

Editorial: The Exceeding Greatness of God's Power to Believers

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After reminding the saints in Ephesus that, to the praise of the glory of God's grace, they were chosen to be holy and blameless, predestinated to be adopted as God's children and to obtain an inheritance in Christ, in whom all things in heaven and earth will be gathered together, the apostle Paul recounts his response to hearing that they believed (Eph. 1:1-16). His response was thankfulness in prayer—not to them, for they were not the authors of their own salvation, but to God who had predestinated them unto this faith according to the good pleasure of His will.

His grateful prayers were especially directed for their benefit, that the Father of glory would give them spiritual enlightenment to know and understand three glorious things: first, the hope unto which God has called us, second, the riches of the glory of the holy church which is God's inheritance and, third, the exceeding greatness of God's power toward all who believe (vv. 17-19). It is this last glorious subject that is the focus of this editorial, particularly as it relates to the theme of the BRF conference this summer: "Union with Christ."

While Paul began by speaking of the election and predestination of the Ephesians, the occasion for his prayer was hearing of their faith and of their love to all the saints (vv. 15-16). Before this faith, the Ephesians were no less elect, having been chosen before the foundation of the world. Yet, only when he saw their faith and love, did he pray thankfully for them. Paul does not conclude, based upon their predestination or their faith, that there is, therefore, no need for him to pray for anything on their behalf. This attitude, which so easily entices and bewitches us into spiritual carelessness, laziness and presumption, is carnal. It does not glorify God, as if He is more glorified alone for His work of salvation the less we are involved in praying for our brothers and sisters. It is the same, in principle, as the presumptuous man who says, "Let us continue in sin that grace may abound" (cf. Rom. 6:1).

Besides the simple moral objection, the argument is false because the God who appointed the end has also appointed the means. Calvinism has always insisted upon this because Scripture insists upon it. Sincere, continual, thankful prayer is necessary for Christians (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 116). Understanding this, Paul expressed his thanks in prayer first of all, and continually asked for God's grace and Holy Spirit for the Ephesians. Included in God's predestination of the Ephesians were Paul's prayers for them, with their answers.

The subject of Paul's prayer should also teach us that initial faith is only a beginning and not complete knowledge (Eph. 1:17-18). We need the eyes of our understanding opened more and more, and so we need to make this prayer our own for our fellow saints and ourselves. Since this is the first and chief subject of Paul's prayer, we should learn not to denigrate knowledge as if it were merely optional or secondary. The knowledge of faith is salvation (John 17:3). Having heard of their initial faith, Paul prays for the increase and progress of their faith.

We also need to identify who are the beneficiaries of this exceeding greatness of God's power. Paul mentions the saints immediately prior to this but, when he speaks of God's power towards us, he refers to us as believers (Eph. 1:19). It is appropriate that God's people should be called "saints" when speaking of God's inheritance in us, as those dedicated to Him in holiness. This is God's eschatological glory in the church and the purpose of His election of us, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, to the praise of the glory of His grace (vv. 1-6). But when Paul refers to the exceeding greatness of God's power presently towards us, he instead identifies us as those "who believe" (v. 19). This does not imply that we are only holy in the future, since we are already holy in important respects though not perfectly (cf. v. 1). If Paul had referred to those who are elect, this would not be precise, since this divine power is not yet at work in the elect who have not yet been brought to faith. So Paul highlights that one gift in God's people which especially explains how the exceeding greatness of His power is towards us and in us.

Faith (or believing) unites us spiritually to our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, in terms of our conscious union with Him. The object of our faith is the Triune God in Christ who is the eternal incarnate Word, the image and revelation of God to us by the Spirit, the only Mediator between man and God (John 1:1-14;

3:3-18; 6:63; Heb. 1:1-3). Being united to Jesus Christ, the same exceeding greatness of God's power which was at work in Christ is also at work in us. Now we should begin to see the connection between Paul's description of us as those "who believe" and his description of the working of God's mighty power in Christ.

