

How To Pray When You Feel Hopeless

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"I Believe in the Church" Series

Ephesians 1:15-23

Last week I told you a story about a man in this congregation in whose life God worked powerfully to heal molestation that occurred in a Catholic Seminary and years spent in pursuing homosexual relationships. That fellow now is heading up a ministry to men and women who are struggling with homosexuality.

It is wonderful when we hear the end of the story. But there are lots of folks who are still in process, who feel utterly overwhelmed by their struggles. There are lots of folks who you look at who used to have some connection with Christ, but now don't seem to. And you might say, "Well, what hope is there for them? I am glad to hear stories of victory and triumph and healing. Those are great encouragements. But when you are in the thick of it, what does the scripture offer?"

This past week I got an email from a young man who was in a small group that I led some years ago. This young man moved to another state and gave me permission to share from his email to me. He said:

"I don't know where to begin. okay, I guess I could start from the top. My Christian life has always been a total roller-coaster, plus charismatic experience, plus lots of legalism, plus emotional stress. I think that pretty much sums it up. I got tired of all of it. And while this was going on, I was waiting for God to 'heal me' of my homosexuality. I hope you have already heard about that, otherwise, this will come as quite a shock to you. Since then I have been going through a period of enlightening and, yes, I can hear you chuckling at that. But anyway, I am freeing my mind of all the morals and ideas that society, parents, and especially the church implanted in me since day one. I am questioning all these different thoughts and judgments like what's really wrong with an older man being with a younger boy?"

He goes on to share some of his doubts now in the Bible and then he says:

"I don't wholly believe in the Bible anymore. I don't know even if God exists. I believe that there is a chance that all my experiences were created by an abused boy desperately seeking hope and meaning in my life and that I allowed myself to be caught up in the emotions and that maybe there is something psychologically disturbing about that whole ordeal. Is this making any sense to you?"

But sometimes when I just sit there and think about it, I know deep down inside that it is all true and that I went off on the wrong path. But then I get confused

and I wonder: maybe I am just brainwashed. I don't know what will convince me. I think I want a direct encounter with God and for him to tell me exactly what to do. But even then, I don't know how long that is going to last. Maybe I am just doomed to go to hell. I am just so sick and tired of fighting. What I really would like to do is just kick back and enjoy the rest of my life."

Then he says toward the end of his email:

"I was just down by this beach community [where he lives] talking with some friends and I saw all the homeless people – many of them are young. There were lots of talented street performers. But anyway, seeing so many people there so miserable, I thought these people need some hope. They need Jesus. So you guys need to send some young Christians out here to do some street evangelizing. Even though I think it may be false, my heart breaks for all these kids and it is not fair that someone has to live this miserably. And if Jesus can give them hope and happiness, then more power to him. Well, I have gotten way off the subject, so take care. I really appreciate you reaching out to me and loving me and challenging me. Love, [I will call him] Bill."

I read his note and it was so representative of his generation – totally authentic, totally conflicted. I am not sure I still believe in God, but my heart is broken for all these hopeless people and could you send a few evangelists out this way because they need Jesus. And I am not sure I believe in the Bible anymore, but when I am alone and quiet, I know deep down that what I have experienced is true and that I have taken the wrong path. And I don't know what is going to fix me or heal me. Maybe if I encountered God? But I am so sick and tired of trying and failing. I really just want to kick back and enjoy life.

Have you ever felt any of the things that this young guy wrote to me in his email? Struggling with a problem that doesn't seem to go away; tired of failing; full of doubts? You are looking around you and see folks who obviously need Jesus and recognizing in your more honest moments that somehow you have gotten on the wrong path.

When you are conflicted inside, like Bill is, or you watch someone who is obviously caught in the swirl, what do you pray? What do you say to God that would make a difference? Bill has been asking God for some type of encounter, something that would absolutely convince him. But then he said: "I don't know how long that will last."

If you are in a chronically bad marriage; if you have chronic health problems, if you have a child who doesn't seem to want to turn around; if you are living with a parent who is declining; if your job situation is just chronically bad; if you are struggling with an area of weakness or sin and always seem to lose, what should you pray? How should you pray?

This morning we are going to explore one of the most powerful prayers modeled for us in the Bible. I have called today's talk, "How to Pray When You Feel Hopeless." Let's ask God's presence and then we are going to look at Ephesians 1:15-23.

