

A greater inheritance

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Date: 09 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Our first reading is Psalm 8 and can be found on page 540 of the Bibles. Page 540, Psalm 8.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babies and infants you have established strength because of your foes to still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands.

[1 : 11] You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Well, our second reading is from Ephesians chapter 1, verses 15 to 23.

And you can find that on page 1174 in the Church Bibles. So that's Ephesians chapter 1, verses 15 to 23.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

[3 : 20] Thanks very much for reading. Please do keep Ephesians open. Ephesians chapter 6.

Finally be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this letter to the church in Ephesus, written such that they might indeed be strong in the Lord.

And we pray this morning, please would you help us to hear your word, to take it to heart, such that we likewise might be strong in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. I think it was the 16th century statesman Sir Francis Bacon who said, knowledge is power.

And of course it is. So just think of the world of sport. If you know your opponent's tactics in advance of the game, then you're in a very powerful position, aren't you?

[4 : 29] To catch them off guard. In the business world, if you know which companies are going to do well and which are going to do badly, then you're in a very powerful position in terms of making investment decisions.

Or just think of the world of fashion. If you know what this season's colours are going to be, what the stars are going to be, they're going to be flying off the shelves over the next few months while you're in a very powerful position when it comes to your competitors.

Knowledge is power. And that is true in the spiritual world as well. But of course it doesn't feel very powerful, does it? Knowledge doesn't feel very powerful.

It sounds a bit dull. And yet actually, Ephesians chapter 1, verses 15 to 23, it is a prayer for knowledge. Did you notice that?

Verse 16. I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.

[5 : 34] It is a prayer to know God better. Last week, you'll remember, we thought about why the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus.

Do listen online if you missed it. It will help you make sense of this whole series of talks. Ephesus was the second largest city, the second most important city in the Roman Empire.

It mattered that you were seen to be a good Roman citizen. It is a city dominated, you'll remember, by this massive temple, the temple to the goddess Artemis.

It had an enormous grip on people's lives. In other words, if you were a follower of Jesus Christ in first century Ephesus, the world around you looked very big, very impressive.

By contrast, Jesus and your church gathering, the great temptation would be to have felt very small and very unimpressive.

[6 : 38] And so you see, they're in danger of losing heart, not standing firm, in danger of keeping a low profile, and rather than living distinctively for Jesus, simply to live like everyone else around them.

Just as for us, living in a secular culture, increasingly suspicious of genuine Christianity, the world looks big, doesn't it? The church feels small.

Some of us, I guess, will feel that very acutely. Perhaps at school or at work or in our friendship group or family. Indeed, it may be that you actually come from a culture not dissimilar to first century Ephesus, where the sort of spirit world and the world of demonic power actually looms very big in your mental landscape.

And it all begs the question, how do you stand firm as a follower of Jesus Christ? It's a question, of course, most obviously for those who are followers of Jesus.

But I take it that actually, even those of us who are here looking in on the Christian faith, at some stage or another along that line, along that road, we're going to ask ourselves the question, well, if I were to put my trust in Jesus, how would I stand firm?

[7 : 51] How would I keep going? Well, you'll see three headings on the outline. First of all, God wants you to see. God wants you to see.

Have a look at verse 18. Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened. Did you know that you have two sets of eyes?

Did you know that? In other words, we have the eyes in our heads, but we also have a set of eyes in our hearts. When the Bible talks about the heart, it's talking about the sort of control center of our lives, the center of our personality.

It's my heart, isn't it, that determines what I feel is important and unimportant in life. What my priorities are, what I'm going to value, what I'm going to pursue and drive after, what my heart is set on.

Which is why it's vital that those who belong to Jesus have the eyes of our hearts opened. To see reality as it really is.

[9 : 06] To see with our hearts what actually we cannot see with our physical eyes. But to have the eyes of our heart enlightened, to see what?

Well, the key is verse 15, for this reason. In verses 3 to 14, we've seen, haven't we, with the wonderful blessings that belong to those who belong to Jesus.

The blessings of adoption as sons, adopted as his people. The blessing of the forgiveness of sins.

The blessing of knowing the plan of God through all history to unite everything under King Jesus.

And the blessing of being sealed by his Holy Spirit. So what is it that Paul now prays so urgently well, notice first of all, he doesn't pray.

He doesn't pray, does he, that they would receive more blessings from God. Sadly, there are plenty of churches that teach that what you really need if you're going to stand firm as a Christian is a second blessing or a second anointing of the Spirit or something like that.

[10 : 15] In other words, to receive more blessings from God. After all, it may well be that actually some of us here this morning are finding the Christian life particularly hard at the moment. You know, perhaps hard to live distinctively.

Perhaps hard to stand firm. Perhaps hard not to lose heart. And one of the temptations when we are feeling like that is the temptation to listen to false teachers who promise new blessings from

God.

But Paul doesn't pray that. Instead, he prays this very simple prayer that they would see what they already have in Christ.