The exceeding greatness of God's power towards us who believe is according to the working of God's mighty power in Christ because it is the same power at work in us who are joined to Christ by a true and living faith. In short, it is the power by which Christ was exalted. Since we are united to Christ, this same power will also exalt us and is already exalting us who believe. The Lord's exaltation is described in three distinguishable stages: His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into the highest position in heaven, and His session as ruler of all creation and head above all to the church (Eph. 1:20-22). That this passage has in view our union with Christ is proved by Paul's reference to the church as Christ's body, even as Christ's "fulness," which He fills "all in all" (v. 23). Calvin, in his commentary on this verse, calls this "the highest honour of the Church, that, until He is united to us, the Son of God reckons Himself in some measure imperfect."

Christ's high priestly prayer also refers to His filling of the church (John 17:20-23). This is a prayer similar to Paul's. Christ referred to believers being in Him and in His Father when He prayed for "them also which shall believe ... that they also may be one in us" (vv. 20-21). Not only are we one in Christ and in God, but Christ also gives us His glory so that we are also one with one another even as He is one with His Father (v. 22). He speaks of filling the church all in all when He adds "I in them" (v. 23). If this is the reality of Christ in all believers, then how can God's power work in Christ to exalt and glorify Him, and not also work in us to exalt and glorify us? Christ prayed, "the glory which thou gavest me I have given them" (v. 22). This is the riches of the glory of God's inheritance in the saints, the hope of our calling, the effect of the exceeding greatness of God's power toward us who believe in Christ (Eph. 1:18-19). That little word "in" is important and weighty (e.g., v. 15). It speaks of our dwelling in Christ by faith, even as He dwells in our hearts by faith (Eph. 3:17; Col. 3:3). It speaks of Christ filling the church as His body and of us joined to Him as our head above all (Eph. 1:22-23).

If then the power which exalted and glorified Christ is at work in us, in what specifically is this power manifest in us? Having sincerely prayed, Paul begins to teach how this divine power is at work in us. This is a pattern for us too. If we pray but refuse to seek after what we have prayed for by lawful means, as God gives us opportunity, then we display the hypocrisy of our prayer. That God has predestinated all things (including our prayers and His answers, often through and by our work), does not encourage sloth but encourages us to seek after what we have asked. We ask for our daily bread, trusting that the Lord will provide, and, *therefore*, we work diligently and confidently to seek it, knocking until the door is opened to us. Our asking is only half-hearted if we refuse to seek also by use of the ordinary means God has appointed (cf. Luke 11:9-10).

The entirety of what is in between the bookends of the first (Eph. 1:16-23) and second (Eph. 3:14-21) of Paul's prayers for the Ephesians is his explanation of what he is praying for. He begins by asking that the Ephesians may understand this divine power at work in them, he continues by explaining the effects of this power and he concludes by asking God to work by this power in them. Ultimately, to know this power is to know with all the saints the love of Christ which is beyond knowledge (vv. 17-19). The love of Christ is known only as we all together are filled with all the fullness of God in Christ who dwells in our hearts through faith. The rest of the epistle is the practical application of this glorious calling to our lives and our walk together as living members of the body of Christ.

Since Paul refers to three stages of Christ's exaltation, he applies these three also to us, and not merely to us in the future, but to us "who believe" already at this present time. Paul relates the divine power by which Christ was raised from the dead to our spiritual resurrection. Once, as Christ was dead in the grave, so we were dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). The description of our death is vivid, active and complete. Being dead in sins is not some kind of hypothetical neutral or inactive state but a state in which we were inwardly driven by the "prince of the power of the air" (v. 2). This description of the devil is not unique in Scripture, since Satan is the prince of the whole host of demons (Matt. 12:24-28). For this reason, he was called Beelzebub, the lord of the flies, where flies are an appropriate description of the legions of Satan's unclean spirits which, as it were, fly about freely and unhindered in the air, in

high places, so that there is nowhere on earth where Satan's minions cannot reach. This is the one who rules without rival, resistance or restraint in the hearts of "the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2; cf. Rom. 6:16-20).

