

s-Ephes. Series 2 -09-His Power for Us
Ephesians 1:15-23 *I do not cease to give thanks for you* (NL)
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HIS POWER FOR US

Power—everybody wants it. The screaming infant wants power over the mysterious warm entity that provides milk. Two years later, that same individual wants power over his choices. The school-age child wants power over his possessions; the adolescent wants power over others' opinions, the young adult power over knowledge. We middle aged folks want power over our bodies; those who are getting even older want power over the relentless press of time.

Somewhere in there, with guidance and a little luck, we might start to have some insight into all this power... how do we get it, attain it, keep it, let loose of it? Why do we want it? Can we do without it? Do we really have any control over our lives, or is this all an illusion? That's something for the philosophers to chew on.

Ephesians is the book that theologians of a certain persuasion turn to when they want to emphasize the doctrine of predestination. Predestination is not, as some people suppose, the idea that God decided way back when, before the creation of the universe, just exactly how things should go. That idea is also in Ephesians, but it is not predestination.

Predestination, that favorite tenet of Calvinism, especially Presbyterian style Calvinism, is the belief that before God created the world, and all the people on it, he decided in advance precisely who would receive salvation—a limited number of souls. This predestined status is called “election.” And you either have it, or you don't have it. When they say you can't earn salvation by good works, this is the ultimate manifestation of that idea. You not only can't earn it, you don't have any say in the process.

The question John Calvin, who was a famous Protestant leader—very influential on the Puritans, by the way—the question for Calvin was *how do we live our lives, if we have no way of knowing whether or not we are predestined for election?* In other words, why be good? Why try so hard, sacrifice so much, study and pray and follow the rules... if, in the end, it doesn't make any difference in our ultimate situation?

Well, John Calvin—who was not really the hard-nosed puritanical guy he's usually made out to be—Calvin decided that the answer to that profound question is simply that we must all trust God... if we are meant to be saved, we will be; but in the meantime it's still better to be good than to be bad.

In a way, I agree with him. And yet... I think the real problem lies with this long-held and traditional interpretation of Ephesians. I'm not so sure that what Ephesians is describing is real old-fashion Presbyterian predestination.

Well, you all know me. I have trouble with believing that there's *anybody* who doesn't get to go to heaven, let alone an idea like God having a heavenly roster and nobody gets in without a reservation. But let's tackle Ephesians with this idea in mind, and perhaps you can decide for yourselves.

It has to do with power, I think. God's power, specifically. Ephesians approaches God's power from way out in left field. You know, the Bible is full of images of an almighty God. In the Hebrew scriptures he's known as Lord Sabaoth, leader of hosts of angel armies. He is El Shaddai, the great one who is to be respected, feared, and loved. Visit some of those Old Testament books that are full of battles and complicated diplomacy. God is quick to anger and powerful to deliver, compassionate to those who fear him and a fiery opponent of injustice and lax religion.

In the Gospels, and in the authentic letters of Paul, we meet yet another God. This God is perhaps not, as some Christians attest, a more merciful God. The New Testament God is certainly not a *different* God. Jesus just teaches a different way to relate to this God. To Jesus, our God is a personal God, who cares not just for the people, but relates to every individual, one on one. In the Gospels, God's power very definitely takes the ultimate form of *resurrection*. The God of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is a God of triumph over adversity—sin and death vanquished. A mighty God indeed.

Paul goes further, because his is a God whose power resides in *sacrifice*. Specifically, in the cross and all that connotes. Paul's God demands a lot from his believers—especially personal sacrifice. Give it up, lay it down, take on the burden. That's Paul's God's glory—and it is glory, especially in some times and some places.

Ephesians, on the other hand, offers an almost unique vision of divine power and how that power works in the world and in the lives of those who believe.

As I mentioned, the God of Ephesians has planned the entire form and course of the universe, long before that vast project was even begun. There is a plan of salvation, a hidden order and sequence of events that existed before the world was created. Now, to you and me as modern men and women, that is a stunning concept! We have been taught to think of the universe as infinite. The most up-to-date physicists might have some arguments about that, yet it is what most of us were taught. Infinite. What existed before the Big Bang? Don't think about it too hard or it's your head that'll explode! What's going to be left when we're all sucked into the last black hole? Don't think of that, either. It'll give you nightmares.