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. 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. 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 who believe. 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. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

I love what I saw in this email and in this young guy's life – the rawness, the sheer honesty. Why is he struggling so much? Why do we struggle so much?

Last week we saw that the problem with all of us is ignorance. We don't know what we need to know. Verse 17: *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation. [verse 18] I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened that you may know...* We don't know what we ought to know.

Philosophers say this: Ignorance keeps us in bondage. That when you are ignorant, you are a slave to your fears and addictions. Ignorance keeps us falling into the same rut over and over again. We don't know how to get out. Ignorance keeps us locked into the same patterns in our marriages, our behaviors, and in our workplaces.

Where Paul and the philosophers differ concerns what we need to know. If ignorance is the problem, then what is it that we need to know to heal the ignorance? The philosophers, the therapists, we saw last week say that we need to know ourselves. You need to know your past. What they would say to Bill in this letter is: "We are going to explore your past. We are going to explore your trauma. We are going to explore your issues, your patterns, your thought processes, and that will release you."

There is some truth to that, but knowing yourself, knowing your temperament, knowing your Myers-Briggs score, knowing what kind of animal you are in God's zoo – are you an otter, or a lion, or a beaver, or retriever? I heard a talk by a

Christian counselor on the radio and he said that marriage problems basically are because we have all these different personality types, which he described in animal terms, mixed up in marriages. I came home to Marlene and I said, "Marlene, I now know why we sometimes have conflicts with each other."

She said, "Really, why is that?"

I said, "Well, you are a beaver/retriever and I am a lion/otter. It is so obvious."

Knowing yourself is secondary, according to scripture. What is primary is knowing God. Paul prays in verse 17: *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, our glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better.* Not just yourself and your issues and what's happened in your life. If you want to get out of the ruts that your wheels are sunk down into, you need to ask God to let you know him better.

I want to back up for a second here so that we can get the bigger picture of the chapter again. For those of you who were here last week, you might recall me saying that Ephesians 1 can be divided into two sections – praise and prayer. Verses 3-14 are Paul praising God for all that God has done on our behalf. And starting in verses 15, he switches gears from praise to prayer and he is praying that we might know the benefits of all that God has done for us.

So, what we are looking at starting in verses 15 is a prayer. Paul's prayer can be a model for your own prayers, as you pray for yourself, as you pray for others. A lot of people don't know where to start in prayer and you might be one of those people. You say, "Well, I have heard that it is really important for me to spend time alone with God each day, but I honestly don't know what I would do if I carved out time to be alone with God in the morning or shut my office door and carved out a half an hour to be with God over lunch or in the evening. I don't know what I would do with a half an hour of time alone with God. I know I am supposed to read the Bible, but what should I read?"

If you don't have some type of reading plan right now, I want to ask you on your way out of church this morning to pick up one of the Bible reading guides that we make available to everyone in the church. They are free. You can pick one up at the information counter, or by the small-groups wall, or in the bookstore. There are Bible reading guides available out in the lobby. Basically, what they give you are some portions of scripture to read each day. The particular guide that we hand out here will take you through the entire Bible in one year. I am telling you, you will feel an enormous sense of accomplishment, if you stay with this Bible reading guide, and read through the whole Bible. For most of you, you have never done that. I know that that's true. Not only will you have a sense of accomplishment, but you will feel like God is speaking to you as you plow ahead.

But in addition to reading the Bible, what should you pray? Especially, if you are in the position of Bill, or where you know someone is in Bill's position. Someone who is feeling hopeless, who has this very real tug of war going on in their lives. What should you pray?

It is not essential that every morning you be brilliantly creative in your prayers. You wake up in the morning and you have this rich vocabulary of prayer and praise to say to God and it just flows so wonderfully. The Bible prints up prayers, dozens and dozens of them. And these prayers that we read in the Bible are designed to be a guide, a model, an outline for our own prayers – your prayers and mine. Because we don't know how to pray or what to pray, especially when we feel like we are going under for the third time.

