



IN THE SHADOW OF HIS WINGS

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 1:15-23

Sixth Message

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Two years ago, I asked a good friend to plan a trip for a group of men from our Wednesday morning men's group to one of the most beautiful parts of his home state of Colorado. Eleven Californians and a recently arrived brother from Romania decided to make the trip. I gave each of them a teaching assignment from the Old Testament. They had to pick a character from the OT whom they resembled, and their assignment was to teach the rest of us the life of the character they had chosen and why they felt they were like him.

We set off in a van on a 1,000-mile journey to Colorado. It was an odyssey of breathtaking beauty. Our destination was a 5,000-ft. bluff overlooking the plains near Grand Junction, and on our arrival Christian friends had a feast prepared to welcome us. Next day we set up camp at 10,000 feet by a roaring river in a grove of Aspen and pine trees, while behind us stood the 14,000-foot high Mt. Snuffles. Our cook set up the kitchen, and, because it was the weekend of the Fourth of July, he hung a huge American flag between two trees, right over our table. Following a wonderful steak dinner, while we were sitting contended in our chairs, he brought out an ice chest and produced gourmet ice cream for dessert — at 10,000 feet! Next day we climbed almost to the top of Mt. Snuffles and, following our descent from the mountain, immersed our aching bodies in a local hot springs resort.

Then the men began to share from the Old Testament and from their lives. One said he was like Isaac, and he described himself as a timid person; another compared himself to Samson, and so on. As we began to open up to each other the sharing became more intimate. At last, when one man told his brother-in-law, who was part of the group, how much he loved him, we felt that the Lord had come into our midst. We were so moved we began to weep. Towards the end of our time together that evening our cook shared that he had recently come to Christ, and as a result his wife had left him. We had the privilege of baptizing this new brother in the roaring river at the end of our time of sharing. On our return home we all agreed that we would never be the same again because of that journey we had taken together up the mountain.

The problem with a journey like this, however, is that it is not repeatable, and, of course, everyone can't go. But this morning I want to tell you about a journey which the apostle Paul once took, and which everyone who is in Christ can likewise take. In the text to which we come today from the apostle's letter to the Ephesians we will learn that Paul, too, ascended a mountain, a peak much higher than the 14,000-ft. mountain our group climbed in Colorado. There, underneath the throne of God, the things that Paul saw and heard changed him forever. Don't you find it encouraging that the journey that he took is open to all Christians through the gift of the Holy Spirit who transports us to heaven in prayer? The book of Acts tells the story of Philip witnessing to the Ethiopian eunuch, and the next moment the evangelist was transported to an entirely different location. In the same way the Holy Spirit transports Christians, not geographically, as was the case with Philip but, more importantly, he takes

us to heaven, bringing the heavenly Zion to earth so that we can enter into it through prayer.

In the opening verses of this first chapter of Ephesians we have already seen that Paul has been listing the great blessings that are ours in Christ: We were chosen by the Father; redeemed by the Son; taught by the apostles; and sealed by the Holy Spirit. In our text today, the apostle prostrates himself in prayer, beseeching that the Holy Spirit transport Christians to the throne room of God in the heavenly Zion.

This morning therefore let us imagine that we are pilgrims taking a journey up to Mount Zion. The first thing Paul tells us is what prompted his prayer.

I. What Prompts Our Prayer? 1:15,16

For this reason, I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ...

As I grow older in the faith, I find that my thoughts want to be in communication more and more with God, but when it comes to talking to the Father, at times I feel like a rusty pump: nothing issues forth from my soul. Even while I am saying grace at meal-times I often feel empty and dry. I find I need motivation, something to prime my pump for the purpose of prayer. Here Paul tells us that there is something that does this for us. It is this: As we are going up the mountain to pray to God, we will notice that the route is thronged with worshipers; and as our eyes are opened to what God is doing in their lives, the report of that grace motivates us to pray.

