

## "A Prayer to Appropriately the Gospel"

Eph. 1:15-23

--CEFC 4/22/20; 6/30/13

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I want to begin with several stories with a similar point—

First, is the story of two brothers in New York City

who were sons of a famous doctor.

Both were bachelors, who were well educated

and lived on the luxurious family estate

left to them by their father.

But, because they lived as recluses,

over time they were forgotten.

In 1947 the police got an anonymous phone tip that someone had died in the mansion.

In answering the call, the police found two corpses in a house full of junk—

140 tons of garbage!

The brothers had been stockpiling the trash for years;

collecting everything,

throwing away nothing.

Though they were immensely wealthy, they had lived in a squalid dump./

The second story is about William Randolph Hearst,

the famous and extremely wealthy newspaper publisher

who read about several pieces of art he wanted to add to his collection.

<sup>1</sup> Attributed to John MacArthur as recounted by Brian G. Hedges, *Christ Formed in You*, p. 111.

He sent his agent all over the world looking for the items.

Months later, the agent returned and reported that the items had finally been found:

they were in one of Hearst's own warehouses!

He had purchased them years before./

The third story is about a poor man who went on a cruise.

He saved all that he could to buy a ticket,

but had no money left for food.

So, he took a suitcase full of peanut butter sandwiches.

But as he watched the porters carry trays of delicious, luxurious food,

he almost went crazy.

After several days he begged for a plate of food,

promising the porter to do anything to earn the meal.

The porter informed him that if he had a ticket,

he could eat as much as he wanted.

The food came with the cruise! /

Three stories with the same lesson—

sometimes what we want is already in our possession—

we just don't know it or don't appropriate it.

And that can be true of Christians, you know—

we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ,

but we can live as paupers,

ignorant of or not appropriating the great treasure that is ours in the gospel.

It's a sad state of affairs, but one that is far too common.

And it is that tragedy that Paul wants to prevent  
in this letter of encouragement and exhortation  
that he sends to the Christians of Ephesus.

The first half of the first chapter of this letter  
is full of blessing—  
as the Apostle blesses God for the abundant blessings of the gospel.

v. 3—"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
**who has blessed us in Christ**  
**with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms,"**

As those united to Christ  
he says, we are chosen—chosen by God to be his very own.  
We have a new story by which we understand who we are.

In Christ, we are forgiven--  
We have a new conscience washed clean.

In Christ, we are adopted a new family—  
in which God has become our Father.

In Christ, we are redeemed—  
purchased from our slavery to sin by the precious blood of Christ.  
We now have a new Master—under whom we enjoy real freedom.

In Christ, we are to be holy and blameless—which will bring glory to God.

Seeking this holiness gives us a new purpose in life—  
one that God himself will empower us to fulfill.

In Christ, we are now included in a new community---  
a loving community of grace and truth—  
the church of Jesus Christ.

And in Christ, we are sealed;  
we've been given a down payment of a new destiny—  
a destiny full of God's glory. /

Such are the blessings of every Christian believer through their union with Christ.

Now, in the second half of this first chapter  
Paul moves from benediction to intercession—

As John Stott puts it:

"First, [Paul] blesses God for having blessed us in Christ;  
then he prays that God will open our eyes  
to grasp the fullness of this blessing" (p. 51).

In other words, Paul wants us to appropriate the gospel—  
he wants us to experience all that is ours in Christ;  
and this is only possible through the work of the Spirit  
in our hearts and minds,  
which is why Paul's desire for us comes in the form of a prayer.

What God has begun in us, as those who have received the gospel,  
Paul prays will continue and ultimately come to completion in us

by that same gospel—  
the gospel of God's gracious work—  
planned by the Father,  
accomplished by the Son,  
and now applied to our lives by the Spirit.

So let's turn to this prayer in Eph. 1:15--

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1:15—"For this reason,  
ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus  
and your love for all the saints,  
I have not stopped giving thanks for you,  
remembering you in my prayers."

