

So *Where's* the Power? Or
A Prayer to Pray in the *Dog Days* of Summer!

Ephesians 2:1-3

There is nothing like the weather (especially the weather in Michigan) to challenge you to work out the implications of your theology. There are elements we love and elements we hate. I love warm weather. I don't like mowing on a hot, humid day. I despise shoveling snow. I really like sledding in the snow followed by a cup of hot chocolate in front of the fireplace. I love blooming flowers and a green lawn in the spring. I hate raking leaves in the fall. There is something to love or hate with all the seasons. But all in all, most of us prefer the warmer months. The same is true of life in general. We endure the winters, we wait for the spring, and we live for the summer. But even summer has a *catch* to it. We call it the *dog days* of summer. Or summer doldrums. Summer doldrums don't make us long for winters with gritty salt under our feet and tons of snow to shovel. But they tend to wear us down and make us tired and lethargic.

I think the same is true about life as a whole. Before we came to faith in Christ, we experienced the bitter, harsh cold of winter. Life in a sin-cursed can be hard and we do all we can to make it livable and enjoyable. But fireplaces and snowmobiles can only do so much. Maybe that is why currently nine of the ten fastest growing cities in terms of property values—are in Florida. But when we come to faith in Christ, spring resurrects in our hearts and we have hope and joy and a reason to live like we never had before. Then come the dog days of summer—and often with it times of spiritual indifference.

Churches cycle through the seasons as well. Because our church has a lengthy history, some of you can remember different seasonal experiences that Cornerstone has gone through in years past. Such as when the merger of Gratiot Baptist Church and Beulah Baptist Church took place back in the early eighties. Both churches had enjoyed a wonderful measure of God's blessing in the past. But in the early eighties, both were endeavoring to move out of a time of winter and back towards the spring of life. And by God's grace, that seems to have happened in the past two decades. During these years, God has placed us far beyond what anyone could have imagined back in 1983 when the merger took place. But a church is never more vulnerable to the dog days of summer than when it has basked in the rain and sunshine of spring.

So how do *we today* avoid the *spiritual dog days* of summer? What can we do to prevent the enjoyment of God's blessing giving way to our natural propensity to take God's blessings for granted and succumb to the kind of spiritual indifference that has overtaken other churches in years gone by? How do we at Cornerstone avoid what in fact happened to our nation long before the founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776? You may be asking—"what is he talking about?" Wasn't the early history of our nation the spiritual "good old days!" **Think again.** Our nation's spiritual heritage started off pretty strong when the pilgrims made the Mayflower Compact and sought to get this nation off on a good footing back in the 1620's. But the truth is that within a couple of generations, we were already experiencing alarming spiritual decline. Oddly enough, the decline began with high standards for Church Membership. But as the morals of society

declined, the tests for membership became more and more *moralistic*. They degenerated into check lists and rules than evidence of saving faith in Jesus Christ. And so church leaders began to lose sight of the Gospel of grace and the Church became increasingly occupied with personal and social improvement (*Sound familiar?!*)

To be a member of the church was to be a citizen of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (and vice versa). But since fewer and fewer citizens demonstrated the evidences of conversion, they had a crisis. Either abandon society to heathenism by excluding the unregenerate and their children from membership—or baptize the children of unconverted people to keep them “*in the church.*” This became known as the *Half-Way Covenant*. Within thirty years, the faith had largely degenerated to a “*civil religion.*” (Civil religion is where people express a general belief in God, pray to him, and pay him lip service. But it is a religion that is essentially devoid of a vital, saving faith). Couple this development with the increasing influence of the European Enlightenment that was undermining belief in the supernatural and the core issues of the faith—and suddenly you can see the spiritual leaves of early American Christianity turning color and dropping off the tree. It has always been an axiom that every church is never more than one generation removed from spiritual apostasy!

By the 1730's, things had so degenerated spiritually and theologically that the church was now in the middle of spiritual winter and in need of great spiritual awakening. And that is exactly what God did through the preaching of famous men like Jonathon Edwards and lesser known but equally powerful preachers like Asahel Nettleton. What was the secret of their power? Was it their impressive eloquence and ability to sway their audiences? No. Edward's famous sermon: “Sinners In The Hands of an Angry God” was read from a manuscript. What brought revival was the same thing that Paul prayed for in Ephesians 1:17-2:3. Let's read it and see for ourselves: “*A Prayer To Pray In The Dog Days of Summer.*”

Ephesians 1:17-23:

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.

