

THE CHRISTIAN IN THE WORLD

First in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *A Christian Looks at the World* from Ephesians 1:1-23
"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe." Ephesians 1:18-19

Vassilius Tzaferis is a Greek whose occupation is Biblical archeology. He tells of standing at Dan in northern Israel, staring down into a deep pit, thirteen feet by thirteen feet, that he and his team had carefully excavated. Below him he could discern the narrow bands of changing colors that marked each strata of human habitation on that spot dating back perhaps three thousand years. Here he was at the top, the top of a platform, if you will, that rested on the contributions of all those generations who had come before. *"I...realized how frivolously history deals with past eras and cultures,"* he mused. *"No matter how brilliant ancient eras and civilizations were, in the final stratigraphical counting, each of them is represented by only a thin layer of debris and ashes."* (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/August 2006, 22)

I had a similar experience at Ephesus in October 2003. The apostle Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians by addressing it in the first verse *"to the saints who are at Ephesus."* I stood on the great mound of the temple where once the emperor Domitian was worshiped as God, looking over the excavated ruins, and I thought about them. First century Ephesus had street lights. They had sewers and running water they piped in from 25 miles away. Ephesus had a world class library with 20,000 volumes, and a theater that seated 25,000 people and had acoustics that still are among the best in the world. Ray Charles did a concert there once, and a symphony orchestra performs there from time to time. Ephesus was a major seaport and a center of world trade. It also was the base of a world-wide religion and boasted one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—the temple of Ephesian Artemis, or Diana. The people who lived there were not crude barbarians but extremely sophisticated people, the equal of the best educated and most cultured people in the world today. The city is gone now. All of their great accomplishments are now pressed into one of those thin layers of debris. When Paul wrote to the Christians there he says they were *"faithful in Christ Jesus."*

What does it mean to be faithful in Christ Jesus? You and I live in our own time. We are preoccupied with the present. To us it seems as if all of life revolves around us. On my way here today I saw a giant earth-moving machine hard at work preparing a building site. I saw a woman jogging in an effort to stay fit. We're concerned about our marriages and about our children. We're consumed by matters of education or finances or health or our plans to get ahead. And yet the reality is that one day—and that day is not all that far in the future--the sands of time will drift over us and we too, like all who have preceded us, will slip into one of those thin layers of human debris, and some future archeologist will uncover our time and then quickly dig down to the next layer below us and then to the one below that. So, I ask again, what does it mean to be faithful in Christ Jesus while we live?

Turn with me to the book of Ephesians, to the first chapter, where the apostle helps us to see with perspective. Today I want to focus particularly on verses 15-21. The apostle is praying for the Christians of first century, and by extension, for us as well. It is actually four prayers. He prays that we might, **1. Know God instead of living in darkness, 2. Serve instead of being served, 3. Prevail in hope instead of yielding to despair, and 4. change the world instead of surrendering to it.**

1. Paul prays for us that we would know God instead of living in darkness. He prays in verse 17, *“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.”* The “Him” that he hopes we will know is Jesus. Notice how we come to know Christ. It is not knowledge we gain by reading or study or by attending church. That is, it isn’t the product of our own search or our own effort. You can know everything about Christ but still live in darkness. I had a conversation with a friend a few days ago that somehow turned to the subject of Pee Wee Gaskins. Some of you will remember Pee Wee Gaskins. Gaskins was one of the first people who attracted my attention shortly after Barb and I moved to Irmo. He caused me to wonder what kind of place I’d come to! Pee Wee Gaskins was on death row over in the state prison on Broad River Road. He had murdered a fellow inmate by exploding a bomb he’d constructed inside a transistor radio. For this he had been sentenced to death. But Gaskins kept delaying his execution by slowly revealing, one by one, where he’d buried the bodies in a series of unsolved murders he’d committed over many years. The thing that was so frightening about Pee Wee Gaskins was that he knew the gospel as well as you or I. He could and did quote the Bible extensively. But Gaskins was no Christian. His soul was so cold and dark that it chilled me just to read the accounts they printed in each day’s newspaper.

