

Sermon File # 866

Scripture Text: Ephesians 1:15-23

Sermon Title: *Insight for a Glorious Life*

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Insight for a Glorious Life

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 1:15-23, as we continue this series of sermons from this great letter that Paul wrote from prison, perhaps his last letter, which is a profound summary of his thought and of the believer's new life in Christ. Last Sunday we looked at the opening of the letter, which includes Paul's greeting to the church and a very long sentence (in the original Greek) in which Paul expresses the significance of the life of the believer. Our lives are significant because of the work of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Today we look at the latter half of the first chapter, which is another long Pauline sentence, some 169 words. As one has said, these long sentences are quite excusable when one realizes they are expressions of praise and also outpourings of prayer. In times of praise and intercession, one is likely to go "on and on," without any thought of length (Hoehner, 247).

Our text for today is the first part of a great prayer in this epistle (1:15-23; 3:14-21), and this prayer is not just a parenthetical afterthought in this letter, but may well be the main message Paul wishes to share. This prayer may be the central focus of the letter, being "the kernel of the nut and the rest of the epistle as the shell," more in support of and asides to this prayer (White, 127). In the

first part of the prayer, our text for today, we will note that Paul prays for the church's insight for a glorious life.

Follow as I read **Ephesians 1:15-23**.

For many years I have tried to intercede regularly for my missionary friends, particularly for those who have had a close connection with our church or with my involvement on a mission trustee board some years ago. Being a recipient of many missionary prayer letters, I try to address specific prayer requests. But I've decided that the best things I can pray for them are based on the thoughts that come from my daily reading of Scripture. Then I know I am asking for them what God himself wants. This prayer direction was reinforced for me when one missionary's prayer requests included praying for her cats while she was away from them. I can understand why this single missionary's cats were important to her; it's just that I want to invest my prayer time in asking for the things that God desires for his children and ministers. And today's prayer is a great model for us in praying for others. But it's also an important message to us, about our need for insight for a glorious life, the kind of life God wants us to live.

The church at Ephesus was a great church, having the basic ingredients for effectiveness in the kingdom—"faith in the Lord Jesus and...love for all the saints" (15), even though at a later time the risen Christ commanded them to return to this love that they had forsaken (Revelation 2:4f). A Baptist pastor notes that Paul didn't assess the greatness of the church the way we are likely to—by the size of the budget and buildings and the number of baptisms, but rather by the intangibles of faith and love (Tolbert, 23), which would be an important measurement for any church today.

But although the Ephesians were a commendable church, they were nevertheless a needy people, and Paul addressed their need in his prayer for them. In fact, Paul said he hadn't stopped giving thanks for them and also for remembering to intercede for them. When Paul speaks about praying continuously and not stopping praying, he's not saying that he's always consciously praying for them at every waking moment. Rather, he's using a conventional way of speaking that means that he remembers them always during his regular times of praying, which we can assume for Paul were very frequent, intense and lengthy, especially during his imprisonment (Lincoln, 55). These Ephesians (Perhaps Paul also had in mind believers throughout Asia Minor, since some think Ephesians was a general letter intended for wider circulation) had many needs, no doubt. They were, like most believers in that part of the Roman Empire, facing mounting difficulties and persecution. But Paul knew their deeper need and prayed for these believers to have insight for a glorious life.

I like the way *The Message* paraphrases verses 17 & 18:

"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 is praying for the spiritual insight, “the eyes of the heart” to be opened, to have greater understanding of God’s life-changing truth. This insight is not the exclusive property of the elite intelligentsia, academics, Bible scholars and theologians, but rather is the privilege of every child of God who is open to God’s truth revealed from the Word and by the Holy Spirit. This insight is available even to those who have no physical sight, and sometimes more particularly to them. (I have a heightened appreciation this morning for good physical sight, since I’m recovering from an eye infection; which is why I’m wearing glasses today instead of my contact lenses! God seems to be giving me a lot of visual aids and personal examples for my preaching lately!)

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 the dispensation. 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 are privileged to have access to the spiritual insight that Fanny Crosby knew and for which Paul prayed. We need to be answers to Paul’s prayer in our text by having insight for a glorious life, which means...

Seeing the reality of our hope

In verse 17, Paul gets to the heart of his prayer, asking that God would give the Ephesians “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that (they) may know him 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 in a life-changing relationship, we are given “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” (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 for Christ as Savior 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 the person

and words of Jesus (John 9:35-41). Jesus also commended the disciples for their openness to the truth of his revelation that enabled them to understand his parables and to see his saving significance, unlike those who were spiritually closed to the truth (Matthew 13:1-23).

