God helps believers understand the riches and greatness of His calling on their lives.

Roy and Ella Brock, my maternal grandparents, married in 1921. After the wedding, they set off to make a life for themselves on a farm in southeastern Oklahoma, a sparsely populated area of the state. Granddaddy Roy had decided that he wanted to be a dairy farmer, knowing full well that it was hard work with no guarantee of success. Their farm had no electricity. Drinking water had to be drawn daily from a well. The cows had to be milked by hand twice a day every day, including on weekends and holidays. On Sunday mornings, Granddaddy learned to finish the first milking early enough so that the family could drive into town for the eleven o’clock church worship service.

The Brocks were just starting to get ahead financially when the Great Depression struck the nation in 1929. By that time, the couple also had three children to support, including the young girl who would grow up to marry my father and give birth to me. Mom remembers a time of having only one dress and pair of shoes for school days and a second, somewhat nicer, dress and pair of shoes for church. The family managed to survive the depression years and keep the farm in operation. Eventually, Granddaddy was able to buy the pasture land he had been leasing for his cows. Moreover, electricity arrived in southeastern Oklahoma after World War II ended, and my grandparents built a new farm house with indoor plumbing. Things were getting better for them financially, though they still had to live frugally.

When my grandparents passed away in the 1980s, none of their children wanted to operate the farm, so the land was sold. The heirs retained the mineral rights in the sale, however, and by doing so made what turned out to be a brilliant decision. A decade later, a petroleum company struck a rich gas deposit beneath the farmland. My mother and her two siblings started getting monthly royalty checks as heirs of the mineral rights. At family get-togethers through the years, the three of them often wished their parents had been aware of the pool of treasure lying beneath their feet.

The Brocks’ story could serve as a parable that illustrates the truths Paul emphasized in this session’s Bible passage. The apostle knew that the believers
he was addressing already had a deposit of immense spiritual wealth. He also knew that at least some of the Ephesians were unaware of their inheritance. As we study this passage, may we realize that, as believers, we too are heirs of spiritual riches beyond our imagination. Knowing this truth helps strengthen us to live faithfully and with great confidence as Christ’s followers.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

When Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians, the number of Christians in the region was likely only a fraction of the total population. Nevertheless, the apostle’s preaching ministry there had penetrated every level of society so that it could be said that “all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

Paul’s ministry in Ephesus eventually provoked hostile opposition from pagan priests and merchants who made money selling merchandise associated with the idolatrous religions. When adherents to these pagan religions became followers of Christ, they no longer participated in the temple rituals or purchased the idols and trinkets being sold. Their transformed lives—and resulting lifestyle changes—dramatically affected economic life in the city (see Acts 19:23-27). Moreover, after Paul moved on from Ephesus to work in other places, the Ephesian believers still had to live in a social setting that was increasingly hostile to their Christian faith.

Paul gave little indication in Ephesians that believers were facing severe persecution; however, he knew they were facing the same struggles that all believers do when living in a predominantly pagan culture. Paul therefore began his letter with an extended prayer on their behalf. He prayed especially that the believers might understand and embrace their spiritual benefits. The Bible passage for this session consists of the second part of Paul’s extended prayer-blessing.

When Paul wrote this thanksgiving and prayer for his first audience, he used the standard letter writing format of his time. We can observe other letters Paul wrote in which he used the same format. Some examples include Romans 1:8-10, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10, and 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12.

As we explore the conclusion of Paul’s prayer-blessing in Ephesians, we will dig deeply into its doctrinal meaning. What did Paul want the Ephesians (and us) to understand about God, salvation, and the greatness of Christ? Moreover, we will seek to apply Paul’s prayer to our lives today as believers.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD (Eph. 1:15-17)

Paul expressed his sincere prayer for the letter’s recipients. He explained that he was constantly praying for them to know God better in their faith.

VERSE 15

This is why, since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,

In using the phrase this is why (“for this reason,” ESV; NIV), Paul affirmed that his doxology to God concerning the rich spiritual blessings of salvation in Christ (1:3-14) formed the basis of his forthcoming prayer for believers. In particular, the apostle was thinking about the blessing of being sealed with the Spirit as the down payment of the believer’s ultimate spiritual inheritance (1:13-14).

The words since I heard about raise a question concerning Paul’s relationship with the letter’s recipients. Did the apostle not have firsthand knowledge of many Ephesian believers? After all, Paul had spent more than two years proclaiming Christ in Ephesus and the surrounding region (Acts 19). There are three possible explanations for Paul’s language of having heard about the recipients’ spiritual reputation. First, the apostle may have heard that many new converts to the faith were now in the congregation—people who had become believers since his departure some five years earlier. Second, if Paul intended the letter to be read not only in Ephesus but also in churches throughout the surrounding region, then the likelihood was even greater that Paul was addressing numerous believers whom he had never met. Third, the words since I heard about may refer to Paul’s hearing reports of the Ephesian believers’ continuing, demonstrable spiritual growth.