For example, we read in Luke 11, if you are taking notes – jot that down, that the disciples came to Jesus and said, “‘Lord, teach us to pray just as John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray.’ And he said to them, ‘When you pray, say Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’” I don't believe what Jesus was attempting to teach the disciples regarding prayer is that we just repeat the words of the Lord's Prayer over and over again in rote fashion. You rush through four Lord's Prayers and three Hail Mary's and you are done with prayer. By the way, some of you don't know the Lord's Prayer by heart. I didn't when I first became a Christian. I didn't know the Lord's Prayer. One of the first things I memorized from the Bible was the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6. I would encourage you that if you are new to the faith and you don't have a church background to memorize the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.

But the Lord's Prayer is meant to be not just memorized, but a model for how we are to pray. So from time to time over the last 27 years I have used the Lord's Prayer to assist me in my own morning prayers. I have been doing that over the last month, in fact. I come before the Lord and say, “Our Father, Lord, you are my father. What an amazing thing that you love me and that I am your son. As my father, you provide for me. As my dad, you protect me, you watch over me, you care for me, you discipline me, Father, in love. O Lord, help me to reverence you as my Father, to respect your authority in my life, to fear displeasing you. I want to honor you as Father.

And Lord, you aren't only my Father, you are our Father. You are the Father of the people in the Vineyard. And so Lord, for those in the vineyard, who have had abusive fathers, [and then I often name some folks that I know] and for those who have had neglectful fathers and for those who have had passive fathers and uninvolved fathers and angry fathers and adulterous fathers, O Father in heaven, fill in the gaps, the places in so and so's life where her father failed her, where he didn't give her the blessing, where she wasn't nurtured, where she was molested. O Lord, I want to grow as a Father not just as a leader or a teacher or preacher or an evangelist, but I want to be a father to the people in this church.”

And so I pray down the phrases of the Lord's Prayer. "May your kingdom come." O, I love praying "May your kingdom come." May your kingdom come, Lord, for Andy in Central Asia. May your kingdom come, Lord, in the Bible study that he is leading. May your kingdom come to Tim who has been diagnosed with cancer."

Model prayers. And Paul's prayer here is a model prayer. So we use Paul's prayers, we use Jesus' prayers, we use the prayers of the psalms, the Old Testament patriarchs as models for our own prayers.

Paul prays here in Ephesians 1:18 "...that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened that you would know the hope to which he has called you." We have spiritual glaucoma, if you will. There is a film over the eyes of our hearts so that we cannot see spiritual reality clearly. That's what is going on in Bill's life, in this letter. That's what is going on in my life and in your life. We have a film, a condition that I have called spiritual glaucoma. We are spiritually dull. It is like there is this cloud over spiritual reality. We are unable to perceive God's activity very well. We can't hear God's voice. The Bible is closed and it remains mysterious to us. We don't understand it. We are out of touch with the work of the enemy and what Satan is up to in our homes, in our ministries, in our workplaces, in our offices, in our relationships.

And because of this spiritual glaucoma, you pray: Lord, enlighten the eyes of my heart. I can't see the face of Christ in my heart. I can't draw near to you because there is this film over me. I can't understand your Word. Before you read the Bible, pray "enlighten my heart, O God." Take the film away so that I can understand the scriptures.

See, there is a need for the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit. Friends, as long as you and I are in this world, the clouds are always gathering over the eyes of our hearts. The film is always thickening. If you go two days without praying, without asking for the Spirit's enlightening look, you become dull to the voice of God. The Holy Spirit often wants to place a check in your spirit regarding what God is saying. God is saying, "don't do this or don't do that or don't go there or break off that relationship, or here is what I want you to do." But often we become dull to what God is saying to us.

Isn't that true in your life? Don't you frequently experience a dullness – that you are dull to God's encouragement? You hear someone talk about God really encouraging them and you say, "WOW, I don't feel that." Someone talks about how kind God has been to them and the kind words that the Lord is speaking to them and you say, "I don't feel God's kindness to me."

The principle of this universe is entropy. There is an increasing winding down, an increasing unraveling, an increasing dullness. Do you see this in your life – a creeping dullness that if you don't press in, if you don't ask the Holy Spirit to

enlighten the eyes of your heart, that you would find yourself getting progressively duller to spiritual reality?

The lie is, of course, that if you do nothing, if you don't read your Bible, if you don't pray, that you will stay in the same place you presently are. The reality is that the stream in this world is moving away from God. That the film over your heart is daily thickening unless it is operated upon by the Holy Spirit.