"For this reason"—

that is, because of all the rich blessings of the gospel that are theirs in Christ—  
their election, their justification, their adoption, their sanctification,  
and perhaps especially what is mentioned in the immediately preceding verse—  
the fact that they had been sealed by the promised Holy Spirit,  
as a deposit guaranteeing their glorious future—  
in the light of all this,  
Paul is led to pray unceasingly for these Christian brothers and sisters.

But that prayer first takes the form of thanksgiving—

for he recognizes that these Ephesian Christians  
have indeed already begun to enjoy these blessings—  
as evidenced by two realities displayed in their lives.

First, he thanks God for their **"faith in the Lord Jesus."**

Surely, this was a demonstration of the Spirit's work among them—  
they had forsaken the idols of their culture,  
they had turned from trusting in their own abilities to keep the law  
and to save themselves.

They had committed their lives to be followers of Christ—  
they understood him to be their Messiah—  
crucified for their sins and risen to give them new life.

They had put their faith in Jesus as their Lord—  
the one who alone can save them.

But this inward and very personal act of faith  
also had an outward and public consequence—  
they also demonstrated a **"love for all the saints—God's holy people."**  
They had been rescued from self-centeredness  
and been given a power to look beyond themselves  
and relate to others in love.

I'm sure it wasn't perfect—this **"love for all the saints"**--  
for why would he need to encourage them to pursue this love later in the letter.

But it was still real—  
real enough to assure Paul that that their faith was real  
and that they were in fact chosen by God  
as real recipients of his gracious blessings.

And when he heard about their faith and their love,  
his heart welled up in thanksgiving to God.

What a joy to see God's saving grace at work in the lives of people!/

And may I, as your pastor, say to you here this morning  
that I feel the same joy as I reflect on your faith in the Lord Jesus  
and your love for all the saints.

And even in these days of social isolation,  
I've seen people reaching out to others,  
checking in on each other,  
looking for any needs to be met,  
and giving to our benevolence fund to help those impacted by the shutdown.

Just the other day,  
after hearing about how some people were caring for others,  
Susan said to me, "This is a good church,"  
and my eyes welled up with tears.

This is one of my greatest joys as a pastor—  
to see your faith in the Lord Jesus,  
and especially as that faith is demonstrated in your love for one another.  
That's evidence of God at work among us.

I thank God often for you.

You have entered into the rich blessings of God in the gospel.

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But Paul goes on.

He immediately moves from thanksgiving to intercession.

And the heart of his prayer for these fellow believers is found in v. 17—

**"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the glorious Father,  
may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation,  
so that you may know him better."**

Here is Paul's deepest desire for his fellow believers:

He wants them, as those who have received the gospel,  
to grow in their knowledge of the God of the gospel—  
the glorious Father.

But he knows that this can only take place as the Spirit—

the Spirit of wisdom and revelation—

works in their hearts and opens their minds to the glory of God.

as he says in v. 18—

I keep asking **"that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened."**

V. 18 doesn't give us a new prayer, a second prayer, as the NIV translation suggests;

it is a continuation of the one prayer.

In fact, the whole of this paragraph in the Greek is just one long sentence

of 162 words,

with one phrase after another

flowing out of Paul's heart of love for these people.

All the many blessings of the gospel converge in this one great reality—

that we may know God.

Not just know *about* God—

the word here for "knowledge" (ejpignwvsi") means more than that—

it's a word that speaks of a full knowledge,

a personal knowledge,

an experiential knowledge.

It's the difference between knowing **about** the President of the United States

and actually knowing the man **personally**.

And that's a huge difference.

And because of the great disparity between us in status and position,

there's no way that I could just call up the President and invite him to lunch,

saying, "Mr. President,

I'd love to get together, just the two of us,

so I can get to know you better."

No, I can only get to know him

if he initiates the relationship

and he allows me that opportunity—

he must reveal himself to me.

How much more so with the King of the universe—

**"the glorious Father"** as Paul refers to him here.

I don't make him **my** friend,

he must make me **his** friend.

