

Union With Christ

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

The Power You Already Have

Ephesians 1:15 – 2:10

Introduction: My Son and Me

It's a real privilege to be here with you today. I know many of you, and I'm glad to make the acquaintance of those of you I haven't met yet. Today I wanted to share with you from one of the greatest prayers ever spoken. It's actually been my prayer for you especially in this last year. It's also been a prayer that I say for my two kids. Let me begin by giving you a snapshot of my life. Like many of you, my wife and I care about people who have been disadvantaged in the city. My wife Ming and I live in a three decker house in Dorchester, in a low-income, high crime neighborhood. We live in an area of Boston called the Youth Corridor. The last statistic I heard was that an estimated 17,000 youth live in the immediate area. Our household is a ministry team, praying for our neighborhood, relating to folks, and organizing neighborhood events. Leslie Moore, one of your board members, lives in my house and does a lot of outreach to youth. Vince Campbell came over last Wed to help me do Boys' Group. He's been teaching Tae Kwon Do for the last 5 weeks to a group of boys. We've learned how to salute in with 'jumbi,' stand at attention with 'chario,' and bowing with 'kyongae.' Now my son John, who is 5 years old, is a sensitive little person. So he didn't like it when one of the older boys, a friend of his, was trying to help him with a roundhouse kick. John fell, which wasn't a big deal, but he got pretty upset. He started sulking. He withdrew. He didn't want to do Tae Kwon Do any more. So I looked at him and thought, 'My poor son – he's inherited my struggle with self-pity and anger. I'm a lot like that.' So I talked to him afterwards and told him I understand. But I also told him that when we get angry, we can ask Jesus to give us his power to not give into it.

Relevance

How many times do we feel the need for that kind of power? Power to deal with your disappointment with yourself, when you realize for the first time or you're reminded again that you're about half the person you thought you were. Power to just deal with bad habits that we have. Power to deal with an imperfect community, or an imperfect marriage. Power to hang in there with other people who are difficult. Power to confront an imperfect society. Power to live out the values you say you have, but find difficult to express. It's so much easier just to lower your standards, and live life at a low level, not hoping for much more. But if we have Jesus, we power: his power. We'll look at what that power is and how to access it.

If you do not know Jesus, I'm so glad you're here. I want to thank you for being here and just listening. I hope that this time helps you to get a better idea of who Jesus is. If you would like to talk to a friend or even me about what you hear today, please feel free to do that. If you do know Jesus, I hope that this will serve as a reminder to you of the power you already have, or even be an explanation that hits you for the first time.

Context: Paul's Prayer from Prison

The passage I'm looking at comes from a letter from a radical Jew named Paul. Paul had had a profound experience with Jesus, and was running around the entire Mediterranean world telling people about Jesus. He wrote this letter to the Christian community in Ephesus and the region of Asia Minor to remind them of the power they already had with Jesus. Actually, by the time he wrote this letter, Paul was under house arrest. He had been imprisoned for disturbing the peace and being a political subversive in an Empire that wanted peace at the price of injustice and lies. Paul's belief in Jesus led him to truth and reconciliation between peoples under Jesus' leadership. So he was in jail for being truly Christian.

But far from feelings sorry for himself, Paul seems to be excited. He says this prayer for his audience in 1:15, 'For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you...I do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of

Him...so that you may know...' And what does he want them to know? Is it how much God loves us? No. I'm sure that's included in there, but it's not just that. It's that God shares His power with us.

The Power that Raised Jesus from the Dead: 1:19 – 23

'What is the surpassing greatness of His power towards us who believe...the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised him from the dead, and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...'

Now if I were in jail and wanted to talk about God's power, I might start off talking about His power to create the universe, to fling everything into existence. Or I would talk about God's parting the Red Sea and liberating Israel out of Egypt, like in the movie *The Prince of Egypt*. Or God's ability to deploy a thousand angels. So why does Paul talk about God raising one man from the dead? What's the big deal about THAT?