Notice that Paul prays that *“God may give you”* the knowledge of Christ. In other words, we can know Christ only if God’s Holy Spirit opens our hearts. Look at verse 4. Paul says, *“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.”* In other words, God had a plan for you and me, a plan he made long before you or I were ever born. He intended to pluck us out of darkness so that *“we should be holy and blameless before Him.”* In other words, God planned to grant you forgiveness for your sins. How was he going to accomplish that? Look at verse 7. *“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.”* He sent Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, to redeem us. To redeem something means you pay for it. It’s owned by someone else. It has a price tag on it. Jesus came to pay the price that held you fast in darkness and judgment because of your sin. What was the price? Life itself. Jesus gave up his life for sinners like you and me when he died on the cross. Notice that our salvation was accomplished by God’s grace. In other words, it does not happen on account of anything you do, or because you make an effort to fix up your life, or because you become religious, or because you pray a prayer. Your salvation comes entirely as a gift of God which a person may receive through repentance and faith, by turning from sin and trusting in Christ.

When Paul says in verse 17 that he prays that God will give us *“a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him,”* he is praying that God will enable us

to really understand what the gospel is all about. That it is Christ alone who saves us. When we grasp this, God gives us the ability to turn to Christ to save us. When you receive salvation, it changes everything. Friday evening on the ABC News broadcast, the network featured a story about what has happened at the Louisiana State Prison at Angola. Ninety percent of the inmates there are serving life sentences. But ten years ago Christians went into the prison and began to train a few prisoners who were Christians how to be ministers of the gospel. The transformation has been amazing. One of those Christian leaders in the prison, Donald Bierman, said that before he became a Christian, he and the other prisoners lived by their own rules. "This place was evil," he said. But in ten years the amount of violence has fallen fifty percent. There are six churches inside the prison and a Christian radio station. Dr. Osterlund has been planning to do a similar thing through Columbia International University in the prison where Pee Wee Gaskins died, five miles away from us. Please pray that everything will come together so that program can get started this Fall. God changes prisons by changing the prisoner. If today you are held in a prison of sin and darkness, God can change you and set you free to know him. I call you now to come to Christ. If you'd like help, use the tear-off in today's program and I or one of our elders will be glad to talk with you so that by the grace of God, your life may be changed, and you may know God.

2. Paul prays that we may *serve instead of being served*. In verse 18 he says, "*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling.*" You become a Christian. Now what happens? Many believers don't know. They come to church regularly to worship. They may become involved in a group that is studying the Bible. Perhaps in their private lives they start to pray. Maybe they listen to Christian music on their CD player or on the radio. Some Christians never deviate from that pattern their entire lives. A Christian lady I once knew said, they "sit, soak, and sour." The apostle says we have a calling. So, what's our calling? Perhaps, you say, it's missions. Christians are supposed to be involved in missions. We're supposed to preach the gospel all over the world. Or, you say, it's evangelism. We're supposed to tell our neighbors about Jesus. We are commanded by Christ to do both of those things, but how many of us are actively involved in missions or evangelism? You say, this Summer, more than ten percent of Cornerstone's worshiping congregation is going on Summer missions trips. OK, what about the other ninety percent of us? You say, we've given our money. We pray for them. That's good, but when Paul talks about our calling, he has something else in mind.

Let me illustrate. A few days ago I received an e-mail from my friend Glenn Stanton. Many of you will remember Glenn. He now is director of social research and cultural affairs for Focus on the Family. He sent me a preview copy of an article he has written for *Christianity Today*. In it he tells the story of a friend of his named Anita, who understands something of Christ's calling. Many years ago Anita's son, Tony, announced to her that he was a homosexual. As a Christian mother, she was devastated and attempted to "talk" her son straight. But it didn't work. Some years later she got an evening job waitressing in a restaurant. Her boss said to her, "Are you aware that this restaurant is a hangout for the homosexual community?" Anita felt God had led her to the job, so she stuck it out, and grew to love some of the men who frequented the place.

Some time after that, Tony, now a young adult, moved in with his partner, Rick, an older man. Rick delighted in shocking and embarrassing Anita's Christian sensibilities. It was hard to take. Then it got worse. Tony told Anita Rick had infected him with AIDS. She wrestled with hatred and anger, but Anita remembered what she had learned at the restaurant, and recalling Paul's words, she explains, "Rick was not the enemy. He was another lost soul created in the image of God, just like my son." So Anita committed herself to loving and caring for the man who had given her son a death sentence. In Rick's last weeks and months, Anita cleaned him, tracked his medication, changed his diapers, and spent time talking and being with him. Rick came to love Anita. Glenn concludes his story in these words: "*Rick is gone, and Tony is still alive. But they both witnessed the remarkable, incarnated grace of Christ through Anita.*" (*The Conservative Humanist*) The point is that Jesus calls us to represent him in this world. We're to serve others in his name so that they are able to see Jesus and may, just may, by the grace of God, "*receive a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him*" (v 17) Your calling is to let others see Jesus in you by serving instead of being served.