You say, "Well, I can blow off my small group, church, or my devotions. This is a really busy week. I have so much going on with the new baby, with my job, with school."

Let me ask you a personal question: First, do you see these points of increasing dullness at work in your life? Are you in touch with this - your dullness to spiritual reality? And if you are in touch with your dullness to spiritual reality, do you regularly pray what Paul prays? Do you pray for the eyes of your heart to be enlightened? Do you say to God, "God, do eye surgery on my heart. Get me in touch with the truths that are found in verses 3-14. I am so out of touch with the fact that you have given me every spiritual blessing in heavenly places. I don't meditate on it. It is not real to me that I have been adopted as your child. That you chose me before the foundation of the world. That you redeemed me.

You ask God to make his truths vivid. To make it real. To make it alive. To it burn. To set it on fire in your heart. You not only pray this for yourself, do you pray it for the church? For your kids? For your mate? Open the eyes of our hearts. Make your truth come alive. Pray this for the leadership for the church. Pray this for leaders in the community. Pray for the eyes of the heart for the President and for the leaders of Congress.

What specifically do we grow dull to? Paul prays that we would know the hope of our calling. Verse 18: *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.* For Bill in that email, Lord. For the couple in the church who are right now planning on getting divorced because they have given up. I pray that they would know the hope to which you have called them.

The word "hope" is a common one in the Bible. Paul prays in Romans 15:13 that "the God of hope would fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Friends, as we look around the world, we see hope collapsing in so many places. Six months ago, there was some degree of hope for a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. But every single day there is news of more killings and more funerals and more outrage and more hardening of positions.

Folks in India hoped for a better life and over the last couple of weeks we saw scenes of such misery, such wretchedness in the wake of the earthquake that

they are now saying may have killed as many as 100,000 people. I am going to ask, by the way, for you on your way out – I ask that you give money to the poor and that money normally goes here in this community – but this week, we are going to give the offering that is in the boxes in the back for Earthquake Relief in India. If you have some money and you can be generous on your way out, place some money in those boxes in the back.

It seems that hope is collapsing – even hope for the economy. Consumer confidence is at its lowest level in years. We hear announcements of massive layoffs. Manufacturing is at its lowest level in a decade. There is a saying that where there is life, there is hope. There is a deeper truth as one Christian writer, JI Packer, put it that only when there is hope, is there life. Only when a person has hope, do they have life. Take away hope and life is reduced to survival – just getting through today, existing, no joy, no meaning – just relentless, ongoing continuous passage of time until we die. Take away a person's hope, like Bill. Take away his hope and about the only thing he wants to do is to kick back and enjoy life.

I wonder how many of you live really defeated lives. You used to believe. You used to really try. You used to be motivated. But all the shine is off now and you are just going through the motions. You find yourself staring off into space. You are apathetic. You just say, "Well, I am just going to make more money and buy another thing." But you are dead inside.

I think hopelessness is at the root of a lot of the random violence we see these days. A person gets fired or continually fails in school. Or loses their girlfriend or wife. They feel they have nothing to live for. Things are only going to get worse. This despair begins to eat away like acid in their soul and it turns to bitterness and the bitterness turns to rage. And then you have a rage at people you don't even know and rage at the government. Rage in our schools. All the discussion about violence in our society, I wonder how much anyone has ever focused on hopelessness?

The apostle Paul prayed "that the eyes of your heart might be enlightened that you might know the hope to which he has called you." The hope offered in verse 18, the hope prayed for, is prayed for Christians. Paul is not speaking to the world in general. He is not praying that there might be over the entire country a big general sense of prosperity. That everything is just going to be okay. He speaks about the hope of your calling. He is praying for the called ones – people who have heard and responded to God's call. They heard it in the gospel – the call to repent, the call to turn from your sins, the call to trust in Christ. Those who have responded to the call, Paul prays that we would know the hope of our calling. To the called of God, the Bible offers hope. Hope that's anchored in the promises of God for his people.

