

Above All

We live beneath the glorious ridge of Mt. Thompson. We always point up to the snowy peak and brag to visitors how *amazing* it is to hike up there. But how often do I *personally* actually stand on the peak? Seldom.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is like a field guide to a world class hiking trail. It tells us what to look for as we wind our way on the upward climb. It tells us about our power and our identity as followers of Jesus Christ: who we once *were*, who we are *now*, and what we will *become* "in Christ." Paul uses the expression "in Christ" over and over again in Ephesians. To be "in Christ" puts us *on the map* somewhere along the trail. This letter clearly marks out the terrain we are in so we know what to expect, and come prepared. Ephesians, is our field guide that describes the climate on the trail the so know how to dress properly. No flimsy tennis shoes please – only proper boots – feet shod with everything that makes us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. (6:15) . We need to have the right equipment. For to be "in Christ" is to be out on the trail somewhere, climbing up the slope of in whatever the sphere our daily life is being lived. To be in Christ is to show the reality of Christ to the world. We must show that *we* inhabit a different sphere of power in our lives, one that allows us to be always keep climbing.

Up

Have you seen the movie? An old man longs all his life to go on a great adventure. So finally he ties hundreds of helium balloons to his house and away he goes. As you read Ephesians, think UP. He's the old man, and you're the breathless boy scout Kevin who gets dragged along on this wonderful spiritual adventure. FAR ABOVE ALL!

Paul spent considerable time in the city of Ephesus – two years – so he knows the place. The city is the centre of goddess worship at the shrine of Artemis. Ephesus is *the* place to go for magic books and charms – things very typical of daily life in the Greco-Roman world. But you may recall from Acts 19 that after two years teaching the Christian faith in a rented lecture hall, the power of the Gospel was so evident in the city of Ephesus that the *silversmiths* of the city rioted in fear that this new faith in Jesus Christ would soon ruin their livelihoods because people were turning to God and if that continued, they knew eventually no one would buy their silver idols and charms anymore.

Paul left a small fledgling church that became strong and endured and now he writes to Christians in Ephesus, many of whom he would not have met personally, but were the fruit of the church's ministry there and he says. . .

I have heard about you

Paul's great prayer of thanksgiving grows out of what's filtering through about what God is accomplishing among them. Despite the culture of Ephesus steeped, as it was for centuries in pagan religion and the twisted values of this dark world, there now exists in Ephesus a worshipping community which Paul call "*the saints*" for short. Now the word "saint" in Greek has nothing to do with people having glowing rings their heads as seen in medieval European artwork. No. "The Saints" means simply "*those set apart.*" Because worship always sets people apart because we invariably become like what we worship. Worship defines who we are; and these Ephesians are worshipping the one Creator God through Jesus Christ. And they get the concept in Ephesus that their faith in *God* unavoidably must lead to love for *each other*, and that can be challenging. Christian unity is not an easy thing. Too often waht people hear is that Christians don't get along very well with each other. But these people do.

For the Gospel presents an alternative reality to the world of the Caesar and goddess worship

and magic charms that all that the rest of Ephesus depends on to protect them from the powers of darkness that they believe rule the world they live in.

But Walter Wink writes “to worship is to remember who owns the house.” And Ephesians had so grasped what it means to be a worshipping community that Paul hears through the grapevine, from a distance, stories of faithfulness, stories about love for each other, about how the Ephesians are reflecting the character of their God out into their city.

Unfortunately too often a church community wants to merely mirror *itself* in its worship: Too often the church community can say, in effect, “this is who *we* are, this is what we are like – *like it or not.*” But, you know, *that* kind of “worship”, would have never caused a riot in Ephesus. That kind of worship would never have turned anyone’s world upside down. I have a sinking feeling sometimes that much of our contemporary worship a kind of a tempest in a tea cup. It all goes on inside these walls, but the response from those on the outside looking in is , “So What. Who cares?”

The Ephesian’s rejected that kind of pseudo-worship and affirmed God’s salvation. When the Ephesians met to worship it cause a stir in heavenly places and caused a riot in the streets of their town. Genuine worship never sits apart from the culture but becomes a part of the culture, always uses the appropriate, relevant expressions from the culture; but true worship is always *counter-culture* in that it refuses to conform to the passing parade. But nor does it fossilize into the same old same old year after year. True worship is fresh, always on the cutting edge of a genuine experience with God.

And people do *hear about it*. It *can’t* go undetected. It seeps through the church walls into the street.

How might we recover the kind of worship Paul describes to the Ephesians?

Well, if you’re Paul, job one is to PRAY for them.

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth said “to clasp hands in prayer is to begin an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

Now, I don’t have to tell you that this world is in a terrible mess. But if the church is to understand the reality of God in this world, and rise up against it, and create a different kind of order, perhaps we should put this orange sign in front of the church on Sunday morning with a sign that says . . .

