Ephesians, Part One

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, well, this episode is the first, starting a new series. It's going to be five parts on the podcast, and these were five teachings that I did, exploring different sections of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This was a number of years ago, when I was a teaching pastor at Door of Hope Church, and we spent a whole fall working through the letter to the Ephesians, and these were five contributions I made to that series.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a *masterpiece*. It's *so,* so profound, so beautifully designed—the flow of thought, and of the argument he's developing. If there was ever a short summary that you wanted to make about the beliefs, the convictions, the theology, the mission of the Apostle Paul—what he was all about—his letter to the Ephesians about sums up everything this guy was about.

And it's short. You can sit down and read the whole thing through in less than thirty minutes. But if you really want to understand it, well, that'll probably take the rest of your life because [Tim laughs] it's so amazing. So anyhow, I actually did an opening message for this series to introduce the whole letter, but my microphone broke that night. So that message is lost to history with bad audio. So, there you go.

This first teaching in the series is actually from the middle of chapter one. It's a prayer that Paul prays for these followers of Jesus in Ephesus. It's an *amazing* prayer, where

he prays for *power*, which sounds really, you know, intense and kind of, like, I don't know: [With enthusiasm] "Victorious Christian living—it's a life of power!"

But the kind of power that Paul thinks followers of Jesus have access to is a really different conception of power—it's upside-down. It's the power that came and was expressed when Jesus gave up his life and became powerless, and through the resurrection, was raised to life with a new, different kind of power—the power of love and self-sacrifice.

And that's exactly the kind of power that Paul wants followers of Jesus to be in touch with and empowered by. And so there you go. This is a meditation on "power," through the lens of the crucified Messiah, from Ephesians chapter 1. I hope it's stimulating for you, so let's dive in.

[Musical Break (03:22—03:28)]

Because really the big idea of what this letter is about, you may recall from a couple of weeks ago, when I, kind of, intro-ed the whole thing, is that most of Paul's letters—like First Corinthians or Philippians or Galatians or something—if you've read other of Paul's letters in the New Testament, they're very specific. He's writing them in response to a specific need, or problem, or issue, or whatever.

And Ephesians is different. Ephesians was likely written to a whole number of churches in a region in and around Ephesus—and Paul planted a lot of churches in that area. And Ephesians reads a lot like an essay—like a summary statement of Paul's, kind of, whole vision of the unique calling that Jesus gave him, to announce the lordship and the reign of Jesus that extends even over the non-Jewish world, and that Jesus was making a new family, a new covenant family, that found their identity only in the life and death and the resurrection of Jesus. And so this whole letter is about God making all things new, and making a new people for himself.

And so last week, Josh helped us explore this, like, *uber*-dense, first fourteen verses. And I'm really glad I didn't have that assignment because it was just a really, really dense, packed statement. But he began with this beautiful poem of praise. And if you recall—if you were here last week—it's this poem of praise to the triune God—to the God who, in the first verses, in verse 3, is the Father, God the Father, God the Son, Jesus, and God the Spirit, who mediates Christ's blessings to us in these spiritual blessings.

And so he talks about this God who is three in one, who's a community within God's own self, and who has both created, and invited, and redeemed, and saved people for

himself in the midst of a broken world. And so he opens with this beautiful poem. And what we're going to explore tonight, here, is verses 15, and following—and it's a prayer. He begins with this praise poem to the God whose story is revealed to us in Jesus. And then he's going to pray for these Christians who live in and around Ephesus. And this is such a rad passage, and I can't say everything that I want to say because it's just—there's too much here. But it's so beautiful and profound, and there's so many great things going on here.

And I should say, personally, this—verses 15 through 23, that we're going to explore tonight—this has been a really important passage for me, personally. So as a pastor, I pray with and for people quite a lot. And that's fine. I never planned on being a pastor. And so, you know, it's not like I'm more qualified than anybody else to pray with or for people. [Tim laughs] People seem to think that, and that's fine, whatever—I'm the pastor, so that's okay. But I'm certainly not, and I never planned on this. It just, kind of, happened.

And so this passage has been really important in teaching me about prayer. And so I would just, kind of, wear that as a set of glasses as we read through these verses, and—because prayer may be a new or old practice for you. But what is the purpose of prayer for each other in this new family that Jesus is creating? And Paul—this passage has amazing wisdom to give us about the purpose of prayer for each other, in our midst, and the kinds of things that we should pray for each other.

And before we actually, kind of, dive in and work through it, just to, kind of, help give us a new frame of reference, I want to tell a short story of an example of the kind of life that Paul is praying for here. Paul's praying for these believers, and as we're going to see, he's praying that a *new* kind of living would emerge among the Christians in these churches.

And the kind of life that Paul has in mind is the kind of life that was lived by a guy named Friedrich von Bodelschwingh. Say that ten times fast, yeah? [Referring to visuals] So this is a father-son duo here, the von Bodelschwinghs—come on, what a rad name, [Tim laughs] right? The von Bodelschwinghs—and so father and son right here. And you, likely, have not heard of these guys before. German, if you didn't guess already by their name.

And so these two guys are responsible for starting an organization that still exists today, and is today the largest Christian charitable care network for the mentally and physically disabled in all of central Europe. They started something called the Bethel Foundation, back in the late 1800s.

And it's essentially, I mean, it's in fourteen cities all over Germany. There's hospital clinics and orphanages, and so on, all dedicated to the care of the mentally and the

physically disabled, in the name of Jesus. That's why this organization exists—and it was started by these two guys. [Referring to visuals] Can we get their picture? I just like looking at their faces. They're like—well, look, Senior has a smile, but this guy is way too serious—you know what I'm saying? So rad, amazing followers of Jesus.

And I first heard about their story, actually, not by anything about them, but actually by reading a biography of another German Christian that you probably have heard of before, a guy named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a German pastor and theologian. And he grew up in the early 1900s, and was an adult, kind of, basically, coinciding with the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s. And this is how all these stories come together.