Let me work this out for you, okay? I think about a person who is painfully aware of their flaws and their mistakes. Let's take for example, a woman I know who was molested as a child. Her molester was her own father. During her teen years she just thought of herself as damaged goods. So she found it impossible to say "no" to all the different guys she met at schools, at parties, at work. So many different guys that she doesn't remember all of them or all that she did. She also had abused drugs and alcohol. At age 19 she got pregnant. She married the father of her child and by 23 she was divorced. This woman is now 31. She has two children and is married, but her second marriage is failing. She recently heard the gospel call, "Come to Jesus. Turn from your sins. Repent. Believe in him and you will be saved." She responded to the call.

What is the hope of the calling for that woman? The promise of the Bible is that one day this woman will be like him, like Christ. It says in 1 John 3:1, "Behold how great is the father's love that he has lavished on us that we should be called 'Children of God' and that is what we are." Beloved, we do not yet see what we shall be, but we know that when he appears, when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

The hope of her calling, the hope for those of you who feel yourselves to be damaged goods, there are just too many scars on your souls, too many mistakes, too many sexual encounters, too many lies – the hope of your calling is that your damage and your brokenness is not a permanent condition. You will be one day like him – whole, healed, well, pure, clean, fixed.

The hope of your calling is the amazing truth that what you will be like one day when you see Christ is now being worked into your life. That the more you look to Christ, even in this life, the more you change, the better you get. The more healed up you are. You are going to be like him one day. But amazingly, he is making you day by day like him as you look to him.

Or take the person who is lonely. Maybe you come from an unhappy family. Maybe you are single, unwillingly single, you have your job, but maybe not a whole lot else. Maybe you are one of the lucky ones and you have a dog because your landlord lets you have a pet. You might be lonely in your marriage. Marriage is not necessarily the cure for loneliness. You might feel disconnected from your mate, who is emotionally distanced from you. What's your hope if you are lonely?

That you will one day be with him. If you have responded to the gospel call to repent and to trust in Christ, loneliness is not a permanent condition. You will one day be with him and with others. It's what the church has historically called, "you will enjoy the communion of the saints." And the wonderful thing about God, and what he is doing right now by his Spirit, is that he will give you fellowship with himself and fellowship with others as part of the hope of your calling. You can escape loneliness to a large degree even in this life.

Maybe you are a person who is always overlooked. You never had the starring role in the school play. You always played second fiddle to a brother or a sister that had the limelight. That's just the way that life stacked up for you. There was always someone in front of you. You have always played the supporting role. You have always been behind the scenes. Perhaps you are overlooked in the church for leadership. Perhaps you are a person who rarely gets noticed and doesn't really get listened to. Sometimes that feeling of being overlooked is the result of being married to a person who is more charismatic than you, more dynamic, more obviously beloved. You can work incredibly hard and never be thanked, never get patted on the back. What is the hope of your calling, you who have been overlooked repeatedly?

If you responded to the gospel, you will be rewarded by him. You will be like him. You will be with him. You will be rewarded by him. Being overlooked is not a permanent condition.

And then the apostle Paul speaks about knowing the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. Lots of commentaries will say that Paul is referring to our inheritance – the fact that one day we will see God, our inheritance in heaven. But I don't believe that Paul is talking about knowing our inheritance. Rather, his prayer for those who are hopeless is that we would know about our worth to God. Not what God is giving us, but what God finds in us. Throughout the Bible, God's people are said to be his inheritance. And if you are taking notes, jot down Deuteronomy 4:20 or 9:26 and just cross reference this idea. It occurs about 20 times that I could find through the Old Testament where the people of God are God's inheritance. God gives an inheritance to his people, but his people are the inheritance of God.

Let me put it this way. We get this extraordinary list of blessings in salvation. We read about them in Ephesians 1:3-14. We are chosen by him. In love we are predestined by God to be adopted as his sons and daughters. We have redemption. We are set free from our bondage to sin. We are forgiven. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit. He fills our lives with the knowledge of God, with a future hope.

What does God get out of it? In saving you? Or in saving me? What does God get out of the deal? Simply put, what God gets out of salvation is you and me. He gets a people. The church is God's portion.

Do you grasp why, therefore, it is so important for you to obey God and resist sin? Because you are what God gets out of it. Do you see why it really matters if you trust God and refuse to yield to unbelief? You are what God gets out of salvation. You, the church, are God's bride. You are his beloved. Your obedience, your purity, your pursuit of God – God is not looking for great activity, necessarily, his portion is you.

