

Sermon for Zion - May 22, 2022

Hymns: Come, Now is the Time to Worship; 420 – Praise, I will praise you Lord;
496 – Thy Word is a Lamp Unto My Feet; 567 – Eternal Light

Scripture: Ephesians 1:15-23

Sermon: Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart

Ephesians 1:15-23 - CEV

I have heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people. So I never stop being grateful for you, as I mention you in my prayers. I ask the glorious Father and God of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you his Spirit. The Spirit will make you wise and let you understand what it means to know God.

My prayer is that light will flood your hearts and you will understand the hope given to you when God chose you. Then you will discover the glorious blessings that will be yours together with all God's people.

I want you to know about the great and mighty power that God has for us followers. It is the same wonderful power he used when he raised Christ from death and let him sit at his right hand in heaven. There Christ rules over all forces, authorities, powers, and rulers. He rules over all beings in this world and will rule in the future world as well. God has put all things under the power of Christ, and for the good of the church he has made him the head of everything. The church is the body of Christ and is filled with Christ who completely fills everything.

“You don’t know how good you’ve got it.” Whenever I complained about something, this was my father’s response: “You don’t know how good you’ve got it.” And he was right. I didn’t. After the passage of many years, and with the advantage of hindsight, I did, but oftentimes, in my childhood or adolescence, my father’s words were absolutely true. I didn’t know how good I had it.

I don’t think my father was the originator of that thought. It goes back to the Apostle Paul. Maybe, and I’m pretty sure certainly, it predates Paul as well, all the way back to the very first parent of the very first teenager, but for our purposes this morning, I want to look at Paul’s way of expressing it.

While it’s true that Paul himself can give the impression of being pretty grumpy – he seldom backed down from an argument, and never backed down from a fight – he is actually framing the idea that the people in Ephesus “don’t know how good they have it,” in a positive, rather than a negative, way. He says, “My

prayer is that light will flood your hearts and you will understand the hope given to you when God chose you. Then you will discover the glorious blessings that will be yours together with all God's people.” “My prayer is that light will flood your hearts and you will understand...” Or, the same thought expressed slightly differently in a few other translations:

- NIV - *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know...*
- CEB - *I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see...*
- CJB - *I pray that he will give light to the eyes of your hearts, so that you will understand...*

It's a phrase unique to Paul – “*that light will flood your heart,*” or “*enlighten the eyes of your heart.*” There's nothing in the ancient literature of the time preceding Paul quite like it, but I think even you and I can get at what he means: That deep down, we would understand. That at the very core of our being would be a foundational, inspirational, transformational, knowledge and understanding and experience of the place and power of God in our lives. That, says Paul, is his prayer for the Ephesians. That, says Paul, is his prayer for us. That we, as my father would put it, would “know how good we've got it.” And from whom. And with whom.

This is more than an exercise in counting your blessings, which is a very worthwhile thing to do in itself. This goes deeper. This goes to the very core of who we are, and who we understand ourselves to be. And whose we understand ourselves to be.

Our recent Bible Study and Sermon Series through the Gospel of Mark revealed a central question – “Who is this?” Who is this Jesus? The crowds asked it, the critics asked it, the disciples asked it, his family asked it – even Jesus asked it. Here's just a few examples:

- The crowds: *Mark 6:2 - When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?*

- His critics: *Mark 2:7* - “*Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?*”
- His disciples: *Mark 4:41* - *They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”*
- Jesus himself: *Mark 8:27-29* - *Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”*

Of course, Mark doesn’t leave us hanging. He begins his Gospel with the words, “*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.*” And just nine verses later, as Jesus emerges from the Jordan, baptised by his cousin John, a voice from heaven confirms it: “*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*” Nine chapters later, the voice comes again: “*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*” Even famously thick Peter gets it: “*You are the Messiah.*” And not only his friends come to understand; the Roman Centurion who supervised the execution of Jesus was moved to exclaim, “*Surely this man was the Son of God!*”

So, let’s presume we are here not only to find the answer “Who is Jesus,” but to proclaim that answer to the world – to join our voices together with Mark, with Peter, with the Centurion, with the voice from heaven itself: “*Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.*”

Agreeing together that Jesus is the Son of God, and agreeing together that when we say God, we mean, as the Apostles’ Creed proclaims, “*God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth*” – not just any god, but the One True God – if we can agree together on that, we can begin to approach just what Paul is so excited about in our letter this morning. He’s so excited about it, that the whole paragraph we read – all 212 words – is but a single sentence in the original Greek Paul wrote in. And what he wants us to know, to grasp, to understand (an understanding which will flood our hearts with hope and faith and gratitude and strength) is that through this same Jesus, the very God of all heaven and earth has chosen to love you. To bless you. To adopt you into his family. To call you his own.

