

KNOW GROW

EPHESIANS 1:15-19

In 1989, Ronald Reagan left a note for his successor in the White House, George H.W. Bush. It was a simple note, written on Sandra Boynton stationary (by the way, if you have little ones in the house, get yourself all her board books). This started a tradition that has been continued by every outgoing president since.¹ Other than Donald Trump's, all the notes have been made public. They've been short, kind, often referencing the serious responsibility of the office and usually contain some vague hope that the future will be brighter in the days ahead.² They're more courteous than practical. None of them contain the nuclear launch codes or says which of the 35 bathrooms is the nicest. They're mostly a gesture of camaraderie, despite the fact that, in several instances, the recipient was a bitter political enemy. But still, we're fascinated to see them. We eagerly wonder, "What did they say?"

Last week in our studies through Revelation we began the section that contains 7 letters from Jesus to specific churches and anyone who has ears to hear. Though they are short, they're not just some traditional nicety from an outgoing politician. They are practical and critical - each one an *essential* message from a King who is *coming back* to rule and reign forever.

We went through the the letter to the church at Ephesus, and we discovered that something had gone very wrong there. They were in danger of losing the most vital thing and so Jesus reached out to them to try to pull them back from the brink. I thought it fitting to go back and look at *another* letter that had been written to that church during a time when it was operating in love. It was about 30 years before the Lord Jesus wrote to them. This time the message was penned by the Apostle Paul, who had founded the church in that city.

It had been around 5 years since he had been in town and he was now a prisoner in Rome. Though he never expected to see his Ephesian friends again, they were not forgotten by Paul or their Savior. They were still on the Lord's mind and so the Holy Spirit prompted and inspired Paul to write them this wonderful letter. Like the letters we find in Revelation, this one is written to us, too. Though first delivered to a local congregation in Turkey, it's addressed to *everyone* who is in Christ.

The late Ray Stedman called Ephesians a letter about "how to handle life as it is." Of course, for a Christian, handling life doesn't just mean getting *through* life, but *growing* through life as we progress in what the Bible calls sanctification - that process by which God accomplishes great, transformative work in us, where we are more and more conformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

By the time Revelation 2 was written, the Ephesian church had gone off course. But, years before, when they were still in love with the Lord, Paul still had concerns for them he wanted to address. And as he taught, he shared one of his prayers with them: A prayer to God on their behalf that they would enjoy abundant spiritual lives, full of power, satisfaction and growth.

We want that, don't we? Well, Paul knows the way and explains it. We begin in verse 15 of chapter 1.

Ephesians 1:15 - ¹⁵This is why, since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,

¹ <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/nation-world/national/article248601975.html>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/us/politics/letters-from-presidents-to-successors.html>

In the opening of his letter, Paul overflowed with excitement about all the blessings that God's people receive through His grace. He describes how God's eternal plan has been to enrich us by His love, taking away our sin and then revealing mysteries to us, bringing everything together in Christ. And all of these great things are not simply what God would *like* to do if He ever finds the time, these are the things that God is *actually* doing right now. He began it in eternity past, He continues it today. He's making payments on this purchase.

These great thoughts of God's grace and generosity compelled Paul to pray. Specifically, he was praying that the Ephesians Christians would not miss out on any of what God had made available to them. That they wouldn't wander around in confusion or take some detour out of the way. Obviously, it's *possible* for that to happen to churches - it happened in Ephesus 30 years later.

Though Paul founded the church there, he hadn't been around in quite a few years. But he would *ask* after them and inquire about how they were doing. And the reports that came in were really great. First, they were full of faith. In the Bible 'faith' means not only mentally accepting certain ideas, but also when a person puts their trust in something. It can be described as the "conviction of truth," "reliance on Christ for salvation," "a pledge to follow Him," and "constancy in our profession."³

Christian faith is not simply a list of doctrines that certify you as having passed some cosmic test. Rather, it is a life lived out. *Your* faith, Paul said, which leads to *your* life choices. These Christians in Ephesus *believed* and what a difference it made in them and the world.

