

A Prayer for the Church

Ephesians 1:15-19

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

May 16, 2021

The lectionary epistle for today is Ephesians 1:15-19. We will read that passage in a moment, but first a few words about the text. As you will hear, it begins with the author saying to the recipients of the letter, *“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints.”*

Why would Paul, traditionally the author, say that he has “heard of” their faith in Jesus and their love for the saints? According to the book of Acts, Paul lived in Ephesus for three years. He was welcomed into the local synagogue and taught there for three months. Then he taught in a private home for two years. He supported himself with a job, though we aren’t told doing what. He stayed in Ephesus long enough to start a riot, which got two of his companions dragged off by a mob. Surely, Paul didn’t have to “hear of” their faith and their love for the saints. He must have known about it first-hand.

That puzzle plus other considerations more technical in nature have led many scholars to conclude that this letter was not written to a single congregation in Ephesus or elsewhere. Rather, it was, like the epistle of James, a general letter to be circulated among several congregations in a given area.

That it was intended to address issues shared by various congregations and not specific concerns of a single church gives the letter a more universal appeal. Indeed, the prayer the author offered for those first century churches could well be offered for churches in America today.

Here is that prayer.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us who believe, according to the working of God’s great power.

There is much to think about in that prayer, but time prevents us from dealing with the entire prayer adequately. I will just flag a couple of petitions and expand on a third.

The author prayed that God *“may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God.”*

The letter to the Ephesians is dated sometime in the last third of the first century. That is significant, because in the earlier years the church was in frequent conflict with leaders of Jewish communities. But in the 60s the church began to run afoul of the Roman Empire. In 62, for example, Nero, in order to “banish the belief that the fire (that burned a quarter of the city of Rome) had been ordered”, blamed the conflagration on the Christians, “a class hated for their abominations” (the words of the Roman historian Tacitus).

The terrible persecution depicted graphically in the Revelation took place in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), which is where Ephesus was located.

The person who penned the letter to the Ephesians prayed for wisdom for believers to know how to live in a world that was growing increasingly dangerous for members of these young, still tiny Christian communities.

The letter-writer also prayed that *“you may know what is the hope to which God has called you.”* In difficult times, indeed, especially in difficult times, the writer wanted his readers to know that they had been called to hope. They had not been called to defeat and despair.

I want to focus our attention on a third petition of the prayer: that *“you may know . . . the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints.”*

We can think of our “inheritance among the saints” in two ways. First, the inheritance we received.

In 1975 I had the good fortune to be invited to become pastor of Lake Shore. Except for a couple of weekend pastorates in college and seminary, I had never been a pastor. I was teaching in a small college in Florida when the search committee, led by Bob Baird, contacted me.

This will give you an idea of how young and fresh-faced I was when I became the part-time pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church “out on the Hillsboro highway” outside of Cleburne. (This was when I was in seminary at Southwestern in Fort Worth.) One day when I was calling on members of my congregation, I knocked on the door of an older woman who lived alone in a small house off one of the main roads. I introduced myself as her new pastor. She stared at me through the screen door and said, “If I’s out killing preachers, you’d a got clean away.”

Lake Shore was young (less than twenty years old) when I became pastor, energetic, creative, and fun. On Memorial Day we shut down the church and the entire congregation spent the weekend at a nearby camp – sleeping in the dorms, eating camp food. And each year Penny Edens wrote and directed a Lake Shore-inspired musical.

Central to the inheritance that was bequeathed to me when I became pastor was a free pulpit. Baptists like to brag about free pulpits, but in fact genuinely free pulpits are quite rare. My impression is that they are becoming even more rare.

Not long ago someone sent me a manuscript of a sermon that Burt Burleson preached at Lake Shore some time back. The reason the person sent it to me is because Burt mentioned me in the sermon. He said that when he was a senior at Baylor he had almost given up on the church. Someone suggested that, before he gave up entirely, he should visit Lake Shore. (Over the years Lake Shore has been the church of last resort for many people, possibly including some of you.) Burt said he came to Lake Shore and sat on the back row. He said that he heard me say things that he had never heard anyone say in a Baptist pulpit. That helped to change his mind about church.

I don’t recount that story as a way to pat myself on the back. I’m sure that I didn’t think that what I said – whatever it was – was out of the ordinary for sermons preached from that pulpit. I followed Daryl Fleming, for crying out loud, who followed Rhea Gray, for crying out loud. A free pulpit was part of the inheritance that was bequeathed to me when I came to Lake Shore.

Under Rhea Gray and Daryl Fleming the church developed its own eclectic worship style – drawing on the richness of other Christian traditions while remaining true to its Baptist heritage -- and an atmosphere of honest inquiry, in which people

could struggle with issues and not have to pretend to believe something they weren't sure they believed. And a social awareness and a willingness to get involved that I had not experienced in a congregation.

Lake Shore is where I learned how to be a pastor and what church can be. Those who came before me – and you – left us an inheritance, a way of understanding and living out the Gospel that revived the faith of many of us and gave life to us all.

I said that there are two ways to think about our “inheritance among the saints.” First, the inheritance that has been bequeathed to us. Second, the inheritance ywe leave to those who follow us.

Every Sunday morning worship is introduced by someone – this morning it was Vern Sauter -- reading: *“We are a welcoming and affirming community of Christians, attempting to discover, articulate, and embody the meaning of the Gospel in the world today.”* That is also the first thing you see when you visit the church website.

There are a lot of other things about Lake Shore you could have singled out. That is what you said you wanted the community to know about this congregation.

Those who founded this special place 60 years ago sang, “This is the church that love built.” Your generation clarified that by saying, “*We believe that God’s love*” – the love they sang about – *“knows no bounds.”*

The final test of a congregation is the issue(s) its values compel it to address and the spirit in which it does so. To illustrate: many, if not most, churches in the South have not dealt seriously with race and racism, because their values do not compel them to do so. Indeed, their deepest-held values compel them not to do so.

Over the years Lake Shore has dealt with difficult issues in its attempt *“to discover, articulate, and embody the meaning of the Gospel in the world today,”* because, given who it is, who you are, it/you could not not do so.

That is a major part of the inheritance you will set aside for those who follow you.

As you go through a reconciliation process, as you call a new pastor and begin a new era in the history of Lake Shore Baptist Church, remember the inheritance you have received. But also be aware of the inheritance you want leave to those who follow you.

The prayer of the ancient letter writer for the churches of his day is my prayer for you: *“that God may give you a spirit of wisdom, that you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, and that you may know the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints.” Amen.*

Benediction

The writer of the Ephesian letter offered another prayer for the churches. It is one of the most beautiful passages in scripture. I offer it as our benediction.

Before God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love, and that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.