

## “With the Eyes of Your Heart Enlightened”

Ephesians 1.15-23

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This past Thursday was an important day in the Christian calendar. It was the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter, the day we remember Jesus Christ’s ascension into heaven – for the Book of Acts tells us that Jesus appeared to his disciples for 40 days following his resurrection, and then ascended into heaven. Luke tells us that momentous event happened in or near Bethany (Luke 24:50), on the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12); the precise location is not known. Early Christians would gather in secret in a cave on the Mount of Olives to commemorate Christ’s ascension. In the fourth century Christians built a church a little bit uphill from the cave. The center of that church was open to the sky. In later centuries the church was destroyed and rebuilt, twice. In the twelfth century the church fell into Muslim hands, and converted into a mosque. However, Christian pilgrims still came to visit the site, so in a gesture of goodwill the Muslim sultan ordered the construction of a separate building for Muslims to worship in, and permitted Christians to visit the original chapel. The Chapel of the Ascension remains to this day under Muslim control, though people from all faiths are allowed to visit the chapel and pray.

That is the point of it all, isn’t it, that Jesus is no longer here on earth, in bodily form, but that God raised him from the dead and – in Paul’s words – “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 age to come.” Ultimately, it doesn’t matter who controls what pieces of property or holy shrines in the Holy Land – or anywhere else, for that matter. For *Jesus reigns in heaven*, and there ain’t *nobody* on this earth who has any kind of rule or authority or power or dominion that can come *close* to rivaling his. *He’s in charge*. *God put him there*. *Nobody* can take him down!

So Ascension Day deserves a bit of attention every year. It’s a time for us to remember who’s in charge, who’s got the power, whose kingdom will *endure*, no matter what. A time to bow down, bend the knee, give our thanks and praise to the Son who sits at God’s right hand, and to our heavenly Father, who put him there. No matter what happens in this life, no matter what trials or sufferings may come our way, no matter what happens in the world, *Jesus will remain on that throne*. That’s good news!

What’s more, when Jesus left this earth to take up his seat in the heavenly realm, *he didn’t leave us all on our own*. He left us with two precious gifts. The first is the written testimony about him, the holy gospels and the writings of his apostles – the Word of God written, the holy scriptures. *The* most important book in the world. The second gift is equally precious: *the Holy Spirit*, the divine presence

that prompts us, nudges us, encourages us, challenges us, comforts us, *speaks to us* in all sorts of diverse circumstances, if our eyes are open, our ears are attentive, and our heart is ready. *We are not alone!*

It is this Holy Spirit that Paul is speaking of here in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus. Oh, he doesn't mention it, not explicitly. The Holy Spirit is often more subtle than that. But let's back up a bit.

"I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints." Paul is writing to a group of people who *are already Christians*. He is not trying to "win souls" for Jesus; he is not trying to evangelize the pagan world, not in this letter. He is writing to people who have *already placed their trust in Jesus Christ*, just like you and I have done. He's writing to people who show genuine Christian love towards their fellow believers, people who are already *living out their faith* – just like you and I are.

"For this reason," Paul says, "I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." Paul regularly offers to God his heartfelt gratitude for these faithful Christians, just as we do for one another. But Paul not only *give thanks* for these people ... he also *prays for* these people. Specifically: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him." A *holy* Spirit of wisdom and revelation. *The Holy Spirit*. Paul is praying that the Holy Spirit would *come upon* these Christians. Which begs the question – surely these Christians had already *received* the Holy Spirit? Already been *gifted* with the Spirit's power? For how else could they already have faith? How else could they do such good works?

See, the thing is, where the Holy Spirit is concerned, *we can keep receiving more*. Our journey as Christians doesn't stop once we have joined the church, once we have been placed on the church's membership roll. The Holy Spirit comes to us again, and again, and again, at different times and in various ways, *as we apply ourselves to the faith*, as we seek to grow in the ways of Jesus Christ ... with our eyes open, our ears attentive, and our heart ready. These were *good Christians* Paul was writing to in Ephesus ... and Paul's prayer is that they will *continue* to grow, *continue* to develop, *continue* to mature. That they might grow more and more *wise* in Christ; that more and more of Christ's will and God's mysteries would be *revealed* to them. For these Christians in Ephesus are "coming to know" God. They are works-in-progress. None of them know God *fully*. All of them are on a *journey* ... just like us.