First of all, because no one has the power to raise people from the dead. Death is the tyrant waiting for every human being at the end of our lives. We try to escape him by eating healthy, doing aerobics, and even taking Viagra and Botox and other things that give the appearance of reversing the aging process. We try to escape death by becoming famous, by becoming the 'best' in our field, by leaving buildings and scholarships in our name and living on after we die. But even if you manage to do that, what happens? Some kid walks into a building named after you, and do they think of you? No. If they did even for a brief moment, do you get to enjoy that? Do they experience you? No; you're dead! Death comes for all. So it does mean something that God raised Jesus from the clutches of death and seated him above death and all the other powers. And God didn't just resuscitate Jesus, so that he would one day die again; He resurrected Jesus to immortal life that shook off death forever.

Second, it also means that God is committed to us as human beings. We were supposed to have dominion and rule over the creation. But Adam and Eve blew it, and we blew it, too. But the great news is that God has put another human being in the place we should have had. That human being is Jesus. He is the beginning of God's new humanity. So God is restoring to Jesus all the dignity humanity should have had, all the honor and power humanity should have had. A resurrected Jesus fits perfectly in the story. No other action would have restored humanity to our place in God's story.

The Power that Raised Us from the Dead: 2:1 – 7

If you're like me, you're asking at this point, 'So what? What does Jesus' resurrection have to do with me?' The answer is in chapter 2, verses 1-10. We got spiritually resurrected when we gave our lives to Jesus. In v.1-3, 'And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world (meaning you copied other people), according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the disobedient (meaning you were influenced by negative spiritual forces). Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind (meaning you yourselves were part of the problem). But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Notice the parallel between us and Jesus? The same verbs are used to describe us, namely 'raised' and 'seated.' Christ was raised from the tomb of physical death. We were raised from the tomb of spiritual death. Christ was seated high above everyone else. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

This is the second evidence of God's resurrection power. God used a lot of power to save people through Jesus. All of us, apart from Jesus, would be in cycles of decline. Corporately, people say that young people today are so much more disrespectful than they were thirty years ago. Today is worse than yesterday, and it's all getting worse. I believe it. Individually, no one starts off with low ideals for their life. Everyone starts off with high hopes and high ideals. But then you compromise and then you lower your standards. Your life is in a spiritual decline. The only way to stop this downward spiral is to be joined to Jesus, because Jesus was raised above the clutches of death.

Illus: It's as if God sent Jesus on a rescue mission. Let's say that I was on a sinking ship and went down with it, trapped in the ship. Then, Jesus dived off a rescue boat to find me, knowing that he only had enough air in his lungs to reach me, but not enough to make it back up. So he carried a rope. He found me, already drowned. And with his dying breath of air, he wrapped himself around me and tied himself to me. Then he, too, drowned. But on the other end of that rope was his Father. And his Father above the surface pulled him and me back up to the surface, and performed CPR on us both, rescuing us both. Jesus entered the death we were in, and died our death, to pull us to new life on the other side.

A lot of the time Christians don't think that their own transformation was that significant, especially if you grew up in the church and gave your life to Jesus at age 4 and then age 5 and every year after that, or if you have a fairly quiet conversion story without fireworks and miracles. But consider the fact that the resurrection of Jesus was also quiet. Paul is not referring to the events surrounding the resurrection. We tend to focus on the angels, the earthquake, the overpowering of the Roman guard, the rolling away of the stone. Why? Because we always associate power with bells and whistles, with great demonstrations, with things that bang and explode and buzz and hum. But the actual resurrection itself was quiet. Jesus' body simply phased through the burial cloths. And he may have actually walked through the boulder before it was moved away; the boulder itself was moved so other people could see in! The angels, the earthquake, the rolling away of the stone were things that just happened afterwards.

In the same way, God's power in us begins quietly. When you accepted Jesus, you may not have felt anything in particular. I didn't. I certainly didn't feel a flow of power rejuvenating me. Probably most of you didn't see fireworks. But nevertheless, God's quiet power was put in you. You didn't have any sense that it happened, but it did happen. And now God's power is let loose in you. This is a power you already have.