But Bonhoeffer knew Friedrich, Jr., pretty well. And he visited the Bethel community a number of times. And as I read—I was reading Bonhoeffer's story—he was really impacted by his relationship with these guys, and by what they were doing at the Bethel community. I want to read you a description of Bonhoeffer's visit to the Bethel community.

It's in the biography by Eric Metaxas. It was written a couple of years ago. If you like biographies, you have to read this. I couldn't put it down. He says, "Bethel began in 1867 as a Christian community for people with epilepsy. But by 1900, it included several facilities that cared for 1,600 physically and mentally disabled persons.

"Frederick, Jr., took it over at his father's death in 1910, and by the 1930s, it was a whole town, with schools and churches and farms and factories and shops and housing for patients, nurses, and caregivers. At the center were numerous hospital and care facilities, including orphanages."

And so, this is about Bonhoeffer's visit, "Bonhoeffer saw Bethel as the antithesis of the Nazi worldview that exalted power and strength. It was the Gospel made visible, a fairytale landscape of grace, where the physically and mentally disabled were cared for in a palpably Christian atmosphere."

Now, this description grabbed my attention for a number of different reasons, particularly because, just, really Metaxas's wording, here, of describing this little community, this town, as a little "fairytale landscape of grace"—I just love, I love that phrase. It's a little community that's living under the reign of a different king, essentially.

And so this—so Bonhoeffer visited the Bodelschwingh, you know, in the late 1920s and early 30s—this is as the Nazis and the Third Reich is, kind of, gaining momentum in Germany before the mid 30s, when Hitler and his group seized power, and so on. And so, the antithesis of the Nazi worldview.

And so we're talking about a whole culture that came to see it as a "good idea," that for the progress of the human race, we need to exalt certain values—such as power and strength and ethnic purity, and so on—and therefore eliminate the lives of millions of other human beings who don't fit that description.

And so it's actually really, really interesting. Von Bodelschwingh became a defender of the people living in the Bethel community. And once the Nazis seized power, they came numerous times, demanding that he turn over the care of the people that were in the Bethel community so that they could engage in what the Nazis called "mercy killings."

So it's well known that millions of Jewish people were murdered during the Second World War by the Nazis. A lesser known fact is that hundreds of thousands of mentally and physically disabled people were also murdered in the death camps, because they didn't fit the bill of the Nazi worldview of a *Ubermensch*—of "the great human"—that would be the progress of the human race.

And so they came knocking at the door of Bethel numerous times. And it was actually such a stressful, dangerous time for Friedrich, Jr., that just a few months after World War II ended, he died in his mid-seventies—and I can only guess out of, just, pure exhaustion, right? Because his life was threatened numerous times, and so on.

And so, here's this guy, living in the bubble of, like, living the bubble of the Nazi culture that exalts power and strength at the expense of the weak, and he somehow believed that he was accountable—and that Hitler, himself, was accountable—to a higher power. Namely, Jesus.

And he created this community that lived according to a, like, a "fairytale land," a totally different world, where the weak are actually exalted as the most important, and the people worthy of most dignity and care. That's a Gospel-centered world that he's created, right here, in the middle of a whole totally different culture, governed by "the powers that be" that said *these people aren't worth anything*.

And it seems to me that we might hear that story and be, "Well, that's super-inspiring. These are the stories that make you proud to be a Christian." You're like, "Yes, that's rad." And "they did that in the name of Jesus. That's awesome—I like that." But we might see that, and be, like, "Yeah, that's probably not in the future for me—that kind of inspiring life," [Tim laughs] and so on.

And I would want to challenge you and say, actually, this kind of life is exactly the kind of thing that Paul is praying for in the paragraph that we're about to read. It's a kind of life that looks at the landscape of your culture and says, "My allegiance is, first and foremost, to King Jesus, and whatever 'powers that be,' that may exist in my world—and the values and the worldview of my culture—those no longer have power over me. I live

under the reign of a different king—not just as an individual, but actually as a community."

And Paul's vision is that this prayer would generate little "fairytale lands of grace," in these churches that he's praying for. What could motivate a kind of life like Friedrich von Bodelschwingh's? A lot of prayer. And a lot of prayers like this one, that we're about to read. We'll come back to him, but I think that suffices for a framework.

So this prayer has a lot of *Bible-y* language, and it makes our eyes glaze over and you're like, "Oh yeah, another prayer in the Bible." *No,* dude—*no*. This is not just "another prayer" in the Bible. This kind of prayer has the power to generate lives that make big, big impact in our world. Let's dive into his prayer.

Verse 15 of Ephesians, chapter 1, Paul prays—he says, "For this reason," by which he means "everything" he said before, "ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in all of my prayers."

Let's just pause, quick, here. There's a number of things that are really, really interesting here. So he's heard—so he's away now. He's actually in prison somewhere else, and he's hearing about the lives of these Christians in churches that he helped start. And so you can imagine these are people—we know he lived in Ephesus for almost two years, helping start the first community of Jesus followers that was ever there. And he did that in a number of other places around Ephesus as well.

And so he hears reports, and they're really good reports. He hears two things about how they're doing. He says—what's the first thing? He says, "I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus." And the second thing he hears about is their love for the other Christians around them: "your love for all God's people."

Now this is profound, and this connects with the story of Friedrich, here. When we hear "faith" in the New Testament, we think of "belief," or something that happens in your brain. And that's true. If you have faith in something, there is, I hope—something's going on in your brain, right?

But that's not the only thing that—what this concept is about. "Faith," in the New Testament, is about "allegiance" and "loyalty," and who you're "grabbing onto for dear life." To place your "faith in the Lord Jesus"—and all of the names he uses for "Jesus," in this prayer, are very strategic—to place your "faith in the Lord Jesus" is about recognizing that Jesus is truly Lord, and that my allegiance and devotion is now directed at nothing else but the risen king, Jesus.

It's grabbing onto him as the best thing I've got going for me. And it's something that happens in your brain, but it's something that immediately—and is connected to how

you live—which is what he says right here, “I’m hearing about your faith, your devotion and trust and allegiance to the Lord Jesus, and about your love for all God’s people.”