(a) Their Faith in the Lord

This is what happened to Paul. The report of the faith in the lives of the Ephesian Christians, who had turned from idols to the living Christ and made him Lord, was what motivated him to pray. When we remember that the economy of Ephesus depended upon idolatry and sexual licentiousness, we can see that it was at great cost to themselves that the Ephesians embraced Christ. The book of Acts records that at one point a number of magicians in Ephesus who had come to faith burned their magic books, at great expense and risk to their lives. Here is how Acts describes that scene: "And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver" (Acts 19:19). At that time a drachma was equal to a day's wages, so if we calculate that the average wage in 1992 is \$100 per day, we see that these new believers in Ephesus destroyed property worth half a million dollars in their new-found zeal for Christ.

There was a second thing about the Ephesians that motivated Paul to pray.

(b) Their Love for the Saints

Their faith was accompanied by love. Like our twentieth cen-

ture world, there was not a lot of love demonstrated in that Greek world, yet these new Christians began to open their homes and share their meals and belongings without regard to wealth, age or race.

So it is the report of God's grace that prompted unceasing thanksgiving on the part of the apostle. This means that we must be part of a body, linked together with other Christians so that we may know what God is doing. Every time I meet Renee Russo, a member of our congregation, she says to me, "I pray for you every day!" When I heard her saying the same thing to someone else the other day, I began to wonder what motivated her to do this. At our Thanksgiving service last week I learned the answer. She told us that 11 years ago she was diagnosed with cancer. The doctors were not optimistic, and she began to pray for her recovery. When she had surgery, however, they discovered that she had hardly any cancer at all. They gave her a clean bill of health and, because she had been given a second chance, she began to pray for others. The grace of God shown to her was what motivated her to pray for the saints.

So God is the one who initiates prayer; it is not up to us. Rejoice therefore if your pump is rusty. Listen to the reports among us of what God is doing and then you will be motivated to enter the throne room in prayer.

Notice next the title Paul gives to the one to whom we should pray.

II. The One To Whom We Pray 1:17a

...the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory...

(a) The God of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem on a feast day were immediately struck by the reminders on every side of God's absolute holiness in the many barriers used to keep sinful man at a distance from God. When God first appeared to Moses, he gave explicit instructions to create barriers around the mountain lest anyone touch it and die. In Jerusalem, the city wall was erected to protect the sanctity of the place, and beyond the wall stood the various courtyards. Gentiles, for instance, could not pass beyond the court of the gentiles. Then came the court of the women and the inner court for men. Beyond these barriers lay the sacrificial altar. This was as far as Jewish males could go. Only the priest, dressed in holy garments, could go further. Only he was allowed to enter into the holy place, with its three pieces of furniture. But beyond that stood another barrier, a curtain hiding the Holy of Holies, and no one except the high priest ever ventured beyond that point; even he could do so on one day only, the Day of Atonement.

But now everything is different. When you make the journey to Zion, it is as if a limousine picks you up and the driver races by all the barriers. To your amazement and uneasiness he goes right to the altar. There you are greeted by a priest dressed in glory, and his first word to you is, "Brother." He dresses you in the garments of a priest and takes you by the hand, past the altar, past the laver, and directly into the Holy Place. Now you are really feeling uneasy. No longer is there a curtain guarding the Holy of Holies — it has been torn in two. Then you see at last that the priest who has been escorting you is Jesus himself. Through his sacrifice, the temple has been eternally changed. Once it was off limits, with the penalty of death for violators, but now the sign says, "Open access via the Son." To whom are we praying when we come to Zion? It is to "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory." His sacrifice altered forever the heavenly architecture.

When we get there, we are at the ark, and underneath the

wings of the cherubim we behold the Father of glory.

(b) The Father of Glory

In the OT, Uzzah once merely tried to steady the tottering ark and he was killed as a result. But now you are standing in a place, underneath the wings of the cherubim, where only a handful of OT prophets stood. As we know, when this happened these men were never the same again. Listen to the words of Ezekiel following his experience: "Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I saw from the appearance of his loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of his loins and downward it was something like fire; and there was a radiance around him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking..." (Ezekiel 1:26-28)

This was what Ezekiel saw, and this is what we enter into when we pray today.