But *what* did they believe? It was faith *in* the Lord Jesus. You see, their faith wasn't just in 'God' or in 'morality' or 'justice.' The difference is key. Because, without an external standard, man fashions gods and morality and justice in his own image. But Jesus Christ is different than any god ever conceived in the imagination of man. If their faith was simply in moral goodness, that would do no good. Human morality changes and shifts from time to time and place to place. No, their faith was anchored in and built upon a real Person, revealed by Heaven: The Man Christ Jesus. How are we to find information about this GodMan? It is found in one place: The inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. He is revealed "in the volume of the Book."⁴ What He said, what He did, what He's like, what's His plan. It is all found on the pages of Scripture. The truth of Christ and the salvation found in Him is not found by looking within at our own wicked hearts, nor at culture around us, nor even in Creation, but in what we call "special revelation" - the 66 books of the Bible.

We are hanging here a moment because this is so important. Because we are talking about life and death, meaning and purpose. Our faith must find its source and supply in the truth of Christ.

Think of it this way: How do you set a clock? If you want it to be right, you have to set it according to the *right* and reliable standard. We can't set our clocks on what we feel would be best for us. We don't just poll our friends and neighbors and get their opinion. We need to *know*. So we let Steve Jobs tell us. But how does *Apple* know what time it is? Well, the most accurate timepiece in the world is found at the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C.⁵ "The Master Clock is critical to much of the world's communications, financial, and scientific infrastructure. Mundane parts of daily life like computer clocks and GPS wouldn't work without its precise timekeeping services."

³ *A Concise Dictionary Of The Words In The Greek Testament And Hebrew Bible* / DBL Greek

⁴ Hebrews 10:7

⁵ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/master-clock>

Faith must be set to an impeccable, perfect standard: Jesus. Now, faith *in* Christ leads to a life *like* Christ's. That's a natural byproduct and it is God's specific plan. And to live a life that imitates Christ means to be a person who *loves*. The Ephesians were. Paul said, "I've heard about your love for all the saints." Now, in the Bible, a saint is not some super Christian, like they are in certain traditions. A saint is every Believer in Christ. If you're a Christian, God considers you a saint. And saints love.

So, we find that Christianity is not simply an intellectual or doctrinal thing. To be a Christian means to be a person motivated by and overflowing with the kind of love that God demonstrated through Jesus. That love has been poured out on us⁶ and it's meant to be exercised and enacted.

We might expect Paul to wrap up his letter right here and say, "You did it! You're full of faith. You love everybody. So, you've maxed out your Christlikeness." But that's not the case at all. To Paul, this was the *starting point* of his letter! *Now* they were ready for a greater depth and growth in the Lord.

Ephesians 1:16 - ¹⁶I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

In Paul's mind the Ephesians weren't just part of his spiritual portfolio. They weren't just a quarterly earnings report. It wasn't, "They're doing good so let's move on." No, he had a real love for them. He spent time thinking about and praying for them. Specifically here, he was *giving thanks* for them.

Giving thanks to God is a needful part of our prayer lives. It's all over the Bible. Especially when we look at the Psalms, we see that being thankful in prayer is particularly important when God's people gather together to worship. But it's not just an Old Testament idea. In Philippians 4 we're told that, "in every situation...present your requests to God...with thanksgiving."

That's exactly what Paul was doing. And in verse 17 we get to his first request.

Ephesians 1:17 - ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.

We're only part way through the first chapter of this book and already Paul has referenced God being our Father 4 times. And what a difference that makes. God is more than just a power or a great monarch or a gatekeeper to the afterlife. He is your perfect, heavenly Father, full of unfailing love toward you. If He *wasn't* our Father, think of how hopeless prayer would be. Imagine writing a letter to the President that says, "Mr. President, I'm in so need of help. I've got this issue going on in my family, I don't know what to do." There's no chance you'd receive any real response or interaction. But go to a loving *father*, that's all the difference in the world. Here's how God talks about our prayers: "I have heard your prayers and I have seen your tears."⁷

You see, He is not only *willing* to listen, He is actually much more attentive to us than we are to Him! All His love and power and ability are bent upon accomplishing His plan to adopt us into His family and fill us with all His fullness.

So Paul says, "I pray that God would give you the spirit of wisdom." He can't be referring to the Holy Spirit Himself, because Paul already established that they had been sealed in the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit had been given to them as a down payment and guarantee of God's promises.

