

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 18, 2007**

PRAYING WITH REAL HOPE

Ephesians 1:15-23

This Sunday is “Amazing Grace Sunday.” Churches around the world are singing the hymn we just sang, “Amazing Grace,” to acknowledge God’s answer to prayers to end slavery in one part of the world and to pray earnestly for freedom for those who are enslaved today – and to pray for the unfinished work of racial equality. This day coincides with the upcoming release of the inspirational film called “Amazing Grace” that charts the lifework of William Wilberforce. The movie premieres this Friday on the 200th anniversary of the date the British Parliament, through Wilberforce’s leadership, voted to ban the slave trade.

Do you know the story of William Wilberforce? He was a devout Christian and a member of the British Parliament. When he came to faith in Christ, he was encouraged to serve God by using his influence in Parliament to work for the abolition of slavery. Beginning around 1787, he sought to do what then seemed to be an impossible task, to lead the British Empire to abolish the slave trade! He was vigorously opposed. Many argued the British economy would collapse if Wilberforce succeeded.

For 20 long and difficult years, Wilberforce introduced bill after bill to end the practice, but without success. Then, in February 1807, Parliament voted to abolish the slave trade. After that, for another 26 years, Wilberforce fought for the abolition of slavery itself! Just days before his death in 1833, he learned that his lifelong dream would soon become reality when slavery was outlawed all across the British Empire. For that effort we praise the Lord!

What do you think motivated Wilberforce and kept him from giving up? What was the driving force behind his decades-long faithfulness to his cause? Let me read from his own words:

“Boldly I must confess that I believe the national difficulties we face result from the decline of religion and morality among us. I must confess equally boldly that my own solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend, not so much on her navies and armies, nor on the wisdom of her rulers, nor on the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many who love and obey the gospel of Christ. I believe their prayers may yet prevail.”

Wilberforce was a man committed to prayer. The secret was his confidence in the real hope of prayer – the power of the gospel to change lives. During those long years of waiting for change, he regularly and faithfully cried out to God.

Like him, we often face problems or obstacles that seem insurmountable. Our friends and co-workers, maybe some in our own family, seem far away from the gospel. Problems, pain, hurt from other people, even our own besetting sins never seem to go away. We pray and pray and pray again and the years go by and things remain the same. But change comes slowly. The transformation of our character takes a lifetime, the transformation of the people around us may

occur in bite-size chunks over many years. During the wait, how do you and I persevere in prayer, over the long haul, like Wilberforce? We must pray with real hope, like Paul did in our passage this morning.

THE REASON FOR PAUL'S PRAYER

Let's first think about why Paul prays the way he does. We read in verses 13-14, that the Ephesians believed the gospel and have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. *"You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit."* They are men and women who have recognized their disobedience to God and their need for His redemption. They have trusted in Jesus Christ and Him alone for salvation. It is for this reason that Paul prays that they may know God better and have the eyes of their hearts enlightened to know the benefits of their salvation. And Paul is absolutely confident that his prayers will be answered!

Why is this important? Paul had a long history with the Christians at the churches around Ephesus. Like Wilberforce, he stood for Christ. But the cultural tide seemed to flow against him. Ephesus was a center of pagan worship - the Temple of Artemis in the center of town was one of the "Seven Wonders of the World." Paul had gotten into trouble with the idol makers telling people that Jesus was the one true God, and he was nearly killed. The last time he saw the elders at Ephesus, he told them that he would probably go to prison and may never see them again.

He was right. Ephesians is a "prison epistle." Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem, put on trial before Jewish and Roman authorities, and because he was a Roman citizen, was carted off to a legal hearing before Caesar. At the time he wrote this letter, he is in Rome awaiting his trial and potentially, his execution, for sharing the good news of Christ. Paul's circumstances seemed hopeless, desperate and beyond the reach of prayer. Yet Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is filled with so much hope.

PRAYER TO KNOW GOD BETTER

In verse 17, Paul prays that God will give the Ephesian Christians *"a Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that they may know Him better."* In verses 18-19, he prays that they 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."* Pastor James Montgomery Boice says about the prayer, "Put together, it is really one great prayer of knowledge: knowledge of God and a fuller knowledge of the elements of salvation – our hope, our inheritance, and the power available to us through Jesus Christ. The chief idea is that we know God."