Only the Spirit of God can open our eyes to the saving truth of Christ and give us, who were spiritually dead, grace for the understanding of faith. Thus, “the Spirit of wisdom” in verse 17 is not our spirit, but the Holy Spirit, who takes the initiative toward us, while we were dead in our transgressions and sins (2:1). Our spirits cannot generate the wisdom we need to understand the truth of God’s saving grace through Christ (Hoehner, 258). Christ, through the working of the Spirit, gives us spiritual eyes to see/understand our lost-ness, our need for forgiveness and for a reconciled, personal relationship with God, and opening our eyes to the truth of Scripture, making us “wise for salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15).

“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 are able to understand the truths of God’s Word (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). The life of discipleship is the life of one who learns by following, and we are to keep on growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). And with the understanding of faith we have also...

The assurance of hope

Here in verse 18 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 prayer of Paul he is asking God to give us insight into the reality of our salvation and eternal life, to trust in Christ, the object of our faith. It’s a prayer that we will be convinced of the reality of our salvation to which God has called us (Hoehner, 263ff).

In this sense the hope for which Paul prays is focused, not so much on our everlasting future, what is called eschatology, 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 wishing that our underdog favorite team will win the championship. Paul prays that we will 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.

The writer of Hebrews connects faith with hope, saying that it was their confidence in the reality of God’s promises that enabled his examples of faithful people to become heroes of faith (Hebrews 11). They simply learned to believe God’s promises and to act on that belief. They trusted that God was sovereign over their lives and trusted in him, even when all circumstances seemed to be

to the contrary. This was also the faith of Abraham, who believed “against all hope” (Romans 14:18).

In his painting “Hope,” Victorian English painter George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) pictured hope as a little more than wishful thinking, as a blindfolded woman sitting on top of the world playing with one string left on her lyre” (Griffith, 29).

(To view the painting, paste into browser and click <http://www.georgefredericwatts.org/Hope.html>)

God alone through the Spirit gives us insight into the reality of the kingdom of God and assurance that the work he has done in us is real and that he is also at work in this fallen, suffering world, and moving it onward to its final redemption (Romans 8:18-21).

When I note the desperate situation of the thousands of people in Haiti, I have to question the title of this sermon, “Insight for a Glorious Life.” What kind of a glorious life can these people hope for? We need grace for insight into the truth that there is hope for those whose lives have been devastated by this horrible earthquake in Haiti. In all of the rubble of that broken country, the kingdom of God is active and at work, giving grace to the suffering and offering a word of life and hope to the dying.

And we need insight to trust that our lives are safely in the hands of the Crucified, who is leading us through this life to city that has everlasting foundations (Hebrews 11:10). And we need the insight for...

Seeing the riches of our inheritance

Paul prays for our insight into “the riches of (God’s) glorious inheritance in the saints” (18). Every one of us who follows Jesus as Lord is a “holy one,” separated from the unbelieving world, and set apart to God’s love and service (e.g. Paul addresses this letter to the entire church, “the saints in Ephesus,” verse 1). Paul speaks of us...

As God’s inheritance

Our text speaks of God’s inheritance being in the saints (18), which means that “God’s possession is located in the saints,” that we are his inheritance (Hoehner, 267). As Moses said in his song,

“For the Lord’s portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted inheritance” (Deuteronomy 32:9).

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! From the fall of Adam and Eve, God set out to rescue and redeem his fallen people and restore

us to himself. When we respond to his initiative, love and grace we become his choice possession, his trophies of grace.

Our Lord Jesus expressed this incredible truth of his love for us and his desire that we be with him forever. He has gone to prepare a place for us so that we might be with him (John 14:3). Jesus says in his High Priestly Prayer that he wants us to be with him in everlasting glory (John 17:24).

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 is 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, Mohrlang, 1999).

We need insight to see the treasures that are ours in Christ, how rich we are and must be in faith, hope, joy, peace and all the virtues and fruit of the Spirit. We need insight into what God desires to give us and do in us and through us, enabling our lives to produce everlasting fruit, in our lives and in the lives of those we serve.

Because we are 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. Jesus has many warnings for us about how we either live for him and the eternal or we serve the immediate and the material (Matthew 6:24).

The late Kenneth Chafin, Baptist 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, 33).

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).

I doubt if there were many in the Ephesian or any of the Asia Minor churches that were as materially wealthy as most of us here today, but Scripture warns us against the desire to be wealthy and the love of money (1Timothy 6:3-10). Paul prayed for these believers to be spared from this dangerous illusion and 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.

We need the insight for which Paul prayed, that means...

Seeing the resources of God's power

In verse 19, 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 for our insight into...

The abundant power of God

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 over all and empowers Christ to rule the universe and, incredibly, is available to every believer (Hoehner, 271). In verse 19, Paul uses four different Greek words for power, including the words for power, working, strength and might (Foulkes, 62), making sure we don't miss the point that God is able to meet every need in every life, and do so with much strength to spare!

