Hope and Power

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 1:15-23

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Let me talk about attention spans for a moment. *Attention spans* refer to the amount of time we focus on a task before we zone out. According to a study conducted by Microsoft, our attention spans are decreasing. In the last 15 years, our attention spans have dropped from 12 seconds to 8 seconds. We lose interest in something after 8 seconds. Get this: goldfish have a longer attention span than we do. Goldfish have an attention span that lasts nine seconds.

Last May, we sent a video to our entire online mailing list in connection with our Ignite initiative. It was a lighthearted invitation to our block party. I say light-hearted because every time I mentioned the words “dunk tank,” I was doused with water. Over 1100 people opened this video. While we were happy about the open rate, do you know the average length of time people watched this 59-second video? Would you believe 10 seconds before some of you turned to something else? Ten seconds, are you serious? Like I said, our attention spans are decreasing.

Reading is in decline in our day—less Tolstoy and more Facebook, you might say. We would much rather post a picture than read a book. Why read when you have Netflix? There are all manner of apps, video games and pop-up ads to distract us. Modern technology is actually rewiring our malleable brains.

We are asking you to do something countercultural this fall—read Ephesians. I don’t mean merely scan it. I mean
read it. Take time with Ephesians and ponder its meaning. Mull over it and ask questions of the text.

I read two emails yesterday that I want to share with you. One from a man in the Monday Night Men’s group: “I can follow about 40 percent of what I read in the Bible—about 10 percent leaves a lasting impression on me. I am reading along quietly when suddenly a passage hits me like a thunderbolt. Thank you for challenging us to read the Bible.”

A woman who has been attending for seven years writes, “I decided, after your repeated appeals to read the Bible, to dust off the study Bible my parents gave me years ago. I have been reading a chapter in Ephesians each day. Don’t be too impressed—its only been four days. As I read and reread a passage, I keep asking how it relates to my own life. Imagine that! Thank you for telling us more than once how to create habits to change our lives. I can see some changes already.”

We urge you to read the Bible and center each day in prayer. If you are having difficulty in reading Ephesians, our staff suggests two modern translations: Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* and the *New Living Translation*.

Last Sunday, I talked about how to read the Bible. I talked about the flow of a passage. I also suggested being on the lookout for words and phrases that repeat.

Let’s look at the flow of this passage. Ephesians follows a typical first century letter-writing style. It identifies the sender (Paul) and the
recipients (believers in Ephesus) in the opening sentence (1:1). Paul relays a greeting: “Grace and peace to you” (1:2) and then transitions into a blessing, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3-14). His blessing flows into a thanksgiving section, which is the focus of today’s sermon.

In verses 15-16, Paul begins with a thanksgiving and then moves, quite naturally, to a prayer in verse 19. In verses 20-23, he closes the chapter with a soaring doxology to the risen, exalted Christ.

Next, let’s look at specific words in this passage. Paul begins the thanksgiving with these words in verse 15: “Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you” (1:15-16). He moves to prayer in 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 so that you may know him better.”

All three members of the Trinity are present and accounted for in this verse—the glorious Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit. Last Sunday, we walked through verses 3-14 by noting the role of each member of the Trinity, which I described as “Chosen by the Father, Redeemed by the Son and Sealed by the Spirit.” While the word “Trinity” does not appear anywhere in Scripture, the core belief of one God known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is everywhere in the Bible.

In verse 17, three words bear a close resemblance to each other—wisdom, revelation and know. Paul repeats the same word know
in the next verse: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know the hope to which he has called you” (1:18). The Greek word for know that Paul uses in these two verses refers to a deep, intensive form of knowing. Paul is not talking about mere head knowledge but a personal, first-hand form of knowing. There is a world of difference between knowing about God and actually knowing God.

