

“Power Shift”

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Second in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 1.15-23

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We just heard Paul in his letter, letting us overhear his prayers. He’s telling the Ephesians what he prays when he prays for them. As in this whole letter, he focuses on what they see. He prays they will see things they were not seeing before. Among other things, he prays they will see power. That’s a good prayer for us too. Pray that God gives us wisdom to see where power really rests in this world.

I

Most of us have power. We have wealth. We can vote. We make decisions. We might even have power over others. You have power. Does it feel like it? Or, do you often feel under powers that are beyond you? Do you feel powerless?

A business closes, and jobs end. Who did it? The decision was for “economic realities.” The economy is real. It is about millions of us, each making decisions. So who has the power? All of us? Some of us? None of us?

It’s the same in governments, schools, workplaces, unions, churches. In any group of people, something more is going on than just individuals working together, or even against each other. Something which is both part of the group, and beyond it.

I just read a new book about the causes of the First World War.¹ Just a handful of men made the vital decisions. Most of them did not want war. Yet these most powerful people in the world felt powerless to stop it. What was going on?

We say people are “trapped in poverty.” So much seems to keep people from getting on their feet. Is it a conspiracy? Did someone set the trap?

Sometimes good people, like us, make well-meaning decisions, but the results are disastrous, for ourselves or others.

What’s going on?

The Bible diagnoses this with a concept, called “the powers.”² We live within institutions, systems, networks, relationships. There are forces that are within, and above, and beyond them. We don’t see these forces. We can’t touch them. Yet we experience them every day.

¹ Margaret MacMillan The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914. (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2013)

² See the good discussion of “the powers” in Timothy G. Gombis, The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), chapter 2.

These “powers” are real.

These powers are part of God’s good creation. God makes them for the good ordering of God’s world. Here’s the thing, though. These powers are participating in the rebellion against God, the same rebellion we are part of too. So these good things get twisted. The powers become hostile to God, and God’s good purposes.

They make us feel powerless, controlled, dominated.

II

Paul sent his letter to people he knew. He has spent time in Ephesus.³ He knew it, and he knew them. He knew the powers they faced.

Civic pride was a power in Ephesus. It was the “big city” where important things happened.⁴ It was sophisticated. It had impressive buildings; even today their ruins cause people to take notice.

Wealth was a power in Ephesus. It was a booming centre for trade, by land and sea. Many rich people lived there.

Politics was a power in Ephesus. It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. From it, the empire spread its control over the region.

Spirituality was a power in Ephesus. All sorts of religions flourished there. They were about harnessing power – power to make things happen, power to control people and nations, power for wealth, health, prestige, protection, and victory.⁵ Its Temple of Artemis was a wonder of the ancient world. She was the god of reproductive power, hunting power, agricultural power.⁶

Ephesus was under the powers. Every place is under the powers. We are under the powers.

Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus. Their group was small, their status marginal. Many were slaves! These folks were without power and at the mercy of the powers. They were following Jesus, who had been crucified, a sure sign of weakness and defeat.

³ See Acts 18.19-19.41.

⁴ Michael J. Gorman, Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 499.

⁵ Tom Wright, Paul for Everyone: The Prison Epistles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 15.

⁶ Gorman, 499. When Paul was in Ephesus, he clashed with the industry that had grown up around Artemis’ temple; see Acts 19.23-41.

Yet Paul prays for them with confidence! Confidence in the real power who holds them, and holds us all.

III

Paul prays with confidence, because he trusts in God. He trusts in the *“immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us who believe.”* “Believe” here has the sense of trust. If we trust in God, we will see God’s power at work.

Paul points us to Jesus. Want to see God’s power, God’s power that we can trust in? Look at Jesus!

God raised Jesus from the dead.

God’s greatest display of power is the resurrection of the one who was crucified. God is making all things new. God is redeeming creation to its fullness and balance. God is defeating death’s power, and rescuing us from its hold over our bodies and souls. Jesus is the down payment, the foretaste, the new beginning. God raised Jesus.

God seated Jesus at God’s right hand.

In royal courts, the king’s chief minister sat at his right hand. It was the place of power. Paul draws on this image. Jesus rules with God. Jesus rules above all rulers, all authorities, all dominions, and all powers.

God put all things under Jesus’ feet.

Again, this is an image from the kingdoms of the ancient world. It’s about victory, and brining enemies under control.

God made Jesus head over all things . . .

Paul is praying they will see who the true Lord is, who is truly over every ruler, every authority, ever dominion, and every power. Jesus’ resurrection has given him the victory over every power that seeks to dominate, to twist, to enslave, to control. Emperors and dictators, parliaments and presidents, economies and spiritualities, organizations of every kind . . . all are now under the lordship of our Master Jesus.

Paul points us to Jesus. Which points us to a strange thing about God’s power, for people living in Ephesus . . . or Elora. Remember, Ephesus had pride power. But Jesus was a nobody . . . whom God raised from the dead. Ephesus had wealth power. Jesus lived with the poor . . . and God seated him at God’s right hand. Ephesus had politics power. It was imperial politics that put Jesus to death . . . and God put all things under Jesus’ feet. Ephesus had religion power. Jesus was usually rejected by the religious . . . and God made Jesus head over all things. Jesus was crucified. That’s weakness, shame, curse,

defeat. But it's also the power of God.

For Jesus' power does not dominate; he liberates. His power does not abuse; he honours. His power does not twist; he sets right. His power does not destroy; he heals. His power does not lie; he is truth. His power does not bring others down; he comes to those who are down and lifts us up.

IV

God made Jesus head over all things, for the church.

That's you. That's us.

When we encounter the powers in whatever form they take . . . when we are experiencing their twisting, distorting, hostile effects . . . we will know who is the greater power, over these powers.

When we run into people – and this happens every day, and often we run into ourselves! – people who the powers are using, we will know our battle is not with the person in front of us. It's the power that is using that person, maybe us. So we treat that person with respect, honour and love, knowing that at the heart of things, they are not the problem.

We follow Jesus into the trenches, where the powers are distorting people, twisting institutions, damaging communities, all in rebellion against God. Jesus is calling us into those places. To unmask the powers. To point to what is going on, and show how things should be right. To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, the powers' judge and our hope.

Because Jesus is above all powers. And we know what his power is like. Let's keep praying, then, asking God to keep showing us Jesus. Amen.