

“How Your Future Shapes the Present”

Ephesians 1:15-23

September 21, 2003

Dr. Jerry Nelson

M. Scot Peck, author of The Road Less Traveled begins that book summarizing the human experience with these three words, “Life is difficult.”

Everyone hearing my voice has experienced discouragement.

“Jolted, jilted, hammered in a car crash and robbed, Lawrence Hanratty was named Friday as the unluckiest man in New York.

Nearly electrocuted in a construction site accident in 1984 that put him in a coma for weeks, Hanratty lost the lawyers fighting for his liability claim – one was disbarred and two died – and his wife ran off with her lawyer.

Hanratty, who spent years fighting heart and liver disease, had his car wrecked in a crash last year. When police left the scene of the accident, he was held up and robbed.

I say to myself, “How much more am I going to be tested in life to see how much I can endure?” Hanratty told the New York Daily News in a description of more than 10 years of agony.

As if he hasn’t tolerated enough hardship, 38-year-old Hanratty of Mt. Vernon, NY, said an insurance company now wants to cut off his worker’s compensation benefits and his landlord has threatened to kick him out of his apartment.

Depressed and suffering from the fear of open spaces, Hanratty uses a canister of oxygen and takes 42 pills a day for his heart and liver ailment.

(from “Luck Rivals Worst of Sick Jokes...” Los Angeles Times, 19March, 1995, A28 In David Jeremiah’s A Bend in the Road p31)

Some of you know what Hanratty feels.

But even if your experiences have not been as dramatic as his, you know what discouragement feels like.

And we Christians are not exempt from temptation to discouragement.

In fact some of us become easily discouraged.

We get sick, a loved one gets sick, we lose our job, we have unexpected bills, we don't get into the school we wanted, we don't get the job we expected, and we get discouraged.

And we begin to lie to ourselves about life, about God and about our future.

We conclude that bad luck is our lot, that God won't or can't intervene and that our future probably looks like the past.

In that discouragement our faith begins to teeter as if to fall.

How much or how little do you experience before you begin to doubt the reality of God, his love for you, and the certainty of your future?

For many of us, our faith is tenuous, weak, and flimsy.

And we begin to live, just waiting for life to get over – no real hope, at least no hope that energizes us.

But discouragement is not the only malady we face.

Another disease may afflict us, which is not discouragement but dullness.

And I'm not describing a personality, I'm describing a perspective on life.

Let me describe "dullness" this way:

Acedia is an old English word rooted in Greek, which means "without care".

The word has sometimes been translated as "sloth" but acedia is not just laziness.

R.R. Reno in the August/September issue of "First Things" describes it as a dullness, sterility, dryness or barrenness of the soul that makes the reading of God's word seem tasteless and turns prayers into hollow exercises.

Citing Medieval English writers, he describes it further as "a waning of confidence in the (usefulness) and importance of prayer."

It saps motivation and leaves the soul stagnant.

It leaves us in a state of spiritual sadness “that drains us of our Christian hope.” (R.R. Reno “Fighting the Noonday Devil” in First Things August/September, 2003, p31-36)

Mike Yaconelli in his book, Dangerous Wonder, writes, “The most critical issue facing Christians is not abortion, pornography, the disintegration of the family, moral absolutes, MTV, drugs, racism, sexuality or school prayer. The critical issue today is dullness. We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer good news, it’s okay news. Christianity is no longer life-CHANGING, it is (maybe) life-enhancing. (We act as if) Jesus doesn’t change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore; He just changes them into “nice people.” (Yaconelli, Dangerous Wonder, 23)

Reno, whom I mentioned earlier, goes on to describe too many of us: “Most of us just want to be left alone so that we can get on with our lives. Most of us just want to be safe. We want to find a cocoon, a spiritually, psychologically, economically, and physically gated community in which to live without danger and disturbance. The care-free life, a life “a-cedia” is our cultural ideal. (We are) characterized by a belief that moral responsibility, spiritual effort, and religious discipline are empty burdens, ineffective and archaic demands that cannot lead us forward. (Believing they are) inaccessible ideals, that, even if we believe them, are beyond our capacity.” (R.R. Reno “Fighting the Noonday Devil” in First Things August/September, 2003, p31-36)

How did we arrive at this emotional and spiritual dullness?

