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GOD'S MIGHTY POWER

Ephesians 1:19-23

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Ephesians Lesson 11

God's Mighty Power Ephesians 1:19-23

I begin by admitting that our text creates some problems for me. While there is an interpretive problem, Paul's overall point is pretty clear: God's mighty power that saved us has exalted Christ over all rule and authority in the universe. He is the head of His body, the church, of which we are members if we have believed on Him. Therefore, this mighty power of God is presently available for us.

That's the problem. As a pastor, I often deal with Christians who are defeated by sin. Some are enslaved to pornography or sexual immorality, or to alcohol or drugs. Some have ruined their marriages and families because of anger and verbal abuse. Many are just plain worldly, wasting their lives by frivolous activities that have no bearing on the kingdom of God. They spend their money just as the world does, with no thought of laying up treasures in heaven. They spend their time living for themselves, with no thought of seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness. They feed their minds with godless TV shows and movies, but don't read and study God's Word. What is worse, I often hear of pastors and Christian leaders who live like this! My question is, "Where is God's mighty power in the lives of these people?"

Some will say that God's mighty power should be seen by frequent miracles of healing or by speaking in tongues or by words of supernatural knowledge or prophecy. But, all too often, those making such claims are guilty of living just as the world lives. When their immorality and worldly lifestyles become known, the world mocks and the gospel is discredited.

So the question is, how can we reconcile what Paul says here about God's mighty power toward us who believe with what we see all around us? What do these words mean and how do they apply to us? How can we legitimately experience the reality of God's power in our personal lives?

To grapple with these verses, we must remember what Paul prays in verses 18 & 19, “that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know . . . what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” We will not be able to know God’s mighty power unless He opens the eyes of our hearts. So we must continually ask Him for understanding.

Also, as Paul makes clear in Philippians 3, this is a lifelong process. He states there that his aim is (3:10) “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection. . . .” But, then he adds (3:12), “Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” Paul wrote those words about 25 years into his Christian experience. So the process of coming to know Christ’s resurrection power is one that we should be growing in until we meet the Lord.

With that as a context, in our text Paul is saying that . . .

God wants us to understand the magnitude of His mighty power that saved us and exalted Christ over all, so that we will properly represent Him on earth.

1. God’s mighty power that saved us is the same power that raised Christ from the dead (1:19-20a).

I have never understood why the NASB inserts the words, “*These are*” at the beginning of the sentence in the middle of verse 19. The Greek text is literally, “according to. . .” and refers back, not to all three things that God wants us to know, but only to the third one, “the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” So if you want to break up the sentence, a better translation would be, “*This is* in accordance with. . . .” In other words, Paul prays that we would know the surpassing power of God that saved us, which is in accordance with the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

The mightiest power ever unleashed on this earth was not the power of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. It was not the power of an earthquake, volcano, tornado, hurricane, or flood. The mightiest power ever unleashed on this earth was when God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Satan and all of his evil forces were aligned in full battle force when Jesus lay in the tomb. If he could

have kept Jesus from rising from the dead, Satan would have been triumphant. And so Paul piles up words to make the point that God's power in raising Jesus from the dead was the mightiest display of power ever known.

Paul not only refers to God's *power*, which would seem to be sufficient (since He is omnipotent!). He adds, "the *greatness* of His power," and then tops that by adding, "the *surpassing* greatness of His power." *Power* is the Greek word *dynamis*, from which we get our word, dynamite. It is often used of miraculous power. But Paul goes further, stating that this power is "in accordance with the working of the strength of His might." We get our word "energy" from the Greek word translated *working*. Paul uses it in 1:11 to refer to God's working all things after the counsel of His will. It refers to the exercise of His power, or to action that gets results. It accomplishes what it sets out to do. *Strength* may also be translated "dominion" (1 Tim. 6:16) or "power" (Heb. 2:14). *Might* refers to inherent strength.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*God's Ultimate Purpose* [Baker], p. 397) points out that there is a logical flow here: "He first speaks of energy, a power in action; and then says that it comes from a force which is irresistible, which in turn comes from the ocean of God's might, the eternity of God's illimitable power."

It is important to note that Paul is not praying that God would give us this mighty power, but rather that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened to know that this power has *already been displayed* in us if we believe in Jesus Christ. Since he goes on (in 2:1-6) to state that when we were dead in our sins, God raised us up and seated us with Christ in the heavenly places, his point here is that the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at God's right hand is the power that saved us. Paul wants us to know that if we have believed in Christ, it did not come from human will power or reasoning. No, it came from God's mighty power, the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

It seems to me that this may be a large part of the answer to the problem of those who claim to be Christians, but are not living in accordance with God's mighty power. These people need honestly to ask, "Do I have new life in Jesus Christ? Whereas I once was dead in my sins, am I now alive to God through His resurrec-

tion power?" It takes nothing less than a resurrection from the dead to make a genuine Christian!

