

Ephesians 1:15-23
Knowing God Better

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As a church we have been considering the purpose of the Christian life and the purpose of the cross and resurrection. We have been re-examining the mission of the church, the mission of the Christian disciple; the heartbeat of Jesus' mission when he lived on earth. I grew up believing that the purpose of the Christian life and the purpose of the cross and resurrection is my salvation so I can be reconciled to God and go to heaven. With that as my purpose, all my decisions are made through that lens. It means that what I do becomes about making sure I'll get to heaven. How I live my life becomes focused on how I make sure others get to heaven too. Over the past few months, I have been suggesting to you that I have it all wrong. The purpose of the Christian life, the purpose of the cross and resurrection, the purpose of the church is not so I get to heaven. It is not about getting others to believe in Jesus Christ so they also go to heaven. Rather, I believe the eternal purpose of the Christian life, the purpose of the church, the purpose of the cross and resurrection is to glorify God. Jesus' purpose on earth was not first to save people. Jesus' primary purpose on earth, as we learned when we studied texts in the gospel of John, was to glorify God. The driving force behind Jesus' ministry, behind his words and actions, behind the cross and resurrection, was to manifest the divine essence of God.

Two weeks ago we began our study on the book of Ephesians. As we looked at the powerful, complex single sentence (verses 3-14 in chapter 1), we realized that the church exists for the praise of God's glory. The church's mission is to glorify God. When we make something other than God the primary purpose of the church, we will lose sight of that which gives church her unique identity. When we make disciple-making or saving the lost our primary focus, we start to make our decisions based on what we think people want or need; not about God. When we make justice and compassion ministries our primary focus, we forget that God is at the centre. Now

this doesn't mean we are not to devote time, energy and resources on discipleship or compassion and justice. But these pursuits, these ministries flow out of our primary focus to glorify God. To glorify God means that in our living and working, our playing and praying, we manifest the essence of who God is, we reveal the heart of the Father to the world. And when we glorify God, we naturally participate in evangelism and discipleship, we naturally participate in compassion and justice ministries because those represent the heart of the Father. Yet there is a difference between making God and His glory our primary focus or making the salvation of others and justice our primary focus. One puts God at the centre of our ministry and our mission; the other puts people at the centre of our ministry and our mission.

The book of Ephesians, as we learned a couple of weeks ago, tells us what defines the church. It is a book written to God's people to tell God's people about their purpose, about their identity. It is a book written to the church in Ephesus to address how church is formed, sustained, and how it grows. This letter doesn't address some human problem but explores that unique identity which makes church church. So this morning we will continue to work our way through this book.

In the first half of the first chapter, we learned the purpose of the church; we learned why the church exists. We learned why God blesses, chooses, and destines us. Why God bestows and lavishes His grace upon us. Why God makes known to us the mystery of his will and why God will bring all things in heaven and on earth together. God does all these things for the praise of his glory. God blesses and chooses us so we can glorify him. God bestows and lavishes his grace on us so we can glorify him. God reveals the mystery of his will and brings all things in heaven

and earth together so that he may be glorified. He does all these not so we can go to heaven, not so we can go and make disciples, not so the hungry can be fed or the homeless housed. God gives us all these gifts primarily so that God can be glorified. The church exists for the praise of his glory! The Christian faith, the Christian life, the Christian disciple exists for the praise of his glory. Our primary purpose and goal in life is not to get to heaven or to make more disciples or to heal the sick. Our primary purpose and goal in life is to glorify God. And when we glorify God we will then of course participate in Christian discipleship, we will take care of the widow and orphan, the stranger and alien among us.

The church exists for the praise of his glory. The church exists to glorify God, to reveal the essence of who God is, to honour the divine nature of God. And so in order for the church to be the church, in other words, in order for the church to glorify God, the church must know God. Paul puts it this way in verse 17: “so that you may know him better”. To glorify God; to grow in Christian maturity; to grow as a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ starts with the knowledge of God. It starts, as Paul prays, “with the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know God better”.

The letter begins with praise – praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The letter starts with praising the glory of God – ‘to the praise of his glory’. It moves from praise to prayer. And as it moves from praise to prayer; it becomes a prayer that we would keep glorifying and praising the Triune God. To glorify God means that we must know God. So we keep on praying that we would know the fullness of who God is and what God has done. We praise God

for who he is. We glorify God for what He has done. We pray that we would know him better so that we can continue to keep praising and glorifying God.

So Paul begins his letter with praise and then moves to prayer in the second half of chapter 1. It should be no surprise to us that when Paul writes a letter to the church about what gives the church her unique identity; about what defines the church, Paul uses the language of prayer. This means that the language we use as we mature in Christian faith is prayer. As we mature as Christian disciples and are formed in the Christian faith, we learn how to pray. Prayer is the language we use not just during crises and tragedy, celebration and joy, but in all of life: in our working and playing; our eating and house-cleaning; our socializing and leisure. We use the language of prayer in response to God's work and God's presence. Prayer is appreciation, praise, and thanksgiving of the blessings we have already received.

