

An apostle's letters. But of all the letters in history, the epistles of the apostle Paul are undoubtedly the most widely read and circulated with 100 million copies printed each year. Paul's letters continue to inform and influence Christians around the world, almost 2,000 years after they were written. Consider that without Paul's letters, no one would say:

- "Love is patient; love is kind" (1 Corinthians 13:4);
- "The one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6);
- "Let us not grow weary in doing what is right" (Galatians 6:9);
- "Bad company ruins good morals" (1 Corinthians 15:33); and
- "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).

So, what's in this letter? Paul's letters enriched the English language, right along with the Christian faith. In verses 15 and 16 of our reading, Paul writes, *"I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you."* The Christians in Ephesus are showing faith in Jesus by showing love toward each other, and this makes Paul very thankful.

But Paul is not content with the Ephesians' faith and love. He goes on to write, *"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power"* (vv. 17-19).

Empowered Christians. That's a complicated sentence, but what's clear is that Paul wants the Ephesians to continue to grow in wisdom, enlightenment, hope and most of all...power. Paul uses the word "power" twice in verse 19, and then twice more in the remainder of the passage. This power comes to us from Jesus, who is seated at God's right hand, *"far above all rule and authority and power and dominion"* (v. 21). Power is not the message we expect to hear. Faith, yes. Love, yes. Power, no. But in this letter, Paul writes to *empower* the Ephesians to be strong disciples of Jesus Christ.

Sara Zaske, a journalist with *Time* magazine, wrote about a visit to Germany where she learned an important lesson about parenting. She says, "The first time I went to a playground in Berlin, I freaked. All the German parents were huddled together drinking coffee, not paying attention to their children who were hanging off a wooden dragon 20 feet above a sand pit. Where were the piles of soft, padded foam? The liability notices? The personal-injury lawyers?" Sara was a bit concerned.

Germans are famous for being disciplined, but Sara found most German parents to be the opposite of strict. "They place a high value on independence and responsibility," she writes. "Those parents at the park weren't ignoring their children; they were trusting them." Paul, the epistoler, places a high value on independence and responsibility. He trusts his fellow Christians to make good use of the power from Jesus that is available to everyone who believes. According to Paul, God put all things under Christ's feet and *"made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body"* (vv. 22-23).

Jesus has power over all things, and he shares this power with us, the members of the church. This means that with Jesus, we are never powerless. That's the good news of Paul's letter to the Ephesians and to us. God wants us to be *"strengthened in [our] inner being with power through his Spirit"* (3:16). Paul prays that we *"may have the power to comprehend" the love of Christ* (3:18-19). Paul wants us to be *"strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power"* (6:10).

Power is clearly good, when it strengthens us spiritually. But power makes us nervous when it is exercised in the world. We associate power with politics, and we hate it when power is abused by local or national leaders. As Christians, we would rather serve a needy world than get involved in power politics.

But God put God's power to work in Jesus Christ, and God calls us to be the body of Christ in the world through the power of God's Spirit. There are good ways for us to use our God-given power to seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:17). Paul wants us to take him seriously when he speaks of *"the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power for us who believe"* (v. 19).

In Greek, there are nine different words for "power." Seven of those words appear in our passage from Ephesians.

- *Dunamis* ("dynamite") is kinetic energy, the energy of a body in motion, which makes sense because our God is in constant motion toward us and for the world.
- *Kratos* is demonstrated power, power we can see, as when God powerfully raised Jesus from the dead.
- *Kuriotates* is the power of a ruler having dominion over people or kingdoms as God is the ruler over heaven and earth.

- *Iskus* is the force used to overcome something, as when God in Jesus overpowered the forces of sin and death.
- *Energion* ("energy") refers to the effectiveness of an action, as when we flip the light switch and the energy powers the lamp.
- *Exusia* is the authority or influence we exert over others.
- *Arche* ("hierarchy") is the chain of authority or command through which power passes; in this case, God's power which comes to those who believe in Jesus through God's Holy Spirit. That's a lot of power!

Great Power. All that power is ours, Paul says, because of our faith in Jesus. With God's Spirit, we can be energy in motion (*dunamis*), demonstrating our power (*kratos*) over situations and exerting our influence (*exusia*) over the leaders and the powers of this world (*kuriotates*). Through our letter writing, our activism, and our prayers we can apply the necessary force (*iskus*) and wield the energy (*energion*) needed sway those in positions of authority (*arche*) to right the wrongs of this world. With God's power behind us, we are a powerful force for good in this world.

It doesn't matter the task we face - providing meals in our community, building homes for our neighbors, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison, lobbying for equal pay, speaking out against human trafficking, mentoring a teen – we already have within us the power we need to succeed. Paul wrote to encourage us to attempt ever greater things for God's Kingdom in the name of Jesus and by the power of God's Spirit. We have faith in the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints, says Paul, the epistoler; but we also have power – God's power, immense power, limitless power - to change the world for the better.

Prayer: Lord, I thank You for making such power available to me. Now I see that I have no excuse to ever complain that I am weak, for You have placed at my disposal the very power of the resurrection itself. Teach me how to tap into that power so it can be released in my life. I know that this power is the answer for many people's needs and that You want it to flow through me. Holy Spirit, as my Great Teacher, please teach me how to open my heart wide so the river of Your divine goodness can flow through me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sources:

- "What was the most important letter in history?" *The Atlantic*. September 2017, 104.
- Zaske, Sara. "How to parent like a German." *Time*. February 24, 2015, time.com.

Paul, the Epistoler

Sunday, May 13, 2018
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Ephesians 1:15-23

An "epistoler" is someone who writes letters. Sadly, the custom of letter writing is a dying art. Letter writing is rapidly being replaced by email, texts, and instant messages. The only things we regularly put in the mail anymore are greeting cards and payment envelopes, and we can do both online.

In the past, however, the writing of letters was an important exercise. A recent issue of *The Atlantic* magazine (Sept. 2017) listed the most important letters in history. Here are a few:

- Queen Atossa of Persia is credited with writing the very first handwritten letter in 500 B.C. She "established the genre," according to history professor Brid McGrath, "and made letters the most normal, effective form of long-distance communication for millennia."
- The "Groans of the Britons" letter, sent circa 450 A.D. by ancient Britons appealing to Rome for help in resisting invaders. When no help came, the Britons asked Germanic mercenaries to come to their assistance — leading to the Germanic takeover of Britain and the birth of the English language.
- Abraham Lincoln wrote five public letters that bolstered Northern morale and helped the Union to win the Civil War. "I am naturally anti-slavery," wrote Lincoln in the most famous of these letters. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."
- In 1939, Albert Einstein wrote a letter to President Roosevelt, suggesting the possibility of an atomic bomb. Six years later, the United States dropped nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called for nonviolent resistance to racism. That letter became the 20th century's most influential essay on civil disobedience and inspired major civil-rights legislation.
- Lastly, there is the "Golden Record" – not a written letter but a recorded message - sent into space aboard the *Voyager* spacecraft in 1977. It will probably never be heard or answered, but it contains a record of who we are as human beings.