Frederick Buechner writes, We “listen to the great blaring, boring, banal voice of our mass culture, which threatens to deafen us all by blasting forth that the only thing that really matters (is) your work (and) how much it will get you in the way of salary and status, and that if it is gladness you are after, you can save that for weekends.” (Frederick Buechner, The Hungering Dark, 29)

And again from Yaconelli, “Most of us act as if it more important to make a living than to live. Financial security is much more valued than the insecurity of following Christ. Most people would tell us that money, not poverty, matters. Even in the church, well-meaning Christians would advise fellow Christians to seek financial security. Seek Christ yes, but don’t be foolhardy, don’t be silly, don’t be

childish. Find a good job. You can serve God and still work for a standard of living that reflects the economic realities of today.” (Yaconelli, Dangerous Wonder, 28)

We are so easily distracted from the great truths of the Gospel that we first heard and believed.

And with the culture blaring in our ears we slowly give ourselves to other things, losing sight of the gospel that life and the future are in our relationship with Jesus.

How did we lose sight of the good news?

When did we drift away?

When did our love for Jesus, our commitment to the kingdom, a confidence in God’s provision, and a certainty of the future that enabled us to face anything in the present become little more than words we say on Sunday?

If you have ever known anything of a real relationship with Jesus in the past, you didn’t intend to get into this state, this condition, of discouragement or dullness.

George Buttrick uses a good illustration.

“A cow is nibbling on a tuft of grass in the middle of a field, moving from one tuft to the next, before you know it she ends up at some grass next to the fence. Noticing a nice clump of green on the other side of the fence, the cow stumbles through an old tear in the fence and finds herself outside on the road. “Cows don’t intend to get lost,” the farmer explains, “they just nibble their way to lostness!” (From The Interpreter’s Bible vol 8, ed by George Buttrick Nashville, Abingdon, 1952, p265 in Mike Yaconelli Dangerous Wonder p15)

We didn’t intend to wander into discouragement or dullness, we just kept responding little by little to our circumstances the same way the world around us does.

We were listening and believing the culture around us more than the Spirit within us.

The Apostle Paul knew what kind of world the Ephesian Christians were living in.

He knew that they needed to maintain a very clear perspective on life and eternity or they would fall prey to all kinds of half-truths and lies about life and end up in what John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress* called either the "slough of despond" or in "vanity fair".

For this reason, as I mentioned last week as we began thinking about the book of Ephesians, Paul begins his letter to them with a resounding affirmation of the great truths of the Gospel.

And in so doing, he lays out a Christian world-view – a way of seeing life and eternity the way God does.

In an emotionally charged 202 word sentence, in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul praises God for choosing, adopting, redeeming, forgiving, and promising them a future – and then giving his Holy Spirit to live in them to guarantee the relationship and the future.

The worldview that Paul expresses in 3-14 is now applied to the Ephesian Christians themselves in verses 15-23.

Paul wants them to have complete confidence in their God – God who is theirs by his grace and power.

Paul wants them to know and believe what they have in Christ so that it will form the very basis of their lives.

Ephesians 1:15-23

"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 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. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ 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.

²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be

head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

When Paul begins this section with the words, “For this reason” he is referring as I said to everything he has written thus far.

He wants the great spiritual truths he laid out in the first 14 verses to become so relevant and so powerful in their thinking that they completely determine the way they live.

And for that to happen, Paul knows God will have to do something. To counteract the discouragement and dullness to which we are so easily tempted, it will take a supernatural work of God.

And so Paul prays.

Ephesians 1:16-17 “I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking God...”

What Paul is about to pray for those Ephesian Christians is exactly what you and I need today.

And so I want us to see what Paul prays and I want us to be so convinced of what he prays that we will pray this prayer for ourselves and for others, not just once but continually.

In verses 17 and 18 Paul begins the description of his prayer for them.

Ephesians 1:17-18 “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. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened...”

In two different ways he expresses his need for God to act.

That God “may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” and “I pray that they eyes of your heart may be enlightened...”

Wisdom and understanding of the truth about life and eternity, of a biblical world-view, are gained by having the eyes of our heart enlightened.

- We live in a world that continually tells us that this life is all there is.
- We live in a culture that ridicules a belief in a God that has any real relevance.
- We live in a society that offers nothing but getting all you can get, while you can get it, because when it's over, it's over.