For three of you in the sanctuary, today is a very special day: your graduation from high school. Each of you has been involved in this church in different ways, and at different phases of your life so far. Each of you is a valued, treasured part of this community of faith. And while we know this will not be the last time we see any of you, your paths are diverging, your future is unfolding, and we want to send you off today with our heartfelt love and best wishes. And, also, some words of advice and challenge!

You see, what Paul said to those Christians in Ephesus long ago, we can also say to you now. "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him." Do you already know him? Of course you do. But can you *keep coming to know him better*? Yes, absolutely. If that's *important* to you. If it's a *priority* for you. See, we can't *make* you develop a deeper relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We can *encourage* you. We can *pray* for you. But we can't do the work for you. That's something you will have to *own* for yourselves. There's not going to be anyone giving you any *homework* pertaining to your

ongoing spiritual development. You have to decide if it's something you *want*. Is an ever-deepening faith important to you? I hope and pray that it is. And if it is, then you will need to *make time* for it. Wherever you end up, you will need to *find* a Christian community to be a part of. You will need to be *intentional* about doing things that will nurture your faith. The pressures in this world are many; the temptations are strong; it's *so easy* to just "go with the flow" and do what most of your peers will be doing – which is basically *nothing*, at least as far as faith is concerned. The number of young adults who walk away from their faith is *very large*. Maybe they think they're too "smart" for it, too "sophisticated;" Christianity too "simplistic." They just don't know the depth of what Jesus has to offer.

Because what happens is that as *you* grow, as *you* get more experience in the "real world," as you get exposed to more and more things, *your faith needs to grow to match it*. There is a depth to Christianity that many adults are completely oblivious to. Paul alludes to it right here in Ephesians: "so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power." *Enlightenment! Hope! Calling! Riches! Glorious inheritance! Immeasurable greatness* of God's power! Paul doesn't give illustrations of those things right here – though there are *plenty* of illustrations elsewhere in the scriptures, and in the history of the church. Here, he just gives *hints* of the depth and the beauty that you will discover, *on your own*, through the power of the Holy Spirit, *if* you choose to keep developing in the faith, *if* your eyes are open, your ears attentive, and your heart ready.

The same is true for the rest of us, of course. We have choices *every single day* of what to do with our time and energy. How much of it goes towards developing our faith? How much is devoted to deepening our relationship with God? How important, *really*, is your faith? How important is our *Lord*?

I could tell you all sorts of stories of people who have made some poor choices. Some *very* poor choices, choices that hurt themselves, hurt their friends, hurt their families, wounded their *soul*. Decisions not made with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Impulses acted upon without thought. Temptations given into. Unhealthy habits that take over a person's life. I see a *lot* of tears, a *great deal* of regret. I could also tell you stories of relationships that have been mended, marriages that have been redeemed, addictions that have been broken, healings that have occurred for no rational reason other than faith and prayer. Sometimes, people choose to walk away from the faith, to stop following Jesus, to stop asking the Holy Spirit for wisdom. The truth is that sometimes the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us something that *we don't want to hear!* When we stop listening, things often don't turn out well. If we truly trust Jesus, we will listen to the Spirit's call, even when we don't *want* to. Other times, people go through life, sometimes wandering, sometimes straying, but somewhere along the way they heed the voice of the Holy Spirit, nudging them back to a better way of living. Those are often not easy journeys. Some mistakes that are hard (or impossible) to undo. But redemption is *always* available for those who seek it. My hope, my prayer for you, my young friends, is that you will *choose* to continue developing your faith. To *continue to come to know* our God and Jesus Christ. To *never stop growing* in the faith.

You'll be happier. *Your life will be richer*. More full. More satisfying. More *blessed*.

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