

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Tenth Sunday after Trinity, August 8, 2010

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Hymns: 16, 9:5, 21, 24, 45.

Lessons: Genesis 18:20-33, 1 Thessalonians 5:5-18, Luke 6:12.

Text: Ephesians 1:15-19a

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

How do you get to know someone? Spend time with him. That is the kind of thing that Paul is praying for in our text today, that the Ephesian Christians – and us, too – get to know God even better. For we have been called, elected, chosen to be his children, and that has been accomplished by what Jesus Christ did. And so now we have

A MODEL PRAYER OF PRAISE TO GOD FOR THE FAITH AND LOVE OF BELIEVERS

1. **Paul gives thanks.**
2. **He prays and asks.**
3. **Why he prays and asks.**

“For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” Paul is writing in the spirit of praise and thanksgiving.

For this cause, by reason of all the wonderful blessings which he had listed in last Sunday’s sermon text, (Ephesians 1:3-14) because all these benefits have come upon us Christians in such rich measure, the apostle cannot but give thanks. For he had abundant evidence that his readers were believers. From the book of Acts we know that Paul served in Ephesus for three years. He had also received additional information about their fruits of faith since that time. Paul had been in captivity in Rome for almost three years by the time he wrote this letter. So it is likely that Paul’s best and most recent source of information about the readers was what he had heard from reports that had come to him. Among their fruits of faith was the fact they were united with all the believers, both Jews and Gentiles, by the bond of true brotherly love. This encouraging circumstance caused Paul to continue his practice of making continual grateful mention of them in his prayers. On their behalf he sent up ceaseless prayers of thanksgiving to God’s throne of grace; he never failed to remember them in his prayers. The reports which were reaching Paul concerning the growing spiritual prosperity of the Ephesian congregation were a source of cheer to him. Here he writes that he is continuing his prayers for them.

We have here a model prayer of praise to God for the faith and love of believers. Paul says he prays for them constantly. Do we pray constantly? Do we pray for other believers? Do we pray for people other than for ourselves or our immediate family? Do we pray for others – *“for everyone – for kings and all those in authority”*? 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

He has heard about their *“faith in the Lord Jesus and [their] love for all the saints.”* Faith and love in this context are really closely related. We could say that love is simply faith in action, and both are produced by the gospel, which alone can win hearts and lives for the Lord Jesus Christ. But in Paul’s prayer, we do not only see praise for believers. He adds a petition or request for the Ephesians. *“I keep asking that the God of our Lord*

Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." Ephesians 1:17

Only in and through Christ may sinful people approach God in prayer. This is what it means to pray "in Jesus' name". Thus Paul addresses God as "***the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father.***" He is not only Christ's father but by our faith in Christ he is also our father, as Paul wrote to the Galatians: "***You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,***" Galatians 3:26. Because of that we may come to him boldly and confidently like "dear children coming to their dear father." This is what Paul does when he asks the Father to give the Ephesians gifts, including "***the Spirit of wisdom and revelation.***" Paul is praying for the Holy Spirit to give wisdom to the Ephesians. In the next verse he prays that "***the eyes of your heart may be enlightened,***" asking God to give the Ephesians enlightened minds and hearts, which come from learning God's truths as they are revealed in his holy Word. Paul's prayer is that the Ephesians grow in their understanding of these truths so that they may know God ever more fully.

It is God who must continue the work of sanctification that he has begun. For anyone to know God more fully God must intervene. So Paul prays to God "***that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.***" Such enlightenment from the Word of God will help the Ephesians to recognize and especially appreciate three great blessings from the father: First, the hope to which he has called them, Second, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and Third, his incomparably great power for those who believe.

Paul prays "***also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints***". In Biblical language, the heart is the center, not only of feeling, but also of thinking, willing, and understanding. Through His Holy Spirit God must enlighten the understanding of the Christians; for only then will they know what the hope of God's calling is. Not only are faith and love worked in the heart by God in conversion, but he also works hope. This hope, planted into the heart of the Christian by the call of the Lord, grows and becomes more alive with his increase in spiritual life. The believers always have before the eyes of their mind the wonderful blessing which has been promised to them, the riches of the glory of God's inheritance among the saints. The apostle piles up the pictures in order to bring home to the Christians, in some measure at least, the glory which is awaiting them by the promise of God. The perfected blessedness which shall be ours in heaven is a rich and magnificent inheritance. It is heavenly joy, bliss, and salvation, the reflection of the divine majesty and glory. We Christians are all too apt, while living in this world, to have our attention distracted by the "fool's gold" of this world, and so it is necessary to be trained continually to think of the inheritance of the saints in light.