And in the gospel, he has!

In the gospel, he has made me his son./

It's true that God has revealed himself in an objective way  
in Jesus Christ.

God displays his character supremely  
through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

That revelation of God is out there for all to see.

But that objective revelation would be useless  
without the subjective work of the Spirit in our hearts.

You see, by nature we reject the knowledge of God—  
in our moral rebellion, we refuse to acknowledge him,  
and as a result,  
our foolish hearts are darkened (Rm. 1:21).

Apart from God's grace at work in us,  
the story of Jesus is just a story,  
with no more impact on our lives than the story of Hansel and Gretel.

That's why Paul must pray that the Spirit would reveal him to us—  
enlightening the eyes of our hearts,  
illuminating our dark minds.

The Spirit of God makes a difference—  
When the Spirit works,  
suddenly the words on the pages of the Bible come alive—  
The Spirit who inspired those words,  
now opens our hearts to receive them,  
And Jesus becomes a real person, a divine Person,  
through whom we encounter the living God.

It is the difference between knowing that honey is sweet  
and actually tasting it.

When the Spirit works,  
suddenly in our worship we get a sense that God is present among us—  
something of his glory touches our hearts—  
we are humbled and we are lifted up at the same time.

We are convicted of our sin,  
and we are convinced of God's loving grace.

When we sing,  
we taste something of the sweetness of his love.

It's an experience that's hard to put into words—this knowledge of God.  
Just like it's hard to put into words exactly what it means  
to get to know another human being—  
you just know it when it happens.

But this is the supreme blessing of the gospel—to know God.

Listen to J.I. Packer, in his superb book, *Knowing God*—

“What were we made for? To know God.

What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God.

What is the ‘eternal life’ that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. . . .

What is the best thing in life,  
bringing more joy, delight, and contentment,  
than anything else? Knowledge of God. . . .

“What makes life worth while is having a big enough objective,  
something which catches our imagination  
and lays hold of our allegiance;  
and this the Christian has, in a way that no other [person] has.  
For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be  
than to know God?” (p. 30).

To know God is to taste the sweetness of his love and to love him in return.

The Bible invites us to this taste test-

**“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!”** (Ps. 34:8).

To know God is to appreciate his fatherly care and protection

and to trust him.

**“If you, being evil know how to give good gifts to your children,  
how much more will your heavenly Father  
give good gifts to those who ask him.”**

To know God is to behold the beauty of holiness

and to desire to obey him.

Jesus says, **“Come, follow me”**—

That is both a command, and a glorious invitation.

This is what the gospel is all about—

this is why Christ died,

this is what we were created for—

to know God—

to know him as the glorious Father who loves us and cares for us

and who desires to make us more and more into his image in Christ.

And when Paul thinks about these people in Ephesus  
whom he has come to know and love,  
this is what he prays for—  
not that they would always be healthy and happy,  
not that they would prosper financially,  
not they would make the right decisions about what job to take  
or who to marry or where to live.  
not even that they would be free from persecution and hardship.

His highest prayer for these beloved brethren is that they would know God better.

Is that how you pray for those you love?

Is that how you pray for yourself? //

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By receiving the gospel, having put their faith in Christ,  
they have entered into this relationship;  
now Paul prays that they may grow in this relationship—  
that they grow in their knowledge of God.

And he mentions three things in particular  
that are involved in growing in our knowledge of God--

v. 18—"I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened  
in order that you may know  
[first] the hope to which he has called you"

The message of the gospel is a message of hope—

it is a message of hope

because it declares that God cares about us—

and that he has a purpose in our lives.

We not just floating out in some vast boundless sea

with no direction, no destination,

just trying to survive as best we can

as long as we can

as comfortably as we can.

That's ultimately hope-less.

No, we have a great hope grounded in the purposes of God.

He has called us, he has invited us, even summoned us.

We now have a divine vocation--

a calling to be a part of his eternal purpose for his creation—

his purpose to bring glory to himself

by redeeming a people who will display his image in his world.