Whatever the precise explanation, Paul was confident that two shining spiritual qualities characterized the letter’s recipients. First, he commended their faith in the Lord Jesus. They had come to Christ for salvation by believing in Him. Paul further developed the relationship between salvation and faith later in the letter (2:8-10). Second, Paul affirmed the recipients’ love for all the saints. Loving those whom God loves is the (super)natural result in a life transformed by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek word for love in this verse (agape [ah GAH pay]) refers to Christlike, self-giving, sacrificial love. It is more than having a good feeling about someone; it involves willingly taking action for someone’s well-being even at a cost to oneself. The Ephesian believers’ reputation for Christlike love was inclusive:
they demonstrated love for all the saints. The title saints refers to all believers, not to an elite group of Christians. All believers are saints in that they are set apart in Christ as God’s holy people in a fallen world.

VERSE 16

I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

The apostle described his prayer life with remarkable language. First, he used two related phrases: giving thanks and my prayers. An important foundation for our petitions to God on behalf of others is to begin by thanking Him for what He has done in our lives. Paul had done that very thing in his extended doxology (1:3-14). The term rendered prayers is a general term for earnest, devout speech directed toward God. It includes both praise and thanksgiving as well as entreaty.

The apostle described his prayers for the letter’s recipients as ongoing (I never stop). He used similar language near the end of the letter: “Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request” (6:18). Paul was practicing what he had taught the Thessalonians: “Pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). Of course, Paul did other activities besides pray; however, his praying to God on behalf of other believers was a regular—daily—practice. Further, Paul likely maintained an attitude of prayer throughout the day, regularly expressing prayerful thoughts to the heavenly Father.

Consider also that Paul prayed intelligently for believers (as I remember you). To the extent that he was aware of some believers’ actual life circumstances, he brought before God those specific concerns. Moreover, having lived in Ephesus for a time, Paul was aware of certain cultural challenges that all of the letter’s recipients faced.

VERSE 17

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.

One specific need that believers everywhere and at all times have is the need to keep on growing in their faith-relationship with God. Thus, Paul prayed for the recipients of his Ephesians letter in this regard. He made clear in the wording of his intercession that Christian prayer invokes the presence and work of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Christian doctrine of prayer asserts that every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change
like shifting shadows” (Jas. 1:17). Paul affirmed this truth by addressing his prayer for the Ephesians to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father (“the Father of glory,” KJV; ESV). All of the spiritual blessings described in Ephesians 1:3-14 have their source in the heavenly Father, and they are made available to believers only in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus is the divine agent who brought the blessings of heaven to earth in sinless human form and who was offered as the perfect sacrifice on the cross for sinners’ forgiveness. It is the Spirit of God who then convicts sinners of their sins, draws them to repentance, makes them spiritually alive in Christ as they believe, and then seals believers forever by His indwelling presence in their lives.

Thus, Paul prayed that God in His triune nature would give the believers in Ephesus both wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God. Wisdom, as mentioned in the previous session (see p. 16), generally refers to the capacity to apply God’s revealed truth appropriately in everyday situations. Wisdom is taking the right actions based on knowledge and understanding. Paul knew well that for believers, Christ Himself is “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). Such wisdom is beyond mere human comprehension; apart from the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence, such wisdom is always beyond us.

Second, Paul wanted believers to grow, with the Spirit’s help, in revelation in the knowledge of God. To know God in Christ refers to more than knowing a set of facts. Without question we need to know the facts about God—hence the crucial role of the Scriptures. However, knowledge in the sense Paul interceded for on behalf of believers goes beyond intellectual facts to relationship. The apostle wanted his letter’s recipients to grow in their faith-relationship with their Creator (Father), Redeemer (Son), and Sustainer (Spirit). We would do well as readers of Paul’s letter today to pray as Paul did for ourselves and for one another in this same manner and to this end.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Review Ephesians 1:3-14 alongside this session’s passage and take note of the two forms in Paul’s prayer: praise and petition. How do you keep both forms present and balanced in your daily prayer life?