In speaking of the hope to which God has called the Ephesians, Paul is not using the word "hope" as we do when we might say, "I hope to finish this job today" or "I hope it won't rain." The hope of which Paul speaks is not simply a fond wish, but a sure and certain confidence. It is certain, because it rests on God's call, God's election. Remember, as you heard last week, Paul just reminded the Ephesians that from eternity God chose them, and in time he redeemed them, and now he has sealed them for all eternity by giving them his Holy Spirit.

Now this is a certain hope. But it is a promise that will be fully realized only in the future. And so Paul prays that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened to see and comprehend "***the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.***" An inheritance is not something earned or deserved. It's an undeserved gift. It is grace. And that is how God deals with his saints, the believers whom he has called, redeemed, and sealed with the Holy Spirit.

But this hope and this inheritance both rest on a promise and both these things lie in the future. Where, then, is the assurance that God can and will keep his promise? Paul prays that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened so they may see God's "***incomparably great power for us who believe.***" Knowing about God's power is the basis for trusting that God can and will keep his word.

But where do we find the proof of his power? Well, Paul reminds the Ephesians of what God did in and through Christ. Paul emphasizes ***“That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.”*** For the believer an incomparably great power is at work, which is like the power God demonstrated in connection with the resurrection of his Son. Although Jesus always remained true God, even when he took on human flesh and became true man, he humbled himself and laid aside his divine power. He became obedient to his father’s will, even to death. He was truly dead when his body was put in the grave on Good Friday afternoon. But God used his incomparably great power to restore his Son to life and give back what had originally been his. In addition to this, God greatly exalted him.

At Jesus’ ascension into heaven the father welcomed his Son back to heaven. He set Jesus, the God-man, at his right hand, giving him a position of power. In fact, he exalted him ***“far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given.”*** Notice that here there are four terms to describe positions of great power. More could have been listed. The point is that absolutely no authority figure can successfully oppose the risen and ascended Christ. He is Lord over them all. Just as he proved this long ago at his resurrection, it is also true for the present and for the future. Jesus is far above all opposition, ***“not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”***

But there’s even more talk here of Jesus’ power and authority. Jesus is in charge of everything that happens. ***“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”*** Ephesians 1:22-23. Where is the assurance that God can and will keep his promise? Paul’s answer is, the power that God has given his Son makes that absolutely certain, particularly when we see the favored relationship we have to this all-powerful Lord Jesus Christ. God placed him over all humans, over every authority, and put him in charge of absolutely everything ***“for the church, which is his body.”***

Christ’s rule is absolute. All his power is now used for one grand purpose, the good of his church. Remember, the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints is the sum total of all believers. The relationship between Christ and the rulers and authority figures is simply that of a lord and master dealing with subordinates. Christ’s relationship with his church, however, is entirely different. It is a connection as close as the one that the head of the body shares with the members of the body.

Later in this letter to the Ephesians, we have the picture of Christ as head and the Church as his body in yet another setting, but we will address that in a future sermon.

Right here Paul’s point is that with the all-powerful Christ feeding and caring for us, we, the members of his church, can rest in complete security. But Paul says yet another thing regarding Christ’s relationship to the church. He calls the church ***“the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”*** From eternity God elected and predestined the members of his Holy Christian Church – and he will not rest until he has accomplished their final salvation unto heaven. Only then will he be truly fulfilled. Paul prays that the Ephesians and we may see this truth with enlightened eyes

After opening his letter with an inspiring doxology in praise of the eternal election of grace and its blessings, the apostle prays for the Ephesians that they might come to the knowledge of the glory of their future inheritance, of the power of God in working and preserving saving faith in their hearts, and of the position of the exalted Christ as the Head of the Church. That is God’s prayer for us, too.

God’s eternal plan of salvation was devised already in eternity but it was carried out in time. That is our next sermon. Amen.