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 made efficacious for atoning for the sins of the world and his redeeming power was 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 such as the earthquake this past week in Haiti, we asked, "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, 284). 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).

When I reflected on the title of this sermon, in the wake of the news of this past week's earthquake in Haiti, I wondered, what glorious life is there for those poor people, who have lost everything? Yet, in Christ and by God's gracious power, the most destitute of humankind can have a glorious future. In fact, the good news of Christ is about "the great reversal," as young Mary saw it, when the Lord will lift up the humble, fill the hungry with good things, and "send the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52f).

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 (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 (Mohrlang, 1999). We need to see that it's the victorious Christ who lives in us as our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). And thus we ought to see...

The working of his power in us

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 (Lincoln, 78). 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).

The place to begin for us is to receive the "Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that (we) may know him (God) better" (17). Again, it's not that we need to know more about God. We simply need to get to know God better, as Paul aspired to do (Philippians 3:10). I realize my own desperate need for a deeper and stronger relationship with Christ, which is the key to my have a greater insight for living and faith for facing the challenges before me. I need the awareness of the presence of the One who promised to be with me always (Matthew 28:20) and a sense of his leading me and sustaining me, whatever the circumstances.

I need to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), who is the source of my strength and joy, and the one who produces his fruit of godliness in me (Galatians 5:22f). I need the resurrection and exaltation power of the Holy Spirit to lift me above myself, overcoming the downward pull of my old

unconverted nature, and enabling me to live on a higher plane of faith living. Only then am I able to join God in his powerful working in this world.

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).

Some words that are a challenge for Bible scholars are these closing verses (22f). It seems that Paul prays that we will see that just as God filled Christ with his glorious presence, so Christ will fill his church with his presence and thereby fill the earth until “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). Under the Old Covenant, the presence of the glory of the Lord so filled the tabernacle and the temple that Moses and the priests were overwhelmed and couldn’t do their normal routine (Exodus 40:34f; 1 Kings 8:10f). We need to pray for God to so fill the church, each one of us as members of his body, that we will be overwhelmed by God’s presence in power and glory, to transform lives, relationships and ministry. We simply won’t be able to “do business” in the old, standard way.

God will fill the earth with his presence through the church. John Piper preached to his congregation from these verses to call Bethlehem Baptist Church to “fill Minneapolis with Christ” (3). 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 the European Union, NATO, and the business offices, factories and houses of Brussels, Belgium and the entire world with his presence. And his presence comes through his people, including those who are digging through the wreckage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

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.”

Conclusion:

I have many 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. 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 glorious life (Colossians 1:27), filled with the glory

of his love, wisdom, power, and hope for everlasting joy and absolute fulfillment. This glorious life, made so graciously available to me, is available to those suffering and dying in the wreckage in Port-au-Prince.

We do well also to pray this for one another, for this heavenly insight that will enable us to trust God in the midst of spiritual darkness in this fallen world and in this secular, post-Christian culture. Ephesus and all the surrounding cities of Asia Minor were not post but were pre-Christian and in the grips of pagan deities, superstitions and hostility against the message of Christ (Acts 19:1-41). Yet God's presence entered that hostile environment, giving a powerful witness to Christ.

Let's pray for the presence of Christ to fill the devastated streets of Port-au-Prince and also the streets 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 Haiti it isn't true for you and me.

The place to begin is for Christ to fill us with his Holy Spirit, which comes when we invite Jesus into our hearts as Master and Lord. I hope we will all seek his fullness right now, and offer ourselves to Christ unreservedly and completely. To have the clear vision and insight for which Paul prays requires that we confess and forsake all sin, disobedience and unbelief that bedims our spiritual sight and keeps us from seeing Christ and what he wants to give us and to do in us and through us. What he wants to do in us is make us more like Jesus, a glorious thought. And his power is at work in us to enable us to join in his glorious kingdom work on earth. All of the time the Holy Spirit is at work in us (even when we least suspect it) to prepare us for everlasting life in the New Heaven and Earth. That will be a glorious life.

God, help us to see it!

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What does Paul's prayer in our text say to you about how and for what we should pray for one another?
2. Why could this prayer be the only prayer you and others might ever actually need?
3. Describe the difference between knowing about God and knowing God.
4. As you think about the victims of the earthquake in Haiti, how can Christ give them hope? Think about ways that the people of God can be messengers and bearers of hope to the suffering.

5. What does it mean to you to realize that you and I and all of his children are God's inheritance, his "portion"?
6. What is our inheritance in Christ?
7. Why is it important that we have insight into God's power? How does God want to fill you with his presence and power? Think about what his plan is to fill your home, your workplace, city and eventually the world with his presence and glory.
8. Reflect on what it means for you to be filled with the Spirit and pray for his fullness in your life and in the church.

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