And we display that image

when we engage in that part of his creation he entrusts to our care—

in our homes, in our work, in our neighborhoods, in our church—

we display his image when we reflect his character.

We are participants in God's grand plan to create a people for himself

who serve as royal priests in his creation,

which one day will become a new creation.

Being called by God for this grand purpose gives us hope,

because if it is God's purpose,

then it will be accomplished.

Nothing can stand in the way of its ultimate success—

you can be sure of it.

That's why Paul can say that

**"in all things God works for the good of those who love him,**

**who are called according to his purpose" (Rm. 8:28).**

Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened

in order that we may know the hope we have

in virtue of our being called by God.

We all need that work of the Spirit,

because there are times when life seem pretty hopeless—

a dead-end job,

a troubled marriage,

a ruptured family,

a financial crisis,

a global pandemic--

but none of that can thwart God's good purpose to which he has called us in Christ.

That's the hope of the gospel.

Do you appreciate that hope?

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Second, Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened

in order that we may know

**"the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. "**

Last week, we talked about our glorious inheritance from 1 Peter 1—

that **"inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade**

**kept in heaven for us."**

But here Paul actually speaks of **"his [that is, God's] glorious inheritance"**—

this inheritance belongs to God.

What is God's inheritance?

In the Old Testament the Lord often speaks of his inheritance

as his people Israel,

Here the that inheritance refers to us.

As followers of Christ, we are God's saints,

God's own holy people,

we are the ones he has set apart for himself—

we belong to him.

Paul prays that we may appreciate that fact.

We are God's treasured possession,

That's where our ultimate worth comes from.

We are precious to the God of the universe.

Paul prays that the Spirit would help us to see the richness, the glorious richness,

in knowing ourselves to be a part of this people of God—

God's own inheritance,

the people in whom God himself takes pleasure.

I need this in those times when I get down on myself—  
when I think I'm not what I want to be or ought to be—  
I look at other Christians and other pastors  
who seem so much more godly than me,  
more passionate than me,  
more spiritual than me--  
those times when I feel worthless.  
I need the Spirit's work to help me see that I am precious in God's sight.

Do you appreciate the riches of that position of being valuable,  
treasured, dearly loved by God?

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Finally, Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened  
in order that we may know  
God's "**incomparably great power for us who believe.**"

Our God is a powerful God,  
and we can't know him properly if we can't appreciate that power,  
for he will exercise that power "**for us**"—  
for our benefit.

But what is interesting here is the way Paul expounds this theme of God's power.

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What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the power of God?

I suspect you first think of the power of God in creation.

When one of my sons was ten years old,  
in one of those seemingly innumerable school projects,  
he had to write a report on one of the bodies in our solar system--  
He chose the sun.

He really enjoyed it.

He told me, "Dad, I'm glad I chose the sun--It's so powerful."

It is mind-boggling--

- at its core the sun burns at a temperature of 27 million degrees Fahrenheit.
- 4 million tons of mass are converted into energy every second.
- one sunspot emits enough energy in one hour  
to supply all the energy needs of the United States for a million years.

The apostle Paul may not have known as much about the sun  
as my ten-year-old son did,  
but in considering how to describe the overwhelming power of God  
he knew enough about the majesty of creation  
to use the sun and the moon and the stars as illustrations of that power  
if he had wanted to.

And it is true, all of creation bears testimony to the power of God.

But instead of using creation, what does Paul do?--

As the ultimate example of God's power

Paul points us to the resurrection of Jesus.

**"That incomparably great power of God toward us and for us**

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."

The raising of Jesus from the dead is the supreme demonstration  
of God's incomparably great power.

Why does Paul use the resurrection of Jesus?

Why is the resurrection so much more powerful than the creation of the sun?

It's because the raising of Jesus from the grave  
was more than just a physical miracle--  
it was more than just a manipulation of the forces of nature.

In the resurrection, God demonstrated his power  
over the far more powerful forces at work in the world--  
the forces of death and of evil.

