to us as we turn to prayer and to the scriptures, to use the means God has provided for the revelation to happen.

Specifically, Paul prays for us to see three things once the eyes of our hearts have been enlightened by God's Spirit.

First, Paul prays that we will know the hope to which God calls us. Second, he prays that we will know the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints. And third, he prays that we will know the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, according to the working of God's great power. Notice the way Paul structures this language. From hope to the riches of the glorious inheritance, to the immeasurable greatness of God's power. It's like a crescendo of knowing God. It starts small and it expands more and more. From hope for the future, which is foundational to being alive in Christ; to an appreciation of the treasures of the inheritance from the past, where we can see that our hope is grounded in a proven reality, passed along from one generation to another for thousands of years; into a power that is so great that it cannot be measured – not by kilowatts or megawatts, or by gigabytes or terabytes, or by electoral votes or popular votes or congressional votes, or by millions or billions or trillions of dollars, not by whatever kind of ways we may devise to measure power – this power is different. It is so great that it cannot be measured. It is God's power, and Paul is praying that it will work in us and for us and through us, for all the world! From hope to remembrance to power. That is Paul's prayer. Wow!

So where does all this hope and this glorious inheritance and this immeasurable power come from? What does it look like? Paul is very clear. He prays that we will be given this power, and he says that God has already "put this power to work in Christ." This is the power that sends Jesus into the world with saving love. This is the power that raises Jesus from the dead after He endures the agony of the Cross to conquer sin and death. This is the power that seats Jesus at the right hand of the Almighty, in the control room of the cosmos, to bring in a new creation, to open the gates of everlasting life, and to reign far above all other powers, "from galaxies to governments," as Eugene Peterson puts it in his Message translation. This power overcomes empires and monopolies and mafias. This power undoes death and despair and disease. This power lifts up the down-trodden, binds up the broken-hearted, and builds up the life of faith and hope and love in hearts and souls and minds, far and wide, forever and ever.

This power is Jesus. Paul is praying for us to know Jesus, and thereby to receive what he calls the "immeasurable greatness of His power." Paul is not praying that we would have this power when we get to heaven. Paul is praying that we would be given this power now. Here on earth. In believers who are still alive.

So, does God answer Paul's prayer, or not? Have we received this power?

Can we see this power at work today? Where? Where is this immeasurable power, in the face of a deadly global pandemic? Where is this immeasurable power, in the face of persistent and pervasive racial inequities and injustices? Where is this immeasurable power, in the face of economic vulnerabilities and hardships and disparities; of quarantined nursing homes, and boarded-up nurseries, of angry mobs and anxious masses? Where is this immeasurable power of God?

Well, it is far above the ways we would naturally think about power, without the eyes of our hearts being enlightened. If we can only see with the eyes of our heads, then we will be looking in vain for it. But with the eyes of our hearts enlightened by faith and hope and love, with God's grace at work in our spirits, with the 2020 of God's vision instead of the 2020 pandemic vision, we will see that this immeasurable power is in the same place it has always been. We see it in Jesus.

So how does Jesus exert power? It's not the way the world exerts power. It's not the power the world craves. But it is the power the world needs. It's not the love of power. It's the power of love. Christ-like, forgiving, non-judgmental, long-suffering, self-giving, self-forgetting, self-sacrificing love. And it is not hard at all to see at work in the world today.

It's what chokes us up when we hear about 70 and 80+-year-old doctors and nurses coming out of retirement to go back to work in the emergency rooms to help treat patients dying of covid-19. It's front-line workers writing farewell notes to their own children, fearful that they might not see them again, and nevertheless going to care for patients who are suffering. It's meatpackers telling their families good-bye as if it could be for the last time as they go to their everyday job to help feed strangers in other parts of the country even as they seek to feed their own families. It's people doing what it takes to get food to escalating crowds of hungry children and hungry neighbors. It's legislators voting with bipartisan consensus to provide an economic lifeline for businesses that are collapsing and workers who are despairing. It's stay-at-home crafters spending their waking hours making masks to share with people they may never meet. It's everyday people wanting to do our part by giving up so many things that we enjoy doing so that we will not infect our neighbors and will do our part to stop the spread of the virus. It's all the people we said thanks to earlier, and so many more. It is an immeasurable greatness, an heroic power of love, in the face of a dangerous threat. It is the power of Jesus.

Whether our eyes are open to see it or not, it is His power at work in the world today.

Through the life and ministry of the church, this immeasurable power takes form and gives shape and gains influence in real life and real people, heart by heart, layer by layer, changing the world. And after 2000 years, it is a power that has had quite some influence.

Far beyond the reach of the actual church itself, it powers the church's mission in the world. Paul isn't praying simply for the church to be filled, but that through the church, Christ may be the fullness that fills all in all. All in all. The Contemporary English Bible says, everything in every way.

Imagine what the world would be like without the influence of the Church spreading the love of Jesus? Imagine where the world would be in the midst of this pandemic, without the Church having been around for 2000 years, teaching us the power of Jesus' love. Let's just say it would be a lot messier than it is! Unbearable, really, without the love.

The role of the Church is to bear witness to Jesus and His love and power, at work to save the world. The immeasurable power of Christ, filling up the church, and overflowing through the Church, to fill all in all. That is the hope, that is the glorious inheritance. That is the immeasurable power. Jesus has conquered sin on the Cross, conquered death in the Resurrection, and is now enthroned forever in the control room of the cosmos.

I remember a visit I made several years ago, to the bedside of one of the saints of the church as he lay there dying. His children and grandchildren and some long-time friends were there, in the hospital room, overflowing into the hallway. I stood and waited my turn to talk with him. As I stepped up to the bed, his wife whispered in my ear, "Not too long, pastor. He's very weak."

I knelt down to see him eye to eye. I spoke his name and said, "I just want to remind you that Jesus loves you and you're going to be alright."

He nodded his head back to me and whispered, "It doesn't look too good right now, but I'm going to be alright. And you are too. Jesus loves us all."

Even if it doesn't look too good right now, Jesus has this. And we have Jesus. We have Jesus to let the world know that Jesus has the world. His saving love and power are sure. It is all we need. All in all.

Others may not count it as essential, not the way the world thinks. And that's okay, because that is not the world's calling. But it is our calling. And Paul's prayer has been answered. The eyes of our hearts have been enlightened, and we will do whatever it takes to bear witness.

It does not look too good right now, but Jesus has this! Through the hardship, through the trouble, through the suffering, through the pain, through the despair, through the death. Jesus has been there, and will get us through. Through it all.

Jesus has this! Amen and amen.