The tyranny of Satan in the hearts of the unregenerate is in agreement with the desires of their hearts. The unregenerate walk according to this present evil age following only their own lusts with no regard for God (Eph. 2:3). Pelagians restrict sin to mere actions and Arminians imagine that the will is still free to do good in God's sight, but Paul describes this spiritual death in terms of our will, that is, in wicked lusts pouring from the heart as the fountain of all our actions (cf. Mark 7:21-23). These lusts comprehended all our will, whether more base and carnal desires or more sophisticated and intellectual desires (Eph. 2:3). This is, therefore, a *total depravity*, not a partial depravity in all parts or a total depravity only in some parts. Every part is wholly under the dominion of Satan. The only restraints are creaturely, natural, physical and mental limitations, with carnal considerations not to lose benefits from others such as esteem, respect, loyalty, service and natural affection, and to avoid all punishment and retribution. According to the measure of natural ability, some are better at figuring out what is in their own sinful self-interest than others, so that even this "natural light," such as it is, is turned to the service of darkness (*Canons of Dort* III/IV:4). Such tyrannical rule would still be welcomed by us too but for God's "great love wherewith he loved us" (Eph. 2:4). We were "by nature" the children of wrath, in as much as we were children of disobedience, that is, not children bearing the image of our Father in Jesus Christ, but children bearing the image of the prince of devils and walking in his way (vv. 2-3; cf. John 8:44; I John 3:10).

We need to pause to consider the richness and wonder of God's grace, and to consider how humbled and how thankful we ought to be. God loved us, while we were still children meriting only His just and severe wrath, abhorrent to His holiness and righteousness in ourselves, not only in our walk of life, in all our actions, words and thoughts, but *in our very nature*, so that every desire which proceeded from our hearts was nothing but sinful lust, abominable to God (cf. Gen. 6:5; Job 15:16). How is it that the thrice holy God, who cannot even look at sin (cf. Isa. 6:3; Hab. 1:13), could have loved us, and loved us with such great love that lifted us out of this abyss of death and exalted us to

sit in heaven with Christ? Even now, we have only a small beginning and there is so much pollution which still cleaves to us, and which we accrue day by day in so many ways by our lack of holiness. We might be tempted to say it is at least a little easier to comprehend now, if God has given us faith and new life, which things are undoubtedly pleasing to Him. After all, it was significant in Jeroboam's baby son that there was "found some good thing toward the LORD God of Israel" (I Kings 14:13). We might be tempted to think that at least there is some good thing in us to merit salvation.¹ This is the argument made by those who become universalists based on the idea that all men are still in the image of God or any measure of a denial of *total* depravity. There is a certain logic to it (cf. Gen. 18:23-32). To avoid such confusion or distraction, Paul pointed the Ephesians to their unregenerate state.

God's love towards us (electing us in Christ) is identified by the apostle as the motivation for His quickening of us "together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5). The idea is that we are united to Christ and thereby brought to life. The Old Testament saints were taught by so many examples that, when the unclean touches the clean, the clean becomes unclean (e.g., Hag. 2:12). But there is no depth of unholiness which can make Christ unholy, just as even death could not hold Him in the grave, since He is the Holy One of Israel (Acts 2:24-27). The reason is the exceeding greatness of God's power in Christ. In contact with Him, we live. This is what the glorious gospel teaches us: "And [they] besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole" (Matt. 14:36). Those who feel in themselves that their faith is very weak or those who feel isolated from the church in a spiritual barren wasteland should take heart. Though they may only touch, as it were, "the hem of his garment," they with us all will be "made perfectly whole." This is the washing of spiritual baptism into Christ signified by water baptism (and this also shows why a little sprinkling is sufficient).