And apart from God revealing his perspective on life and eternity, we would be hopelessly limited to only what our senses and the world around us tell us.

And so Paul prays that the Spirit, the Holy Spirit would enlighten the eyes of our hearts and give us wisdom and revelation of the truth about life and eternity.

This work of the Spirit is consistent with what Paul told the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 2:10-12 "God has revealed (the good news) to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us."

I need God, everyday, to convince me of the truth of the Gospel, of forgiveness, of adoption into his family, of his presence in my life, of the future that is mine by his power and grace.

Paul said to the Galatians, Galatians 1:6 "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you..."

And to the Romans, Romans 12:2 (Phillips) "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold..."

The world speaks so loudly of other "truths" that we are easily and too quickly convinced of "greater" realities than those of God.

When we stop allowing the Spirit to speak into our lives we cut off our supply of fresh air.

E.W. Bullinger said it this way:

“Instead of breathing this life-giving air of heaven, their windows are closed, and their doors are shut, and they are asphyxiated with their own exhalation. They are breathing over and over again their own breath, from which all vitality is gone.”

E.W. Bullinger, Selected Writings London: The Lamp Press 1960 p227 found in Hughes Ephesians, 52

Our faith will wane if we don't allow the Holy Spirit to continually reaffirm the truth of what life and eternity are all about.

That's why we pray, that's why we read the Bible, and that's why we spend time with God's people talking about what it means to trust God.

But what is it that Paul wants the Holy Spirit of God to convince us of?

I. Ephesians 1:18-19 "... that you may know the hope to which he has called you..."

You can walk through any tunnel if you can see light at the end of it.

God has never promised any of us health and wealth and ease in this life.

He has instead promised us difficulties, hardship, and even suffering.

But he has also promised us himself on the journey and he has promised us that it will be worth it.

1 John 3:2 "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

If you say this is just "pie in the sky, bye and bye."

I say to you, you are partly right!

And I thank God for that future that he has promised.

You can be as optimistic about this life as you want to be, and I will join you in delighting in every good gift that God gives, but in the end everything dies.

And if it were not for the hope that God promises for those who are his, despair would be the only logical response.

About the best perspective on life and death that an unbeliever can give is the following: “I was not, I was, I am not, I don’t care.”

A friend of mine wrote, “The elderly read the obituaries first, (when they pick up a newspaper). The young have lost a sense of hope of making a difference or of being successful and their music shows it. Middle-aged people are bored... We have a sense that we cannot solve our problems – either individually or socially. This loss of hope for the present is based on a loss of hope for the future (Snodgrass, 82)

But Paul writes, I want you to “know the hope to which he has called you.”

This hope is not feeble optimism; it is a strong certainty.

I want you to know with confidence that you have been called by God into a relationship with Him, he is actively ensuring that you will remain his, and that in the end you will be with him forever.

This hope rests on Christ’s cross-work, his death and resurrection for us.

Romans 8:32 “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things.”

Paul prays that the Holy Spirit of God would give the Ephesians a strong confidence in the future God has called them to.

No, we don’t know all that the journey will entail, and we don’t know in detail what that future with God will hold, but we know we will be with him and we know it will be worth it.

II. Following on that same thought of “it being worth it”, Paul says that he prays, secondly, that they may know, Ephesians 1:18 “The riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”

This is a complicated phrase in English and even more so in the language in which it was written.

In context it seems best to understand that Paul is saying he not only wants us to be certain of a future with God (“to know the hope to which we have been called) , but he also wants us to know that that hope, that future is more marvelous than we could possibly imagine.

On another occasion Paul said it this way, Romans 8:18 “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

The Bible carefully declares that Jesus is coming again and when he does

- this present physical universe will be totally changed – a new earth will emerge
- and we who belong to God will be resurrected or changed in a flash to have new physical bodies in which to live for eternity on the new earth with God himself.

If that is true, that ought to color everything we think and do in this present life.

Oh, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

III. And lastly Paul prays that we may know, Ephesians 1:19 “his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

How can you be so certain of the great future that God promises?

Paul says it is because God’s incomparable great power is behind his promise.

And what kind of power is that?

Ephesians 1:19-21 “That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ 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.”

It is power to raise the dead.