Do you know God? I don't mean do you have knowledge about God or knowledge of the Bible. We can talk about religion, debate theology with our friends, or even attend a Bible study, and never know the God of the Bible. It is possible to have knowledge about the Bible and about theology and not know God. Jesus prayed in John 17:3, *"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."*

Knowing God means knowing Him experientially and personally, that is, having a relationship with Him. I may know a lot about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln (I don't!); I may have studied their biographies and become an expert on their lives. Tomorrow, I may happily celebrate their birthdays. But I don't know them. I have no relationship with them. But I know my wife. I have a committed, personal and real relationship with her.

In the same way, we must know God personally. The Christian life is all about knowing and serving Jesus Christ. In his book entitled *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer suggested three elements to this idea of a personal knowledge of Christ. The first, he calls personal dealing in which you and I deal with God as He reveals Himself to us through His Word, and our being dealt with and changed by Him as He takes knowledge of us. The second element is personal involvement where we rejoice when God is honored and feel distress when He is dishonored – especially the shame and grief we feel when we are convicted for sinning against Him. Third, knowing God is a matter of grace – it is when God takes the initiative through Christ's death on the cross and brings us into a relationship with Himself. Packer writes, "What matters supremely is not the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it – the fact that He knows me."

That is what Paul is getting at here – a prayer that you and I would understand God as the One who has set his love on us and has chosen to know us as His own.

PRAYER TO KNOW THE BENEFITS OF OUR SALVATION

The second part of Paul's prayer is the request that the Ephesians may be enlightened to know the benefits of their salvation. Actually, he's praying that God would give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation because the eyes of their hearts have been enlightened. That enlightenment will enable them to understand and grasp what their salvation had achieved.

This means spiritual illumination, the kind of wisdom and knowledge that God gives through His Holy Spirit to those who believe. Paul wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 2:11-14.

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Paul prays confidently for the Ephesians because God has enlightened them and has given them the Holy Spirit. Because of this, they can be taught by God. Because of the Spirit's illumination of their hearts accomplished when they put faith in Jesus Christ they can know God better

Now this is not some sort of special knowledge of the Bible that cannot be obtained by the plain reading of Scripture. It's not God giving us a hidden meaning of a Bible passage. It is simply the work of the Holy Spirit, taking the clear words of Scripture and enabling us to see how they

are relevant today, helping you and me grasp how to live our lives before the face of God and be transformed by His power. Without the Holy Spirit working in our hearts, God's Word seems like foolishness.

In his prayer for knowledge, Paul asks that God would help them – and each of us – fully realize three things.

First, is to know “*the hope to which He has called you.*” In the Bible, the word hope is used to express something to which we look forward – the future, the completion of something. The calling by God to a relationship with Him is such a hope. It is not an ambiguous or empty call. It is a calling to something and for something. Up in verse 4, Paul says we were *chosen to be holy and blameless*; in verse 5, we were *predestined to be adopted as God's sons*. The hope to which we are called is incredible. We will be made like Jesus, we will be taken up to heaven to live with Him as part of His family.

James Boice tells the story of Phillip Henry (father of commentator Matthew Henry). Phillip had fallen in love with a young lady who was from a higher level of society than he. Both had become Christians. However, her parents were greatly concerned about the disparity in their social status and asked, “This Phillip Henry. Where is he from?” She put far less weight on earthly treasure and answered, “I do not know where he has come from, but I know where he is going!” That woman understood the hope of being called to Christ.

Paul's second request is that we would understand *the riches of [Christ's] glorious inheritance in the saints*. By using the word “riches” Paul is talking about the scope of the blessing that is in store for us. The future laid up for us is beyond our wildest dreams, more than we can ever imagine or think. Paul wrote elsewhere, in Romans 8:18, that “*the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*”

No matter how difficult your circumstances or pain (and for many of you, your suffering is great!), no matter how insurmountable your problems, the hope you have in Christ is much, much greater.

We can only imagine what it's going to be like in heaven because only a little is written about heaven in Scripture. But the Lord has given us a clue. In verses 13-14, Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit is “*a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.*” That's the idea of a down-payment, like when you buy or sell a house.

