

06-06-2020 Ephesians 1.15-23 Bible Study

Read Ephesians 1.15-23 in your favorite translation. I will print the NET-2 translation.

15 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you when I remember you in my prayers. 17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and revelation in your growing knowledge of him, 18 —since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened—so that you can know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe, as displayed in the exercise of his immense strength. 20 This power he exercised in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms 21 far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And God put all things under Christ's feet, and gave him to the church as head over all things. 23 Now the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

COMMENTS:

Paul shifts his attention from blessing God to offering thanksgiving and prayer for the Christians in Ephesus (cf. Phil. 1:3-11; Col. 1:3-14; Philem. 4-6). This is a special emphasis in his prison letters. In the Greek, vs. 3-14 contained 202 words. This section also comprises one long sentence (169 words) in the Greek.

Notice how Paul's words in v. 15 mirror Jesus' description of the commandments: 1) love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and spirit, and 2) love people. V. 16 does not mean Paul went around all the time "thanking God for them." It means whenever he prayed, which was regularly, he gave thanks for their faith.

Paul is thankful for their faith because they lived in a hostile environment where Christianity was marginalized and Christians suffered persecution (cf. Acts 19:21-41), they held firmly to their faith. Notice this is not a blind faith but a specific faith "in the Lord Jesus."

They did not confess the god Artemis (Diana) or even Caesar as Lord. Rather, their Lord was Jesus. Their faith was not simply an intellectual affirmation of Christian belief about Jesus but was, more importantly, an intimate union with Jesus, who provided them with grace and strength to survive and thrive in the world.

The second of these two purposes is further expanded with three demonstrative pronoun phrases ("what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the incomparable greatness of his power"; vv. 18-19).

Paul then further elaborates on this final point by offering four ways in which God's mighty power is displayed through his Son (vv. 20-23). He begins with thanksgiving and prayer but moves to lofty statements of Jesus' exalted position in the universe, which, as the length of material devoted to this latter topic indicates (vv. 20-23), is being emphasized by the apostle.

Second, Paul is thankful for the love the Ephesian believers possessed "toward all the saints." "Saints" refers to all believers, who have been "sanctified" or "made holy" by the redemption found in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:1, 18).

Then Paul transitions from thanksgiving to intercession. The content of Paul's prayer begins in verse 17, but not before he includes a twofold description of the one who is the source of all divine blessings.

First, the one to whom Paul prays is acknowledged as "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ." Similar to his eulogy in 1:3, Paul links blessings from God to his Son Jesus Christ, demonstrating the centrality of the Son in the Father's purposes.

Second, he addresses God as "the Father of glory." Elsewhere God is referred to as "the God of glory" (Ps. 29:3; Acts 7:2), "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8; James 2:1), and "the King of glory" (Ps. 24:7-10).

Paul asks that God would give the Ephesian believers "the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation" (Eph. 1:17; cf. Isa. 11:2). Although it is possible to take "spirit" as a reference to human disposition, it is best to interpret this usage as a reference to the Holy Spirit, who imparts both wisdom and revelation (so ESV).

Specifically, Paul prays that the work of the Spirit would produce wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God. Paul often prays for his readers to grow in the knowledge of God (Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9-10; Philem. 6); this knowledge is not some mere esoteric insight but is the type of intimate knowledge that family members possess.

Paul continues his intercessory prayer by requesting that God would grant his readers spiritual insight. Paul uses the phrase "the eyes of your hearts" to refer to believers' capacity to discern spiritual realities related to the purpose and plan of God (cf. Pss. 13:3; 19:8).

Before their conversion, Paul's readers were "darkened in their understanding" (Eph. 4:18), but now Paul prays that they would be "enlightened" by God's Spirit in order to comprehend the mysteries of God. To see with one's heart is to perceive not with physical eyes but with the eyes of faith.

Paul then prays specifically that the Ephesian saints would comprehend three spiritual realities. Paul's first request is that his audience would know the hope of God's calling. Notice that the text does not read "the hope of your calling" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26; 2 Pet. 1:10). Rather, it is the hope of his calling or, as the ESV rightly translates, "the hope to which he has called you."

God not only predestined his people (Eph. 1:4-5); he also called them through the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 8:30; 2 Tim. 1:9) and now, in that gospel, extends hope to those who embrace it (Col. 1:5). Before hearing and believing the gospel, Paul's readers had "no hope" and were "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

But now, through Christ's work on the cross, those who once had no hope have been called to a sure one. It is Paul's prayer that his readers would come to understand and experience this reality in their lives.

Paul also prays that his readers would comprehend "the wealth of his glorious inheritance." Although it is possible to see the inheritance as God's possession of his people (a concept found in both OT and NT), here it is best to view the inheritance as that which God gives to his people.

Just a few verses earlier, Paul had said that those who believed the gospel were sealed with the Holy Spirit, “who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (v. 14; cf. Col. 1:12).

Paul’s third request is for the Ephesians to know the greatness of God’s power, the very same power that raised Jesus, seated him at God’s side, and gave him authority over all things. This request is expanded in verses 20-23, emphasizing that it is especially important to Paul.

