

The Power You Already Have

by Ray C. Stedman

When I was a student at Dallas Seminary back in the '40s right after World War II, Elaine and I lived in a tiny trailer on the campus of the seminary. It was the only housing that we could find in Dallas at that time. A number of families, 17 all together, moved trailers right onto the campus, and we lived there throughout the four years of our seminary training. In a trailer directly behind us, Don and Bea Campbell lived. Don is now the president of Dallas Seminary, so you can see that trailer life is a very good beginning for somebody. On the next row over were Howard and Jean Hendricks, and many of you know of their ministry. Howard is probably widely known all over the world today as a speaker and as a Christian educator. They lived in a trailer identical to ours. We were all poor as church mice. In fact our trailer was so small that the mice were humpbacked trying to fit into it! Seventeen families shared two bathrooms! I remember standing outside one day, waiting in line, singing the old hymn, "Why do you wait, dear brother? Why do you tarry so long?"

I'll never forget the day, in our extreme poverty, when there was a letter in my mailbox from a man whom I had never met, but whose name I knew. When I opened it there fell out a ten dollar bill and a note from him that said he had heard about our ministry among the servicemen, during the war, teaching the Bible. He said he wanted to help us financially and was praying for us. To this day I can recall the immense feeling of gratitude that I felt because some man, unknown to me, had thought of us, and was praying for us, and wanted to help us.

We find a similar situation here in the letter to the Ephesians. The Apostle Paul had started the church at Ephesus (you can read about it in Acts 19), and he had been away from it for a number of years. Evidently many other people had come into new life in Christ, and a great many new Christians had joined the church. It was now filled with people that he didn't know. In fact he tells us in this opening paragraph that he had heard about their faith, but he had never met them yet. Nevertheless he was praying for them and was hoping to help them in their spiritual growth. So this passage is very appropriate, especially for me, when I come back and find a lot of people that I have never seen or yet met in the church, and yet we've been praying for you as well.

The apostle says, in Verse 15:

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. {Eph 1:15-16 NIV}

That must have been a wonderful word of encouragement to them. You perhaps are asking, "What does he mean 'for this reason'?" I don't want to go back into the opening verses of this chapter, but there you will find a magnificent statement from the Apostle Paul. It is actually only one sentence long in the Greek, but it covers several paragraphs in English translation. In them the apostle is describing all that they possess in God, all that Christ has done in their lives, and all the great doctrinal foundations of Christianity. And it is all addressed to the mind, that they might understand with their mind, to the reason, in order that they might understand with their intellect what God had done for them. It is for that reason, he says, that he has been praying for them.

But now in this paragraph he goes on in Verse 17 to give the content of his prayers:

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. {Eph 1:15-23 NIV}

Now, that is really the major objective of a Christian life -- to know God better. We need to ask ourselves, "Is this happening with us? Are we really getting to know God better?"

There is a principle in the Scripture that is very important for us to understand. We are all familiar with the phrase that says we are made in the image of God, which means in some way that humanity reflects God. But that fact means that we cannot learn who we are until we begin to know and learn who God is. It is the revelation and understanding of the nature of God that will tell us what we are like.

I believe that this is one of the major reasons why many people today never seem to discover who they are. They never learn what they can do, what possibilities lie within, and what potential is theirs because they have never discovered who God is. We reflect him, and therefore it is extremely important that we come to know God better.

Remember that Jesus said this in his great prayer to the Father in John 17: "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent," {cf, John 17:3 NIV}.

This is the reason that we exist -- that we may know God better. I hope this is happening to you, young and old alike. You never get over knowing more about God. He is such a fantastic being that revelations about his character and nature keep coming to us and we discover that as we know him better we suddenly realize we know ourselves better too.

So Paul prays for them. He doesn't know their circumstances. He can't pray for their daily problems and pressures as you can when you know somebody personally. But he can pray, and does pray, that they may know God better. That will take care of everything.

All of this is addressed to their minds. They need to understand the great facts about God -- to understand with their thinking the being and majesty of God.

But now, in Verse 18, he adds another thought:

I pray 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, and his incomparably great power for us [to us or in us literally] who believe. {Eph 1:18-19a NIV}

That is a different idea. The eyes of the mind can grasp the doctrine and teaching about God for we *see* with our minds.

Perhaps somebody has said something to you and you have replied, "Oh, yes, I see what you mean." You didn't see it with your eyes; you saw it with your mind -- with the eyes of the mind. But Scriptures declares that your hearts have eyes too. And Paul prays that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.