The modern view is often that when a person decides to go forward and believe in Christ, he is saved. Evangelists will exult that there were so many decisions after the meeting. But, we shouldn't be so quick to count heads. The Puritans were much more guarded. They would say, "There are so many who *seem* to be hopeful of eternal life." But they waited to see the fruit.

Even the most famous modern evangelists admit that only ten to fifteen percent of those who make decisions at their crusades are going on with Christ five years later. Why is this? It is because there is a difference between making a decision and being born again. All that are truly born again believe in Christ. But, not all that profess to believe in Christ are born again. People can make decisions based on the emotions of the moment, or because they think that following Christ will get them what they want out of life. But being born again requires an act of God that raises a person from death to life. No one decides to be born. No one decides, "I think I'll be raised from the dead!" You can't even help God out in the process. It requires God's sovereign, mighty power.

Maybe you are wondering, "How can I know whether I am truly born again?" First, do you truly believe in Jesus Christ and His shed blood as your only hope for eternal life? If you do, such faith did not come from within you. It came from God. He had to open your blind eyes to see your need for Christ. He had to give you the faith to believe the gospel. If He had not done so, you would have thought that it is foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18-31).

Also, if God has raised you to new life in Christ, your desires are changing. Whereas before, you loved a dirty joke, now such jokes repulse you. Before, you liked watching steamy sex scenes in movies, but now you don't want to defile your mind with such filth. Before, you didn't hesitate to cheat to get ahead, but now, you are honest, even if it costs you. Before, you never read the Bible, but now, you find that it feeds your soul. You used to hate being around Christians, but now you delight to be around God's people and talk about spiritual matters. There are many more such changes. While these changes are not automatic or instantaneous,

they are evident and growing since becoming a Christian. You could sum them up by saying, "God changed my heart!"

So Paul's prayer is that God would enlighten the eyes of our hearts so that we will know the surpassing greatness of His power that saved us. It is the very power that raised Christ from the dead.

2. God's mighty power seated Christ at His right hand, far above all spiritual powers (1:20b-21).

God not only raised Christ from the dead. Also, He ascended bodily into heaven, where He now is (1:20b-21) "seated 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." God's right hand refers to, as Calvin puts it (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker reprint], on Eph. 1:20, p. 215), "the power which the Father has bestowed on Christ, that he may administer in his name the government of heaven and earth." Calvin adds (p. 216) that the phrase, "in the heavenly places," "directs us to contemplate the heavenly glory amidst which our Lord Jesus dwells, the blessed immortality which he enjoys, and the dominion over angels to which he has been exalted."

Paul piles up four different words, "rule, authority, power, and dominion," to encompass all spiritual powers. These words may indicate different gradations of rank or power among the angels and demons (Matt. 12:45). But Paul isn't putting our focus on the finer points of angelic or demonic organization. Rather, he means that whatever levels of spiritual power exist, Jesus is over them all. And if we ask why he didn't just call them "angels," Calvin answers (pp. 216-217), "it was to convey exalted views of the glory of Christ.... As if he had said, 'There is nothing so elevated or excellent, by whatever name it may be named, that is not subject to the majesty of Christ.'"

Paul adds, "not only in this age but also in the one to come" to make it clear that Jesus Christ is exalted to the place of absolute, supreme power in the entire universe. His authority is not just for a period of time, but for all eternity. Although we do not yet see everything subject to Him (1 Cor. 15:23-28), that day is soon coming. As Psalm 110:1 states, "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'" God

never gave that invitation to any of the angels or to any other created being. He only gives it to His eternal Son, who is of the same nature as the Father. Scripture promises that Jesus will come again to crush Satan and all that follow his evil ways. So, even though Satan and his evil forces still have frightening power, they are on God's leash. They can only go as far as He permits.

As we know from the Book of Acts, the believers in Ephesus came out of a culture steeped in idol worship and the occult. Demon possession was so common that some made a living by trying to cast out demons. When the Ephesian believers got saved, they burned their magic books, which amounted to a small fortune (Acts 19:11-20). Such people would not have regarded Paul's words in our text as an interesting point for theological discussion. For them, these words were intensely practical. They knew and had been fearfully enslaved by the power of Satan. But now they had a new Master and Lord, who is seated far above not only all of the evil spirits, but even above the most powerful angels. Paul wants them to know that the power of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ is available to them in their struggle against the forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (see Eph. 6:10-17). That same power is available to us if we are in Christ.

3. God's mighty power put all things in subjection to Christ and gave Him as head over all things to the church (1:22).

The phrase, "He put all things in subjection under His feet," reflects Psalm 8:6, where David reflects on the honor given to man to rule over God's creation on earth. This goes back to God's words at creation, that man would fill the earth and rule it, having dominion over all the animals (Gen. 1:26-28). What the first Adam lost through sin, Christ as the second Adam regained. While the complete fulfillment of these words awaits Christ's return and final victory over Satan and death (1 Cor. 15:24-27; Heb. 2:8-15), His resurrection, ascension, and present enthronement at God's right hand guarantees the outcome. All things, including the terrible forces of evil in the heavenly places, are under Christ's feet, even now. As I said, Satan is on a leash.

