

The Measure of Immeasurable Power

by Alexander Maclaren

The sermon emphasizes the immeasurable power of God, which is available to believers through simple trust and continuance, and encourages listeners to access this power to overcome their weaknesses and doubts.

Scripture: Matthew 2:8, Mark 5:19, Luke 7:22, John 3:15, John 14:6, John 16:25, Acts 4:23, 1 John 1:2

Topics: "Eternal Life", "Evangelism"

Description

Alfred Plummer explains that 'apaggello' means to proclaim and make known, while 'anaggello' means to proclaim again what has been received elsewhere. The root word 'aggello' is seen in English words like 'angel' and 'evangelism,' emphasizing the idea of bringing a message. The verses in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and the Epistles demonstrate the act of reporting, announcing, and proclaiming the message of Christ and His works. The Epistle of 1 John focuses on the concept of Eternal Life, emphasizing Jesus as the eternal life and the importance of sharing this truth with others for salvation.

Transcript

THE RICHES OF THE GLORY OF the inheritance" will sometimes quench rather than stimulate hope. He can have little depth of religion who has not often felt that the transcendent glory of that promised future sharpens the doubt-- "and can I ever hope to reach it?" Our paths are strewn with battlefields where we were defeated; how should we expect the victor's wreath? And so Paul does not think that he has asked all which his friends: in Ephesus need when he has asked that they may know the hope and the inheritance. There is something more wanted, something more even for our knowledge of these, and that is the knowledge of the power which alone can fulfill the hope and bring the inheritance. His language swells and peals and becomes exuberant and noble with his theme. He catches fire, as it were, as he thinks about this power that works in us. It is "exceeding." Exceeding what? He does not tell us, but other words in this letter, in the other great prayer which it contains, may help us to supply the missing words. He speaks of the "love of Christ which passeth knowledge," and of God being "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or think." The power which is really at work in Christians today is in its nature properly transcendent and immeasurable and passes thought and desire and knowledge.

And yet it has a measure. "According to the working of the strength of the might which he wrought in Christ." Is that heaping together of synonyms, or all but synonyms, mere tautology? Surely not. Commentators tell us that they can distinguish differences of meaning between the words in that the first of them is the more active and outward and the last of them is the more inward. And so we liken them to

fruit and branch and root. But we need simply say that the gathering together of words so nearly co-extensive in their meaning is witness to the effort to condense the infinite within the bounds of human tongue, to speak the unspeakable and that these reiterated expressions, like the blows of the billows that succeed one another on the beach, are hints of the force of the infinite ocean that lies behind.

And then the Apostle, when he has once come in sight of his risen Lord, as is His wont, is swept away by the ardor of his faith and the clearness of his vision and breaks from his purpose to dilate on the glories of his King. We do not need to follow him into that. I limit myself this morning to the words which I have read as my text with only such reference to the magnificent passage which succeeds as may be necessary for the exposition of this.

The Immeasurable Power

So, then, I ask you to look first at the measure and example of the immeasurable power that works in Christians.

"According to the working of the strength of the might which he wrought in Christ." The Resurrection, the Ascension, the session at the right hand of God, the rule over all creatures, and the exaltation above all things on earth or in the heavens-these are the things which the Apostle brings before us as the pattern-works, the chef d'oeuvre of the power that is operating in all Christians. The present glories of the ascended Christ are glories possessed by a man; that being so, they are available as evidences and measures of the power which works in believing souls. In them we see the possibilities of humanity, the ideal for man which God had when He created and breathed His blessing upon him. It is one of ourselves who has strength enough to bear the burden of the glory, one of ourselves who can stand within the blaze of encircling and indwelling Divinity and be unconsumed. The possibilities of human nature are manifest there. If we want to know what the Divine power can make of us, let us turn to look with the eye of faith upon what it has made of Jesus Christ.

But such a thought, glorious as it is, still leaves room for doubt as to my personal attainment of such an ideal. Possibility is much, but we need solid certainty. And we find it in the truth that the bond between Christ and those who truly love and trust Him is such as that the possibility must become a reality and be consolidated into a certainty. The Vine and its branches, the members and their Head, the Christ and His church are knit together by such closeness of union as that wheresoever and whatsoever the one is, there and that must the others also be. Therefore, when doubts and fears and consciousness of my own weakness creep across me and all my hopes are dimmed, as some star in the heavens is when a light mist floats between us and it, let us turn away to Him our brother, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, and think that He in His calm exaltation and regal authority and infinite blessedness is not only the pattern of what humanity may be but the pledge of what His church must be. "The glory that thou gavest me I have given them."