David also experienced a state of ecstasy when this happened to him, as we read in Psalm 63:

When I remember Thee on my bed,
I meditate on Thee in the night watches,
For Thou hast been my help,
And in the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to Thee;
Thy right hand upholds me. (Psalm 63:6-8)

And in Psalm 27, we have his words as he beheld the beauty of the place:

One thing I have asked from the LORD, this I shall seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to meditate in His temple. (Psalm 27:4)

I feel that my problem in prayer is I am too quick to speak. I don't take time to watch and listen. I get but a glimpse of the glory of God, and then I hurriedly write my petty requests like memos and leave them in the Holy Place to return down the valley. I never really enter in to the Holy of Holies.

Now, as we stand beside the Son, underneath the throne of the Father of glory, we are free to make requests. And what do we ask for? When we see this kind of glory, our requests tend to undergo a radical transformation.

Let us see what the apostle prayed for.

III. The Focus of Our Prayers 1:17

...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.

(a) Revelation in the Inner Man

Paul is so taken by the awesomeness of God's glory that he wants others to see what he sees. He wants God in his generosity to give to the Ephesian Christians the same gift of a spirit of revelation that he himself had (1:8-9), and to do so with the same measure of wisdom and insight.

Recently I heard a tape by Larry Crabb in which he shared that it was suffering that caused him to change his counseling methods. A few years ago, he was terrified with the thought that

his wife had cancer. When the biopsy showed that she did not, he went out rejoicing and praising God. Three days later, however, he was told that his brother was killed in an plane crash, and he wept with grief for days. His grief, he said, tapped a deep root of grief which he had never felt before, but through the pain he got to know God better. "Now," he says, "I don't use God to solve people's problems. I use their problems to help them get to know God." If you want God to solve your problems, don't ask for counseling. But if you are hurting, and if you want to find God in your hurt, then we can help you. This is what prayer is all about — getting to know God.

(b) To Know God Intimately

Paul prays that the Ephesians would come to know God as intimately as the apostles did. Though they were the first to hope in Christ, and they alone as eyewitnesses of the risen Christ were uniquely authorized to write Scripture, the apostle says they had no corner on the market of intimacy with Christ. Thus, as every generation of Christians feeds on the writings of the apostles they can become as intimate with Christ as the apostles themselves. How thrilling this would have been to the Ephesians! They had forsaken the high-priced mystery religions where knowledge was something to be kept secret, a practice that is continued today with many of the self-help groups who charge high fees for their weekend rituals and then demand secrecy from their gullible followers. But it is not so in Christ. While the apostles occupied unique positions, their word leads us even today to the throne room of heaven where we too may know Christ.

This then is the general purpose behind our prayers.

Paul lists some specifics in the verses that follow.

IV. The Specifics of Our Prayers 1:18-19

**...having the eyes of your heart enlightened,
so that you may know
what is the hope of His calling,
what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in
the saints,
and what is the surpassing greatness of His power
toward us who believe...**

In this phrase "having the eyes of your heart enlightened," Paul is praying for knowledge that is deeper than mere knowledge of the mind. He prays that the minds and hearts of the Ephesians would catch fire.

He continues with three things he desires for them as they enter the throne room.

(a) The Hope of His Calling For Us

In these words, "what is the hope to which he has called you," I think Paul is asking Christians, "How certain is your calling?" This speaks to our greatest need, doesn't it? When we pray, we see ourselves as sinners, always in a rut. We tend to think that God is standing there saying, "Oh it's you again. Are you here with the same problem?" We wonder if God's call is effectual, and will he be faithful to truly change us. Is he committed to us? in other words. Paul assures us that when we are underneath the throne of God, in the presence of his glory, our doubts will melt like wax before the burning flame, and we will begin to have expectations of perfect holiness one day. This is what gives us assurance.

