

Ephesians 1:19-23
(Isaiah 61:1-3; John 16:4b-15)
“The Immeasurable Greatness of His Power”

Introduction

We are studying the second part of the great prayer with which the apostle Paul opens this letter. In the first part, Paul offers prayers of praise and thanksgiving for all God has done to redeem his people. In the second part, Paul turns to intercession, asking God to press the knowledge and experience of this great salvation into the minds and hearts of his readers. Last week we noted the three main requests Paul makes in this section:

That we may know the hope to which he has called us
That we may know what are the riches of his glorious inheritance
That we may know the immeasurable greatness of his power
(1:18-19).

This morning, we return to the final request – that we may know the immeasurable greatness of his power – because Paul follows that request with three illustrations of why God’s power, given to us by his Spirit, can only be described in such terms as “immeasurably great.” In illustrating what God’s power can do, he also takes us more deeply into the main theme of the letter: that we may understand and embrace our vocation as representatives of a new humanity through our union with Jesus Christ.

The three examples that Paul cites of the immeasurably great power of God touch on our deepest fears as mortal creatures living in a world that, for all its beauty and splendor, can seem at times wildly and uncontrollably dangerous. And even those of us who have the means and the good sense to stay relatively safe and secure know that we will, at some point, grow old and die, or get sick and die, or have an accident and die. And if there is a God who knows us, how are we to know him?

Anyway that we imagine our story, however filled with love and pleasure, with happiness and success, we know that it ends at the cemetery, with those we love weeping and, perhaps, with some pastor who hardly knows us trying to find words of comfort and consolation for those we leave behind. And we know that, if that’s all there is, then nothing finally matters at all, and life only grants us occasional illusions of meaning and transcendence.

Of course, humanity has always, at least as long as humanity has left a record, intuited more than this. God has “put eternity within our hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), and we seek to press beyond the physical and visible to know from whence we came, toward what we are going, and why we are here. The message of the Bible is that God has spoken in every age to reveal himself to those who long to know him,

and as Paul wrote earlier in this chapter, God has revealed the mystery of his will to unite all things in Christ (1:9-10). So here, Paul addresses our fears and weakness in the light of God's immeasurable power to rescue us and make all things new.

Body

1. The power that raised Christ from the dead (1:20).

Paul prays that we may know, not merely know *about*, but actually *experience* now, the power of God, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. This is a crucial aspect of Paul's understanding of the gospel. Christ has died our death, bearing our sins, and in him we have died the death we all deserve. But death could not hold him, could not destroy him, because the power of God was at work within him, and raised him up to life, conquering death's power, not only for him, but for all of us who are joined to him – in Paul's language, all of us who are "in him" – and raising us with him to new life.

Paul is writing from prison, facing once again the threat of the Roman Empire to put him to death for proclaiming another Lord than Caesar. Yet he faces whatever may come with joyful confidence because he knows that, for him as a man in Christ, death has no final say, for its power must yield to the immeasurably greater power God.

What fills you with fear today? What is holding you back from living fully and joyfully in the face of death? Pray this central and essential truth of the gospel into your own heart and mind, as well as into the hearts and minds of those for whom you pray, that they and you together may know the immeasurably great power that raised Christ from the dead.

2. The power that gave Christ authority over the cosmos (1:20-21).

But even if you believe that you will survive death, you may wonder whether you will survive life, or find it crushed down by sickness or accident, by the forces and powers of the cosmos that may, at times, seem to be conspiring against your happiness.

Paul prays that his readers may remember always that we are not the playthings of impersonal forces, adrift in the cosmos with no help in sight. The same power that raised Christ from the dead also "seated him at [God's] 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" (1:20-21). It is a picture of absolute authority and dominion over everything that would frighten us or threaten to destroy us.

One can only imagine the comfort this thought brought to the apostle Paul. In the face of the greatest empire of his day, an unequaled earthly power demanding that he stop pursuing his mission, that he be silent, or recant and say, "Caesar is Lord," Paul remembers and rejoices that there is One enthroned over all the powers of this age and the next, One who is not against us but for us, who has suffered and died and conquered death so that we might live with him forever.

Of course, every Christian professes to believe this, but we can tell whether or not we truly believe it by the way that we respond to the crushing disappointments and disasters that find all of us at some point, and that seem to dog some of us throughout most of our lives.

3. The power that made Christ head of the church (1:22-23).

Finally, what grounds have we for believing that any of this is true, that there is a God of grace who has poured out his power on those who have believed and received his Son as Lord? The evidence of the truth of the gospel is that the One who has been made Lord of all the cosmos and of every authority and power, is also head of "the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (1:22-23).

Why did Paul develop this idea of the church as the body of Christ? Certainly it is an excellent and universally understood illustration of unity and diversity: one body, many members each relying on the others, each member having its own dignity and function, each unable to live apart from the body. Each body has one head that guides and directs the body, and no body can live cut off from the head, nor can the head accomplish anything apart from its body. So the reason that Paul loved to use this illustration is clear.

But I think its origin went back to the moment of Paul's own encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul was on his way to arrest and persecute followers of Jesus. When he was blinded by a dazzling light and a voice spoke to him, the voice asked, "Why are you persecuting me?" and Paul answered, "Who are you, Lord?" Again, the voice spoke, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5). As Paul thought through that encounter, he realized that to touch a follower of Jesus was to touch Jesus; to persecute a follower was to persecute the Lord. Thus, he came to understand that, in salvation, we are joined spiritually to the One who has redeemed us.

The phrase, "the fullness of him who fills all in all," has been interpreted in at least three major ways, but only one that I believe fits the context, and that is this: Christ who fills the church by his Spirit is himself filled with all the fullness of God. So the fullness of God is to fill the church and the church is meant to reveal to the world who God is. This accords with what Paul says in several different places, both in this letter and in other letters (e.g., 2:22;

Colossians 1:19). It also fits with what he says is God's "plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (1:10).

Do we begin to grasp – in a way that will transform our hopes and dreams and even our choices and behavior – the dignity and mission of being in Christ, new creation? Do we realize how much the world depends on us being the people of God, loving one another and graciously serving those around us, in such a way that they will have before them, in some measure, an intimation of God's goodness and love, and evidence that the gospel just may be true after all?

How can we do this? How can broken people like you and me demonstrate and display the life of Christ? Only because of this: "the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe" (1:19).

Conclusion

Will we join Paul in this kind of prayer for one another and for ourselves? *God has done all that needs doing and provided all we need in order to be and do what he desires, but it is for us to receive through faith and learn through faithfulness.* It does not just happen. It takes a life of intentional discipleship, the only life that is finally worth living. Will you ask the risen Christ to pour out on you his immeasurably great power, and in that power begin to live and love as Christ has lived and loved, and now rules and reigns, for the renewal of this glorious cosmos and a new beginning for you and me?

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