We could harness all the power of the sun,  
we could unleash all the hidden power of the atom,  
we could travel close to the speed of light  
to the distant reaches of the universe,  
but we would still be powerless over these two areas--  
and we would still be without hope--  
for life would still end in death,  
and our world would still be plagued by evil.

But the gospel declares that God has overcome those powers--

And the power that did it, Paul says, is what God has for us.

This is the power God exerted when he raised Christ from the dead--

This is God's power over death--

The miracles of modern medicine have dramatically increased

the average lifespan,

but the simple truth is still the same--

the death rate remains at 100%.

It may be sooner or it may be later,

but in the words of the British economist John Maynard Keynes,

"In the long run we are all dead."

Death is a relentless enemy--stalking every one of us.

Those masks we wear can only help us so much.

But God exerted his power in raising Jesus from the grave--

Death didn't prevail.

Jesus wasn't just resuscitated, to live for a while, only to die again--

he was raised to a new kind of life--

never to die again.

He transcended death.

No rocket scientist could dream of that kind of power.

It is the power of the resurrection--and that is the basis of our hope.

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But there's more than just power over death--

there is also power over evil--

Paul says that when God raised him from the dead

he also "**seated him at his right hand above all rule and authority,**

**power and dominion**

**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."**

On the cross it appeared as if evil had triumphed--

Jesus the righteous One had been unjustly executed--

He was put in the grave--that was the end of that.

The devil and all his agents seemed victorious.

But that wasn't the end--

God's power overcame the power of evil and Christ was raised.

We don't often think of evil as a power--

But the Bible speaks of a power of evil that stands above and exists within

all the evil and unjust acts of men and of nations.

Evil is a power at work through institutions of society

and in the motivations of our own hearts.

It's a mysterious power deep within our own souls--

I remember when the president of American University, Richard Berendzen,

was fired for making a series of obscene telephone calls.

When asked why he did it, he said,

"I could understand a quasar 15 billion light years away,  
but I couldn't understand the boy that now was within the man."

That mysterious power of evil is great,

but there is a power that is greater still.

And that power has been demonstrated

in the resurrection of Christ.

This is a fallen world—

This world is in the grip of the evil one.

But the empty tomb of Jesus reminds us that

the wicked forces at work in this world will not win.

God will always have the last word--

his power is greater—greater than the evil in the world,  
greater than the evil of a deadly virus,  
greater even than the evil in our own hearts.

And Paul prays that we may know that power—

that "**incomparably great power for us who believe.**"

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Do you see what that means?

It means that though we still live in this world of evil and death,

and we still wrestle with our own sin

and we will still have to die,  
there is a power at work within us  
that will see us through to victory in Christ.  
The Spirit's power—that same Spirit who raised Jesus from the grave--  
that Spirit is at work even now imparting to us  
something of that resurrection life of Christ.

You see, the Christian life is a supernatural life—  
it must be.

There ought to be something inexplicable about us  
apart from the powerful work of the Spirit in us.

There ought to be displayed in our lives a quality of Christ-like love,  
and something of that beautiful spiritual fruit of joy, peace, patience,  
kindness, goodness, gentleness,  
faithfulness, and self-control  
that are evidences of a power beyond ourselves.

We ought to have a sense of God's presence and God's grace  
that goes beyond any natural explanation—  
Paul prays for that divine power to be at work in us to make that happen.

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As I close,

I want to bring us back to the central theme of Paul's prayer—  
the knowledge of God—  
that personal experience of the living God

as your Father in heaven.

We are in a strange situation right now—

this whole sheltering-at-home situation,

and I believe God wants to get our attention through it.

He wants us to consider what is certain in our lives,

what we can depend on,

what really matters—

and in the process, he wants to turn to him.

Some of you may not have ever put your hope in Christ,

you may have heard of his death and resurrection,

but you've never been drawn to it as God's saving work for you.

You've never responded to God's call in your life

to turn from yourself and turn to Jesus in faith.