In the Scriptures the heart is the seat of the emotions. The apostle's prayer is that they (and we) may so grasp the revelation that is made to the mind -- that it begins to enlighten, move, and motivate our hearts. That is when we become vital Christians -- turned on, ready to serve, and highly motivated because we have begun to feel the power and the wonder of the truth that we have been taught. That is why Paul prays for the eyes of your heart, that you may *feel* the truth -- not just in your intellect, but also deep in your emotions -- and that you may reflect and rejoice on who God is and what he is like.

There are three specific things, he says, that we need to know about God:

- First, the hope to which he has called us,
- Second, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and
- Third, his incomparably great power.

Let us take a closer look at those three things because they are designed to keep us steady under pressure. They will grip our feelings, turn us on, motivate us highly, and make our lives effective and influential. Everyone wants to be significant. We all want our lives to count for something, and these are the three ingredients, says

the Apostle Paul, that will keep us turned on, excited, and anticipating the adventure of walking with God.

1. The first one is that we may remember the hope to which we have been called. This is clearly the hope of being changed into his likeness, the hope of glory. Paul speaks of it many places in the Scripture. He says, "This light affliction which is but for a moment is working for us an exceeding great and eternal weight of glory," {2 Cor 4:17 KJV}. And he also says, "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us," {Rom 8:18 KJV}. In other words, we must not look at life as the world around us does, as being all that we'll ever get, as the only chance you are going to have to find fulfillment. The world says, "if you don't take it now, you are never going to get another chance." I have seen that misunderstanding drive people into forsaking their marriages after 30 or 40 years and running off with another, usually younger, person, hoping that they can still fulfill their dreams because they feel life is slipping away from them.

Christians are not to think that way. We are being told that life is a school, a training period. It is where we are being prepared for something that is incredibly great, but it is yet to come. I don't understand all that is involved in that, but I believe it, and I can hardly wait until it happens sometimes.

We are told in Scripture (and certainly our experience agrees with it) that these bodies of ours are growing old and will lose their powers.

Ever since I moved to Oregon I have noted a few streaks of gray in my hair. I can tell by the way I feel, many times, that my body is losing its elasticity, its ability to function, and I grow weary and weak. I don't know why, because in my mind I don't feel that way at all. But, as I get older, I remember that it is all aimed at something tremendous which I am being readied for.

It is important not to forget that. Don't succumb to the philosophy around that you have got to have it now or you will never have a chance. You can pass by a lot of things now and be content because you know that what you are getting, what God is sending you in terms of your present experience, is just what you need to get you ready for what he has waiting for you when life is over. One of my favorite quotations from literature is the words of Robert Browning, which you sometimes see on sundials:

Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be.
The last of life,
for which the first was made.

So don't lose hope. You are headed for hope, headed for life, headed for glory. All of this life is working toward that end; its playing its part in that process. That's the first thing to hang on to. You don't need to be depressed or feel that everything is useless, that you can't do anything -- you are getting older, you have lost your ability to function, and so on. That is not true. Paul prays that these Christians may feel in their hearts the great hope to which he has called them. It is all waiting for them beyond death, it is the shining hope that they are moving inevitably toward.

2. The second aspect is the "riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints." Now this is such an important truth that I despair sometimes of trying to get it across to people. When people hear the word *inheritance*, everyone thinks in terms of the inheritance that we have in God, and the Scripture teaches that. He is our inheritance. He is like a great bank deposit of resources from which we can draw strength, comfort, encouragement, correction, and whatever else we need as we face problems in our lives. We can draw on God -- daily, moment by moment. We have all sung hymns about it, and you have experienced it yourselves. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. He is talking about God's inheritance *in us*, and the enrichment that will come to our lives when we discover what it means to let God have what is his -- his inheritance in us.

What is that?

All through the Scriptures we are being told that, when we became Christians, God gave us gifts which we never had before. Every Christian has one or more, and they are given to us in order that, when we begin to exercise them, we will find that we can help others and life becomes an exciting adventure of faith. I could spend the rest of the day up here telling you stories about individuals who have found this to be true: I am thinking right now of retired people from this congregation who have started a Bible class in their home and have begun to reach out into their communities. Though their bodily health is failing, they nevertheless are being tremendously influential in reaching some of the leaders of a community -- the mayor of a city in one case, the chief of police in another -- and influencing the whole community by the exercise of the gifts that God has given them.