**HOPE OF GOD (Eph. 1:18-19)**

Paul stated that he prayed for believers to better understand their hope in Christ. He longed for the letter’s recipients to know the value of their inheritance and to recognize the demonstration of God’s power in their lives.
VERSE 18

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

In the New Testament, the term *heart* almost never refers to the physical organ that pumps blood throughout the body. Rather, the word is used figuratively to describe the center of a person’s true being—where one’s will and affections reside. Paul was therefore speaking metaphorically when he referred to *the eyes of your heart*. (The phrase appears only here in the Bible.) When our physical eyes function as intended, they help us become aware of our surroundings. They help us walk without stumbling over obstacles or wandering into dangerous situations. Similarly, when our spiritual eyes function properly, we become aware of spiritual realities.

Further, just as sunlight and other types of light enable our physical eyes to see what is in front of us, the indwelling Spirit of God empowers believers to know the truth about God and His ways. The Greek verb rendered enlightened implies that God provides the necessary spiritual light to enable believers to know (intellectually and by experience) crucial spiritual truths in their everyday experience. Paul identified three areas in which he prayed for the Spirit to enlighten the believers in Ephesus.

The first insight the apostle wanted Christians to experience was the hope of his calling. Biblical hope is not a vague wish; rather, it refers to objective certainty about something still in the future (Rom. 8:25). Hope endures along with faith and love (1 Cor. 13:13). The specific hope that Paul wanted believers to base their lives on was God’s calling in salvation. Paul noted in other writings that believers are called “into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:9); are called “as saints” (Rom. 1:7); and are called “to be free” from legalism to serve others in love (Gal. 5:13). In other words, when God calls people to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, He calls them to a new life filled with enduring hope.

The second insight the apostle prayed that believers would know by experience was the wealth (“riches,” KJV; ESV; NIV) of his glorious inheritance in the saints. The words *his glorious inheritance* could describe either an inheritance that God (or Christ) receives (a redeemed, holy family) or an inheritance that God (or Christ) provides to His redeemed family. In light of Paul’s similar expression of this idea in Colossians 1:12, the second description is more likely his meaning. In other words, Paul wanted the Ephesian saints to live confidently in their faith whatever the circumstances, knowing for sure that they would one day receive a spiritual inheritance beyond compare (see Rom. 8:18).
VERSE 19

and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the mighty working of his strength.

The third insight Paul prayed that Christians would know by experience was the immeasurable greatness of God’s (or Christ’s) power. If God’s “calling” (Eph. 1:18) looked back to salvation past—that is, to the moment of a believer’s conversion (justification)—and “glorious inheritance” (1:18) looked forward to salvation future (glorification), then the reality of God’s great power focused on the believer’s salvation in the here and now (sanctification).

God’s sanctifying power in believers is limitless; it cannot be measured. He is the infinitely powerful Creator of the universe. Moreover, God’s power is intentionally and graciously made available to all who believe. Paul described evidence of God’s incomparable power in the subsequent verse, but before that he added another descriptor of God’s power. It is according to the mighty working of his strength—literally, “according to the energy of the might of His strength.” There are two destructive forces before which human beings are powerless: sin and death. We are mortal creatures, and so we die. We are also sinful creatures, and we cannot overcome sin on our own. In Christ, however, God’s power has overcome both sin and death. Through faith in Christ, we as believers can live in victory over sin and death.

As we have seen, Paul prayed for his letter’s recipients to grow in hope and power as they more fully understood and lived out their salvation in Christ. We do well to pray this prayer today for ourselves and for others. Most of us likely have barely scratched the surface in our understanding and experience of all that God has in mind for His redeemed people. May we pray for the Spirit to enlighten us with these glorious truths!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Why do you think Paul frequently combined multiple words meaning “power”? What outcomes did Paul have in mind for the letter’s first recipients? What outcomes might we expect in our own spiritual walk with the Lord Jesus as we utilize the gift of God’s immeasurable power?

POWER OF GOD (Eph. 1:20-23)

The apostle emphasized God’s power as demonstrated in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation. Paul further emphasized that the same divine power secures the believer’s salvation.
VERSE 20

He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens—

As believers, we can know the wonderful greatness of God’s power toward us because He has proven His wonderful greatness in Christ, with whom we are united by faith. Paul mentioned three historical events: first, Christ’s resurrection; second, His enthronement; and third, His headship over all things, including the church.

God demonstrated His incomparable power by raising Christ from the dead. We might be able to delay physical death for a time with good health habits or medical breakthroughs, but we cannot escape it. Further, when a human being dies, the process of decay for the flesh is inexorable. When Jesus died on the cross, however, the great reversal began. His body did not decompose, for the Father did not allow the “holy one to see decay” (Acts 2:27). Then God reversed death itself. He raised Jesus to new life—a resurrected life unlike any that had ever been before. Jesus’ resurrection was everlasting and immortal, “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). As believers, we live with the promise that we will receive a resurrection like Christ’s (1 Cor. 15:23).