It has struck me this past week that Paul's prayer at the beginning of his letter to the saints is not a prayer for peace or comfort, not a prayer for healing or forgiveness, not a prayer to experience God's love and protection. Paul doesn't even pray for the saints to be unified or holy, two key themes that emerge later on in the letter. Rather, Paul prays for knowledge of God. To summarize his prayer, Paul prays that the transformation and growth of the church would happen through the revelation of the Messiah. Paul prays that the knowledge of the Triune God would sink so deep that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened. Paul prays that the revelation of God will transform their worldview – how they see and understand and live in the world.

Now, there seems to be a growing trend within our culture and our churches to understand ourselves better, to know who we are and what we like and what we don't like. There are a whole bunch of tests and questionnaires we can complete to understand our personality, our strengths and weaknesses, our values and priorities, the best self-care practices unique to our make-up. In fact, parents often post monthly updates about their newborn infant on social media with a list of what their son or daughter likes and dislikes. Of course the photos and lists are cute and funny and an invitation to get to know the newborn who likes car rides but dislikes bath time. While I affirm the importance of self-awareness, self-understanding and self-evaluation, I wonder about the emphasis on self and the growing drive that dominates our culture: discover who you are so you can be true to yourself. Culture encourages experimentation and exploration in an effort to learn who you are and what you like. But what happens when being true to yourself – doing what it is you like - hurts others?

See, Paul doesn't begin his prayer to the Ephesians with a desire that they would grow in self-knowledge; in self-understanding; or in self-awareness. Paul prays that they would grow in wisdom and revelation to know God better. Christian discipleship begins in the context of knowing God, not knowing oneself. Christian discipleship doesn't start with us practicing self-care or completing surveys to know our strengths and gifts or developing our relational skills. Christian discipleship begins with knowing God. And, as we will see as we study this letter, a growth in knowledge of God is connected to growth of self as we grow in holiness and righteousness.

As I thought about an analogy to use to help explain why Christian discipleship starts with knowing God, not ourselves, I thought about the marriage relationship. As a (new) wife, I grow in relationship with my husband not by focusing on knowing who I am, my strengths and weaknesses, my boundaries, or my needs. I grow in relationship with my husband as I learn and grow in knowledge of who he is, his strengths and weaknesses, his needs and interests. And to grow in knowledge of my husband means that I must be in an active relationship with him, share experiences with him (of which there are very many as we renovate our home). I cannot grow in knowledge of my husband without being in relationship with him, experiencing life with him. Now it is also true that as I learn about my husband, I also learn about myself. As I learn about him, live with him, share experiences with him, solve problems with him, make decisions with him, go mountain biking with him; I naturally learn about myself too. I learn about the situations where I'm impatient, I learn about how I think and analyze problems very methodically, I learn about what makes me laugh, I learn that I am often stubborn and want to do things without help.

And so of course to learn about God, to grow in knowledge of God, to grow in wisdom and revelation of God will mean that I grow in knowledge of myself. But Christian discipleship doesn't start with knowledge of self; it starts with knowledge of God. And the best way to grow in knowledge of God is by being in relationship with Jesus Christ.

So what is the specific knowledge that Paul wants the saints to know so that they may know God better? Paul identifies three: to know God's call, to know our inheritance in Christ which is to say to know God's story, and to know God's power. This is a prayer that God would open our eyes to know and understand, to comprehend and grasp the fullness of God's blessings.

Let's start with the knowledge of God's call. This is what Paul refers to in verse 18 when he prays about knowing the hope to which God has called you. This is a prayer that we would know what God calls us to and for. This is a prayer that we would experience and enjoy God's call on our life. What is God's call? Throughout the New Testament, we read about what it is we are called to and for. Elsewhere in Paul's letters, Paul tells us that God has called us to belong to Jesus Christ and called us into the fellowship of Jesus Christ. God has called us to be saints and to be holy because God is holy. We are called to freedom, called in the one body to enjoy the peace of Christ, and we must live a life that is worthy of the calling to which we have been called, forbearing one another in love. Because we live in a broken world where not all serve and follow Jesus Christ, Paul reminds us in 1 Peter that we have been called to unjust suffering and patient endurance, because Christ also suffered for us. And though we are called to suffer, God has also called us into his own kingdom and glory, to his eternal glory in Christ. We are called to Jesus Christ and holiness, to freedom and peace and love, to suffering and glory. John Stott summarizes it this way: "it was a call to an altogether new life in which we know, love, obey and serve Christ, enjoy fellowship with him and with each other, and look beyond our present suffering to the glory which will one day be revealed." When Paul prays that we would know the hope to which God has called us; this is what he prays for.

Secondly, Paul prays that we would grow in knowledge of our inheritance. What is our inheritance? This is about God's story and the future. Many Christians believe our inheritance is heaven, some geographic place that's detached and separated from earth where we shall live eternally. In other words, the end goal and focus of our Christian faith is to arrive in heaven. So all of life points in that direction. But earlier in his letter Paul described our inheritance. In verse

10, Paul tells us what will happen. Paul writes, beginning in verse 9, “And God made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head.” Our inheritance then is not about going to heaven. In the book of Romans, Paul makes clear that our inheritance is about glory and new creation. He says “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” In the words of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, our inheritance is “heaven and earth come together”. It is about all of creation being set free, redeemed, restored, made new. And in the heavens and earth coming together; the glory is about God dwelling with his people; about God eternally living with us.