That's why, you see, he begins the letter as he does in chapter 1, verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Thelma Howard died in 1981. For 20 years, she was the maid of Walt and Lillian Disney. Every Christmas, Walt Disney would call her into his office and give her a little Christmas present.

[11:26] Perhaps she was expecting something like a \$20 tip or something like that just to make Christmas a bit better. Instead, each year, he gave her some stock, some shares, in the company.

Sadly, she never understood what she had been given and she died in poverty. And when, after her death, her meagre possessions were all sorted out, it was discovered that those shares would have made her a millionaire several times over.

Now, Christian after Christian walks through life like that poor woman. I imagine she looked with puzzlement at some of those unfamiliar words on those share certificates as she held them.

Annual general meeting, capital, registrar, voting by proxy, redemption of stock, and so on, and whatever the American equivalents are. And she looked at them confused and just shoved them away in the bottom drawer and forgot about them.

And Christians, sadly, so easily do the same. Ephesians 1, it's full of complicated language, isn't it? It speaks of election, adoption, grace, redemption, forgiveness, salvation, inheritance, glory.

[12:53] It's all too complicated. I think I'll just shove it away in the bottom drawer and leave it there. And Paul prays precisely that we won't do that.

And that God, by his Holy Spirit, will open our eyes to understand the fullness of what he's done for us in Christ. Your reaction may well be, may well have been to the last two sermons in Ephesians chapter 1.

I'm puzzled by this. It's far too much to take in. Of course you are. We all are. Which is why we need the help of the Holy Spirit to help us grasp the enormous value of what we have if we belong to Jesus.

So then specifically, what is it we need to see? Well, first of all, God wants you to see the future.

God wants you to see the future. Firstly, notice the future hope, verse 18.

Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. Now we've seen already, haven't we, in Ephesians what the hope is.

[14:05] It's chapter 1, verse 4. Even as he chose us in him before the creation of the world, that we should be homely, holy, and blameless before him.

That is the hope. The hope of the day at the end of time in the new creation when those who trust in Jesus will be gathered around him. Holy, blameless.

And it's not a vague hope. It's not a vague hope as in, well, I hope I get there. I hope I make it. We reminded of that yesterday, weren't we, those of us on the day away gloriously. No, it's a sure and certain hope, chapter 1, verse 7, because in Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, our sins.

Because biblical hope is always certain, confident, not wishful thinking. The hope, chapter 1, verse 10, of seeing the end point of history, a new creation united under the rule of Jesus.

Now, in our culture, which reflects, which reflects so little on the future and almost never on eternity, it is, I take it, distressingly obvious that we need help.

[15:22] Because even when we do think about the future, we think, don't we, about the future with what we might call a small F. You know, the future that we save for, that we plan for, that we ensure against.

We don't think about the future with a big F. Death, judgment, heaven, and hell. But we need the eyes of our hearts opened so that we can see the hope, the big F, future, to which we have been called.

just think back to the last holiday you went on. In fact, not so much the holiday, but the week beforehand as you got ready.

And the sheer effort, I mean, it's awful, isn't it? The sheer effort actually of getting ready to go away. You know, the endless list of to-do items at work, the projects that have to be handed over to colleagues, the emails that need to be sent.

And then at home, you know, making sure you've got everything together, packing, planning, and for those with children, not just for yourself, with others as well. You know, who would ever put themselves through that? Well, of course you wouldn't, would you, if you simply had your eyes focused on what you can see, if you were living, in other words, with the sight of your physical eyes.

[16 : 45] Because what you can see around you is the sheer stress of trying to get ready. But actually you're not. At that point, you are seeing with the eyes of your heart.

You are looking to the future, to what is on the horizon, with your eyes fixed on the holiday. Why bother to live distinctively for Jesus?

How do I stand firm, unshakable, as a Christian? Well, I won't do if my eyes are simply fixed on the present if that is where the eyes of my heart are fixed.

It's why we need to pray this prayer. But notice, really, there's a second thing we need to pray regarding the future. Again, verse 18, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints? Notice it's not our inheritance, it's God's inheritance, it's what we saw last week, that's what we are if we belong to Jesus Christ. Chapter 1, verse 14, God will redeem those who are his possession, who belong to him as his people.

[17 : 53] Just think for a moment of a wedding. No doubt the bride and groom have their gift list, no doubt they'll be showered with all kinds of presents from friends and family and well-wishers and so on.

But for the groom, what is the greatest gift for the groom on his wedding day? Well, it's not the set of saucepans, is it?

It's not the matching duvet cover, it's his bride, seeing her walking up the aisle. And in a far greater way, you see, do you know what is the greatest gift that will be presented in the royal courts at the end of history?

It will be the bride of Christ, his church, all those who have put their trust in Jesus, washed from sin, perfected in every way, led to the very throne of God.

That is God's inheritance. And so, not surprisingly, the apostle Paul prays that we had grasped the value that God places on his people, chosen in Christ, precious to him, our destiny to be joint heirs with him in the new creation.