Illus: I got a really good picture of this in the life of a friend of ours who is a neighbor up the street. In 1993, our friend SC Chambers made Thanksgiving dinner. Her three adult children had asked her to make dinner, and gave her money for it. So SC made a lavish Thanksgiving dinner. She thought it would be special because she and her husband had just gotten a painful divorce. She thought it would be a good time to share with her children. But apparently they double booked themselves or neglected to tell her or even spitefully did this, but they didn't come. They went to their fathers' place, without even telling her. SC didn't make Thanksgiving dinner again for years. She went over to friends' places, she went to visit with other family, or she went to serve dinner to the homeless. It was so painful, and her children didn't even apologize for this. It was the beginning of a very rough time in SC's life where she tried to escape using alcohol and drugs. But in 2005, SC began to experience Jesus in a real way. She came over to our place, as we had moved in just down the street from her, and started reading the Bible with my wife and some other women in a neighborhood women's bible study. During this time, Jesus did amazing things; he helped her with a bad roommate situation; he helped her have the self-discipline to clean up the house she had let fall apart for years; he helped her cut down on substances. In October, one of SC's granddaughters, J, came to live with her. This was a huge sign of victory for SC. But in November, J asked SC to cook Thanksgiving dinner. SC at first didn't want to, but J prevailed. SC had panic attacks while she was cooking as she relived how she had felt twelve years ago and wondered if she remembered how to cook these dishes, but she prayed and asked Jesus to help her, and she experienced peace and calm. She cooked off and on for two days, and when she was done, she had cooked a delicious 14 course dinner almost just like the dinner she had made twelve years before. And for Thanksgiving dinner, two of SC's three adult children came. They apologized to her finally for what they had done to her twelve years ago. And they commented on how proud they were of her and how her life was getting better.

This is the curious thing about God's power. It comes quietly. It may come as you are doing things that are not spectacular in the world's eyes, but are revolutionary from God's perspective. Because chances are the way you will experience God's power the most is a place of pain that you don't want to go to. Some of you need resurrection power to rise up out of your inner pains and fears. You may have a quiet tomb where you keep past hurts, where you seal things off and stay very private. And sometimes you stay in that tomb, living your life out of a strategy that is actually killing you, and you're not able to come out of it by yourself.

For some of you, you need God's power to leave behind the tomb of an addiction. You may be addicted to alcohol, or success or the illusion of progress, or status, or pornography, or your parents' approval, or safety. You may be addicted to the stimulation of being needed by someone else. Here is God's power that will raise you out of that death. God enables you to say 'No!' to those things, and keep saying 'No.' His power is your escape out of the death in that tomb.

You might get stuck in a tomb of self-protection. For some of you who are new here, you need God's power to reach out because you're afraid of being hurt and disappointed. Let me tell you how this has affected me. Before I became a Christian, I had the tendency to sulk. One dictionary I looked at defined sulk as 'to be sullen and aloof; to be withdrawn in silent resentment or protest.' Spiritually speaking, sulking is the harboring of anger; it's sin. When Ming and I moved out here to Boston in August of 1999, I left some great guy friends in California. Some of them I had known for almost ten years. In January of 2000, we bought our house in Dorchester. A couple out here had offered us a couch. I needed to ask some other guys to help me move it from their house to ours. And there was a lot of other stuff that needed to get moved or get done. And I was looking forward to doing it because that's a total guy thing. It suddenly hit me that I didn't know who to call. I mean, there were guys I had met who would probably say yes, but back in California, I could have called guy friends who I KNEW would say, 'Sure, and not only that, it'd be great to just hang out with you in the meantime.' The loss of that kind of friendship hit me hard as a guy. At that moment, I felt incomplete. It was an emotional moment for me. Now at that time, I was tempted to sulk, to complain to Ming, to not make any more efforts at friendship out here, to regret moving to Boston. But I felt like God say, 'Mako, that's not who you are. You're closing yourself into a dying place, and people who come visit you there will also be affected negatively.' And His resurrection power came alive in me, quietly but truly alive, so that I would not be trapped in that tomb.