It is very difficult for anyone of us to accurately judge how precious we are to God or how precious the little movements of our obedience are to God. You look at yourself or to someone else who is very damaged and you say, "That's the inheritance? WOW, that's like inheriting a pea green 1974 Ford Pinto with Firestone tires." But we don't see what God sees when we look at ourselves and when we look at each other.

The British writer, C.S. Lewis, in one of his books says, "Imagine a person who is mauled as a child by some vicious dog and as a result is absolutely traumatized whenever he sees an animal. He is absolutely phobic around animals. From the outside it may not seem to be an amazing deal when that person picks up a kitten. But to God it is very precious." We have no idea when we make little motions of obedience to just turn the TV off, or to hold our tongues, or to choose not to go to a place that drags us down – you who are hopeless, you have no idea how precious those little acts of obedience are. That's the inheritance of God.

For Bill, whose email I read, and for so many other folks, you feel hopeless because there seems to be so many obstacles in the way of you really making it. Broken people often feel like they will never make it. Even though I have God's precious promises, the hope of my calling and even though I have the depth of his affection, the riches of me being called his inheritance, I still don't feel like I am going to make it. Maybe you are going through a life crisis with cancer or with AIDS or with an unwanted pregnancy. Maybe your crisis is a marital separation and your husband or wife says they want out. Or maybe it's the case of many of you that you have a chronic problem – like Bill in the email you struggle with homosexual temptations or you have a stepchild who just doesn't like you – it's a very common experience in blended families that your stepchild just resents you. They refuse to respect you no matter what you do or what love you show. It's never good enough. It's always blood is thicker than water. You are never able to connect. You are always on the outside.

Maybe your chronic problem is that you have one of those challenging marriages that I have spoken about so often, or you have a prodigal child or a chronic health problem, or you have continual financial problems. The kinds of issues that won't go away with just one prayer session. You feel like you can't make it.

What is Paul's prayer for those with chronic and crisis problems? What does Paul say that you need to know when you say, "I can't make it"? You say, "There are just too many obstacles in the way." That's what Bill said in his email. "I am so exhausted and tired of trying and failing." There are just too many obstacles in the way for me to keep going in this marriage or to jump into a marriage with just someone because I am lonely, even though they aren't connected to Christ.

Paul prays that you would know the power that's at work toward us who believe. That you would know God's power. He is not asking that if you are feeling weak that God would grant you power to make it, as if God needed to supply you with what you presently don't have. Paul prays that you would be aware of the power that is already at work on your behalf. Just as you need to have the eyes of your heart enlightened so that you know the hope of your calling, that the film would be taken off your eyes, so you would know the hope to which God has called you. And that you would know your worth before God. Paul prays that you would know the power that is at work presently in your life so you can make it.

See, we are so in touch with the obstacles that keep us from moving forward in faith and hope and joy. We know there are obstacles in our own persons. We know that we are unreliable. We can't trust ourselves or our resolutions. That's what Bill was saying in his email. His will is so weak that everything he decides is immediately called into question. Even if God encountered him, he said, that probably in a few weeks he would give up on that too.

Do you feel like sometimes you won't succeed because your will has been eroded and you are unreliable?

And then there is the obstacle of the world – all the pressure we feel in our jobs, our classrooms and in our families. I remember what it is like in the workplace. I worked for years in several secular environments where it was really rude and crude, where there was pressure to compromise and conform and to not make any waves. You say, "How can you keep moving on with God when the whole culture is going in the opposite direction?"

And then we have all of our issues – the crisis issues, the chronic issues. And then finally, there is a spiritual opponent along with our own weakness and the pressure of the world and our issues. We have a spiritual opponent, Satan, accusing us, tempting us and lying to us.

The people Paul was writing to were particularly fearful of the spiritual powers that were working against them. The whole book of Ephesians discusses the powers, principalities and powers because in Ephesus there was a deep belief, a deep feeling of being constantly in danger of being taken down by spiritual powers. In Ephesus, there was a large cult following the Goddess Artemis, who many Ephesians looked to for protection from the demonic realm and from spirits of nature.

There was a widespread belief in the power of the stars and in astrology to control people's destinies. The Ephesians daily used amulets and charms and incense and other kinds of magic and they would repeat these magical incantations. Scholars have discovered hundreds and hundreds of magical papyri, on bits of parchment. They would write out these magical incantations near the city of Ephesus. Life in Ephesus was like permanently living in a New

Age bookstore. The Ephesians lives were lives of constant fear that they were going to be destroyed by hostile powers.