Nor is that all. Not only a possibility and a certainty for the future are for us the measure of the power that works in us. But as this same letter teaches us, we have as Christians a present scale by which we may estimate the greatness of the power. For in the next chapter, after that glorious burst as to the dignity of His Lord which we have not the heart to call a digression, the Apostle, recurring to the theme of my text, goes on to say, "And you hath he quickened." And then, catching it up a verse or two afterward, he reiterates, clause by clause, what had been done on Jesus as having been done on us Christians. If that Divine Spirit raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, it is as

true that the same power has "raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." And so not only the far-off, though real and brilliant, and eye and heart-filling glories of the ascended Christ give us the measure of the power, but also the limited experience of the present Christian life, the fact of the resurrection from the true death, the death of sin, the fact of union with Jesus Christ so real and close as that they who truly experience it do live, as far as the roots of their lives are concerned, and the scope and the aim of them, "in the heavens," and "sit with him in heavenly places"--these things afford us the measure of the power that works in us.

Then, because a Man is King of kings and Lord of lords, because He who is our Life 'Is exalted high above all principalities and powers," and because from His throne He has quickened us from the death of sin and has drawn us so near to Himself that if we are His we truly live beside Him even while we stumble here in the darkness, we may know the exceeding greatness of His power according to the working of the strength of the might which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead.

The Unknowable Power

Secondly, notice the knowledge of the unknowable power.

We have already come across the same apparent paradox covering a deep truth in the former sections of this series of petitions. I need only remind you, in reference to this matter, that the knowledge which is here in question is not the intellectual perception of a fact as revealed in Scripture but is that knowledge to which alone the New Testament gives the noble name, being knowledge verified by inward experience and the result of one's own personal acquaintance with its object. How do we know a power? By thrilling beneath its force.

How are we to know the greatness of the power but because it comes surging and rejoicing into our aching emptiness and lifts us buoyant above our temptations and weakness? Paul was not asking for these people theological conceptions. He was asking that their spirits might be so saturated with and immersed in that great ocean of force that pours from God as that they should never, henceforth, be able to doubt the greatness of that power which works in them. The knowledge that comes from experience is the knowledge that we all ought to seek. It is not merely to be desired that we should have right and just conceptions but that we should have the vital knowledge which is and which comes from life eternal.

And that power, which thus we may all know by feeling it working upon ourselves, though it be immeasurable, has its measure; though it be in its depth and fullness unknowable and inexhaustible, may yet be really and truly known. You do not need a thunderstorm to experience the electric shock; a battery that you can carry in your pocket will do that for you. You do not need to have traversed all the length and breadth and depth and height of some newly discovered country to be sure of its existence and to have a real, though it may be a vague, conception of the magnitude of its shores.

And so, really, though boundedly, we have the knowledge of God and can rely upon it as valid, though partial; and similarly, by experience, we have such a certified acquaintance with Him and His power as needs no enlargement to be trusted and become the source of blessings untold. We may see but a strip of the sky through the narrow chinks of our prison windows, and many a grating may further intercept the view. Much dust that might be cleared away may dim the glass, but yet it is the sky that we see, and we can think of the great horizon circling round and round and of the infinite depths above there which neither eye nor thought can travel unwearied. Though all that we see be but an inch in breadth and a foot or two in height, yet we do see. We know the unknowable power that passes knowledge.