I know about electricity. I know that Dominion Power sends electricity into my home. They send me a bill each month to remind me of this fact. I know how to change a light bulb and turn on a light switch. This is the extent of what I know about electricity. I know about electricity but I don’t know electricity the way an electrician does. I learned this lesson the hard way some years ago when I tried to fix an electrical outlet in my home and received a shock that knocked me off my feet. There is a difference between knowing about electricity and knowing it, just as there is a difference between knowing about God and actually knowing God.

Paul wants his readers to know three things about God in verses 18-19:

First, he wants them to “know the hope to which God has called you” (1:18). Biblical hope is not wishful thinking. It is far more substantial. Our hope centers on God’s faithfulness in the past and his promises for the future.
Second, he wants us to “know the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people” (1:18). Paul references this same word “inheritance” earlier in chapter 1, when he likens the Holy Spirit to a down payment on our inheritance that is yet to come (1:14). As believers, we will inherit a fortune of spiritual riches.

Third, he wants us to “know the incomparably great power for us who believe” (1:19). Paul camps out for a few verses on this notion of divine power. In verse 19, he uses four distinct Greek words for power. The first Greek word for power “dunamis” is where we derive our English word dynamite. Dunamis is explosive power. The second word, also translated power in verse 19, is the Greek word “energia” where our English word energy originates. Energia is power in action. The phrase “mighty strength” is the combination of two more Greek words for power—“ischus” and “stratos.”

In verse 20, Paul writes that this power was in full display when “God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at His right hand, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.” Paul has every earthly ruler and cosmic force in his sights. Every other power will be subject to him, which is why we read in verse 22, “God placed all things under his feet.” Paul finishes this chapter with a soaring tribute to the risen, exalted Christ.

In verses 22-23, we read that Christ is head over everything, including the church. Paul utilizes his favorite metaphor for the church as the body of Christ. He speaks
about the church as the body of Christ in other letters also, namely 1st Corinthians. These last few verses about the church will serve as a springboard for Paul to talk about the church in subsequent chapters regarding its character and mission; stay tuned.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I want to drill down on two words: hope and power. Hope and power are not some vague, ethereal promise. Hope and power are genuine promises. We can live with hope and power.

First, hope—“the hope to which he has called you.” Paul is not talking about some kind of finger-crossing, good luck, pretend hope. Hope is not mere optimism along the lines of I hope for good weather this week or I hope the Indians will win the World Series. We center our hope in the character of God. God is dependable and reliable. My hope is not contingent on outward circumstances. My hope is in the Lord. The writer of Hebrews likens hope to an anchor for our souls, firm and secure (6:19). Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy, “Put your hope in the living God” (4:10).

You may be in a place of distress or heartache right now—a sudden death of someone close to you, family dissension or turmoil at work. Listen to the words of the Psalmist, “Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you so distressed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (42:5).
Second, power, what Paul calls “His incomparably great power for us who believe” (1:18). God’s power manifest in Jesus Christ is incomparable. No other power can rival it. This power is “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (1:21). Paul penned these words at a time when the Roman Empire was unrivaled in terms of power in the ancient world. The Roman Emperor Domitian built an elaborate palace for himself in the city of Ephesus. It must have looked invincible to people back in the day. Here is what remains of it today. It lies in ruins. Ancient despots are in their graves but Christ is still on his throne.

The city of Ephesus was also home to another magnificent structure built in devotion to the Greek goddess Artemis. The temple constructed in her honor was made entirely of marble, 36 columns in all. A thriving cottage industry grew up around this Artemis cult. Artemis was a highly venerated goddess. She was the daughter of Zeus and twin sister to Apollo. We call the temple built in her honor “One of the seven wonders of the ancient world.”

Here is what remains of her temple today. Artemis’ temple lies in ruins also. Jesus is still on his throne.

This power and this hope are available to you today. This is not religious hype. Maybe, to coin Paul’s phrase, “the eyes of our hearts are not enlightened.” Paul has the audacity to claim that we can know in an experiential, firsthand way, God’s transcendent hope and incomparable power.