Does this prayer strike you as unusual? Notice what he is *not* praying for. He is *not* praying for God to manifest *more power*. That has already been exerted in the cross work of Christ and in His resurrection and ascension. How much more power do you need than that?

The problem is not a power shortage—BUT a lack of *personal* connection with the infinite power of God that *already exists* and is *already at work* in us. Listen to Paul in Philippians 1:6:

*“...being confident of this, that he who began a good **work** in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

We don't need *more* of God's power. We need eyes to see the power that is already at work! This reminds me of a similar prayer that Elisha prays in 2 Kings 6:17. What is going on here is that God is giving inside information about enemy movements to Elisha so he can in turn pass the information on to the King of Israel. When the King of Syria finds out about this—he is enraged and sends an army out to pick up and presumably eliminate Elisha and anyone affiliated with him. When Elisha's servant sees that they are surrounded by a hostile enemy, he panics and says: What are we going to do. To which Elisha responds by asking God to open his servant's eyes and see what the angelic army that is already there! Can you see the parallel with Paul's prayer here in Ephesians? Think of all the wasted prayers we pray for God's power when all the power we need for all that God has promised to do has already been provided!

I know this is a scary thought—but it is entirely possible to be around the power of God *and not see it*. Think of the Sadducees in Jesus day. They were in the presence of Jesus and saw His mighty miracles. And yet He said of them: Matthew 22:29: *“You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.* Think of the religious wannabe teacher's of Paul's day—who had the “look” and “feel” of godliness and yet whose lives ultimately denied its *power* (II Tim. 3:5).

So if the power is *there*, *why* don't we see it? Or to put it another way—what should we be looking for if we are to see the power of God working in *our* lives? Excellent question! I am so glad you asked because I think that that is our biggest problem. If we define God's power the wrong way, we will completely miss it when we need it most.

Notice how Paul defines the power of God at work in our lives in verses 1-3. There is nothing about miracles—though God can and has displayed His power at times through miracles and sign gifts. But the greatest miracle of all if you will—is what God did to address the problem of our sin. When Paul asks God to open our eyes so that we can see God's infinite power—the thing he wants us to see when our eyes are opened is what God has done about our *sin*. You want to see the greatest display of God's power in human history? You are looking at it in this text. Listen to Paul's words in Eph. 2:1-3:

Ephesians 2:1-3

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Talk about power! Talk about a miracle! When the people of God understand the miracle of God's grace—that is when they have the capacity to see and be moved by his power to worship, praise, growth, witnessing—and even suffering for the cause of Christ. The reason individuals grow cold, the reason why God's power seems to fade in the church, is that we have forgotten the awfulness of our sin and our need of God's greater grace. The church is never stronger than her view of sin. You look carefully at the Great Awakening—and you will find that this awakening began with a revival of the doctrine of sin. It had nothing to do with clever evangelistic techniques. It had everything to do with people coming face to face with the awfulness of their sin. When that happens—and not until that happens—we can never appreciate grace. The doctrine of sin is the black velvet upon which the diamond of God's grace glitters. De-emphasize the doctrine of sin and suddenly grace is no longer “amazing.”

So how does Paul help us see God's power and produce in us a fresh appreciation of His grace—the sort of response that can power God's people out of the summer doldrums no matter what the temperature is outside? He reminds us of what we were and how sin affected us before we came to faith in Christ:

I. Sin affected you *relationally*— It alienated you from God (1)

Paul is saying here—remember what you were before God saved you. You were *dead in trespasses and sins*.