So he’s not hearing about how they’re writing, like, little “heart letters” to each other, something like that, right? “Love,” in the Bible, is not primarily an emotion. It’s a commitment to action. So in our culture, love is something that *happens to us* and, like, you “fall in love,” and—which causes real problems, of course, when you “fall out of love,” right? Which happens all the time, apparently.

And then you’re like, “Well, what’s the status of this relationship?” And then if you’re married and you fall out of love, then, well, I guess it’s not convenient to be married anymore, and there you go. The “powers that be” have created a culture like ours where you can fall out of love and apparently fall out of marriage too. And it’s just not that big of a deal.

And the Bible’s description of love is very different. Love is a commitment to act for the wellbeing of another person ahead of my own wellbeing. Love is the mark—the key mark—of a follower of Jesus, because if you have given your allegiance to the Lord Jesus, who loved me—i.e., “gave up his life for me”— Jesus’s followers are marked as people who do this for others. And that’s the “fairytale landscape of grace.” Easier said than done, right? But this is what Paul prays for.

And so look at what he’s saying. He’s saying, “I’m hearing about this. These churches—you guys are doing so great. Your allegiance and trust is in the Lord Jesus. You’re caring for one another. And I’m hearing about all the stuff you’re doing. And I haven’t stopped giving thanks for you. I’m remembering you in my prayers.”

Verse 17—look at what he says, in verse 17, “And so I keep asking. I haven’t stopped praying for you guys.” Now this, to me, is really profound. And this is what I was talking about: an insight into prayer, right here. For many of us, we think of prayer as, like, “crisis management.” So prayer is what you turn to when things go bad. And even, just, think about the language that we use, or the times that we bring up prayer.

So we say “so-and-so needs your prayers,” right? Because something bad happened, or because they’re really sick, or this tragedy took place. And that’s true. So-and-so *does* need your prayers when bad things happen. But that is not what Paul is saying here, is it? Look at what he’s saying. He’s saying, “You guys are doing awesome. You have allegiance in the Lord Jesus. You trust in him. You’re showing love towards other people—so I have not stopped praying for you.”

And we think: wait a minute, why do they need to be prayed for? They’re doing great, you know? And Paul would say, “Exactly, they’re doing great—that’s why they need me to not stop praying for them.” Do you see this? He takes our idea of prayer, “it’s

something you do when it's a crisis," and he flips it on his head and he says, "No, no, prayer is just adding fuel to the fire that's already burning."

And so when someone's doing great, they need your prayers more than any other time. And when someone's not doing great, they also need your prayers more than any other time. So whether the fire's about to go out, because things are hard, or the fire's raging because people are doing awesome, *people always need your prayers*. And he never stopped praying for these new Christians in these churches that he helped start, whether they're doing terribly, or they're doing great.

And this is, again, I think this is a unique insight for us, as we think about prayer. Prayer is very important in times of crisis. It's very important in times that are *not* crisis moments. Because it's about praying—because what's he praying for?—as we're going to see, he's praying that these already growing Christians would continue to mature and to grow.

And so look at what he prays for here. And I would just encourage you, as you think about a question, like: how are you supposed to pray for people in your community group? One of the things that we ask community groups is to dedicate time in sharing life and sharing *about* your lives, and praying for each other. How do you do—what are you supposed to do for each other?

And what does Paul pray for here? Look at verse 17. He says, "I keep asking that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, that he would give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart will be enlightened in order that"—and he's going to go on to talk about the things that he wants them to know, and we'll get to them in just a second.

So look at what he's praying for, here. Notice that he doesn't pray for their circumstances at all. I think one of the things that we often pray for: "So-and-so has had a tragedy" or "pray for so-and-so, things are really bad." We pray for the circumstances —"Lord, please provide this. Please provide her with a job," or "please help them recover from sickness." We pray for *circumstances*.

And what's interesting, in this prayer, and a number of other of Paul's prayers in his letters, he never prays for people's circumstances—it's really interesting. He prays for something else. And what does he pray? He prays for God-given *wisdom*. Look at this: "a spirit of wisdom and revelation," so that whatever circumstances are in their lives, that this becomes an opportunity for them to draw closer to Jesus in relationship, right? "So that you may know him better."

Now there's a lot of religious language here that might be easy for us to, kind of, overlook. And so actually, this will be an interesting little vote, right here. He says, "I keep asking for you that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious

Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom." How many of you have a capital "s" on "spirit"? Okay, how many of you have a lowercase "s" on "spirit"? Oh, that's a good one. All right. That's good, that's good.

So it's actually unclear here. Does Paul have in mind, here, that it's "the human spirit," which is the New Testament's way of talking about that aspect of the human person that's open to relationship with our creator and with Jesus? Or is he praying that this is about God's own "Spirit" that is coming alongside us, being present with us, and aiding it. Which one is it? And clearly our translations are divided because we don't have Paul here to interview. Like, "What did you really mean, Paul?" So—the word he uses doesn't make it entirely clear.

One thing I think that is important is that whatever Paul's praying for, it's that God would give us a new quality of insight in our relationship with Jesus, and in actually knowing how to understand—whatever this life circumstance—how I can find God in this. In other words, Paul doesn't pray that "so-and-so's" hip would get healed—you know, "Grandma Zelda's hip," or something. He doesn't pray that "so-and-so would find a job."

What he does pray is that through the experience of Zelda breaking her hip, and through the experience of Mary looking for a job, and John dealing with the breakup with his girlfriend, or whatever, what he prays for is that whatever the life circumstance, God's presence would enlighten something inside of them. And I think by God's own Spirit, God's own personal presence, he prays that these Christians would see—whatever life circumstances they're in—that their eyes would be open to the fact that God's right there with them, personally present in those circumstances.

That's what the Spirit is in the Bible. It's not like a weird ghost, or something like that. It's God's personal presence with every Christian. It's Jesus, personally present, with you in every moment. And he prays that through this circumstance, that I wouldn't see this difficult circumstance as "God abandoning me." Just the opposite: that this is an opportunity in which Jesus is with me so I can actually understand his grace and presence for me much deeper than I ever had before.