And let me remind you of how large importance this knowledge of, and constant reference to, the measureless power manifested in Christ is for us. I believe there can be no vigorous, happy Christian life without it. It is our only refuge from pessimism and despair for the world. The old psalm said, 'Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, and hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands.' And hundreds of years afterward the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews commented on it thus, 'We see not yet all things put under him.' Was the old vision a dream, was it never intended to be fulfilled? Apparently so, if we take the history of the past into account, and the centuries that have passed since have done nothing to make it more probable, apart from Jesus Christ, that man will rise to the heights which the psalmist dreamed of. When we look at the exploded Utopias that fill the past; when we think of the strange and apparently fatal necessity by which evil is developed from every stage of what men call progress, and how improvement is perverted, almost as soon as effected, into another fortress of weakness and misery; when we look on the world as it is today, I know not whence a man is to draw bright hopes, or what is to deliver him from pessimism as his last word about himself and his fellows, except the "working of the strength of the might which he wrought in Christ." "We see not yet all things put under him." Be it so, "but we see Jesus," and, looking to Him, hope is possible, reasonable, and imperative.

The same knowledge is our refuge from our own consciousness of weakness. We look up, as a climber may do in some Alpine ravine upon the smooth gleaming walls of the cliff that rises above him. It is marble; it is fair; there are lovely lands on the summit, but nothing that has not wings can get there. We try but slip backward almost as much as we rise. What is to be done? Are we to sit down at the foot of the cliff, and say, 'We cannot climb, let us be content with the luscious herbage and sheltered ease below?' Yes! That is what we are tempted to say. But look! a mighty hand reaches over; an arm is stretched down; the hand grasps us and lifts us and sets us there.

"No man hath ascended up into heaven save he that came down from heaven," and having returned thither, stoops thence and will lift us to Himself. I am a poor, weak creature. Yes! I am all full of sin and corruption. Yes! I am ashamed of myself every day. Yes! I am too heavy to climb and have no wings to fly and am bound here by chains manifold. Yes! But we know the exceeding greatness of the power, and we triumph in Him.

That knowledge should shame us into contrition when we think of such force at our disposal and so poor results. That knowledge should widen our conceptions, enlarge our desires, breathe a brave confidence into our hopes, and should teach us to expect great things of God and to be intolerant of present attainments while anything remains unattained. It should stimulate our vigorous effort, for no man will long seek to be better if he is convinced that the effort is hopeless.

Learn to realize the exceeding greatness of the power that will clothe your weakness. "Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, for that he is strong in might, not one faileth." That is wonderful, but here is a far nobler operation of the Divine power. It is great to preserve the ancient heavens fresh and strong by His might, but it is greater to come down to my weakness, to "give power to the faint," and to "increase strength to them that have no might." And that is what He will do with us.

The Power at Work

Lastly, notice the conditions for the operations of the power. "To us-ward who believe," says Paul. He has been talking to these Ephesians and saying "Ye," but now, by that "us," he places himself beside them, identifies himself with them, and declares that all his gifts and strength come to him on precisely the same

conditions on which theirs do to them and that he, like them, is a waiter upon that grace which God bestows on them that trust Him.

"To us-ward who believe." Once more we are back at the old truth which we can never make too emphatic and plain that the one condition of the weakest among us being strong with the strength of the Lord is simple trust in Him, verified, of course, by continuance and by effort. How did the water go into the Ship Canal at Eastham last week? First of all they cut a trench, and then they severed the little strip of land between the hole and the sea, and the sea did the rest. The wider and deeper the opening that we make in our natures by our simple trust in God, the fuller will be the rejoicing flood that pours into us. There is an old story about a Christian father who, having been torturing himself with theological speculations about the nature of the Trinity, fell asleep and dreamed that he was emptying the ocean with a thimble! Well, you cannot empty it with a thimble, but you can go to it with one. If you have only a thimble in your hand, you will only bring away a thimbleful. The measure of your faith is the measure of God's power given to you.

There are two measures of the immeasurable power; the one is that infinite limit of "the power which he wrought in Christ" and the other the practical limit. The working measure of our spiritual life is our faith. In plain English, we can have as much of God as we want. We do have as much as we want. And if, in touch with the power that can shatter a universe, we only get a little thrill that is scarcely perceptible ourselves and all unnoticed by others, whose fault is that? And if, coming to the fountain that laughs at drought and can fill a universe with its waters, we scarcely bear away a straitened drop or two that barely refreshes our parched lips and does nothing to stimulate the growth of the plants of holiness in our gardens, whose fault is that? The practical measure of the power is for us the measure of our belief and desire. And if we only go to Him, as I pray we all may, and continue there and ask from Him strength according to the riches that are treasured in Jesus Christ, we shall get the old answer, "According to your faith be it unto you."

Amen

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