God's inheritance in us is the joy he feels in using us to accomplish his work of changing people, of bringing them from death to life, using the gifts he has given us. The apostle is saying that he wants us to discover how exciting and enriching that can be for us.

Do you know that the greatest thrill that any human being can have is the sense that God has just used you to help somebody else?

That is the most wonderful feeling that you can ever have. And God has given each of us gifts for that purpose.

I hope that, if you haven't done so by now, you will seriously think about the gift God has given you and will put it to work in helping someone. Some have the gift of helps, some teaching, some administration, some wisdom, and some knowledge, etc. All of these things are gifts that the Spirit of God has given to us. When we begin to exercise them, we lose the dullness and routine of our lives because we are caught up in an exciting ministry.

I have never been able to appreciate the kind of retirement that many people desire, where all they do is sit around and play bridge or golf or bingo or something like that. They try to just fill up their time until they die. What a waste that is of all the lessons of life and of all the possibilities that God has given! I hope that young and old alike will begin to put this to work and find out the exciting riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

3. You may say, "Well, that all sounds good, but I don't have the strength to do that. I don't seem to be able to begin to do anything like that." That is why Paul goes on to pray that you may know "his incomparably great power [which is at work in us] who believe." Power is the word of the hour today. Everyone is talking about it. You hear about power evangelism, and power living -- power lunches. Everybody is looking for power.

I am afraid that the search for some kind of power sends many people off on wild goose chases. They look for either some kind of internal strengthening, so that they feel adequate and competent, or perhaps even some miraculous event that is going to enable them to do things that ordinarily would not be possible for anyone -- miracles of some sort -- an ability to heal people, or an ability to change our circumstances. But that is because they do not understand the model that Paul gives us here of what the power of God is like.

Did you know that when you became a Christian you were immediately equipped with power?

It came with the Spirit of grace who came into your heart. If you do not already have the Spirit of Christ, you are not yet a Christian. When we receive the Lord Jesus, he gives us the Spirit of love and grace and of power; and all of that comes when we believe in him. What we need to understand is the way that power works.

This is the example that the apostle gives, in Verses 19-21, to describe this power:

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, far

above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. {Eph 1:19b-21 NIV}

The resurrection of Jesus is the model of the power we possess.

Unfortunately, again, we have very confused ideas about this power. We don't listen and look carefully at what the text says about the resurrection. We focus upon the anfel's rolling away of the stone, and upon the earthquake, and the terror of the Roman guards as they realize that some tremendous event has taken place. But what we don't realize is that all those events *followed* the resurrection. They were results of it, not the thing itself.

It didn't take the rolling of the stone, and the overpowering of the Roman guards, to allow Jesus to be resurrected. If you think about it, he was already resurrected when those things took place. His body lay in the tomb wrapped in the grave clothes, and yet at a moment that God determined, the body left those grave clothes; it evaporated out of them. They were left lying there, crumpled up and sunken down, with no body in them. Jesus passed through the great stone while it was still standing before the door of the tomb. It was later rolled away to let the disciples in! In some way he was alive and standing in the garden, where Mary mistook him for a gardener, before any of those events had taken place.

What I am trying to say is that the power of God, the resurrection power of God, is not a power that makes a great demonstration. It is quiet. We are so used to power that makes noises that we don't think we have power if we don't have noise. Things buzz, hum, pulsate, pound, explode, and bang, and these are seen as power. But this is power that you don't feel. You don't have any sense that it is happening, but it is happening.

This power has a peculiar characteristic: It only happens when you begin to act! When you begin to exercise the gifts that God has given you, then the power begins to flow, not before. Then God will work through you to accomplish things that will leave you gasping, sometimes, at what he has done. You didn't feel this power. You don't suddenly feel strong, capable, and mighty. No, you felt weak; Paul says that God's power is made perfect in weakness, but we pay no attention, sometimes, to such a statement. If you feel weak, if you feel inadequate, if you feel ineffectual, this is no hindrance to being used of God and exercising the power of God -- not in the least! That is what this is teaching us.

Many people never discover what God could do in their lives because they keep waiting to feel powerful before they act. No, you won't feel powerful. Begin to reach out and act to meet the needs around, and suddenly you discover that there is unusual power at work.