This is very illuminating. He doesn't pray for their circumstances. He prays that the circumstances would open up *new* levels of growth and maturity in them as they see how Jesus is present with them through the Spirit. And this is a way that we can pray, we can pray for each other.

And even just think about Friedrich von Bodelschwingh. [Tim laughs] We can't say that name ten times fast, right? Think: when the Nazis come knocking at the front door of the Bethel community, you're likely to think like, "Jesus, where are you? You're nowhere to be found." You know? Like "Where—God's abandoned me. They're here, there were rifles," or whatever, right?

And what Paul would pray apparently is, “Friedrich, you know, you’re on a journey and this is an opportunity for you to lean into Jesus in a new way that you have never had to trust Jesus before.” This becomes a moment of growth for him. And I can only imagine that it was these kinds of prayers that were able to keep Friedrich afloat during those types of circumstances. What about you? What about you? Let’s keep going.

So he wants—he prays that these believers would see whatever their circumstances are as new opportunities for growth, and that Jesus is present, right there, with them. And he’s going to pray for three specific, new realizations for these Christians. And the third one is where the dynamite is. But we’ll do all three here, because they’re all connected.

So look at verse 18. He says, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you might know”—and there are three things he wants them to come to experience and know even more. Here’s the first one. He says, “I pray that your eyes would be enlightened so that you might know the *hope* to which he’s called you.” We’ll just read through them all together here. Second thing, “that you might know the riches of his glorious inheritance among his holy people.” And third, “that you might know his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

There’s three things he prays for them—and again, I just would encourage you to think of this as a model. What would it look like for you to pray these kinds of things for other people? So the first thing he prays for is that they might know and experience and internalize “the hope to which he’s called you.” So each of these is huge. We could do a whole series on each of these, whatever—but we’re trying to not take a year to do the letter to the Ephesians, right? So we’re flying—big picture—over these.

This is really profound. So the Christian life is about taking on a posture of hope. And hope is about having a conviction that my present circumstances don’t determine the meaning of my life. Whatever the present state of the world is, whatever the present state of your life is, those circumstances don’t get to determine the meaning of your life.

Christian hope is about the fact that, in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus, something so surprising happened—so counterintuitive and strange and wonderful that, if I'm a Christian, I have to be open to the fact that my life may suck and the state of the world may be horrible, but I believe in a God who brings life out of death. Who came among us to personally bear the result of all of the stupid, selfish things that we do on the cross, and to reverse that into life that can spread and spread and bring new life to more and more human beings who grab onto Jesus as the best thing they've got going for them, in faith.

And so if that’s the God I say I believe in, then one of the disciplines of the Christian life, and what he prays for them is: that you don’t ever forget that there’s this future calling,

“the hope to which God has called you.” God is making all things new. He’s doing that right here in the present, in the midst of this old, broken world. And he will complete that work when Jesus returns and judges and restores our world in the new creation.

And so what that means is that: whatever my life circumstances are, Paul prays that we could always see our present circumstances in light of the future hope, and that whatever my present is, it doesn’t determine the meaning of my life. The life and the death and the resurrection and the hope that I have in Jesus, that’s where my life’s meaning is found. And he prays that they’d wake up to this fact.

And it’s connected to the second thing that he prays for them: “I pray that you might understand the hope to which he’s called you. I pray that you might know and understand the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.” Now that just sounds . . . *Bible-y*, doesn’t it? [Tim laughs] Right? There’s a whole bunch of Bible words and you finish and you’re like, “what on earth does that mean?”

So the *riches, inheritance, holy people*—what’s going on here? And Paul’s brilliant here—in lots of different ways—but he’s taking a handful of different phrases right out of the Old Testament. And they’re phrases that actually were used to describe the people of ancient Israel—God’s covenant family—that he rescued out of slavery in Egypt and brought to Mount Sinai and made as a covenant family with himself.

And the language that God used to describe this covenant people of ancient Israel is precisely this language, right here. He’s actually pulling these phrases right out of one of the books of the Torah, the book of Deuteronomy. And here’s—just to give you a flavor here—here’s two passages that I think he’s borrowing from, here.

So this is Moses speaking to the people of Israel. And Moses says, “But as for you all, Israel, Yahweh took you. He brought you out of the iron-melting furnace”—which is the metaphor of their slavery in Egypt—“out of slavery in Egypt, to become the people of his inheritance, as you now are.

And just a couple chapters later, Moses says again to ancient Israel, he says, “For you are a holy people to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen you”—do you hear Ephesians one here, right? “Election,” and “chosenness,” from last week? Anyway, “Yahweh your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.”

And so the idea here is not that God just happens to “like” ancient Israelites better than anybody else. This is the theme of “election” in the Bible. In order to reach and bring blessing and redemption to all the nations of the earth, he starts by redeeming and rescuing one family, making them his special covenant people, so that they can be his witnesses to the character and the mercy of this redeeming God out to all of the nations. He chooses one on behalf of the many.

Now, how did Israel do at being a holy people, the treasured possession of Yahweh? Yeah, not so well. And so that's the whole, complicated story of the Old Testament. Paul's deep conviction is that the covenant family that God began by redeeming out of Israel has come to its fulfillment in Israel's Messiah, in Jesus, in Christ—in King Jesus. And that God, for all of those who reach out in faith towards Jesus and find themselves in Christ, or in the King, they find themselves among the chosen ones, this *new* chosen family that includes both Jewish people, but also every other kind of human being—Gentiles. And that's what the following weeks of Ephesians will be about: the new family of Jew and non-Jew together in Jesus.

He's using these words that used to describe only ancient Israel to now describe this new family that has been brought together around Jesus. It's language that describes how much God loves and cherishes human beings. And for those who actually accept God's love and cherishing for them, and his grace towards them, they enter into this family.