Yet we modern humans know enough that we're much more comfortable than our predecessors in stretching our imaginations concerning what's out there beyond our solar system. Nobody's been burned at the stake for quite a few years. Even nutcases like Galileo would get an audience nowadays. In fact, we tend to call them geniuses, instead of loonies.

When Jim and I were in Italy a few years back, his favorite haunt was the Museum of Science in Florence. They actually have a number of Galileo's telescopes on display. Just sitting right there, big as life. Another thing they have on display is one of Galileo's fingers, propped upright in a gold case like the relic of a saint. I will leave it up to your imagination to guess which finger it is!

The writer of Ephesians wasn't any Galileo; he wasn't even whatever passed for a scientist in the first century CE. He was a theologian, yet he tried to answer this question of what existed before the universe was made, and what will exist once it is all gone. And here is what he suggests: God existed; and God is not material so there's no real problem with that. Whether God created matter out of nothingness or just zapped some atoms from another plane of existence, our writer doesn't seem to care. He's more interested in the end of time, because it's salvation that specifically interests him. He says this: everything is moving toward reunion with the Divine. All of it will, eventually, return to God. And in the meantime, the creation not only

belongs to God, it all witnesses to God's real power. All that we do, all that we are, all that we see—it's all for God. For good or ill, it's all for God.

But let's come back to earth for a moment, and ask again that question that so troubled John Calvin. *If we have no control over our own salvation, why be good?* And again, Ephesians has an answer that the Calvinists perhaps did not take into consideration—but we, modern Christians of a progressive bent—do.

If you and I and the Unitarians up on Washington Boulevard truly believe in an all-loving, all-compassionate, all-generous God—and I hope we all do (and if you don't, just keep listening to my sermons for another decade and maybe you'll be convinced); if we believe in a God who is all goodness and mercy and wisdom, *what is it that we, as believers, get from all of this?* I mean, don't we get some extra brownie points for believing? Or for serving? For our hopeful faith in the face of discouragement and suffering? Surely, there is some reward. And if not in heaven, then it must be here, on earth, somehow! Right?

And, dear brothers and sisters, indeed it is. Our reward is explained in this book of Ephesians. We are rewarded with the power of God. Not the mighty arm of a warrior God. Not even the infinite compassion of a crucified God. But there is some power we are afforded.

The writer of Ephesians says this: May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, bit by bit as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know... the endless energy, the boundless strength that God grants to us who believe. Is this power our through the work of the Holy Spirit, or is it some human power? Does it matter?

Inspiration, understanding, the ability to discern and to apply what we know about God to the situations of our lives and our current world—that is the gift God gives to us, because we're special. *That, if anything, is our election.* Not predestined salvation, but rather a useful, beautiful, hope-filled gift that blooms within us, moves within us, and moves us forward in a tempo that is more in sync with God's plan for the universe.

Think of it this way: if life is an airport concourse, and all kinds of people, with all kinds of baggage, are moving toward a gate; and some of them have to stop and deal with untied shoelaces, and some didn't pack right, and some are held back by children or sudden needs or uncompleted tasks... eventually, certainly, they all will make it to the gate. Maybe they need to stop and get a magazine. Maybe they need a skycap to carry some of their burden. Maybe their ticket won't be valid and they'll have to go back and start all over. But they will get there.

And you and me? We get to ride the moving sidewalk. We may still have to jump off and go do some of the things everybody else has to do, but we do get that one little perk, for all our belief and our prayers and our sacrifices and our trying so hard to be good.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, my favorite nineteenth-century English poet, has this to say:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil*

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O maybe-not almighty God, yet God that is mighty enough for me, give to each one of us who approaches you one special gift of inspiration and wonder and some deep understanding that goes beyond our normal earthly knowledge. And then teach us, Lord, how to apply our understanding to all the challenges of this universe in which you made us and set us. May we live to your glory and may all our thoughts and words and deeds forward the goodness you intend for all creation. It's the least we can do. Amen.

RESOURCES:

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