And so Paul, to folks who live in constant fear and are trying to get the right magical prayer going and the right words and wear the right charm and deal with their environment to release these energy flows and all of that – to such folks, Paul prays what? That they would know God's power. Verse 19: *His incomparably great power for us who believe.*" Look at the words he uses. He talks about incomparably, surpassing great power. What would you compare to God's power? Some astrological power? Some demonic power? The power of people in your workplace? The power of your boss? The power of your controlling husband?

Do you not know the incomparably great power of God? The God who spoke the stars into existence. The God who creates super novas and black holes and quarks and powers our universe just for his own pleasure. God who makes the ocean. God who touched the earth and raised up Mt. Everest, Niagara Falls, and everything big and powerful and awesome.

And so that believers might know the greatness of God's power, Paul piles up word upon word – all these synonyms. Look at this: Verse 19: *His incomparably great power for us to believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength...* He uses four Greek words for power – *dynamis*, *energeia*, when he talks about working, *kratos*, his strength, *isxus*, his might. Each word has a slightly different nuance. But what Paul is saying is that you are what you are as a Christian and you will continue on the path that God has you on and you will get there safely in the end. You will be able to persevere because his mighty power is at work on your behalf. He wants us, in particular, to understand that God has the ability to overcome any obstacle that we are currently facing – whatever temptation you face, whatever weakness in your person, whatever you are dealing with at work or in your home – that God has the power to overcome any obstacle.

It is for that reason when Paul is choosing an illustration to demonstrate God's power that's at work on our behalf; he speaks of Christ's resurrection and ascension. *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.* Why didn't Paul choose creation, which obviously displays God's power? Or God's divine judgment – his activities in setting plagues upon the Egyptians or destroying Sodom and Gomorra or flooding the world in the days of Noah. Why did Paul specifically point to Christ's resurrection from the dead and his ascension to heavenly places to demonstrate God's power?

Because Christ's resurrection and ascension shows that nothing, not the greatest obstacle known to the human race, death – nothing is greater than the power of

God. See, death, when we talk about obstacles in our way, is the great obstacle. Death comes to everyone of us. No one can escape death. There is a day coming when you will die. Old people, young people, strong people, those of you who watch your weight and diet and don't smoke and those of you who don't watch your weight and do smoke – it doesn't matter if you are wealthy or poor, black or white, educated or uneducated. There is a power that is greater than any of us that we will be defeated by one day called death.

And Paul reminds us that by raising Christ from the dead, God has demonstrated his power over the greatest obstacle to face us – death and the one who has the power of death, that is the devil. The book of Hebrews echoes this idea in Hebrews 2:14, *By his death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil.*

1 John says, *The reason the Son of God came into the world was to destroy the works of the devil.*

Now, if God can do the greatest thing, destroy the greatest obstacle in your way for really experiencing life and health and peace and joy – if God can defeat death and the devil in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, then the power that God makes available to you is certainly able to see you through a chronically bad marriage, or an insecure job situation, or your cancer, or your crude and rude coworkers at your job.

You say, “But you don't know how weak I am.” That's what Bill said in his letter to me. “You don't know how weak I am. You don't know how my feelings go up and down. I am so conflicted and tossed about.”

Paul says, “It's not about you.” Bill, it is not about you. Friend, it's not about you. It's about God's power. It is about resurrection power that is at work on your behalf. Repeat these words after me: It's not about me. You say that. It's not about me. It's about God. It's about what God can do. Paul prays that the film would be taken off the eyes of your heart so that you could really see spirituality the way it is. That you could grasp in some measure the extent of God's power that is at work on your behalf by virtue of Christ's resurrection and enthronement. He stands over every power, everything that holds you down. He seated him at the right hand in 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 in the one to come.

Nothing can keep you from moving forward and inheriting all that God intends for you. Pray that the film over your heart would be taken off so that you would know how much you are worth in God's sight. You are God's inheritance. And that God would take the film of the eyes of your heart so that you would know the hope of your calling. That's what Paul prays for folks who are hopeless. Let's pray.

How To Pray When You Feel Hopeless

Rich Nathan

February 3-4, 2001

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