And so for a long time, I used to think Paul's praying that we would "know the riches of *our* glorious inheritance," by which I thought he meant, like, "going to heaven" or [Tim laughs] something like that—but that's not what he's praying for. He prays that we would wake up to the fact that we, as his people, are God's own special, treasured possession. And again, it's not that, like he [with a grin in his voice] apparently he loves *you* more than everybody else, right? So we're like, *no*, of course that's not what he's saying.

His point is, is that he's created a special people who are unique and holy—in theory—holy, who are distinct and different than the world around them—to be, precisely to be the witnesses to his mercy and grace to the nations. And he prays that we would wake up to the privilege and the calling of what it means to belong to the people that are God's own inheritance, that God has taken and set aside for himself.

And so it's both a privilege that we're opening our eyes to, but it's also a challenge and a calling, which is connected to the third thing that he prays for here. And the third one is where the, where the dynamite is. Here's the third thing he prays for. He prays for the hope, "that we might know the hope to which he's called us, the riches of being part of his glorious inheritance and his holy people."

Here's the third thing: Paul prays that these Christians would "come to know his incomparably great power for us who believe." Paul wants these Christians to open their eyes to this resource of power that's apparently available to us if we just had eyes to see it, and would wake up to that fact. There's this resource of power.

Now, I don't know what you think when you hear the word "power." In our cultural setting, when we hear the word "power," for the most part, it's not very positive. If I were

to say, “She’s a very powerful woman,” right? You expect me to say that, like, “Don’t cross her”—[Tim laughs] you know what I mean?

Or like, “He’s a very powerful man. He can make things happen.” That’s how “power” is conceived of in our culture. And specifically because, here we are, like jaded, disenfranchised, twenty-first century—whatever—generation people—whatever. And so we’ve all these stories of the “abuse of power” that have come before us.

And so we’re automatically suspicious of power. Because we think of power as, just, having the ability to do “whatever the heck you want,” or having the resources, the ability to do what you want. That’s how we think of power.

And so what does it mean that, like, Paul says “that you might wake up to: there’s this *huge power* resource available to you”? And so it’s interesting, actually, in the history of Christianity, there’s been a lot of branches of Christianity that have taken this as, kind of, like, [with enthusiasm] “Yes, in Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, you have power. You’re a powerful person in Jesus. And so we should all be powerful and influencers, and seize your destiny, and God wants to underwrite your dreams, to pave your way to the stars,” or whatever—and there’s whole branches of like “victory-power” Christianity like that.

And for some people, that’s how it goes. And that’s great for them. For most of us, that’s not how it goes, though. And our dreams don’t come true. And our prayers for this or that thing don’t get answered at all the way we thought. And we’re like, “Oh, where’s the power? I don’t know.” And then a lot of people just write the whole thing off.

And that’s why Paul is really quick to qualify what he means. He says: it’s a very specific kind of power that’s available to Christians, if you just have eyes to see it. And look at what he says. He immediately tries to cut off misunderstanding by saying what kind of power he’s talking about.

He says, “I pray that you might know his incomparably great power that’s right there for those of you who believe. That power—this power that I’m talking about—it’s the same power as the mighty strength that God exerted when he raised Christ from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age, but also in the age to come.” All clear? Great. [Tim laughs]

Whoa, okay. So there’s a whole bunch of other *Bible-y* words here. So he immediately qualifies: he’s not talking about, like, “power and victory—be an influencer for Jesus,” or something. It’s very different. He says the kind of power that’s available to us is the same kind of power that transformed the death of Jesus into resurrection life.

And really what's going on here is: Paul has a whole story in his mind, and he's just alluding to a couple different moments in the story. And actually, he states what the big picture of the story is when he talks about this language, he says, "the present age and the age to come." And this is the basic story that Paul's telling in all of his letters, is that he calls the present world that you and I live in, he calls it "the present age," or he calls it "the world." He calls it "the age of sin and death."

It's the good world that God made, but that has been deeply compromised and fractured by human sin and selfishness that results in a world of death—and that looks like ours, because of the seven-billion human beings whose selfish decisions all compound on each other and make the world super screwed up. It's "the age of sin and death."

And part of the story that he's trying to tell in all of his letters—and for him is basically a way of telling the story of the Gospel—is that "the age to come," the future, has actually come crashing in to the present, in Jesus. And it's as if God has, in Jesus, come among us as the one human being who is not compromised by sin and who doesn't give in to the impulses that we all give into every single day. He actually lives as the kind of human being that God always intended human beings to be.

And he lives on our behalf. He dies on our behalf, and on the cross, he absorbs the collective, just, mess and results of all of the stupid, selfish decisions that we make—he absorbs death into himself on the cross. And so the resurrection of Jesus is this moment where, right here, in the midst of our broken, screwed up world, we see what the power of God is all about.

And apparently it's not like power to do "whatever the heck" God wants to do, or to tell you what to do, or command you to, like, "be a nice person," or something. It's the kind of power that gives up status and authority to absorb, and to take the hit on behalf of others, and to allow the sin of others to crush him. But because his commitment to humanity is so strong, and because, according to chapter 2, his love and mercy for sinful humans is so strong, he has the power to reverse death into life. And that's what the resurrection is about.

And so in the resurrection, it becomes: here's what God's power is up to in our world. Not power to "underwrite your dreams to the stars." It's power to take the most tragic sinful, selfish human beings, and through an encounter with Jesus, turn them into something that's actually life-giving—literally, spiritually, metaphorically, the whole shebang.

You know, whether it's physical death—our Christian conviction about physical death is that it's a tragedy. It's an enemy. But it *doesn't* get the last word. Why? Because Jesus rose from the dead. And whatever power God exerted when Jesus was raised from the dead, that power is going to manifest itself, somehow, for me one day too.

And so resurrection power, in Paul's letters, as we're going to see—it's not just about physical death, though—it's about the power that God has to actually change us. So there might be patterns of behavior in our lives, or patterns of relating, and just everywhere we go, we leave a trail of broken relationships, or something.

And what Paul is asking you to entertain is: do you actually have a hope that the present state of your life doesn't get to determine the meaning of your life? The present state of your character—the addiction that you have right now, the broken state of the relationships that you have right now—he prays that you would actually have the faith to entertain the idea that God has the power to reverse death moments in your life into something new. He's making all things new. This is the power to heal and transform sinful human beings. That's what Paul prays for here.