⁶ Romans 5:5

⁷ 2 Kings 20:5

The term used for spirit is described as a ‘vital principle,’ like breath to the body. Every component of our body needs breath, needs oxygen to do its thing, head to toe. Paul gives us an image, then, of wisdom permeating every aspect of our lives. Of course, in the Bible ‘wisdom’ doesn’t just mean smarts. It means *God’s* wisdom. His truth being applied to our thoughts, words, choices, decisions. It means taking what God has said and allowing that to give us a different but true perspective on reality. This is so important that God says to have this wisdom is better than having a warehouse full of gold and rubies. That *nothing* you desire can compare with it.⁸

So, how do I get it? Jesus said in Matthew 7 that to hear God’s word and *do it* is wisdom. We’re back to the Scriptures. To know Jesus we must discover Him in the Bible. Along the way we find the riches of God’s wisdom in the same place. We’re told in Psalm 107 that to be wise is to consider the steadfast love of the Lord. To spend time thinking about how God loves us. That makes you wise!

Paul’s second request here is that they receive the revelation in the knowledge of Him. That these Ephesians would understand more about God as revealed by the words and life of Jesus Christ.

During the election cycle there was a lot of debate and speculation among Christians as to where Jesus would stand on certain policy issues or hot button topics. John, in his first epistle, made it very clear: The Christ has been revealed. His life has been described, detailed and declared. He has spoken, at length, and we are to *know* Him, not through cultural speculation, but by hearing His word, obeying Him and allowing Him to make His home in our hearts.

Paul’s hope was that they would have a greater and greater understanding of who God is and what that means. Not that they’d discover secret things that have never been known before, but that the lens of their awareness would be continually pulling back, allowing more and more into frame.

This is what God wants for you and I. He says that He wants to give us a new heart - *His* heart. He says, “Let the mind of Christ be in you.”

This is an amazing reality: The most remarkable and powerful Person in history has made it His business to make us just like Him! Paul understood this and wanted the Ephesians to understand it, too. That they would grow in this reality and, as a result, operate more and more like He did.

A skeptic might say, “Knowing things about God can’t solve my problems.” But that’s *exactly* what Paul is saying. John Phillips writes: “Paul’s basic answer to all of life’s problems and perplexities... [is] ‘Get to know [God].’”⁹ In other aspects this makes sense. For example, the more you know about a device or system, the better you are able to troubleshoot a problem when it arises.

But notice that what Paul wanted most for this church was a more intimate knowledge of the revealed Christ, *not* a greater experience of certain manifestations. As an apostle, laying the foundation of the Church, he knew this was what they *really* needed. Because it is through belief in the truth that we are made holy.¹⁰ It was a proper knowledge of the truth that would protect them from false teachings that were creeping in. It was that Biblical wisdom which would drive them to consider God’s amazing love and keep them from slipping out of *their* first love for Him.

⁸ Proverbs 8:11

⁹ John Phillips *Exploring Ephesians & Philippians*

¹⁰ 2 Thessalonians 2:13

Writing back, we might have been tempted to say, “But Paul, what we want are more visible manifestations of God’s power in our midst, like the unusual miracles you worked during your time here!” But it is growth in the knowledge of God that solves problems and invigorates us to change the world. Because the truth sets us free. The truth sets us apart, directs us, leads us on, and equips us for every good work. Someone might say, “Well then we’re back to a purely intellectual religion. One all about knowledge.” But that isn’t the case. If you belong to God then His love has been shed abroad in your heart and that love starts to operate in you and through you, just as we see in the Ephesians themselves: People full of faith and love.

Ephesians 1:18-19 - ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the mighty working of his strength.

Your translation may use the term “understanding” instead of heart. But Paul is talking about that deepest part of you, what we call the heart. Spiritual issues are heart issues. It’s the heart that God wants. It’s the heart where transformation must happen. There are countless scholars who have filled their brains with information about Jesus of Nazareth and the texts of the Bible, but they refuse to yield their hearts to Him. In the end, all that information will be useless to them, unless they’re willing to uncloset their hearts and let Christ in as Savior and Lord.

Paul writes here that his prayer is that - as a church and as individuals - their core, the place from which come thoughts and words and plans and desires, they would know three things:

First, the hope of His calling. If you’re a Christian, you are called to be a son of God. Let’s move from the end backwards: We are called to glorious unity with Christ in eternity. To ruling and reigning with Him in His Kingdom. To being presented in heaven faultless as a masterpiece of grace. We’re called to live out our days on this earth as active members of His Body until He comes for us. We’re called to live as heaven’s ambassadors to a lost and dying world. We’re called to serve as priests. We’re called to enjoy the fullness of a walk with God. In all of this and more we’re called to reflect God, lighting up the darkness of this world. We’re also called on the *personal* level, given a certain path to follow, discovering good works that God has customized for us, individually. And all of this is full of *hope* because, in all of it, our good God is working things together to do good for us.