This is the same pattern we see throughout the Bible. In Exodus, God rescues his people from slavery and bondage for the purpose of God’s glory filling the tabernacle. The pattern is this: slavery/bondage then rescue then glory. That is the story of the exodus in the Old Testament and the story of the exodus in the New Testament. To know our inheritance is to know that God will redeem and renew and restore all creation and fill it with his glory. To know our inheritance is to know it is about glory and new creation.

The third thing which Paul prays for is the knowledge of God's power. Paul spends the most time talking about knowledge of God's power. He further divides this into four. The power of God of which Paul speaks is the power that raised Jesus from the dead; the power that seated Jesus at the right hand of God the Father; the power that places all things under the feet of Jesus; and the power that appoints Jesus head of all things to the church. Notice that the examples of God's power that Paul lists are not examples of how God uses his power for us. Paul doesn't name the power of Yahweh God for his people Israel in the Old Testament – the plagues in Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, water from a rock, making a donkey talk, or Jericho falling down. Neither does Paul list the miraculous signs of Jesus, the Son of God, in the New Testament as an example of God's power: healing the blind and lame and diseased, raising Lazarus or the young girl from the dead or multiplying loaves of bread and fish. To tell us who God is, and thus point us to God (not ourselves), Paul lists God's power in relation to what God has done in and through Jesus Christ: God raised Jesus from the dead; God seated Jesus at his right hand; God put all things under the feet of Jesus; and God appointed Jesus head over all. To know God's power means we look at Jesus. To glorify God is to glorify Jesus. To know Jesus is to know the Father.

Paul begins his prayer by acknowledging that God has already been powerfully at work in them. This is a good discipline to acquire: to acknowledge and give thanks for how God is powerfully at work in our midst. I thank God that we will have a baptism service on August 25 and at least one young person will publicly profess Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. That is the power of God working. I thank God for those who come here each Wednesday to pray for the church. I thank God for all of those who, each day or week, pray for the leadership of RBC, for the ministries of

RBC, who take the directory and pray for each individual and family. That is the power of God working. I thank God for the patient perseverance and faith of all of those who are caring for someone sick. That is the power of God working. And I could go on about how I see God powerfully at work among us.

You see, the greatest display of power throughout all time and history is the power of God as seen in Jesus Christ. And the power of God is stronger and more powerful than any other being. The power of God raised Jesus from the dead. The power of God seated Jesus at His right hand. The power of God put all things under the feet of Jesus. The power of God appointed Jesus head and King over all. And that same power which God demonstrated in and through Jesus Christ is available, Paul tells the saints in Ephesus, for us today. It is easy for us to feel and think we don't have much power in this world. It is easy to forget we serve and love and obey and glorify a powerful God. It is not always easy to recognize God's power.

But God's power is readily available for us who believe. What are we to do with His power? If we bring together all of this passage: the knowledge of the hope to which we have been called; our inheritance in Christ; and the power of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, we get an understanding of how God's power works in and through us. When Paul writes that all things are put under His feet, it is a quote of Psalm 8, which the early church used often. Psalm 8 describes one of the purposes of humankind: "you made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet". Jesus Christ, the true King, the true Lord, the true Saviour, the true human being, is now ruler of the whole world. And we, his body, the fullness of the one who fills

all in all now participate in God's work on earth of restoring, renewing, redeeming. We show the world a new way to live in which Jesus Christ is Lord and King.

Paul emphasizes the importance of growing in knowledge of God to grow in Christian maturity. How then do we grow in the knowledge of God? In this text we have been studying this morning, Paul prays that the Spirit of wisdom and revelation would increase our knowledge of God and enlighten the eyes of our hearts. And so sometimes we think that it is simply a matter of praying and then waiting for the Spirit to enlighten our thinking. Other times, we believe that to know God better requires relying solely on our thinking and there is no space for the Holy Spirit to teach us. And yet other times, we believe that knowing God better means we must draw on our experiences, we must put ourselves in circumstances and situations where we can feel God, where we can experience him.

Paul brings these all together. He does this by praying that the Holy Spirit would enlighten the eyes of our hearts. Then Paul lists the historical evidence of God's power. In effect, Paul is showing us that God has revealed his power objectively in Jesus Christ. Human thought and divine enlightenment go together. As we think about the truth of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit will open our eyes to grasp and understand the glory of God.

In fact, in this passage Paul joins faith – which is to say the Spirit's work of giving us wisdom and knowledge – with belief. For Paul, to know and to believe go together. It is impossible for faith to grow without knowledge and knowledge is limited or thwarted if it does not produce

faith. So to grow as Christian disciples is to grow in our knowledge of God. Growing in the knowledge of God requires faith – the divine gift of revelation, thought and experience.

As we grow in the knowledge of God, God's call, our inheritance in Christ and God's power, may we continue to glorify God. Amen.