And for some of you, might think, "Okay, I could see how, maybe, God could do that in my life." And there are others of you who are like, "Yeah, that's a nice, pipe-dream. So—you don't know my story. You don't know, like, the patterns that I'm in. I've been in this downward spiral for fifteen years now. You really think Jesus can get me out of this?" And you know, I can't answer that question for you. All I can say is: "I'll pray for you," and I'll just pray *this* kind of prayer for you.

If a gathering of Christians means anything, we're gathering in hope, that the privilege of being among the people that God calls his own precious "inheritance," and the hope that we have is that he can actually reverse the power of sin and death in our lives. Now it gets even better. It gets even better.

So he wants us to "wake up" to that power that he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead. And then look at this next aspect of God's power that he wants us to wake up to, that's available to us. He says, "It's the same power that seated Christ at God's right hand in the heavenly realms, above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, in the present age and also in the age to come." What on earth is he talking about?

So this is a big theme. This is the first time—and it's not the last time—that we're going to come across it with Paul. And a big theme in Ephesians, and a big part of what a Christian worldview is trying to help open our eyes to see is: that the physical world, as it presents itself to us, is not the whole story.

And as a child of twenty-first century American culture that tells us that what you hear, see, taste, touch, and smell, that's all there is to reality, this is a really hard pill to swallow. What are these "powers" and "authorities in the heavenly realms," and Jesus is above them? "That's cool . . . I've got to go to work in the morning. I've got to, like, pay my bills. It's not like—what does that have to do with anything at all?"

And in Paul's mind, this has *everything* to do with *everything,* because "the powers" have an immense authority in human history, and have immense influence in human history. What are these "powers," and what—what does it even mean to wake up to the role that they have, and the influence that they have?

I want you to look at chapter 2 with me—how you guys doing? Ephesians is dense, isn't it? It's dense. So I guess I was going to say, "I'm sorry"—but I'm not sorry. I think it's good. It's good. Ephesians is a great way to grow. Let's try and understand what on earth Paul's talking about.

Look at chapter 2. This is his description of humanity that's living "in the age of sin and death." He says, "As for you all, you were dead in your transgressions and sins." I talked about this a couple of weeks ago—the idea of zombies, the living dead, is not a new fad. It's actually quite an old idea.

So it's people who are alive physically, even spiritually and emotionally, but they're deadened and dead, because of the perpetual selfish choices that we keep making and getting caught in that deaden us to an awareness of other people and of God.

And so he says, "We were all among the living dead, in which you used to live, when you followed the ways of this world, and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." So Paul has this idea, and it's an idea that's all throughout the Scriptures. It's that human beings—we're not actually that bright. And most of the decisions that we make aren't actually very reasoned choices. We're just pretty selfish, and most of the decisions that we make are based on our desires. And there you go. So that's the story of most of our lives.

And so that's true, but Paul also has another way, another insight to offer, about why this world is the way it is. And it's an idea that's right through the story of the Bible, is: that there exists a whole other realm of beings—created beings—who have real influence in human behavior, and in human history, but that are not visible to us. And some of you are like, "And that just got way too weird for me." [Tim laughs] Right?

So, but I do at least want to encourage you that it's actually not that weird. One hundred years ago, if you were to try and explain Einstein's theory of relativity and, like, where things are going now in physics, and "string theory," and multiple—the idea of multiple dimensions, outside the four that we live in—right?—space, height, depth, width, and time—the idea that there are multiple dimensions. Dimensions that exist and that are real, but that are not perceptible, at all, to us four-dimensional beings. That's commonplace in modern physics now—do you know this? I hope you know this.

The idea that there are things that are real that absolutely can hardly be perceived by us at all, or likely will never be perceived by us, but by the math, they're real. That's a commonplace—this is not very strange. The idea of other dimensions overlap and

intersect with the four that we inhabit. And so the idea that there is a reality, even beings, who exist in such dimensions and can actually influence the four that we live in —it's truth that's stranger than fiction.

And if you would have tried to explain Einstein's theory of relativity to someone living one hundred years ago, they would have thought you were absolutely nuts. So probably more than 100 years ago—when did Einstein? Well, anyway, I don't know. You guys get my point. [Tim laughs] So one 150 years ago, or whatever.

And so here's what the Bible is asking us to entertain. And I would just put it before you and, to say: how do you go about explaining certain things in our world? So even, think personally. And the Bible's view of spiritual realities of which Jesus is the victorious king over—that's where the story ends—the Bible's view of the spiritual realities is such that: it's a way of thinking about our own personal lives, but also our corporate lives as a society.

So what Paul's saying here is that there is a spirit. There is a non-physical being who's apparently influencing individual humans to exploit our sinfulness and selfishness and make a horrible mess—to make a horrible mess even worse. This is right back to what this whole—all the imagery in the story of the garden of Eden is about: this presence of this mysterious, strange, evil being who's trying to exploit human selfishness to make a horrible mess.

And you might say, "That's really strange—talking snakes, and so on. So think about it this way. Think about your own personal experience. So let's say you have a relational conflict with somebody, or, just, someone in your life, and they just kind of push your buttons. And you know that it's wrong to just lash out and bite their head off, you know what I mean? Or just snap at them—and it's wrong. It's the wrong thing to do, and you know you shouldn't do it. It's totally not the right thing to do.

But you get into the moment, right? And they're saying that thing again, and they're bringing up that thing from two years ago, you know? And like, you're right here and you're like, "No, I don't want to do it. I don't know. And you just, you do it, whatever. And you totally level—you just cut them right down with a cutting comment or whatever it is.

And then, ten minutes later, what are you doing? You're regretting the fact that you did that, because you know it was wrong. You know it was wrong if you're even right up to it. You gave in to it, and then every moment leading after, you're just like, shouldn't, dang, why'd I do that again?