Such power is needed as God’s people engage in ongoing spiritual warfare (6:10-12; cf. 3:7, 16, 20). The “power” of God is stressed as Paul describes it as possessing “incomparable greatness.” But Paul does not stop there: he further says that this power is “according to the working of his great might.”

Power, working, strength and might are piled up to provoke confidence in God and his plan (cf. Deut. 3:24; Isa. 40:26). Finally, all of God’s power has been directed “toward us who believe.” This news would have been especially encouraging to the letter’s original recipients.

Because Ephesus was steeped in magical practices and the cult of Artemis, Paul reassures his readers of the supremacy of God’s power. His readers need not fear hostile spiritual powers, because the power of God is far greater. This power was displayed preeminently in Christ.

Although Paul’s prayer continues, his requests do not. Instead, he focuses on God’s power magnificently demonstrated in Christ. The final request Paul mentions is for his readers to know the immeasurable greatness of God’s power. This power is “according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ” (vv. 19b-20a).

Verses 20-23 beautifully illustrate the mighty works of God accomplished in his Son, specifically his (1) resurrection, (2) exaltation, (3) conquest, and (4) domination.

The first mighty work of God was raising Christ from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus represents the pinnacle of God’s work in salvation history. Although others in the Bible were raised from the dead, the raising of Jesus is significantly different because only Jesus conquered the Devil and sin.

The resurrection of Jesus was the focus of early preaching (Acts 2:23-24; 17:18; 1 Cor. 15:3-4) and is at the very center of God’s plan to redeem his people.

The second illustration of God’s power is the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus was taken up into heaven (Acts 1:9). Paul’s reference to Christ’s exaltation is significant for at least three reasons.

First, Christ is seated, which signifies lordship. The place where Jesus is sitting is not some ordinary chair but a throne, which implies that he is currently reigning as the sovereign king of the universe. Whereas the resurrection proclaims that he lives forever, his exaltation proclaims that he reigns forever.

Second, Christ is seated at God’s right hand, which signifies honor and power. When the Bible speaks of Jesus’ being seated at the right hand of God, this should not be understood literally. The Bible tells us that “God is spirit” (John 4:24) and therefore he does not possess a right hand (nor a literal throne). “At his right hand” is metaphorical, indicating honor and status.

Third, Christ is seated in the heavenly places, which signifies prominence. His throne is not merely an earthly throne. Even though there might be other kings, there is no king like him. Indeed, he is the “King of kings and the Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 19:16). His throne is over all the spiritual powers in the universe, whether seen or unseen.

Paul emphasizes Jesus’ supremacy by saying that he has been exalted “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (Eph. 1:21). Although each of these four terms have distinct nuances, Paul piles them up to convey the comprehensive nature of Jesus’ supremacy. In fact, Jesus is exalted “above every name that is named.”

Finally, in case there is any doubt, Paul adds, “not only in this age but also in the one to come.” Christ is not only given a position above all others; he is given that position permanently. Paul’s point, then, is that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to the throne at his Father’s side in heaven is the power now at work in God’s people.

The third component Paul mentions to highlight God’s mighty power in exalting his Son is that all things have been put in subjection to Christ. Paul essentially quotes Psalm 8:6 (“You have put all things under his feet”; cf. 1 Cor. 15:27; Heb. 2:8).

If you go into the home of a world class athlete you often will see many plaques and trophies. One of the important markers for a king at the time of Jesus was the footstool which was by the throne. On it would be carved images of his greatest victories. Putting his feet on the footstool was a way of saying, “Look what I have done to my enemies.”

Although Christ’s ultimate victory is certain, the final subjugation of all things will not occur until death is defeated and God is all in all. But because of Christ’s present enthronement, which guarantees the certainty of future victory, Paul writes as if it were already accomplished (cf. Phil. 3:21; Col. 2:15).

The final example of God’s power displayed in Christ involves his headship over the church. God made Christ head “over all things,” which denotes his supremacy over all of creation, particularly the hostile spiritual powers previously referenced (v. 21; cf. Col. 2:10). In addition, Christ’s headship extends to the church.

“Head” refers to one who is of supreme rank or preeminent status and possesses ruling authority. Thus, God’s power in Christ not only has resulted in the sure defeat of his enemies but also is for the good of believers as the promised Messiah graciously rules his church.

Although Paul typically uses church (*ekklesiā*) to refer to the local gathering of believers, here it refers to the universal church (cf. Eph. 3:10, 21; 5:23-25, 27, 29, 32; Col. 1:18, 24). Paul concludes by again noting that God’s gift of Christ as head over all creation is for the benefit of the church.

So, his prayer is that his readers would comprehend and apprehend the amazing power of God that he works for their advantage. Then Paul switches from the metaphor of Christ’s being head over all things, including the church, to the church’s being the body of Christ.

This metaphor is used here to describe the relationship not of believers to each other but of Christ to his people. He is the sovereign Lord who fills all things in every respect.

REFLECTION QUESTION: By the way, today's reading is the appointed Epistle reading for Ascension Day worship. Too many Christians have missed the gem at the end of v.22. I like the way the NLT expresses it: "God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church." The one who is head over all things is also the head of the church. Since the church is his creation he is ruling in its favor and to accomplish his purposes. If we know that truth, how can we look Jesus in the eye and tell him, I like you, but I don't like the church.