Then Paul adds that God "gave Him as head over all things to the church." This is the first mention of the church in Ephesians, and it is a major theme of the book. The Greek word translated

“church” means, literally, “the called out ones.” It never refers to a building, but only to God’s people, called out of this evil world to follow Jesus Christ. Note that Paul does not simply say that Christ is the head of the church, but that God “gave Him as head over all things to the church.” The idea is that Christ’s ruling authority (headship) over everything in the universe is God’s gift to us, the church. Thus, “The Church has authority and power to overcome all opposition because her Leader and Head is Lord of all” (Francis Foulkes, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Ephesians* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 65).

What does all of this mean practically? I think that the practical application is inherent in the final verse:

4. God’s mighty power is at work in us so that we will properly represent Christ on earth (1:23).

Paul adds that the church “is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” The last clause is difficult to interpret. But before we consider it, note that Paul here brings in the familiar analogy, that the church is Christ’s body. He is the only New Testament author to use this picture. He develops it at great length in 1 Corinthians 12 as it relates to our relationships with one another, each with different spiritual gifts. But here it is the idea that Christ is the head and we are His body.

This implies an inseparable, organic union between Christ and the church. Organic means that it is a living union—we share in His life. If you sever your hand from your body, it is not in this living, organic union. We cannot do anything to produce or attain this union. It comes from God’s resurrection power alone. It also implies our submission to the Head. In a human body, if the limbs are not subject to the commands of the head, it is a spastic or malfunctioning body. If God has saved you through His mighty power, you must make it your aim to obey Jesus Christ as Lord of every area of your life. A disobedient Christian is like a spastic leg, jerking uncontrollably. He does not bring glory to the Savior!

But we need to tackle this difficult phrase, “the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” Some have taken “the fullness” to refer to Christ, who they say is the fullness of God, who fills all in all. But that is a heretical view. The Bible says that all the fullness of deity

dwells in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9), but it never says that Christ is the fullness of the Father, which would put the Father under the Son. So the word "fullness" refers to Christ's body, the church.

The next question is, does the word "fullness" have a passive or an active sense? If it is passive, it means that the church is filled or completed by Christ (somewhat similar to 3:19). If it is active, it means that the church in some sense fills or completes Christ. If this is the meaning, it is not implying that Christ is somehow lacking or dependent on us. As the eternal Son of God, He is self-sufficient and has no need of us. Rather, it is an extension of the head-body analogy, that the head is not complete without a body. The body expresses the wishes of the head. In the wonderful purpose of God for us, He has given us the task of expressing Christ to the world. In that sense, we are His fullness.

Calvin takes this view (p. 218) and then points out that the next phrase, "who fills all in all," "is added to guard against the supposition that any real defect would exist in Christ, if he were separated from us." Rather, all that we are and have as His people comes from His gracious hand. Christ's filling all in all not only refers to His gifts and power as given to the church, but also to His supreme presence and power in all the universe. As God asks (Jer. 23:24), "'Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?' declares the Lord. 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' declares the Lord." So the phrase means (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 151), "Christ pervades all things with his sovereign rule, directing all things to their appointed end (cf. Heb. 1:3), and this entails his functioning as the powerful ruler over against the principalities (1:21) and giving grace and strength to his people, the church (4:13, 15-16)."

So the practical import of God's opening our eyes to see the magnitude of His mighty power that saved us and exalted Christ over all, is that we should properly represent Him on earth. People do not see the risen and exalted Christ, but they see His body, the church. What do they see? Do we represent our risen, exalted Head in a proper manner? Do they see His grace, His love, and His holiness through our lives?

Conclusion

Warren Wiersbe (*Be Rich* [Victor Books], p. 30) tells of the late, wealthy newspaper publisher, William Randolph Hearst. He spent a fortune collecting art treasures from around the world. One day he found a description of some valuable items that he felt he must own. So he sent his agent abroad to search for them. After months of searching, the agent reported that he had finally found the treasures. They were already in Mr. Hearst's warehouse. Hearst had been searching for treasures that he already owned!

If you are a Christian, God's mighty power is already yours, but perhaps, like Mr. Hearst, you are not aware of what you possess. Are you experiencing God's mighty power to overcome temptation and live a holy life? If not, you should entreat God to open the eyes of your heart so that you will know the surpassing greatness of His power toward you. If you have no desire to overcome sin and to represent Christ on this earth, you may not have experienced the power of being raised from spiritual death to spiritual life. Ask God to give you new life in Him. Then live according to His mighty power.

Application Questions

1. What are some evidences that you have experienced God's mighty power in salvation? What signs should raise some doubts about this?
2. How would you counsel a person who was living a very worldly life, but who said, "I'm going to heaven because I believe in Jesus"? Should you give him assurance of salvation?
3. Which is a more certain evidence of God's saving power: Performing miracles or a godly life (see Matt. 7:21-23)?
4. Can demons plague true Christians? If so, to what extent? (Consider 2 Cor. 12:7-9; Luke 13:11-16; 1 Cor. 5:5.)

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