A few months ago, Theresa and I sold our home in Massachusetts. Before closing, the buyer gave us a small amount of money as a pledge that he would later come with the full purchase price of the house. It was, I must say, a rather small percentage of the total amount! The sale price was a whole lot more than the few dollars they put up before closing. But that pledge gave us hope that after a year on the market, our house would be sold. And it was! The down-payment wasn't the reward, it was the promise.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit who indwells us who believe, who encourages us and illumines our hearts, is the promise of the things to come. Take your best day with God, the time you

sensed His presence the most, the day you experienced your greatest victory over sin. That's the Holy Spirit working in you. In this sense, for us He's the down-payment. He is the promise of the reward to come.

Finally, Paul prays that we would know Christ's *incomparably great power for us who believe.*" I think that this is where the crux of Paul's confidence lies. Paul, the prisoner in Rome, urges us to depend on the power of Jesus Christ in the day-to-day and difficult stuff we face in our lives. John Stott explained the verse in this way: Christian living is somewhere between the call of God (which is the past) and the riches of our inheritance (which is the future). We are called to live as God's children in the here and now, in a world that rebels against Him and refuses to acknowledge His sovereignty, in a world that is often full of pain and difficulty, where we might be enslaved, or disrespected or hurt. Paul's prayer is that we would know God's power by experience – an experience with the living Christ.

POWER IS ANCHORED IN CHRIST'S RESURRECTION AND EXALTATION

Look at how Paul describes this power in verses 19-23:

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.

Jesus has risen from the dead! What power on earth could accomplish this? Obviously, it has to be the power God! That is the power that lives in us and gives us victory over sin – victory over the world that constantly bombards us with its values, defeat for the sinful patterns and habits of our lives, tearing down of the strongholds that the scheming devil has over our thoughts and actions. How can we triumph over those strong forces? Only through the power that God displayed by raising Jesus from the dead!

Paul reminds us that the risen Lord has now been exalted and given rule above everything – all rule and authority, power and dominion. He is head over everything. Not that the Son of God did not have power before His resurrection, but that this power that He already possessed was now unleashed on behalf of the church. That means all the earthly powers, but it also includes the corrupt world system and demonic power behind human evil. Paul would write later in this letter to the Ephesians: "*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*" And Jesus is Lord and has defeated any force that contends against us!

Now you might be thinking, "Yeah, sure. I believe that the resurrection and exaltation means that I'll go to heaven. But what about now? I'm not experiencing much of a victorious life today. My problems won't go away. I keep praying and praying, but my pain, my bad

memories, my sinful habits are still there.” For you, life is OK . . . or maybe it’s not! But the hope-filled prayer life and victorious existence described by Paul seems like only a dream.

If you are like me, you struggle with the way God answers your prayers. We want God to deliver us today! We don’t want to struggle and work and pray for years like Paul or like Wilberforce. We want answers now – and when we don’t see those answers we begin to doubt, we start to lose hope and give up on any answer in this world, and no longer pray – or at least without confidence that God hears us.

I think that’s why Paul ended this prayer the way he did. The hope we have is based on the power of Jesus Christ who died for us, who rose again and is exalted above every name in heaven and earth. Our hope doesn’t rest on how quickly God provides an answer to our petitions. Our hope depends on the fact God already demonstrated His power and faithfulness in the Lord Jesus Christ.

When you feel like God is not hearing your prayers and that they’re not being answered, it’s because you’ve got your hope placed on the wrong thing. The promise of answered prayer does not depend upon your getting immediate relief from your problems. It does not depend on how much faith you have that God will give you what you ask. It depends on the reality that Jesus died for you, rose out of His grave and is alive for you, and that all authority has been given to Him in heaven and on earth so that you might know with certainty the hope of your calling to Him and the fabulous riches of your future inheritance in Him. When you have that perspective, you can persevere in prayer. Like Wilberforce. Like Paul.

Friends, we do live in a time when the cultural tide seems to flow against our Lord. Some of you deal with great suffering and insurmountable problems that seem to have gone beyond the reach of prayer. But even when all hope seems gone, we can pray with real hope when we know God and the power of our risen and exalted savior.