For some of you, you need God's power to welcome new people because you're tired of folk coming through Cambridge and then leaving in a year. You feel tired and drained. You need God's power just to be hospitable. You may need God's power not to get bitter about transition. God seems to be transitioning this church community. You need God's power to embrace that transition, whether it means the power to stay or the power to follow Him in a new direction. You need God's power to deal with the reality of Christian community, that it's a fragile thing. It's easy to be idealistic about Christian community – but get into the reality of it and you'll find yourself in need of God's power like never before!

The Power that Gave Us Our New Identity: 2:8 – 10

You know what the sad reality is? Sometimes we don't want God's power because we want to stay in a tomb of comfort, or bitterness, or an addiction. It's comfortable to wallow there. 'No thanks, God. It's dark and private in here, and I like it.' Sometimes we need God's power just to help us care about how our own sin affects other people. What would have happened if SC didn't care about how her granddaughter J felt? Or what would have happened if I didn't care how my self-pitying affected my wife? We care about how our sin affects us, but we don't always care about how our sin affects others!!! At times, we need power just to care about other people!! Sometimes when God offers us His power, we are too lazy to receive it!! If and when we get into that mode, we need to be reminded by this prayer, who we are and what our purpose is.

'For by grace you have been saved
through faith,
and that not of yourselves,
it is the gift of God,
not as a result of works,
that no one should boast.
For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus
for good works, which He prepared beforehand,
that we should walk in them.'

Who are we? We are God's new creation, His new workmanship, created new in Jesus. And what is our purpose? It's to let the life of Jesus pour out through us.

This is one of the best places to find a definition of the words 'grace' and 'saved.' I find that those words are used so freely by Christians that sometimes we forget what they actually mean. Just as God by His grace saved Israel out of Egypt, so God by His grace saved us out of sin. By God's power we have been wrenched out of, delivered from, rescued from our own sin. We have been moved out of our old identity, and given a new identity in Jesus. God catapults us by His grace into a new identity filled with a new purpose. You see, Paul does NOT say, 'For by mercy you have been forgiven, for God has found a way within Himself to ignore our sin while leaving us fundamentally the same miserable creatures we were before.' If that were the reality, then every time we'd try to grow, try to express the life of Jesus, then we would be trying to do something that we are not capable of. We'd be trying to be something we're not. We'd be faking it the whole time. Who would want to believe that?!? Grace does not just mean 'mercy.' Mercy is not getting the punishment you deserve. But grace is getting a great gift, in this case, of power, you don't deserve. In the context of Ephesians 2:8 – 10, and in the overall context of Ephesians 1:15 – 2:10, 'grace' means 'the gift of God's power.' And what does that gift do? It saves us. 'Saved' does not mean 'saved from hell, later.' It means 'saved from sin, in the now.'

So when the question comes of whether we (if we are truly Christians) are going to live by God's resurrection power or not, then we have to remember who we are in Jesus. I sound like Rafiki, in *The Lion King*, reminding Simba, 'You don't know who you are.' In fact, *The Lion King* is a great illustration of how our identity is important. Simba as a cub is wrestling with guilt from the past, so he runs away from home. He thinks that his past deeds have disqualified him from being King. But no. His father comes to him and says, 'Simba, you have forgotten who you are. You are the true King.' And because he understands who he is, he puts aside his fear. Likewise, we may be wrestling with our past, thinking that something we've done disqualified us from being a part of God's good future.

Right now, one live issue for me is that in a couple of months, I'm going to see some old high school friends at a wedding. The last time I saw some of them was at my wedding, seven years ago; and one thing I feel badly about was that, at my wedding rehearsal, I didn't honor them as much as I should have. I feel like I damaged some friendships, so I'm tempted to think, 'God, I don't have a role here anymore. I can't share Jesus with them, even though they need to know about him.' But no. Our Father speaks to me, and to us, saying, 'You have forgotten who you are. Why do you bring up your past now? Your past never qualified you to serve Me in the first place. So put aside your fear. Put aside your sin. That is not who you are.' Likewise, I want you to remember that you are God's workmanship, Kings and Queens in His Royal Family. You have a job to do, the good works that He's prepared for you.

God's power transformed us and gave us a new identity and a new purpose. God's power will help us live that out. God has unleashed His resurrection power in you to bring new life to you, and new life through you to others. This is the power you already have. Go. Live in it.