There is a second thing.

(b) The Wealth Of His Glory In Us

Over the holidays I saw that movie "Far And Away," the story of an Irish couple who dreamt of a new land in Oklahoma.

They followed their dream to that land where they heard that unlimited acres were free for the taking. The story played out all the hardships and disappointments they went through until at last they reached the starting line for the great Oklahoma Land Rush. They discovered that the promise was real: the land was rich, beautiful and free. As my wife watched the film she grew a bit nostalgic. Her great-grandparents got their section of land in that land rush, but when her grandmother died, the government took it all back in inheritance taxes. Inheritances in this world are very uncertain, aren't they?

At times we wonder if God will be generous to us. Will he give himself completely to us or will he hold something back? We wonder if perhaps, like the IRS, he will take everything back. When we begin to see the glory of Christ in the temple, however, and we realize that all the riches that God gave to him are intended for us, then at last we become contented; our grumbling and complaining ceases. We can put up with whatever comes our way for the moment, for the fact that God holds nothing back from us makes us a quieter people.

Knowing this would have been extremely meaningful to the Ephesian Christians. As we have already seen, many of them lost their livelihoods due to their commitment to Christ. They were forced to eke out a living while Ephesus thrived, while the investment bankers and the maritime traders profited and the Temple of Artemis enriched people through idolatry. Yet they were the true heirs of the world to come, and already they could observe the beginning of this new construction in the lives of the saints; thus they had the assurance of knowing for certain that their hope was not in vain.

Here is the third thing.

(c) The Greatness Of His Power Toward Us

...and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...

The majority of this text amplifies this thought of God's power, thus we may conclude that the problem of intimidation probably posed the most serious threat to the faith of the Ephesians. As they surveyed their situation, things did not look very promising. They must have wondered if God was capable of following through on what he had promised as the whole pagan world seemed to be uniting in its opposition to Christ. The gospel not only had spiritual implications, it had strong moral implications as well in its declaration of an end to idolatry. The story in Acts 19 demonstrates that the gospel so threatened the business of idolatry that a riot broke out in the stadium where 40,000 people raucously chanted slogans for two hours. Unlike Judaism, which had legal sanction, Christianity had no protection from its intimidators. We are seeing more and more of this in America today as the world seems to unite against the gospel. Our world is more open to idolatry, and as the pure message of the gospel attacks these strongholds, they unite in their hostility to Christ.

Now when the entire world comes together in this way, what measure of power can Christians count on? Paul tells us in these words,

...according to the surpassing greatness of His power, which He brought about in Christ, raising Him from the dead, seating Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all 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. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:20-23)

Here Paul is saying that the measure of power that is given to us is the same measure that was given to Christ; and the demonstration of this was in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

The first thing we see about this power is that it was unconquerable: “which He brought about in Christ, raising Him from the dead.” Man can boast in a lot of things he has conquered, but no one except Jesus has the power to overcome the grave. His life conquered death and opened up a new world order with a new kind of life — resurrection life. As we utilize this life we must expect to be put to death often. Our response, however, should be to rejoice when we are made to feel weak because this gives God opportunity to use his power in us.

George Ni shared last week on his trip to China to teach English, about how miraculously his financial support was raised, etc. But the Chinese authorities specifically told him that he could not share his faith in Christ, and they took steps to watch him and listen to him to ensure that he complied. George wondered why he was even in China as he could not see how he could fulfill his purpose. Then he became very sick, so sick that he thought he was going to die. He began to pray, and God restored him to health. Afterwards a young woman came to him secretly and said to him, “I am interested in this Jesus. Has he done any miracles for you lately?” George, of course, took the opportunity to tell her of God’s unconquerable power.