So this is the human experience of evil. And I think it's, actually, really true to our experience. There's a sense in which—who made that decision to just deliver that cutting comment in the moment? You did. But there's another sense in which that

impulse feels alien to me. It's me, but it's not me. That's not the me that I want to be—[Tim laughs] that was really cliche—but you get what I'm saying, right?

That's not like—I don't want to be that kind of person and I know it. My virtuous, "good self" knows that that's not—what is this thing inside of me that makes me do this? We use this kind of language, right? And so this is not, like, just—you know, "silly devil under every bush." This is the Bible's way of getting at evil, our experience of evil. It's as if there is this influence exploiting my weaknesses, exploiting my frailties. And these thoughts come out of nowhere, to say and do different things.

And it may or may not be influence from evil spiritual beings, or something like that. Paul doesn't always resort to this explanation. Sometimes he just says, "Yeah, dude, you're selfish and you're working out of your own selfish nature." But other times he really does believe there's outside influence here—you guys with me? And that's part of our experience of evil. It's actually not that bizarre. It's actually not that crazy.

Now here's what Paul does. Turn to chapter 6 with me. What Paul's going to ask us to entertain—and actually I'm guessing this may or may not be a new idea to some of you. Most of us—we might be familiar with what I just talked about. And we might be familiar with the silly version of it, which is of the half human, half goat creatures, with the tail and the pitchfork, and these are the "evil spiritual beings." So first of all, just get that silliness out of your head, right? So that's European Christians who imported Greek mythology into Christianity. So just get that out of your head. So the Bible's saying something different.

So the Bible would ask us to entertain a reality, or a dimension, where these beings have influence over us as individuals. The Bible would also ask us to entertain the existence of beings that have influence over whole cultures, whole societies, exploiting the collective brokenness of dozens, hundreds, thousands of human beings to make a huge, complex mess.

Look at what Paul says, in chapter 6, verse 10. He says, "Finally be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our"—talking collectively, as a community of Jesus—"listen, our struggle is not against flesh and blood."

So just pause, real quick, here. So he's in a context where many Jewish communities were still persecuting these early followers of Jesus for the blasphemous idea that a crucified Jesus was actually the Jewish Messiah. This is a context where the Roman authorities are using violence and even execution to stamp out this new movement.

And Paul has the audacity to say, "You realize, like, the Jews and Romans, yeah, that's not where our struggle is." Like, "Are you kidding? They're at my door with guns." And Paul says, "No, they're not your enemy at all, at all. Here's your enemy," he says. "Our

struggle's not against flesh and blood. It's against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." It's the same words that he used in chapter 1.

And so here's—this is a whole theme. He talks about "the powers"—in this letter, in Corinthians, in Romans, in Colossians. And Paul has this idea that this is not about "a demon under every bush," this is about: there are powers at work to influence and exploit the collective brokenness of humanity, that are working to destroy human beings.

Think of two examples, with me, that I think would illustrate what Paul's getting at. So think of something that happened fifty years ago in American culture, right? It's been called "the sexual revolution," right? Or the "sexual liberation" movement. So here's a movement that takes place, in American culture, about the "free love"—that sex and love doesn't need to be contained within the institution, and by the man, and marriage and this kind of thing. So there's: "free love, man"—you know, whatever—you got the impulse, go for it, you know?

And so here we are, fifty years later, the children and grandchildren of that great liberation—and how's that working out for our culture? You know what I'm saying? So here we are, in the generations and grandchildren-generations—post generations—and the majority of us are growing up without a mom or a dad, or without both, or maybe just one, or neither. Our culture has arrived at a place where it's just a good idea to experiment having sex with as many people as you need to. And this is a good idea in our culture.

Here we are, fifty years into this cultural movement, and it's worked *ruin* in our culture—absolute ruin, right? And so do you actually think the people at Woodstock, if they could have known what was going to happen in the next fifty years—about the millions of human beings who would have such a screwed-up view of the world because they don't have any stability at home, because marriage just became a convenience, or inconvenience for mom or dad, right?

Or the—I mean, this was just brought to my attention the other day. When the Center for Disease Control came into existence in 1946, there were two known sexually transmitted diseases. There are now twenty-seven, twenty-seven. So apparently, the sexual liberation has even invented new ways of humans destroying our own bodies—and we like it—like, we love it.

We all know, in our minds that, like, "Yes, twenty-seven sexually transmitted diseases, but I actually think it's a good idea to sleep with as many people as I can, as I want to." You're like, *what is going on?* Are we like missing something here? Like, what is going on here? Who's responsible for the sexual revolution?

So, well, how many people organized Woodstock? You know, maybe a dozen or so? I don't know. You know, this is, like, the Grateful Dead—are they responsible? Is Hollywood—Hollywood's the problem—are they responsible? You know, like, the Beatles, *The White Album*—that's definitely, you know—who's responsible for this? Nobody and everybody.

And this is precisely the kind of thing that Paul would, he would say, "the powers did." How else do you explain a whole culture of humans acting so irrationally for something that's bringing such ruin into our lives, and we just love it? We think it's great, and we just keep doing it—how do you explain that? And one of the ways Paul would appeal, he would say, "Dude, there are forces at work exploiting the collective ignorance and impulses of humanity to ruin ourselves, and we think it's a good idea." That's one example.

Let me bring it full circle, back to the 1940s, in Germany. And so here you have—of course, Hitler is a very key figure. He's not the only person. You had a whole culture—what's so important for us to recognize, as we think about World War II: Germany was, like, the pinnacle of human culture, in the 1800s—in technology and education and philosophy, everything. They were like the best thing humanity had going for it, in terms of—America was still a backwater—a bunch of hicks—back in the 1800s.

And so the most sophisticated culture on the planet, and within just fifteen years, it becomes absolutely accepted, a good idea, to eliminate the lives of millions of human beings so that our culture can progress. How do you *explain* that? And Paul would say "the powers," dude. There are powers at work, exploiting collective human brokenness to wreak havoc in our world—it's "the powers."

