

Insight for the Good Life

Our New Testament text is the first part of a great prayer (1:15-23; 3:14-21), which is not just a parenthetical afterthought in this letter, but may well be the main message of the epistle. Paul prays for the church's insight for the good life.

I'll read **Ephesians 1:15-23**:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 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, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 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. 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.

A few years ago, as I waited in the lobby of the dermatology clinic where I was scheduled for a procedure, I read some articles in a magazine which focuses on mental health. Several of the printed testimonials from those suffering depression expressed anxiety that life was passing them by, that they were missing out on what life should offer. Paul writes to remind fellow believers in the Ephesian church that he's praying they'll understand the good and glorious life in Christ, whatever their circumstances. Our relationship with Christ guarantees that life now and forever will not pass us by.

The Message paraphrases verses 17 & 18 this way:

"I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for us Christians...."

Paul's praying for their spiritual insight, "the eyes of the heart" to be opened, to have greater understanding of God's life-changing truth. This insight is the privilege of every child of God who's open to God's truth. It's available even to the blind, and sometimes more particularly to those without physical sight.

Frances "Fanny" Crosby (1820-1915) was blinded as a young child, yet rose to great spiritual heights as one of the most prolific hymn writers of all time, having written over 8,000 hymns, many of which have been favorites in the life of the church. About her blindness, Fanny said:

"It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for (my blindness). If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me. If I

had a choice, I would still choose to remain blind...for when I die, the first face I will ever see will be the face of my blessed Saviour."

We're privileged to have access to the spiritual insight that Fanny Crosby knew and for which Paul prayed, for "a spirit of wisdom and revelation," that we might know God better. Paul knew the vital difference between knowing about God and knowing him personally through a relationship of faith and trust that is closely intertwined with hope. Before he met Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-19), Paul was an expert in the Law of the Old Testament and religious tradition; but he didn't know this same God personally. In fact, he was even persecuting him (Acts 9:4). But when Saul became the Spirit-born Paul, his life ambition was to keep on knowing Christ better, in an ever-deepening relationship (Philippians 3:10).

When we meet Christ, we're given "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" (v. 17) and have *the understanding of faith*. The "Spirit of wisdom" is not the human spirit, but rather is the Holy Spirit, who opens our spiritual eyes to see our need and who works in us the new birth as God's new creation (John 3:1-15; 16:5-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus condemned the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders who rejected his message because theirs was a willful blindness, refusing to admit their need for God to open their eyes to the truth of his revelation in Christ (John 9:35-41). Jesus also commended the disciples for their openness to the truth that enabled them to understand his parables and to see his saving significance, unlike those who were spiritually closed (Matt. 13:1-23).

Something like scales fell from Saul's (Paul's) eyes, enabling him to see again following his dramatic Damascus Road conversion (Acts 9:18). And when we turn to Christ, "the veil is taken away" (2 Corinthians 3:16) and for the first time we have Holy Spirit-given spiritual insight. With the renewed "mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16), we're able to understand the truths of God's word (1 Corinthians 2:10-16).

The concept of hope is closely tied to faith, as "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). In this sense, the hope for which Paul prays is focused, not so much on our everlasting future as it is upon our confidence that God has called us to a new kind of living in the present, a kingdom-of-God kind of living. The world uses the word "hope" to refer to their wishful thinking, such as hoping that we have seen the last of bad winter weather or Chicagoans hoping the Cubs will win the next World Series. Paul prays that we'll be people of solid conviction that the kingdom of God, which we cannot see now with our physical eyes, is a greater reality than this present fallen world in which we now live.

Paul seems to allude to the truth that we are God's inheritance, and certainly he has paid a great price for us to be his beloved children. What a difference this would make for our self-esteem, if we had insight into this marvel of love and grace, that we give God joy and delight! I'm sure God's often not delighted by my behavior! But we affirm by faith we're his dearly loved children.

We need insight into this glorious truth, and also to see the riches of *receiving our inheritance*. The Lord's "portion is his people," but also the Lord is *our* portion (Psalm 73:26; 119:57; 142:5; Lamentations 3:24). He's to be the delight of our lives and the central object of our longing and the reason for our living. And our text implies also that we are joint heirs with Christ of all of God's promised blessings (Romans 8:17).

Because we're mortal creatures, inundated by a materialistic culture, we are easily seduced by the here and now world, and our vision of what is truly valuable and eternal is subtly beclouded.

The late Kenneth Chafin, seminary professor, pastor and writer, "tells about the pastor and deacon who were visiting prospective members and drove up to a beautiful suburban home surrounded by a velvet lawn and gorgeous landscaping. Two expensive cars stood in the driveway, and through the picture window, the men saw their prospect, lounging in an easy chair and watching (a wide-screen) TV. The deacon turned to his pastor and said, 'What kind of good news do we have for him?'" (Wiersbe).

