

Much Needed Power for the Perpetually Inept

Ephesians 1:19-23

“That you may know...what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe.”

Introduction: Every family has certain words that are off limits or taboo (beyond the normal BIG ones). Growing up putting the word “shut” next to the word “up” was a major violation of family protocol and would be met with swift repercussions. There are several words that are not tolerated in the Bakker house: “I can’t”, “I quit”, and saying “owww” when it doesn’t hurt. This comes out of a desire to train our daughters to work through thresholds, never take the path of least resistance, to follow through on commitments, and develop overall toughness. However, in studying this passage, one of the profound realities that we’ll see is that being in a place of “I can’t do it” may be the greatest position of strength available to us. Here is what I mean.

This last week I was able to talk to half a dozen folks at our church and community who have situations and circumstances currently that leave one feeling helpless, hopeless, and zapped of strength. Unexpected death, physical ailment, ongoing and long-term medical issues with children, and loved ones who continue to reject the lifesaving faith offered to them are all scenarios that are far too real and facing us each day. In a culture that has often prided itself on “I can do anything if I put my mind to it” mentality, we are betrayed since we all face the inevitable conclusion that we cannot. It is in this exact moment that the authenticity of our faith is challenged. Do we keep fighting to make things work on our own, or do we yield to our Savior in faith? But what does that even mean? How do we walk through these hard and often perpetuating seasons when our strength and power are tapped?

We come back to a passage in Ephesians 1:15-23 that we started a couple of weeks ago, one that revealed Paul’s care for the church as well as what he hoped they would understand and know moving forward. He **thanked** God for the fact that the church had depended in faith and thus lived faithfully, and had demonstrated love to each other, even though they were a diverse group from vastly different backgrounds. His prayer of petition FOR them was for God to reveal to their minds through the Spirit a **true knowledge of God**, which was both EXPERIENTIAL and based on knowledge. We cannot know what we do not understand, so Paul knew that the Spirit would have to enable their minds to be open so their hearts could be softened. This is why we preach the way we do, explaining the text from the Old or New Testament, so that we will know the God we serve and worship.

How are we to come to this knowledge? We need **the eyes of our hearts enlightened**. The heart is not primarily about emotion, though affections are certainly a God given portal through which we worship. The heart is the seat of moral and intellectual life, the place of volitional choice. It is about our mind driving our affections, informing our feelings as to what is true about God and His will. This is why when people try to worship through emotion alone without truth, they end up worshipping a God of their own making rather than the God of the Bible. Paul prays that they would KNOW something that was

previously unknown before Christ. We looked at the first two a couple of weeks ago, but its good to review:

- 1) **The hope to which He has called you** – This is a clear knowledge and future hope of His calling of us. His calling is sure. Those that God predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified (Rom. 8:29-30). In other words, Paul wanted the church to walk in **assurance** of their salvation, a type of surety the world craves and cannot find. One of the results of the Fall and our state of rebellion against God is that we ALL struggle with *INSECURITY*. This insecurity manifests itself in a million different ways, from **anxiety to being controlling, from an unwillingness to admit sin or fault to shunning people who have wronged you or even disagree**. Insecurity kills. We chase it in all kinds of unstable ways, from money to relationships, trying to surround ourselves with enough to drown out the gnawing of our heart. God offers us assurance of salvation through the sure work of Christ, based on His faithfulness, not ours. If we COULD lose our salvation, we WOULD. But nothing separates us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39), and no ONE can snatch us out of His big old hand (John 10:29)

What would be different about your attitude in life in you were totally assured of your position in Christ, in your salvation, and and your future? How would it affect your outlook and joy in the midst of hard?

- 2) **The riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints** - Again, amazingly this is about God's inheritance OF US, not primarily about what we inherit (though that is amazing as well). God gave all those who would believe in the Son as a gift, and the Son gave us back to the Father after faithfully accomplishing redemption (John 17:1-5). Paul wanted the church to KNOW that they are **valued**, to the degree that Christ was willing to endure the cross and despise the shame to buy us back. That means that if you are in Christ, you are highly valued, so valuable to God that He was willing to die in your place. Not only does that inform us of our purpose, but also gives us the greatest **affirmation possible**. I've observed in so many of our lives that we live for the affirmation of others, looking for the approval of loved ones or friends. I've watched men desperate for the approval of their father (or father figure), even if their dad died many years before. What our heart longs for is given lavishly by God: *we are His inheritance!* Paul knew it was true, but also knew the stubbornness of our heart to embrace that reality. So, he prayed that the church would KNOW, experience, and rest in the fact we are His, and made us His in Christ, to be with Him forever.