Have you seen death? Dead is dead!

The Bible says that God broke through the stronghold of death and raised Jesus from the dead.

And not only was Jesus raised from the dead but God placed Jesus in the seat of supreme authority over every other power that ever has or ever will exist.

That's the power that guarantees our future.

That's the Jesus who died but rose again and personally guarantees our relationship with God.

Romans 8:35-39 "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That is what Paul wanted those Ephesian Christians to know and it is what God wants us to know.

Not just know about but also believe with confidence, with confidence in him.

That's how we fight discouragement.

That's how we fight dullness.

The more that discouragement and dullness tempt us, the more we must enter into Paul's prayer.

The more we hear of the world's lies about what is important in life and eternity, the more we desperately need the Holy Spirit to remind us and convince us of the truth about life and eternity.

We must pray, we must listen to God in his word, we must feed our souls at the Lord's Table, and we must meet together to encourage one another in faith and life.

And we must continually depend upon the Spirit of God to enlighten the eyes of our hearts to know the hope to which he has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Spirit of God, convince us today!

And what does being convinced look like?

It looks like Larry Graber whose wife is in an Alzheimer's unit instead of enjoying life, travel and grandchildren.

Is Larry disappointed? Of course.

Is Larry bitter? No.

In spite of all the good things he and Anita have enjoyed and could be enjoying right now, Larry knows the best is yet to be.

It looks like Mr. Nancel of our church, whose wife of over 50 years has died.

Loss? Unimaginable!

Despair? No – He continues to love Jesus and his people and is with us every Sunday and if you talk to him he will tell you how beautiful the day is and how good Jesus is.

Just a positive personality?

Oh he has that alright but much more importantly, he knows the hope of his calling, the riches of the inheritance of the saints and the incomparably great power of God for us who believe.

It looks like John and Sharon Boyer who lived through the open-heart surgery of their three-year-old son, the childhood onset of diabetes in their now teenage son, and a two-year battle with cancer for Sharon.

Discouraged? Yes, at times.

Drop out? No – They know whom they have believed and are convinced that he is able to keep what they have committed to him until the day Jesus comes again.

It looks like Bob Knapp who twenty years ago turned down a very lucrative and prestigious offer in his company because he knew it would detract from his family and his ability to serve the Lord.

Has he regretted it?

Not a minute because he believes in spiritual realities he can't see more than things he can see.

It looks like the Loseys, Newcombs, Engles, Sprengers, and many others of our church who have given up career, extended family, and the convenience and comfort of home to serve a life-time in distant places that are often hard if not dangerous.

Why? Because they know the hope to which God has called them and they want others to know that same hope.

How about you?

Do you know, are you convinced, do you have confidence in the hope to which you have been called?

Does that truth shape your life?

- If the claims of Ephesians 1 are true truths, if Jesus is the ultimate reality,
- If there is a hell to shun and a heaven to gain,
- If we truly need a refocusing often,
- If there is a God who hears our prayers and is moved by them, then let's pray for each other the way Paul did.

What I am asking you to do next could seem contrived but it doesn't have to be. You can enter into it with your whole heart.

Under the seats at the left ends of the rows are sheets of paper on which I have written a paraphrase of the prayer of Ephesians 1.

I want you to form groups of three or four and I want someone in the group to volunteer to read the prayer aloud AND I want you to make it your prayer for yourself and everyone else in the group.

Father in heaven,

I ask you, the true God revealed to us by Jesus, the Father-God who has made himself known to us, that by your Spirit you may give us true spiritual insight into who you are and who we are.

I pray that in doing so you will open our hearts to know with certainty the future that is ours in Christ – the future to which you have called us and for which you have saved us.

I want you to impress on us who belong to you, that the future is full and good and much more than we can possibly imagine.

And I want you, God, to convince us that your power - power beyond comparison and description, the power that raised Jesus from the dead - is the power guaranteeing the future to us who trust in Jesus.

And I want you, God, to convince us that trusting in Jesus is the most sensible and practical trust we can possibly have because of who Jesus is – He is Lord. He is Lord over all other powers, Lord over time and eternity and Lord over us his church, now and forever.

God please enlighten us and convince us so that we may live out our informed conviction in relationship with you, with each other and others. Amen. (paraphrased from Ephesians 1:15-23 by GLN)