A. You were *dead*. Death of course means separation. When the spirit is separated from the body, *physical* death occurs. When the spirit is separated from God, *spiritual* death occurs. When the spirit and the soul are both separated from God, *eternal* death occurs. Here Paul is speaking of *spiritual* death. And the rest of Scripture reminds us that we were actually born into that condition. We were born “dead.” We had no life, no spiritual capacity to know or love God. Some like to argue with this text and say that God would never violate man's free will. God *doesn't* violate man's free will. He let's man do and choose whatever he wants. But because man is dead—he will always choose within the parameters of his spiritual condition. If you go down to the cemetery and try to coax those bodies in the grave to eat a T-Bone Steak, you will get no response. And if you try to impart spiritual truth to a spiritually dead person—you will get no response unless God first gives them new life and the capacity to please Him (Romans 8:8). John Stott puts it this way: “They are blind to the glory of Jesus Christ and deaf to the voice of the HS. They have no love for God, no sensitive awareness of his personal reality, no leaping of the spirit towards him in the cry, Abba, Father, no longing for fellowship with his people. They are as unresponsive to Him as a corpse.” Paul goes on to describe their condition as being dead...

B. *In trespasses and sins*. Or “Because of trespasses and sins.” The cause of our spiritual death is trespasses and sins. Sins we committed in Adam—and sins we continue to commit each day of our lives.

Trespasses: Speaks of a deliberate stepping over the line, a deviation from God's will.

Sins—Speaks of a failure to live up to the righteous demands of God's holy character. A falling short. A missing the mark.

Sins of omission and commission. What shouldn't do and do anyway. And what I should do and fail to do. An impossible situation. We are condemned on all counts. But that is not all....

II. Sin effected you *volitionally*—It enslaved your will (2-3a)

- A. Followed the ***ways of this world***: We are in a cultural bondage, drifting along the stream of this world's ideas of living. See I John 2:15-16:

Lusts of the flesh—biologically driven desires—sex, food etc.

Lusts of the eyes—Visually driven desires. Not just a lust for things, but a lust of looking. We turn all of creation into “eye candy” to be consumed for our personal satisfaction, irrespective of and apart from God's glory!

Pride of life—Arrogance over what we have and what we have accomplished.

We are virtual prisoners of the world's godless agenda.

- B. The ruler of the Kingdom of this world—Elsewhere identified as Satan.

Spiritual warfare is not usually a frontal assault-but from the side or the rear. Works through our flesh.

- C. Gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature (lit. flesh) and following its desires and thoughts (lit. “desires of the flesh and of the mind”). The problem is not with our desires per se—but with desires that have been wrongly directed toward the Creation rather than the Creator.

Illustration: A couple who got so angry with each other that they actually got into a gunfight (fortunately they were both poor shooters!) is qualitatively no different in God's eyes from the couple who verbally lobbs hand grenades at each other when they don't get their way! (Matthew 5:21-22).

III. Sin effected you *eternally*—It made you an object of His wrath (3b)

“By *nature* objects of wrath”

We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners! The problem is pervasive and systemic. (Explain total depravity).

David made this very clear in Psalm 51:5:

“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

It doesn't matter whether you are a fifth-generation Christian or a fifth-generation atheist, whether you are a minister or a murderer, whether you sing in the choir or in a topless bar. We are all equally guilty in God's court room.” (Michael Horton, Putting Amazing Back Into Grace, p. 59)

Paul says all this—and yet in the Greek language that he writes, he has not even completed the sentence yet. He is guilty of bad grammar but great theology. He allows a dangling participle to keep us dangling with the drama that crescendos in the words in verses 4-5: **“But God...”** Read verses 4-5:

Ephesians 2:4-5

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

So where is all this going? Paul is preparing the reader for God's call to change by reminding him in this passage of the power he possesses in Christ to make changes that he will be describing in chapters 4-6.

What are some of the evidences of God's power at work in your life?

- A. Godly, constructive communication at home and among God's people (Eph. 4:25-32).
- B. Growth in demonstrating authentic love and maintaining purity in thoughts, words, and actions (Eph. 5:1-7).
- C. Increasing sensitivity about sin and dealing with it (Eph. 5:8-14)
- D. Wisdom about what priorities really matter in life (Eph. 5:15-17)
- E. A life saturated by God's truth resulting in heartfelt praise and worship (Eph. 5:18-20; cf. Colossians 3:16).
- F. A life marked by service to others (Eph. 5:21-6:9)

And how is all this even possible?

Ephesians 3:20: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his **power** that is at work within us.”

But where does this power begin? In understanding your sin the way God does. Wanting to fight yourself out of the summer doldrums. Ask God to help you understand the greatness of His power by giving you a fresh and deeper appreciation of your sin and his grace!