The proofs of Jesus’ resurrection were the empty tomb and the risen Lord’s appearances to His followers over a period of forty days. Paul himself saw the resurrected Lord, and that experience was pivotal in transforming Paul from a persecutor of Christians to an apostle of Christ (Acts 9).

Second, God demonstrated His immeasurable power by exalting the risen Christ, seating him at the Father’s right hand in the heavens. Rather than mention Christ’s ascension, Paul noted that God had placed Christ in the position of superior honor and authority. This action fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 110:1: “This is the declaration of the Lord to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” To be asked to sit at the right hand of an ancient king was a signal honor. Further, it was a position of royal authority. Christ’s exaltation to the place of supreme authority in the heavens (“in the heavenly realms,” NIV) signaled that the stripping of death’s power was both complete and everlasting.

VERSE 21

far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Many people in Ephesus adhered to pagan religions that deified a host of different idols representing every imaginable force or power. Some of the Christians to whom Paul wrote once worshiped those idols. Paul emphasized
that in Christ, God had clearly demonstrated the empty claims of pagan idols. No idols, no unseen spiritual forces, and no earthly authorities can compare with the power supplied to believers in Christ. He is far above them. Paul piled up references to these forces: ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given. Whether Paul had a precise meaning in mind for each of these forces is unclear. It is best to understand them to refer together to any conceivable power—natural or supernatural, good or evil.

Because of His resurrection and exaltation, Jesus is already supreme over all forces in this age, even though many of them have not yet recognized His victory or submitted to His supremacy. Later in Ephesians, Paul urged believers to put on the armor of God as they continued to wrestle against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens” (Eph. 6:12).

Paul went on with his description of God’s power in Christ. Jesus’ exaltation was not temporary, for a limited time. It was (and will be) the reality for God’s people in the age to come as well. In that future age, no power will be exempt from acknowledging Christ’s lordship and bowing before Him: “At the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11).

VERSE 22

And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church,

Paul continued drawing out the implications of Christ’s resurrection and exaltation. He alluded to Psalm 8:6 in declaring that God had subjected everything under Christ’s feet. At the time of creation, God gave authority to mankind to “rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth” (Gen. 1:26). Even after mankind’s fall that responsibility was not entirely lost. Yet because of mankind’s fall into sin, we corrupted our authority and often fail in our responsibility. Only Jesus Christ fully exercises perfect sovereignty over all things. The writer of Hebrews expounded on Psalm 8 in these words: “For in subjecting everything to him [mankind], he [God] left nothing that is not subject to him. As it is, we do not yet see everything subjected to him. But we do see Jesus … crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death” (Heb. 2:8b-9).

Paul’s first proof of God’s power was Christ’s resurrection. His second proof was Christ’s exaltation. The third proof Paul marshaled was that God appointed Christ as head over everything for the church. Jesus is head,
and that headship includes *everything* (mentioned twice in this verse). The whole universe, visible and invisible, material and supernatural, and all creatures in it are subject to Christ as Lord.

Further, Christ is head over all things *for the church*. This is the apostle’s first use in Ephesians of the Greek term for *church* (*ekklesia* [ek klhih SEE uh]). The word originally referred to people, not to a building. In this context, it referred to God’s people everywhere and throughout all time. Thus, both the created universe (everything) and the church have one head: the Lord Jesus Christ!

**VERSE 23**

*which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.*

The apostle then gave two descriptions of the church. First, the church is Christ’s **body**. Here Paul was using this word as a metaphor that emphasizes the absolute unity of Christ and His people. They are as united (and interconnected) as a human head and the rest of the body.

Not only does the church function as Christ’s body, it is also **the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way**. Bible scholars have offered three possible understandings of this phrase. First, the phrase may refer to Christ (rather than to the church) as the One who fulfills *all things in every way* (see also Col. 1:19; 2:9). Second, the phrase may refer to the church as somehow fulfilling (in the sense of completing) God’s plan of redeeming a people for Himself in Christ. Third, the phrase may refer to the church as the fullness of Christ because He inhabits the church with His presence and continues His mission in the world through the church. I prefer the third view and believe that it is more in line with Paul’s teachings about the church elsewhere (see Eph. 2:21-22).

As we have seen, Christ’s resurrection, exaltation, and lordship over all things are evidences of God’s power that secures our salvation. As believers, we can live with confidence in God’s immeasurable power.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Body” on pages 229–230 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the teaching that the church is the body of Christ help you understand the greatness of His calling? How does this understanding give you confidence in God’s power to guarantee your salvation and empower your faithful living?