Secondly, God has given Jesus *carte blanche* authority to use this power, as was demonstrated in our Lord’s ascension — “far above all 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.” In the ascension, Jesus was given David’s throne, but it was an even better throne than David’s, for Jesus entered a new dimension, the highest rule, “above all.” So whether they are earthly or spiritual, whether they are nations, kings or governments, Jew or Gentile, not one of these powers is strong enough to pose a threat to Jesus. He is not like some local monarch; his rule is universal.

And his authority is for all time: “not only in this age, but also in the one to come.” So Jesus’ rule is not a temporary one. We don’t have to wait for another party to come into office; he reigns and rules for all time.

Thirdly, the power that was given to Jesus does something that no other power could ever do: it restores mankind. Paul says, “...and He put all things in subjection under His feet...” In the Garden of Eden, man was crowned with dominion over all things to be like God. But in the fall, he lost that dominion. He lost more than that: he lost his humanity in the process. In Christ, however, God restored man’s dominion. Now when Jesus gives forth his resurrection life, it does not abuse or coerce you; it makes you human. You begin to feel things you never felt before, things like gentleness and compassion for others. Why? It is because you have had your humanity restored. Part of the reason Christians don’t make much of a stir in the world today is that we don’t present Christ in the proper light. This is why we hear responses like, “Well, that’s fine for you, but it’s not for me.” But, as Tom Wright has pointed out, in the first century, no one else was going around making the exclusive claim that they were the new human race! How does that strike you? Have you ever made that claim while you were witnessing to someone? One of the finest tributes paid to Ray Stedman at his memorial service, I felt, was when someone said Ray was a man — a complete man. This is what resurrection life does: it makes you fully

human.

Finally, where is this power to be found? Paul’s answer is that the exclusive power brokers are the saints.

[He] ...gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all.

Where is his rule and power manifest in the present age? It is not found in Washington D.C., in IBM, Hewlett Packard, the IRS, the Pentagon, nor in Israel. It is found only in the church, in the body of Christ. The fulness of that power is in his body, so go out and take new ground. Don’t be intimidated by anyone or anything. If you understand the vision properly, in the new heavens and the new earth the life of Christ will fill out the temple; the temple will fill out the whole city of Jerusalem; and the New Jerusalem will fill out the whole creation, until Jesus fills “all in all.” Meanwhile, in this present age, Jesus has given his power in the church, and Christians are his power brokers. We get to occupy the starting place in the war for the liberation of mankind.

David in the OT saw that the next event following the ascension of Jesus was the unveiling of the dawn:

Thy people will volunteer freely in the day of Thy power;
In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,
Thy youth are to Thee as the dew. (Psalm 110:3)

The Lord’s people, says David, will be “like dew” — an innumerable army “suddenly, silently mobilized” (Derek Kidner). They will be glistening, having been cleansed in the holiness of the King. This is why Jesus could say, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth, therefore go make disciples of all nations...I am with you...”

So this is the prayer of the apostle for the Ephesians and for us. And the evidence that we know Christ is that we have assurance when we doubt; there is contentment for the discontented; and confidence for the fearful.

My Romanian friend John was the man most deeply moved by our trip to Colorado. He was affected by the new land and the new resources that he saw, but most of all, although his English was not good, he was moved by the testimonies and the outpouring of love he felt from the men. “I thought I was a Christian,” he said, “but I saw something different here.” On the Fourth of July, two of the men took the American flag and wrapped it around him and we rejoiced together. One Sunday a few weeks later I was surprised to discover that John had returned to Romania. But my surprise turned to joy when I heard the reason for his return: he was going home to get his family. All he had was a 1,000-mile glimpse of the new land that we had shown him, but it was enough to assure him that this land was a certainty. And because he knows this, I am sure he lives differently in his own land, as he now knows that it is only a temporary dwelling for him and his family.

The heavenly Father wants to transport you to a new land and for you to catch a glimpse of its glory. When you do this, he will wrap you in the mantle of his glory, and he will send you back to earth to tell your family and friends to come with you and rest in the shadow of his wings.

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