The deacon's question reveals a perception of many Christian people that life consists of the abundance of one's possessions, contrary to what Jesus taught (Luke 12:15). Even the concept of heaven as a place of rewards can be simply one of having more of the same (material possessions) for eternity. But Jesus taught that the desire for things can be at the cost of one's soul and that true wealth is being "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21). We need to grow in insight into true riches, our inheritance in Christ, our riches in godliness and in eternal reward for faithful living and generous giving to those in real need.

Paul prayed for the church to have insight into the resources of God's "incomparably great power." Remember, Paul is praying for and writing to a small group of believers, no doubt facing persecution from the mighty Roman Empire. Paul himself, if he is writing this letter from his second Roman imprisonment, is facing his imminent martyrdom.

Yet, despite the appearance of powerlessness and vulnerability before the world, Paul prays that the believer's spiritual eyes will be opened to see the abundant power of God, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead but also that enthroned Jesus as Lord overall and empowers Christ to rule the universe and, incredibly, is available to every believer.

What power God exerted in raising Jesus from death and hell, where Satan and his legions would have kept Christ subjected to all of their hellish powers! Yet Christ was delivered, and his suffering and death were sufficient to deliver every soul that would ever turn to him for forgiveness and eternal life. His power to exercise sovereignty and lordship over the universe, and power to hold together every molecule of his creation, is the same power to raise us to new life and keep us in his love and care.

In this fallen, sin-marred and chaotic world, it's difficult to see the hidden power of God. When we see the ravages of sin upon society, the evil that runs rampant and unchecked by justice, and as we look at natural disasters, we ask, "God, where is your power?" The truth is, "Christ is exercising control without it being obvious to humankind." As horrible as things are in some places of the world, things are not as bad as they could be (Hoehner). Christ is exercising restraint against the powers of evil, and is keeping this universe from worldwide collapse, and he is working in all places of the world in ways we cannot see. And, of course, some day he will fully judge all iniquity, right all wrongs, and redeem and restore the entire creation to a glory that will surpass the glory of the original, untainted creation (Romans 8:18-27).

I think of that instance when the prophet Elisha prayed for his servant Gehazi, who was “freaked out” by the sights and sounds of the advancing Aramean army. Elisha could see the army of the Lord gathered to protect them, but Gehazi could see only the obvious and the ominous, the physical, the immediate and the material. So Elisha prayed:

“O Lord, open his eyes so that he may see.’ Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:15-17).

How I need to have my eyes opened to the reality of God’s presence of love and power! Faith gives us the insight for which Paul prayed, the vision to see that God placed all things under the feet of the risen, exalted Christ (v. 22). Paul’s image he wants us to see is that of Christ the conquering King, like a victorious ancient monarch, with his feet on the neck of his defeated foe.

Paul’s prayer looked beyond the outward displays of human and institutional power and recognized that this small congregation of believers was by kingdom measures very significant. These believers were tapping into this abundant power of God, who was working mightily within them. As the Lord himself had taught the disciples, they would, in the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit, be involved in greater works than Jesus in his earthly ministry was able to do (John 14:12).

Paul prays that we might have a vision of what Christ will do through his body on earth, the church. The life of following Jesus is not individualism, but is a life together in fellowship and ministry in the world. Paul prays for us to have insight into what God will do through his body, the church, doing greater things than Jesus did in his earthly presence before his passion, resurrection and ascension (John 14:12).

I believe God wants us to have insight into the truth that God wants to fill your life, your home, your relationships and workplace with his presence. God wants to fill the halls of government and the business offices, factories, schools and houses of our city and the entire world with his presence. And his presence comes through his people. *The Message* says it well:

“He (God) is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.”

Like you, I have needs in my life, but the most important thing you can pray for me is that my spiritual eyes and understanding will be open to who God is and how he wants to work in and through my life in my remaining days. I need this Holy Spirit-given insight into the person of Jesus, that I might know him better and that I might absolutely trust that he is in complete control of my life and that his will is best for me, not just in time but for eternity. I need insight to see that my life in Christ and his life in me is a good and glorious life (Colossians 1:27).

Let's pray for the presence of Christ to fill the devastated streets of our nation and world and also the streets of Madison where we live and work. We must pray in the confidence that God is able to deliver the most desperate of people and give to them a glorious life in his kingdom. If this isn't true for the people in lands of destruction it isn't true for you and me. But it *is* true. And God's power will work in us to enable us to join in his glorious kingdom work on earth, and in this part of the earth. Your life may seem small and insignificant, but it's the best possible life, the life God wants for you alone.

Heavenly Father, open our eyes to see the gloriously good life you have for each one of us!