What would be different about your life if you no longer had to seek the approval of people or need affirmation to function (though affirming others is a good thing). Would it change what you pursued? Would it change your level of rest and contentment?

Now, we turn to a **third area** of knowledge that Paul wanted the church to embrace and grasp. He prayed for **power**, or to say it a better way, he prayed the church would know

and access the power available to them in Christ. He prayed for the **purpose, picture, and person**, that we would know that when we say “we can’t do it”, we are in a perfect position to operate in the power He provides.

1) **The Purpose of His Power (1:19)**

*“...and what is the immeasurable greatness of His **power toward us who believe**, according to the **working of His great might.**”*

Paul was a master wordsmith, using his command of the Greek language to communicate specific concepts and ideas. In verse 19, he uses 4 specific words in order to be effusive in communicating the POWER given to us in Christ. That is the first observation we make of this text, is that the object of who receives this power are those “who believe”. This power is directed to us, not in the abstract but in the concrete. Whatever it is, God wants us to have it and Paul prays that we would understand it.

The words for power are different but overlapping. Let’s look at each one and then try to get the whole view:

POWER – (dunameos) – This word simply means power and potential ability

WORKING (energeia) – The working out of the actual power

MIGHT (kratos) – effective strength to overcome what stands in the way

STRENGTH (ischus) – ability or latent power/strength one possesses

Here I don’t think the ESV translates it completely, using “great” instead of strength. It might be gendered rendered “what is the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe according to the mighty working of his power.” Or to say it another way: the *power according to the power of His powerful power*. Are we starting to get the picture?

Let me try to illustrate it this way. If you had to clear out a permafrost laden forest of trees in Alaska, what equipment would you use? Trying to do it with a hatchet and shovel would be overwhelming and de-motivating, causing you to stop before you really got started. But if you knew you had access to a D-10 or D-16 bulldozer (like this one), you’d hop in and start clearing. The bulldozer is powerful in several ways: It has the ability, capacity, and potential to uproot the trees (dunameos), since just looking at it you see its inherent strength (ischus). When the engine roars and it begins to shake the earth and splinter trees, its might is obvious (kratos). When it actually crushes a tree and knocks it over, one sees the activity of its power (energeia).¹ This is the power described that is available to us who believe, the type of power needed to thrive in a broken world that is hostile and driven by a worldly system opposed to God and us. But what does this power do or help us with? It helps us fulfill all the commands and promises God gives to us.

¹ Harold Hoehner, “Ephesians, An exegetical study”, p. 271.

- We are called to **endure** with patience and joy, regardless of circumstances – *“May you be strengthened with **all power, according to His glorious might**, for all endurance and patience with joy (Col. 1:11)*
- We will face persecution, affliction, being struck down and perplexed, but we will not lose heart. Why? *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the **surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.**” (2 Cor. 4:7)*
- We believe that we will be resurrected one day to life with Him forever. *“And God raised the Lord and will also **raise us up by His power** (1 Cor. 6:14)*
- We are to be witnesses for Christ wherever God takes us. *“But you will receive **power when the Holy Spirit** has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*
- We are to proclaim the gospel to a dying world, even though we are communicating with people who are dead, who think we are foolish, and think the message is foolish. *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the **power of God for salvation to everyone who believes**, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16). “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the **power of God.**” (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). “Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also **in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.**” (1 Thess. 1:5)*

How do we endure through perpetual weakness? How do we live with hope when the end does not appear to be close? How do we bear up under accusation, unfair treatment, loss, and pain? In the midst of all of that, how do we fulfill a mission to bring a message to people who don't want it, think it's foolish, and love the exact opposite? The answer is the **power of God, given to us lavishly, but must be understood and believed.** As if anticipating the question, *“How can we know it works?”*, Paul fills in that big blank in the next verse.

