

KNOWING GOD, KNOWING HOPE, KNOWING POWER

Comments on Ephesians 1:17-19

By

Michael D. Taylor

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In Ephesians 1:17-19, Paul prays to God the Father for the believers in the church at Ephesus. In this prayer, Paul asks that they might know: a) God personally, b) the hope and riches of his inheritance, and c) God's incredible power which is behind those who trust him. Said another way, this prayer is about knowing God, knowing hope, and knowing power.

Background and Theme

Paul was very familiar with the church at Ephesus since he had spent over three years with them and was, no doubt, very close to them. He met with the elders of this church at Miletus (Acts 20:17-38), sadly knowing that he probably would never see them again. Unlike other epistles, Paul does not describe any major problems with this church. The general nature of Ephesians makes it difficult to determine the specific circumstances that gave rise to the epistle. It is clear, however, that the recipients were Gentiles (3:1) who probably felt like they were second-hand citizens to the Jews in Jerusalem who referred to Gentiles as the "uncircumcised" (2:11).

The theme of Ephesians is the relationship between Jesus and his earthly body, the church. God the Father, as suzerain King, has appointed Jesus to be his vassal King, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in heaven to rule over everything, including the church (1:20-23). Youngblood puts it this way, "Exalted though He is, He has not drifted off into the heavens and forgotten His people. Rather, so fully does He identify with the church that He

considers it His body, which He fills with His presence (1:23; 3:19; 4:10).”¹ In this letter, Paul emphasizes that Christ is the head of the church, and He encourages his fellow Christians to live worthy of their high calling as Jesus’ disciples, being part of his “body” and no longer being the “uncircumcised.” The words “in Christ” are used six times (1:3, 9, 12, 13, 20) and describe the blessings believers receive because they belong to him. In other words, as believers, the weaker dependent members of the body of Christ, they pay allegiance to God the Father, they receive his benefits and protection because they also pay allegiance to his vassal King Jesus. Even though Paul was writing to Gentiles he may have had in mind this distinction between God the Father and Jesus throughout this epistle.

Knowing God

“[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you spiritual wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him” (v. 17).

First, Paul asks God the Father to give the Ephesians the spirit of wisdom and revelation, not for the purpose of knowing more facts about God or even how to live life, but to know God, himself, in a personal way.

The word “spirit” is adjectival and is not implying that the believer receives another Spirit since they have already been given the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit indwells every believer who is in Christ, Paul cannot be praying that his readers might receive the Person of the Holy Spirit but rather that they might receive illumination from him. The “spirit of wisdom” used here is very much like the “spirit of stupor” (Romans 11:8), “a gentle spirit” (I Corinthians 4:21),

¹Youngblood, R. F., Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Nashville, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson Publishing 1995).

“a gentle and quiet spirit” (I Peter 3:4), or “your whole spirit” (I Thessalonians 5:23). The word *spirit* in these verses is referring to the believer’s character and values. To have a *spirit of wisdom* is not the same as the accumulation of knowledge about God the Father but rather is describing insights which enable the believer to know God on a personal, more intimate basis. By having this spirit of wisdom, the believer can look through a different set of lenses to see: a) the very nature of God, himself; b) life from God’s point of view; c) how God the Father, as suzerain King, has absolute authority; and d) how the believer is to respond to God as suzerain King, and Jesus his vassal King. To have the spirit of wisdom, the believer can continually grow in a maturing relationship with God.

In considering the word *revelation*, it is important to remember that God has already *revealed* himself to man through his Word and his creation (Romans 1:20); but it is by the illumination of the Holy Spirit that God, himself, is understood. This *spirit of wisdom* is given to man so that he can then understand God’s revelation.

This is *knowledge* which is not attained intellectually but from God, himself.² The stronger term (Grk: *epignosis*) is used to denote the full and more perfect knowledge which is gained by being *in Christ*. Paul is not describing the kind of knowledge based simply on facts and information but on an intimate growing knowledge of God, himself. Paul is praying to God that he would grant the Ephesians a more perfect knowledge in order that they would experience God relationally.

²MacDonald, W., Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments (Nashville, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson Publishing 1995).

Knowing Hope

“Inasmuch as the eyes of your heart are enlightened, I pray that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints...” (v. 18).

The second thing Paul asked of God the Father was that the Ephesians would know the hope they have in Christ. Paul now states, “...the eyes of your heart are enlightened...” The “enlightenment” is present (not future)—since the eyes of your heart are already enlightened. Even though Paul’s letter to the Ephesians does not describe any major problems, he may have had in mind the false teaching of the Gnostics who preached that a “special knowledge” about God had to be obtained through a unique process. He wanted the Ephesian believers to know that they already had this enlightenment.

It is important to note that Paul does not say "our calling," although we are the called. He describes this calling by connecting it with God, who is the one who calls, so that we may understand its source and nature. The calling is done by God, himself, and is the basis for the believer’s hope and the believer’s relationship to the inheritance.

The inheritance (Grk. *klēronomia*) used here is what the believer will be to God in that age³ (when Jesus returns). Israel is described as God’s inheritance throughout the Old Testament (Exod. 34:9; Levit. 25:46; Deut. 4:20; 9:26; 1 Sam. 10:1; 1 Kings 8:51,53; Isa. 19:25; 47:6; Jer. 10:16; Zech 2:12). Because both the believing Jew and the believing Gentile are reconciled (Eph. 2:14-22), both become part of this inheritance. This had to be encouraging to the Ephesians and make them feel less like second-class “uncircumcised” believers.

³ W. E. Vine, Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell 1981) 259.

Knowing Power

“...and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might...” (v. 19).

The third thing that Paul asks of God is that the Ephesians may know the power already given to those who are in Christ. This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, made him vassal King to sit at the right hand of God the Father, to be above all rulers, all authorities, all power and dominions, and to have a title which will last forever (1:19-21). It is this same power that appointed Jesus to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body (1:22-23). To the Ephesians, and to us today, it is a wonderful reminder that we cannot live the Christian life in our own strength and self-determination, but only by this same power. Peter also affirms this:

“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (II Peter 1:3).

Conclusion

These verses are some of the most encouraging in the Bible. They must have been encouraging to the Ephesians, and they are definitely encouraging to me. I am always amazed that a God, so powerful, wants us to know him on a personal basis through his Son Jesus. It is this very intimate relationship with the living God that testifies to all that he is real. I find it also encouraging to know that I can rely on God’s power, through the Holy Spirit, to live the life he desires of me. To realize that I, and all other believers, are part of his inheritance is humbling and overwhelming. To know God, himself, to know his hope and inheritance, and to know his power is what the Christian walk is all about!