Second, Paul wants them to know the wealth of His glorious inheritance. Time fails us to even begin a passable list of what this includes. In fact, we have to start thinking not in terms of individual *items*, but whole *categories* of what God has willed to us. The gifts and helps and supplies. The limitless treasures of His grace toward us. Our inheritance also includes privileges, duties, responsibilities and opportunities. Ultimately, our inheritance culminates in a place prepared for us: A mansion in a new city, in a new heaven, made for the specific purpose of our undying enjoyment of Jesus Christ.

Now, some scholars feel strongly that this reference to the inheritance is not talking about what is waiting for *us*, but the fact that *we* are Christ’s inheritance. And, it’s true, we are. What an amazing thing. Think of it: He who could have *anything* considers *you* the ultimate treasure! And today He waits with eager expectation of that moment when you are united with Him forever and ever.

Have you ever paid maybe a little too much for some item on eBay? Maybe the auction ended a little higher than you originally had hoped, but then you get the notification: You won it! Do you think, “Whenever it comes, *IF* it comes, who cares?” Of course not! You’re checking that UPS

tracking number every few hours. “Out for delivery!” Christ paid the highest price that could possibly be paid for the most busted up, defective stock imaginable. But in His eyes we are the pearl of great price. He sold everything that He might have us as His inheritance in glory.

The third item on Paul’s list here: The immeasurable greatness of His power. There’s no power like God’s power. It can move mountains and turn back time. It can raise up kingdoms and bring them down. It can undo any effect of evil and bring the dead out of their graves. And that power is offered to us. In this prayer we catch a glimpse of the incredible package that God has put together for us. He gives us truth to guide, provision as we go, power to do the impossible. How then can we *know* the mighty strength of God, if that’s what He wants for us? Should we expect to break the laws of nature at will or immediately topple every enemy? Escape any trouble? Miracles like that *do* happen. But the Bible explains that there are many other ways by which we know the Lord’s matchless strength. We know it by being full of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 1:7). We know it by being full of joy (Nehemiah 8:10). We know it by being faced with impossible circumstances (Joshua 1:8-9). And God’s strength is made *perfect* in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Usually we are most interested in the mountain-shaking kind of power, but it is a transformed life that makes a greater difference in this world. The fact that Paul healed some people and had a brilliant intellect was less astounding than the fact that “he who formerly persecuted [them] now preaches the faith he once tried to destroy.” Those who heard *that* glorified God.

Paul’s prayer for these precious Christians was that they would *know* what was theirs to receive as children of God and that their love and strength and wisdom would grow and grow. He would wrap up his letter in chapter 6 by saying, “A final word: Be strong in the Lord.” How? We see it here in verse 19: Through belief. Christ has done what is necessary. He has made the way. He has invited us to take it and supplied all we need for the journey. Will we believe and obey?

Remember, this letter is not just some formality or courteous tradition. This is the path forward. This is the way to take that we might lay hold of all that Christ has won for us and promised to us. This is how we can know the power of His resurrection and be transformed from our humble condition into His glorious image.

Today, if you’re *not* a Christian what Paul has been praying about is not directed at you. These are hopes and plans and promises made for those who are in Christ. If you die without being born again, you get none of it. And, along the way, you do not have access to the riches of God’s grace. But you don’t have to stay that way. Jesus Christ really came from heaven to earth, lived a sinless life, died on a cross and rose again. He’s alive today and *His* desire is for you! He knows you and loves you more than you could ever comprehend. You are a precious jewel He wants to retrieve from the crust of the earth. But He won’t force you. He waits for you to surrender and accept His free offer of salvation. There’s no work you need to do, no price you can pay. It is by *grace*, through *faith* that you are saved. If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you *will* be saved. Saved from all the wrong things you’ve ever done. Saved from hell and adopted into the family of God, immediately being granted all the privileges of being a child of our heavenly Father. Call on the name of Jesus Christ. Tell Him you believe and will go His way. Begin your life of faith and start to *know* and then grow with us in His hope, grace and strength.