2) The Picture of His Power (1:20-21)

*“that 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 rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.”*

How do we know that His power is effective toward us? Because the SAME EXACT power that was exercised in Christ to raise Him from the dead is the same that is at work in us. God was the only one with power to raise the dead when he raised Christ, loosing the pangs of death (Acts 2:24; 3:15; 4:10). Many had come before Christ posing as the Messiah, but all faced the same fate: death. Jesus not only claimed to be Messiah, but also One with God (John 10:30). He went to the cross and the grave with the knowledge that God the Father had the ability, the power to raise Him up, swallowing death up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54). It is the resurrection that makes our faith viable, since if Christ had not been raised our faith

would be futile and in vain (1 Cor. 15:17), we should be pitied (15:19), and might as well live for as much as we can get now. But if you are a follower of Jesus today, you have believed in the resurrection. You believe it so much that you are willing to give your life for it and face death hopefully because of it. The reality of the resurrection cannot be understated, so Paul using this is the most assuring and clarifying picture of God's power. But he does not stop there.

Not only did God's power raise Christ from the dead, but also **seated** Him at the right hand of the Father's throne, which was a place of honor (1 Kings 2:19; Matt. 20:21) and of victory (Rev. 3:21), signifying sharing the throne itself. This meant that He is the rightful LORD overall, the head over the universe, and there is no THING or no ONE that can match His power. All things are subject to Him. The demonic hosts are powerless outside of whatever delegated authority they receive. There is no world system that will thwart His plan or overtake His purpose. What does that mean for us? Look down at Ephesian 2:6 – *“and raised us up with him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”* That means **positionally, right now, we are seated with Christ in a place of victory**. It means that no demonic host, no systemic power, no cosmic force has any authority over us because **Christ has total authority**. Sin itself has no power over us, but can only lie and deceive us into thinking it does. This means that we can actively deal **practically** with our sin and temptation because we are no longer enslaved to either one.

No believer can ever say “I can't stop this sin”, or say “the temptation was too powerful”, or “there is no hope for me”. The same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him is that same that worked in us to save us, secure us, and seat us. It's already done, but we are not there yet. So, we continue to kill our sin, to confess it, to repent of it, and turn to Christ. This is the essence of Paul's prayer and the goal of knowing God intimately, that we would know the greatness of the power directed toward us, who received His grace and continue to trust by faith in future grace.

3) The Person of His Power (1:22-23)

*“And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things **to the church**, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”*

It is significant that Paul mentions “the church” here for the first time in the epistle. The church will make up a large focus in the rest of the book, but until now he referred to “the saints” at Ephesus. We remember that the church is BOTH all the saints that follow Christ around the world, called the “universal church”, but is always manifested in the **local church**, a gathering of believers who love each other, make disciples, submit to leaders, and practice the sacraments of baptism and communion. There is always a teaching brewing that says, “We're part of the universal church, so I don't have to “go to” church”. This would work if the church were an event to attend or club to be a part of. But the church in a local context is the body of Christ, a living organism that we are **bought into and born into**, where we play out the “one-another's” and fulfill the great Commission and commandment together.

So, in raising Christ from the dead and seating Him in the heaven lies, God gave Christ as HEAD over the church. *“The power of God has created the church as a **living organism** – a body with Christ as the head – Christ is not only the leader (as one who could be replaced in some sort of re-organization) but is indissolubly connected to the church as a head is to its body.”*² The church is not an organization where we judge success on bottom lines, financial viability, or streamlining structures. It is an organism made up of people connected together IN CHRIST. Him being the head means that we not only cannot exist without Him, but wherever the head goes, so goes the church. The church exists because of Him, for Him, by Him, and through Him. If we are doing anything that is disconnected from Christ, it will not only be ineffective, it is not by definition the church, it is something totally different altogether.

But Christ is not only head, but we have **the fullness of Him**. Because Christ is seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly places, and we are blessed with every spiritual blessing IN the heavenly places, it means we have access to ALL HIS POWER right now, immediately and fully. He does not dole out His power like **pills or medication**, daily hoping we got an accurate dose or don't forget to take our pills. We have the fullness of His power all the time. He does not withhold. It means that the church can fulfill its mission of making disciples of all nations, of equipping the saints, of shepherding the body, of bringing Him glory in all things because we have the power available to us in full.

So, Paul prayed that we would know God in Christ, to know Him fully, accurately, and intimately, and know the hope of being called, know the riches of being His inheritance, and know the greatness of the power given to us. When we admit or acknowledge that **“we can't do it”**, and mean that we have reached the end of our power and strength, we can then, by faith, entrust ourselves to the One who has all power and gives to those who believe. “I can't do it” is a cry of faith, entrusting ourselves to the One who gives freely by His grace. May we know Him clearly in all things.

² Peter T. O'Brien, “Ephesians”, p. 206.