Slow Down God at Work

You know why we need a sign like this? The reality is that God’s work in the world is rarely “public.” Isaiah 45:15 says, “Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.”

God never forces himself on us. He wants us to obey him and follow out of hearts of genuine love. But God nevertheless *is* at work everywhere and in every thing. The old reformers called it *Providence*. God is not an absentee landlord. And if we slow down and think about it, we will realize his hidden presence is revealing grace and purpose all around us. But we have to *slow down* in his construction zone. That really is what *prayer* is all about. And Paul’s prayer is that the Ephesians will be able slow down long enough to be able to grasp what God is really doing. For not only is God’s presence elusive (*we often* wonder where God is and why he isn’t working the way we would want); but we also too often assume that anything and everything that happens to us is God’s action, when it’s not. Because we live in a world where bad things can happen to good people and God does not cause those things. He is not a cosmic puppeteer,

pulling strings and making us jump.

The problem of why God allows horrible things to happen will remain with us for the rest of our lives, but if we slow down in the work zone of God and contemplate Paul's prayer in Ephesians, it will point us first to "*the ruler of the power of the air.*" Spiritual forces in rebellion from God have something to do with what happens to us. And then, in chapter 5: 3ff, he will point to *human evil*, sickness, violence. And we are in this messing, dusty, confusing and dangerous work zone where God is. God is good, but the world isn't always.

But whatever happens, we are never outside of his dealings with us. We are always being flagged safely through his construction zone. God has had a plan from eternity to have a renewed human race to call his own. And Paul's prayer is that the Ephesians in the messy, loud jack-hammering work zone will be able to see over the clouds of dust to the triumph of that plan already demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Jesus rose from the dead we got a glimpse of *finished project* For a day will come when across all creation will be written PROJECT COMPLETED.

Sin and death will be finally no longer exist and every power in heaven and on earth will be brought into subjection to God through Jesus Christ.

So he prays that the Holy Spirit will convey to them . . .

Wisdom and Revelation

"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him . . ."

Think about this: How do we really *know* for sure that we really have the Spirit and are not after all deluded and actually without God in the world? How do we know we're not deceived? Well, according to Paul, is by the change that comes in our lives, primarily shown in our love for others. So he prays that these people will receive a revelation in their hearts and minds of what they already have in Christ.

He wants all believers to know the continual revealing work of God, and thereby come to know God. For when we come to know and appreciate God's benefits – all the good things he gives, we thereby know *him*. Even as Christians we have dark corners in our hearts and minds. That's the result of sin as well as our limited ability to fully grasp God's full magnificence. But the Spirit comes is like a flashlight in the dark shining, sometimes uncomfortably, into our darkest corners and gives us wisdom and understanding.

I sometimes wonder just how much real *wisdom and revelation* the modern church really has. How much so-called "revelation" is really just a kind of drippy sentimentality – or even worse – sensationalism: preachers sounding more like pro-wrestlers hyping the audience than anything like I might imagine the apostle Paul to have done.

Because God doesn't usually just zap people with wisdom and understanding. God works most often through our normal faculties and ordinary circumstances. The church is, in the proper sense a *rational, thinking community* into which God speaks through our hearts and minds. We today, no less that those Paul addresses in ancient Ephesus really need *real* divine revelation to be able to grasp three specific realities Paul names. The first is . . .

The Hope

Specifically, "the hope of your calling." Hope isn't some vague "hoping for the best." The clarity that the Holy Spirit brings is about the great *significance* that God has placed on our

future. The *outcome* of his plan is will be the renewal of both heaven and earth. PROJECT COMPLETED.

Our culture desperately needs that hope – look at the suicide rate. So many struggle to find a reason to carry on. And death haunts us all. Despite pockets of affluence, most of the world lives in grinding poverty. Crime, human trafficking, racism, terrorism threaten to undo our world. But *hope* was just as *rare* a commodity in Paul’s world. In Ephesus. The followers of the ancient pagan religions thought *fate* determined one’s future. Whatever happens, happens, you can’t change it. Class hierarchies in the ancient world were almost impossible to transcend – in the first century it is estimated that at least 1/3 of the population of Rome were slaves. Most people felt powerless, manipulated by unseen forces and so they sought help and protection through charms and spell and magic.

But is this really any different today? We can stare at movies and television and other forms of mind-numbing entertainments, things that can, if we let them, insulate us from reality. In the real world, there *are* no happy endings. We must all deal with sickness, meaninglessness and evil and ultimately death.

But God’s work in Christ addresses our meaninglessness, and the problem of evil and death. Death is not the end. Hope is the secret weapon of Christian life. A life changing experience. Not a pie-in-the-sky fantasy, but a cosmic event – the *resurrection* that changed the course of history. And Paul prays that those people would *know* the hope that resurrection brings to their future AND to their present day.