This is a big concept, to be chosen, to be adopted by God. My sister, whom I love with all my heart, and who loves me, nevertheless tirelessly tried to convince me as a child that I was adopted, left on the doorstep, and that my parents only took me in because I was pitiful, stupid and ugly, and they felt sorry for me. It's hard to argue with that kind of logic when you are only three years old, and your eight year old sister is marshalling a pretty strong argument. She still tries it on me now and then, but it doesn't reduce me to tears like it used to.

Paul is reminding the Ephesians that the foundation of their faith is not that they have chosen, among all the other gods in the ancient pantheon of deities, to follow this one particular God: Paul is reminding the Ephesians that the foundation of their faith is that God has come for them. Has chosen them. Has adopted them. Has called them his own. Has called *you* his own.

God loves you. God demonstrated that love for you by coming to you in Jesus Christ – a self-sacrificial act of love unsurpassed in all of human history, culminating not only in Jesus dying on your behalf, but defeating death on your behalf. In Jesus Christ, God established his Kingdom, and invited you – you! – to citizenship within it, a kingdom which is governed by the eternal laws of grace, truth, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. And as citizens of that Kingdom, you belong to God. You are adopted into his family. You are the very children of God. And Paul wants you to understand that. To understand your true identity. And to understand your worth.

And to do that, to really understand that, Paul prays that, *“light will flood your hearts... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened... that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see... that he will give light to the eyes of your hearts, so that you will understand...”* that you belong to God. Your name, as Isaiah puts it, is written on the palm of God's hand. And God will never let you go.

Jesus expressed it this way, in words particularly remembered by his friend John (15:9-17):

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other

as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

Friends. Of God! Family. Of God! Chosen. By God! Loved. By God! And called, as citizens to the Kingdom of God, to love God and to love one another! That's who we are. That's whose we are. And that's why we are: that in our love for God and for one another, we will be a blessing, to each other and to all the world, as the fruit of that love blossoms forth.

As John would later write, (1 John 3:1) *“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! It is when we understand that – when we really understand it – when the light comes on - “Then you will discover the glorious blessings that will be yours together with all God's people.”*

The blessings? Oh, let's make a list:

- Our worth is derived not from our physical attributes, our material wealth, our various accomplishments, but our worth is derived from being loved by God. And God calls you his own.
- We are not alone in this world. God has made us part of a family of faith. *“Who are my mother and my brothers?” Jesus asked. “Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother (Mark 3).*
- We have the power of God active in our lives, a power that transcends even death itself. Paul writes, *“I want you to know about the great and mighty power that God has for us followers. It is the same wonderful power he used when he raised Christ from death and let him sit at his right hand in heaven.”* Jesus, in speaking with his grief-stricken friend Martha, said (John 11:25-27): *“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”* *“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”*

Do you believe this? Do you? Does the light of God shine in your heart? Do you understand who you are? Whose you are? Why you are? Do you understand that you are a child of God, loved by God, adopted into the family of God, citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven? Do you understand that you are a brother, a sister, a friend of Jesus Christ? Do you understand this to be your foundation, your purpose, your core identity? Will you, together with all those who take the name Christian, seek to live the life to which you have been called, empowered by the Spirit of God within you, shining the light of God's love to all the world in word and in action?

I understand this. I know this. But too often – all too often – I allow myself to forget it. I allow the cares and concerns, the worries and the problems, the temptations and distractions of this world to dim that light. And sometimes – sometimes – to block it altogether. And once again, I am in darkness. I forget who I am. I forget whose I am. I forget why I am. I forget, as my father warned, “how good I’ve got it.”

Church is here to remind us. To remind us of who God is, of how God loves us, of the lengths God has gone to prove that love, and of how we, the recipients of that love, can find forgiveness and purpose and direction and strength in that love and in our response to it. We are reminded of just how good we’ve got it. And of how we can bring that goodness to others, and to all our dark and hurting world.

Worship seeks to instill within us, at the very core of our being, a foundational, inspirational, transformational, knowledge, understanding and experience of the place and power of God in our lives. And that, says Paul, is his prayer for us. That we, as my father would put it, would “know how good we’ve got it.”

I have heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people. So I never stop being grateful for you, as I mention you in my prayers. I ask the glorious Father and God of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you his Spirit. The Spirit will make you wise and let you understand what it means to know God.

My prayer is that light will flood your hearts and you will understand the hope given to you when God chose you. Then you will discover the glorious blessings that will be yours together with all God's people.

Let the light of God shine in your heart. Let it illumine who you are, whose you are, why you are. And the darkness will never put it out. Amen.