I have a power toothbrush that runs by a battery. It has an unusual characteristic. When you get the toothpaste on the toothbrush and you are ready to brush your teeth, you look around for the button to turn it on. But you don't need a button to turn it on. The directions instruct you to put it up to your teeth and press, and suddenly the power will be there. I remember with what unbelief I tried this the first time, but, to my amazement, it worked. I put the toothbrush up and began to press against my teeth, and, suddenly, the brush began to move up and down -- there was power available.

This is a trivial (and even silly), example of what the power of God is like, but resurrection power works much the same way. It works when you reach out to somebody. It works when you sit down to exercise a teaching gift, to comfort someone who is in trouble, or to confront someone who is taking a wrong course. It works *when you expect it to be there*. That is, it works by faith! That is when the power of God is available, and it is wonderful power. It is beyond anything that earth can match.

There are Bible stories that help us understand this. All through the Old Testament, God is teaching his people how he works in power. One of these stories is when Joshua crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The people of Israel were lined up, and the priests were told to go first and bear on their shoulders the ark of the covenant. They were to walk down to the River Jordan, which was flowing in flood before them, and trust in God that something would happen by the time they got to the river. And so they did. In faith they believed that God would do what he said he would do. When the priests put the ark of the covenant on their shoulders, it says, they walked down, and, when the soles of their feet actually touched the water, the water

parted, and they went through on dry ground to the other side. That is the way God's power works. When you put it to work, when you begin to act yourself, expecting him to be with you, then his power begins to work. There is no noise, no flash, and no movement. The power is already there, and God is waiting for you to trust.

Remember the verse later on in Ephesians that says:

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that you can ask or think according to the power that is at work in us. {cf, Eph 3:20}

This is the explanation. You will never find out what God can do with you until you begin to step out and take on some activity that you need power for. Then you will discover his power. That is why Paul prays for these Ephesians and says that the secret of a vital congregation is that you never forget the hope to which God has called you and the enriching adventure that awaits you when you begin to use the gifts God has given you. You will be overwhelmed by the extent of change that God will work through you when you expect that he will act in power when you begin to act.

In closing, I will point out some of the wonderful things this power can do:

First of all, the Scripture tells us that it is power to face our inner hurts and fears. I find so many people locked into uselessness by dwelling on their past. It helps to know your past and to acknowledge it; I am not disparaging that. But once you know the things that set you on a wrong path, you also have to remember that the Scripture says that we are to forget the things that are past and press on because *we are new creatures in Christ Jesus*. We are no longer what we once were, and therefore we can set aside that past, having once faced it and seen its impact upon us. We can set it aside and day by day begin to walk with God as his newly created child. We will discover that this power will enable us to overcome all the dysfunctions of a bad past. I have seen it happen many times. It means that no dysfunctional background can keep us from fulfilling what God wants.

Second, it is power to abandon evil habits. I know Christians who are still in bondage to habits that have held them in an iron grasp -- alcoholism, drug use, an evil temper, a lustful practices, and bad attitudes. Here is a power that enables you to say "No!" to these things, and to go on saying "No." It can break the grip of these things upon us.

One of Charles Wesley's great hymns includes the words,

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.

That's the power of God.

It is a power to restore broken relationships. There may be members of your family or friends that you haven't spoken to for a long time; the relationship is entirely broken. You may be bitter over some experience that you had long ago, and you never want to forgive somebody for what they have done. Here is power to forgive, power to remember that you have been forgiven. Therefore, you can forgive, and you can heal those broken relationships, and give a word of acceptance to somebody who has been estranged from you for a long time.

It is power to change bad attitudes, and stop obnoxious behavior. I know some Christians that I can't stand to be around because they are so obnoxious and are constantly acting in such a way that they hurt people and demolish relationships. No Christian needs to go on being like that. We often excuse it, saying, "Well, I'm Irish, I can't help it," or "I'm Italian, that's the way we all are." But we have no right to use those excuses because we have a power that can break every dominion known to man. That is what this verse says: "It is far above all rule or authority and power and dominion and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

Finally it is power to reach out to others to help them in their need. It is power to respond to people's hurts around you and power to take some of your own time to minister to them. This is what makes a church function as God intended it to in society. That is what these last verses say. Verses 22-23 says:

And God placed all things under his [Jesus'] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church [it is all for the church now], which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. {Eph 1:22-23 NIV}

Everything takes place through the church now. The church is God's great funnel through which all this great power flows.

My prayer for you is that with the eyes of your hearts you may come to know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and the incomparable power which he has already given you.

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