We know the hope of our calling because the church is a community that knows *what time it is*. Without diminishing for a moment the awful pain of diseases like cancer and AIDS, God is bigger than any disease. And this is the time in between the cross and the great renewal of creation. We are waiting for Jesus to come again. So we have hope. The second reality Paul prays they will know is . . .

The Inheritance

“The riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.”

Now I want you to look back in that sentence to see that Jesus is the one who receives this “inheritance”, not the believers’. And this inheritance is not the wealth of property or gold or silver but *a people*. What Jesus inherits from the Father is a people redeemed from the fall. But in order for him to actually take possession of this inheritance, his Spirit must give these people . . .

The Power

Belief in God’s power is *easy* when it’s an abstract theological idea: “God is all powerful”. Of course he is. But can people *today* really believe in the resurrection of Christ, let alone in the *availability* of that same resurrection power that raised Jesus from the grave for their own lives? Well, again, the resurrection was no easier to believe in for the Ephesians. Jesus rose from the dead, but that it didn’t fit within their worldview any better than it does in our modern worldview. So they turned to their amulets and charms and gods and goddesses to receive health and love and success. *Power* in their world worked on that basis: silver charms, potions. But the death and resurrection of Jesus tears down all other worldviews and value systems and replaces it with a new one that does justice to a *God who can bring life out of death*. A God who can do that has real power.

Paul doesn't elaborate too much on the effects of God's power but rather on its ability to free us from the evil we face.

But it was quite a giant step for the Ephesians to burn all their magic books and charms. Acts 19:19 says, "A number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins."

The modern West has no equivalent to the obsession with superstition that existed in ancient times. But in western culture today there is a huge hunger for "psychic phenomena" "spirit guides." New Age philosophy chooses that focuses only on positive spiritual power. "It's all good." But then, what about evil? Christians understand that there is evil, but can go to misguided extremes. Paul's letter to the Ephesians seeks to answer the question of how we should deal with spiritual powers.

Paul obviously believes that evil spiritual powers exist, but the remarkable thing is he hardly cares about the principalities and powers, only to say that they have been defeated by . . .

The Exaltation of Jesus Christ

"God put this power to work 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 age to come."

The literal Greek here says that Christ was raised "*from among the dead ones.*" That's significant because Jesus was raised not just from the *state* of death, but from the same post-death realm that we enter into the moment we die. Whatever happens to us, happened to him. That's significant because his resurrection was not an isolated event. It was the first stage of the resurrection of us all. And from that lowest state humans can ever know, Jesus was exalted and lifted up and is now "seated in heavenly places." This expresses the dignity and honour given to Christ and through Christ, to us.

But heavenly places are not a geographic location. It's used in to describe Jesus in relation to "the rulers and powers" which are also not located in some sulfurous fire-pit underground and come up occasionally to torment us, but are unseen forces active in the human realm and effect our lives. So when it says that Christ is seated in the heavenly realms far above them, it explains Jesus presence with God and the reality of God's life with us. Because we are "*in Christ.*"

When Jesus ascended into heaven, there was a shift in the centre of gravity of the cosmos so that the centre of the action is no longer located within earthly life. Paul's language here in Ephesians 1:20 comes from Psalm 110:1 where God tells Israel's Messiah to "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." All the earthly powers are to be ruled by him.

But in Psalm 8:6, God says to *us* – to his redeemed people – it says that *we* have been given dominion over the works of his hands; he has put *all things* under *our* feet"

Ephesians reinterprets these psalms in the light of Christ's death and resurrection to say that . . .

The Church is a community of power

"And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Power is a dangerous word to be just throwing around. But this power, it is not *intrinsic*

to us. In other words, we don't own it. We don't tell it what to do. It is *relational* power. It only comes by being in a relationship with the one in whom the power resides.

The great temptation of the church throughout history is to mix Christ's power with other powers: powers of the state, church hierarchies, good works, second blessings, claims to have power over the demonic, astrology . . .

But Paul's purpose in giving us this information is so we can focus on Christ. It is to say that evil is real, spiritual personal, systemic. . .

BUT DEFEATED.

The real take home lesson from this passage in Ephesians, indeed, the whole mission of the Gospel is that we can rise above the effects of sin on the creation.

What determines who we are? Where do we get our identity? Christians are defined and shaped by Jesus Christ and his life and death and resurrection; and the demonic is out of that picture.

Power as Paul sees it is not the "power religion" we see on TV which focuses on miracles, predictions and prophecies . . . (and it can only continue if you send them money)

So what actually is this power that can truly lift us UP? It's found in the realization that although evil is still with, God has invaded the present evil age in the resurrection *for us*. But he leaves us in the work zone facing the persecutions, dangers, difficulties and death, but he makes us more than conquerors. And that is not the power to work magic and escape and be healthy and wealthy, but to live in an evil world and engage in the struggle knowing we are seated with Christ in heavenly places, far above all.