Our union with Christ is emphasized in Ephesians 2 particularly by three words (verbs), which are translated as "quickened ... together," "raised ... up

¹ The truth is that "though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them" (*Belgic Confession* 24).

together” and “sit together” (vv. 5-6). These correspond to the three stages of Christ's exaltation as identified previously (His resurrection, ascension and session). These three words each have the same prepositional prefix which denotes a very close union, not merely amid (*meta-*), beside or near (*para-*), but *joined* (*co-*).² This little preposition is at least as significant as the little word “in.” By its use in this context, our union with Christ is meant, which is all our salvation. The doctrine of union with Christ permeates the whole Calvinistic and biblical teaching on salvation.

Unlike the beginning of this epistle, where our union with Christ was limited to God's eternal counsel objectively in His decree of election and predestination, this speaks of the realization of our union with Christ in time and history subjectively. In due time, we as totally depraved creatures are miraculously joined to Christ. The Spirit of Christ graciously breathes into us, so that we breathe towards God in true living faith because God's Spirit in the bond of perfection always returns to Him as He proceeds from Him (Isa. 55:10-11; Rom. 8:9-17; Gal. 4:6; I John 4:2, 12-19). Through this faith, we receive more of Christ's Spirit and grace and abundance of life without end (John 11:26; 17:2-3). By the grace of God, we are saved, receiving beauty in the place of ashes (Eph. 2:5; Isa. 61:3). This is the beauty of God which transforms us into His own image, so that it is impossible for us to continue walking as children of the devil. This is the richness of God's mercy which lifts us out of our misery and exalts us with Christ. Because this grace and mercy is God's grace and mercy, it is almighty. It is the exceeding greatness of God's power towards us and at work in us. Neither grace nor our believing has its origin out of us or out of our works, since both are entirely gifts from God (Eph. 2:8). These *cannot* have their origin out of works, since good works are necessarily preceded by the fountain of grace and faith (vv. 9-10).

² This little preposition does more than just emphasize the closeness of the union. It also safeguards against the loss of individuality within the union. The two that become spiritually one remain distinctly two. The union is not such that we become Christ or Christ becomes us. We are not so taken into Christ that we lose our own person, as if Christ becomes the real subject of our activities and we do nothing. We are *in* Christ and also *with* Christ. If we are not *with* Christ, there is no real communion of love, and the whole covenant would be a sham and farce with only really one party rather than two. The Mediator of the covenant is a mediator between God and men (Gal. 3:20; I Tim. 2:5).

Having been made alive, when we were once dead in sins, we can and do live unto God, and no longer in the service of the devil. The power of this miracle is directly to be compared to the power which raised Christ from the dead. Death itself could not restrain or effectually resist this power, nor could all the demonic hosts. Neither can Satan, and least of all our own puny selves, resist this power which makes us alive. The same power of death which held us in trespasses and sins, was the power of death that Christ defeated when He rose from the grave.

This new life is the beginning of heavenly life. Christ is in heaven and we are joined to Him, but, more than that, the divine power that raised Christ into heaven is at work in us. Paul's point is that, just as we are already quickened, we are also already raised up to heaven through faith in Christ (v. 6). He makes the same point in his epistle to the Colossians that, since our new life is heavenly, our affections ought not to be on the earthly things, but on things above where Christ is and we with Him (Col. 3:1-2). He repeats the same point to the Philippians: "our conversation is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).

If heaven already is our home, how ought we to live on this earth? By storing up treasures for ourselves here? By spending all our time and energy on things which all will pass away in their vanity? We are still bound by so many ties to this earthly life, not least of which are our earthly bodies. But having the beginning of this new life of heaven, "we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life" (II Cor. 5:4). Having been joined to Christ, being raised up with Him to such heavenly life, there is now a great tension and struggle in us. We have ties yet to both heaven and earth, but our union with Christ is a bond above any earthly ties and even earth itself with heaven will be gathered together in one in Him (Eph. 1:10).