But for you to know God, that's what you must do—

for that's who God is—

He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is no other God.

You can know him through his Son whom he has sent.

I urge you to put your trust Christ

and come to know God as your Father in heaven.

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Most of you, I'm sure, are already followers of Christ.

But you may still feel that the things Paul prays for here

are far from your experience,

and you long for them.

You want to know God better—

you want to experience more of his power in your life,

you want to live life on a higher plane.

Your heart is hungry for something more.

I know what that's like. /

But look at what Paul does here—

He doesn't say that you need some kind of "second blessing" experience.

You don't need to be "baptized by the Holy Spirit"

or to try to speak in tongues.

You don't need to go to some spiritual guru,

or some big, flashy conference,

that will give you some secret teaching that will elevate your soul.

There aren't six easy steps to spiritual success.

There is no new technique that will suddenly satisfy you.

No, Paul is simply saying here that all that we need

is what we already have.

Paul is simply praying that we may appropriate

the blessings that are already ours as recipients of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ.

We already have a wealth beyond our imagination at our disposal.

His prayer is that the Spirit may open the eyes of our hearts

so that we may experience those blessings—

so that we may grow in our knowledge of God.

How we need that Spirit of wisdom and revelation—  
whose revealed wisdom now comes to us  
especially in his written word in the Scriptures.

Paul is simply calling for what I would call  
a "gospel-centered" approach to the Christian life—  
all that we need is found in the gospel of Christ,  
and growth in the Christian life is simply a process, as John Owen would put it,  
of the **"implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls."**<sup>2</sup>

We just need to keep coming back to the wonderful message  
of God's love and grace in Christ—  
and the new life that he gives by the Spirit.

We need to keep praying for ourselves and for each other  
that that **"the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father,  
may give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation,  
so that we may know him better,  
and that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened  
in order that we may know the hope to which he has called us,  
the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,  
and his incomparably great power for us who believe."**

Don't be deceived—  
don't be misled;  
don't go looking all over for some key, some secret, some precious truth  
somewhere out there.

<sup>2</sup> cited in Brian G. Hedges, *Christ Formed in You*, p. 115.

It's already yours in Christ.

He and he alone can be our "all in all."

I pray that, by the gracious work of the Spirit, you may more and more see that to be true.

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Prayer

Closing Song: *Knowing You*

Benediction:

2Pet. 3:18

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

April 22, 2020

## **"A Prayer to Appropriately the Gospel"**

### **Eph. 1:15-23**

We've all heard stories of people who amass great wealth but who live lives of abject poverty. It is a sad disconnect, but it is one that is too often found among Christians. They have been "blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ," but they live as spiritual paupers. Paul doesn't want that to happen to these Ephesian believers, so his initial words of benediction (1:3-14) are immediately followed by passionate intercession (1:15-23). He prays that they, and us, may appropriately the glorious blessings of the gospel.

**I. As those who have received the gospel (vv. 15-16)—  
evidenced by . . .**

**A. faith in the Lord Jesus**

**B. love for all the saints**

**II. Grow in your knowledge of the God of the gospel—**

**By the work of the Spirit (v. 17)**

**enabling us to know:**

**A. our eternal hope (v. 18)**

**B. our glorious riches (v. 18)**

**C. our incomparable power (vv. 19-22)—**

**the power of the risen Christ**

**now manifest supremely in the Church (v. 22-23).**

### **Discussion Questions**

Eph. 1:15-23

- Why does Paul move from "benediction" to "intercession" in this chapter?
  
- Why is prayer critical if we are appropriate the blessings of the gospel?
  
- What does it mean for "the eyes of your heart to be enlightened"? Has this ever happened to you?
  
- What role does hope play in your life? What is the hope to which God has called you? How can this encourage you?
  
- What does it mean "to know God"? How can we know him?
  
- What difference does it make to you to know that you are a part of "God's inheritance"?
  
- Why does Paul use the resurrection and exaltation of Christ as the supreme example of the power of God for us?
  
- What power does the church have in the world?