And so I can say lots more about "the powers," but I've actually come—this has come to be really, an important and compelling part of Christianity to me. A way of explaining the way evil works on us. *It's me, but it's not me.* And how is it that myself, and a whole culture of people, can call something that's so clearly ruining us, and we can call it good? How do you explain that? One of the ways Paul would say it: it's the powers.

Now go back to chapter 1. Let's wrap this up. Paul says this—what did he say about the powers? He said—look at verse 20 again, "God exerted his power. He raised Christ from the dead. He seated Christ at the right hand, God's right hand, in the heavenly realms, above all these rulers and authorities and powers and dominions—every name that is named," or every name that's invoked.

And almost surely here, he's talking about the practice, developed in the first century, of calling on the name of Caesar, as though he were a god. Because in Roman culture, Caesar, the king, was deified as a god. He embodied the power and authority of the state. And this is, actually, really inflammatory, what he's saying here. He got caught in

public saying this a time or two, and it landed him in prison because he's saying, actually, "the risen Jesus is the real king, and not any of these powers, and not any of the earthly powers that are being influenced, or used as puppets, in the hands of the real 'powers that be' in the world. Jesus is the true power."

And look at verse 22: "God placed all things under Jesus's feet, and appointed him to be the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." Well, slow down, Paul. Stop. [With a grin] We can only take one idea at a time.

So apparently, Paul has this idea that, in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus—so we might have this idea, like, "Yay, King Jesus. He is the king of my life. He's the king. He's the king of the spiritual world," or something. And that is not what the New Testament—what is Jesus the king of, according to verse 22? *Everything.* What's included in everything? [Tim laughs] *Everything.* Not just the spiritual dimension that we can't see, but, like, *everything.*

Now this creates a real contradiction for many of us. It's like, "Okay, so that's cool. But, like, so . . . I live in Portland. Jesus is the king of Portland. [Tim laughs] Like, that's really"—okay? We laugh because that sounds bizarre to us, doesn't it? What does that even mean? "Jesus is the king of Portland."

But look at what he says here—this had never struck me until I studied this passage to you. Look what he says here: "God made Jesus king over everything, appointed him to be the head over all things"—for what specific people? The church. In other words, Jesus is the king of everything. He's exalted even above "the powers." But does everybody recognize that fact? No.

Here's what the church is, according to Ephesians. The church is this little "fairytale land," where Jesus is actually king, and where people recognize what is true, though not everybody has eyes to see it—i.e., that Jesus's death and resurrection made him the benevolent, loving king, and leader of all of humanity. The church is this little "fairytale landscape" that is called to live as if Jesus is truly the king.

And we are called to, by the empowerment of the Spirit—and this is all what the rest of the letter is going to be about—is to allow the Spirit to create, in our midst and in our own personal lives, a little "fairytale land," where "the powers" no longer get to determine for you what is right and wrong, where you actually get to discover your humanity again for the first time, in Jesus.

And so it's a community where our view of sex becomes completely different. It becomes re-formed around the idea of a covenant-God, who loves and gives himself. And so sex is no longer a right of personal convenience. It's a gift that I have to offer

someone else, to whom I'm going to make a lifetime covenant commitment, just like Jesus made a lifetime, covenant commitment to me.

Money—in this little "fairytale landscape" of money—money is no longer simply a means to an end. Money is no longer something that I use just to survive and, just, think about myself, and my own personal needs. Money is something—it's one resource among many that I can use to help and serve the needs of others ahead of myself.

Power—money, sex, power—three gods of our age, right? So power is: we're all, like, trying to climb the little "ladders" of our own little social hierarchies. And for you, it might be your little niche, whatever, thing—I love making fun of "niche subcultures," in Portland, but—there's so many of them. They're fun to make fun of, you know? Because you think that's like—you think, like, you're at the top of the heap because like you can—you, like, collected that kind of antique guitar, or something. That's—cheers, kudos to you, [Tim laughs] you know what I mean?

But whatever, there's a little social hierarchy of people, and it's like, "Oh, he's the coolest guy because he has that kind of guitar," whatever. So all of these little hierarchies, and the cross, just, levels all of that. And he just says, "Here, in this family, we do power and influence—if you want to have influence, you go to the bottom and you just start serving and helping and meeting other people's needs like crazy. And that's how we do power here in this new family."

And so here's, really, what this prayer, kind of, all wraps up to. And you begin to see—you can see Friedrich von Bodelschwingh's life, just, parabolically enacting this prayer, can't you? When Hitler came knocking at his door, he just straight up—he just said, "That's cool—actually, it's not cool. But you've got this whole worldview thing going, and you've convinced our whole culture that that's okay, but not here. Because Jesus is king here.

And we're doing life differently. And we believe that these people's lives are actually of ultimate value and dignity, because that's what happens when Jesus reigns as king. People discover their humanity and they discover their beloved status by the creator God." And this is what Paul prays for.

So let me just put the question to you, and as we go into worship here, I just encourage you, like: What—this is true personally, but also collectively—what are the areas, personally for you—and even, just, use the list: money, sex, power—where you actually, you profess allegiance to Jesus, but your life doesn't reflect that in any way? Your life reflects a life that's controlled by "the powers," and the value system that the powers of our culture have imposed on us?

And what would it look like for you to even just start small? Start with one—money, sex, or power—what would it mean to just let one of those areas come under the influence of

King Jesus? And that you actually take that part of your life, and you rethink it in light of the community group that you're about to start, or in light of what's going on here in the community—here at Door of Hope.

Because that's what God has called us to be: a little "fairytale landscape of grace," where people can come and find refuge and good news, come out from under the influence of the powers in our culture. And that has to happen to each of us first.

I'm going to close in prayer, and I just would encourage you to take the time that remains to, just—you know, as we always do—make this a time of self-examination, but also examination of our collective life together, and how we could, together, become a more faithful witness to the reign of King Jesus in our midst.

[EMSB theme fades in]

All right, you guys, thanks for listening to "Exploring My Strange Bible" podcast. And we're going to continue on in Paul's letter to the Ephesians in future episodes. So thanks for listening.

[EMSB theme fades out]