3. Paul prays that we may prevail in hope instead of yielding to despair. This world is full of sorrow. The archeologist I mentioned to you as I began this morning, Vassilius Tzaferis, tells of another excavation he made early in his career. In 1969 he uncovered the tomb of a Jewish family in Jerusalem dating from the first century AD. The thing that impressed him was how miserable they all were. Some of them had died of starvation. Many of them had died violently. One of them named Yehohannan, according to the name scratched on the ossuary, had been crucified. It hasn't changed much for most people around the world. And not even for us. In the past few days I have tried to encourage a number of you who are bearing illness. I have dealt with the effects of people's sins, and the crushing unfairness that sinners have inflicted on others. I have listened as some have poured out bitter disappointments. Others are discouraged. And there is death. Death is never far away, and people grieve.

I want you to look again at verse 18. Notice that Paul prays that we might have hope. *I pray that...you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.*" Unlike other people in the world, we have hope because we anticipate an inheritance. Paul stresses this idea of an inheritance. In verse 11 he says, "*We have obtained an inheritance.*" In verse 14 he says the Holy Spirit is given to us "*as a pledge of our inheritance.*" What is the Christian's inheritance? In verse 12 he says it's that we "*should be to the praise of His glory.*" In verse 14 he says it is "*the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*" Let me express it like this. Do you ever wonder if it's all worth it? Are you discouraged because things haven't turned out the way you'd hoped when you were younger? Maybe your marriage has not produced the kind of love you expected it would on your wedding day. Maybe your kids haven't turned out the way you wanted them to. Maybe the dreams you had a few years ago have been left half built. Maybe you've fallen into sin and you feel like you've blown your life. But our inheritance is that God is going to take you and your life as it is and turn it around. Not here, not in this world. In heaven. And in some incomprehensible way he's going to take what you've done—he's going to take you—

and he's going to shine you up and polish you to perfection and put you in his trophy cabinet and he's going to be very, very proud of you. And forever you will bring him glory. I don't know how he's going to do it, but he's going to make something out of you that will shine for eternity. Don't despair. Keep on in hope.

4. Paul prays that we may **change the world instead of surrendering to it**. In verse 19 Paul says, I pray that you may know "*what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.*" God doesn't seem very powerful sometimes. On the temple mount in Jerusalem the Dome of the Rock dominates the skyline. It has been there since about 700 AD as a physical emblem of the dominance of Islam. It sits right on top of the spot where God's temple once stood. There are two inscriptions on copper plates over the eastern and southern entrances to the shrine. One says, "*The Unity of God and the Prophecy of Muhammad are true.*" The other says, "*The Sonship of Jesus and the Trinity are False.*" The primary enemy of Islam since the religion was founded in the 600s AD has been the Lord Jesus Christ and those who are his followers. We have national leaders who look at the present war against Islamic fascism in which America is engaged and urge us to retreat. Even when the terrorist al Zarqawi was killed in Iraq last week by United States bombs, those voices quailed at the thought that there will be fifty terrorist leaders to replace him. Such evil cannot be defeated, they cry!

And at the same time, within our country, we are confronted for the first time in human history, with a demand that we redefine marriage by legalizing a marriage union between two men or two women. Make no mistake, the consequence of same-sex marriage will be the death of freedom for you or your children, and an assault on Christianity like no other in the history of this land. When this evil was opposed last week in the United States Senate, there were those who accused the defenders of righteousness of "injecting bigotry into the Constitution." I am not talking about politics here. I am talking about the forces that are arrayed against Christ and his people. Sometimes it seems like they are overwhelming, that truth and righteousness can never win. But God has called us to change the world, not surrender to it.

Why should we do that? Because in the end Christ is going to win. His victory is based upon the power of God. How great is God's power? In verse 20 Paul says it was demonstrated when he raised Christ from the dead "*and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places.*" In verse 21 he says Christ reigns over every earthly power and will continue to do so "*not only in this age, but also in the age to come.*" Don't give up. Don't yield. Take the salvation God has given you, which you have received by faith in Jesus, and serve faithfully in his name. Don't yield to despair even though this life is hard and we are so feeble. Change the world, don't surrender to it. The triumph is ours forever through our Lord and King, Jesus Christ. Clasp the hands of your children and lead them on into the future! For God will certainly answer the prayers of his apostle!