Finally, the apostle relates the power of the third stage of Christ's exaltation to us who believe. By the exceeding greatness of this power, Christ was seated at God's right hand "far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (v. 21). If there was any doubt that the dominion of the prince of the power of the air over us was broken by our regeneration, this glorious present reality removes it utterly. In His seat of authority at God's

right hand, Christ is not only above all principality (including the prince of demons) but He is “*far above all.*” Paul adds, as much as we have been made alive and raised up to heaven with Christ, so we have also already been made to sit together in Christ. Christ is the head over all to the advantage of the church which is His body, so that in Christ, who is far above all, Satan no longer has any claim over us. In view of this reality, that we are kings in Christ the King of kings, Paul expects all Christians to know that “we shall judge angels” (I Cor. 6:3).

That we already presently reign with Christ means, first of all, that we have right and authority to rule over ourselves in liberty to serve righteousness, whereas before we could only serve sin. It means further that we rule over all that God has given us as His stewards and servants, whereas before we pressed everything in our clutches into the service of Satan. Satan and his minions continually seek to wrest this rule out of our hands, but they no longer have any right or authority to do so. Christ is “far above all” these powers and we are seated with Him. Therefore, as He has the victory over all these, so we also are victorious with Him. Our faith, by which we are joined to Christ, is the victory that overcomes the world (I John 5:4). This is the present spiritual heavenly reality of Christ’s millennial kingdom, in which all His witnesses reign with Him, especially those souls already in heaven awaiting the bodily resurrection (Rev. 20:4-6). All believers confess as witnesses of Christ (II Cor. 4:13). All believers, therefore, also suffer with Him—all witnesses are *martyrs*, even if some suffer more than others (Phil. 1:29). All such martyrs reign with Christ from heaven, by virtue of being joined to Him through faith. Now we reign only a little but hereafter much more.

Although Paul speaks of these three stages of exaltation being present realities for every believer, he also prays for the exceeding greatness of God’s power to work in us more (Eph. 3:16). That is, our faith must increase, and we must be joined to Christ more, appropriate Him more and know more of His love and power, so that we are filled with all the fullness of God (vv. 17-19). Because of the “exceeding greatness” of this power at work in us, God is certainly able and will do it. The remaining deadness and sinfulness in us will be replaced by life and holiness, our remaining earthliness and carnality will be pushed out by heavenliness and spirituality, and our often weak and stumbling reign

will be perfected in glory and strength. Christ is our forerunner and the sure guarantee of this hope of our calling by His Spirit in us, that we will be to the praise of God's glory as His inheritance (Heb. 6:17-20).

To conclude, we need to recall that being joined to Christ as our Head, and we as members of His body, means that Christ must fill us all together in one. Our new heavenly life reigning with Christ is not individualistic. Consistently throughout this passage, Paul uses the second person plural, not "thee" or "thou," but "ye" and "you." Expounding upon the oneness that we have in Christ, reconciling Jews and Gentiles together to God in peace, Paul again uses this little prepositional prefix (*co-*) three more times in this chapter (and later in this epistle, e.g., Eph. 3:6; 4:16). Being incorporated into one body in Christ, we are citizens *together* (Eph. 2:19). And further we are "fitly framed *together*" in Christ so that we together grow as God's temple, being also "builded *together*" into God's dwelling place, so that God in the Spirit of Christ fills us as the whole church and body of Christ (vv. 21-22). What great urgency and motivation we have, therefore, to be as close as we possibly can be to God's church in this world, not to cut ourselves off from it, but sharing and being built up in the same faith and power of God's grace, mercy and love, since the God who predestinated us to be joined to Christ has also ordained the means of faith and its increase. It is together in one that the exceeding greatness of God's power in Christ is working in us who believe in Him.

* The printed edition of the last *BRJ* inadvertently omitted the name of Allen Baird from its list of previous editors (p. 1).