[19 : 09] It's why we need to pray this prayer, isn't it? Because only God can open the eyes of our hearts such that we would see how very precious we are to him if we've put our trust in him.

Such that in comparison, actually the things of this world would pale into insignificance. After all, there are all kinds of things, aren't there, that the world values and offers which we can so easily fix the eyes of our hearts on?

Riches, relationships, our reputation, our retirement, relaxation, the things that everyone else around us invests themselves in.

And of course, we can see them, can't we, with the eyes in our heads. We can see it when a colleague gets a pay rise and they go off on some exotic holiday somewhere. We can see it when that neighbour gets a wonderful new kitchen.

We can see academic success and good exam grades. We can see, in other words, what the good life looks like in the eyes of the world. And if we're not careful, those are the very things, because we can see them, those are the very things which we also set the eyes of our hearts on.

[20 : 34] which is why we need to pray this prayer. That instead we would see the future clearly. Because that in turn will enable us to live now in the present distinctively for Jesus.

Not to get bogged down in this world, but instead to press on to heaven. God wants you to see, God wants you to see the future.

Thirdly, God wants you to see the present. And specifically, notice, he wants to see how very powerful Jesus is. Verse 19. And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might, that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead.

Now, if you lived in Ephesus in the first century, the eyes in your head could see the mighty temple of Artemis towering over the city, exerting its influence.

You'd have heard the propaganda that came out of the Roman Empire proclaiming that the gods had given Rome the right to rule for eternity. Just as the liberal so-called progressive secularists in our society proclaiming that God is dead and the future belongs to them.

[22 : 04] So you see, what the Christians need to see with the eyes of their heart is the far greater power of Jesus. Not only Artemis over Artemis, not only over the Roman Empire, but actually over the whole world, over the entire universe.

After all, it's not obvious, is it? It's not obvious that Jesus is powerful in our world. The eyes of our heads, I guess, get glimpses of it occasionally.

We'll see more of that in Ephesians chapter 2, but they are only glimpses. So you and I need to be convinced of that with the eyes of our hearts.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Now, I don't know about you, but I can't begin to imagine, I cannot begin to imagine the power that made that possible.

For Jesus to be raised from the dead, never to die again. Now, it may well be that you're here and you're not yet convinced that Jesus did rise from the dead, never to die again, in which case I'd urge you to investigate, consider the facts.

[23 : 16] It really is the linchpin of the Christian faith. There is good evidence for it. The Roman soldiers did their job. They made sure that Jesus was really dead. There's good evidence the tomb was empty.

There's plenty of evidence for the eyewitness sightings, the appearances of Jesus on one occasion to more than 500 people at a time. If Jesus didn't raise from the dead, of course, then the whole Christian faith collapses.

But if he did raise from the dead, then it changes everything. Because it means he's not just risen, but he's ruling.

Again, verse 20, picking up from where we were before, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

In the Roman world, in the fights they had in the arena, what did the victor do? Why, he put his foot on the neck of the person he's defeated. Perhaps you've seen it in a film like *Gladiator* or something like that.

[24 : 22] Well, Jesus Christ now has all things under his feet, but on a cosmic scale, he possesses all authority, all power, all dominion, all dominion in the universe, both now and in the future.

unlike the Roman Empire, unlike the goddess of Artemis, which has simply disappeared into the history books, unlike any other person or spiritual force or power that you and I may be intimidated by.

You see, it may well be that a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Ephesians 1 verses 9 and 10 and God's plan for the whole world to unite all things under Christ in the new creation, he may well actually have been thinking to yourself, even if you quite didn't articulate it, it may be that you'd been thinking to yourself, hang on a minute, that just sounds like a pipe dream, you know, a whole new creation, isn't that a bit far-fetched?

No, for the simple reason that Jesus Christ reigns forever, far above all rule, all authority, all dominion and power, every spiritual power, every earthly power, which means that nothing absolutely nothing can get in the way of God's plan.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is why? Why is it that God has given Jesus all authority over everything? Did you spot it?

[25 : 54] Verse 19, the greatness of his power towards us who believe. And verse 22, and he put all things under his feet and gave him his head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Amazingly, Jesus' supremacy over the whole cosmos is for the benefit of his people. In other words, when Jesus ascended to heaven, his message to his disciples was not you're on your own now.

I guess it's easy to think like that, isn't it? Even in part, to think that Jesus is now kind of removed from the place of real earthly influence. But actually the very opposite is the case.

Jesus is now in the place of ultimate influence, of ultimate power, and all for the benefit of his people. I take it that all of us feel the cost of being a Christian, those of us who belong to Jesus.

I take it we feel the cost socially, a couple of us were chatting about that earlier on this week, I take it we feel the cost of it in terms of our reputation and what other people think of us.

[27 : 14] I take it we sense the temptation to lose heart, we sense the battle and conflict that is the Christian life, that is why of course Ephesians will finish with the spiritual battle.

