

Trump Cards
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There was a pastor working in China some years ago. He was under house arrest, when suddenly soldiers came to his house one day and said, “You can return to America.”

As the pastor was celebrating, the soldiers said, “You can take 200 pounds with you.” Well, the pastor and his family had been in China for several years. They got out the scales and began arguing what to take – the new type writer, the antique vase, books, clothes, souvenirs. They weighed everything, putting each item on the scales, taking them off, and putting on various combinations of items. Finally, they got their configuration correct and they got it right on the dot – 200 pounds exactly.

A soldier asked them, “Are you ready to go?” - “Yes.”

“Did you weigh everything?” - “Yes.”

“You weighed the kids?” - “No, we didn’t.”

“Weigh the kids.” And in that moment, the type writer, the vase, and every other item became insignificant trash.

I like this story because it is a lesson in perspective. Often, what we think is important really doesn't mean a thing in the grand scheme of things. Perspective is what keeps us grounded and allows us to prioritize what truly matters in life.

Today's text from Ephesians is a great text for gaining perspective. You see, Paul wrote this letter while he was imprisoned. Yet, he still authors this beautiful passage which is filled with thanksgiving and hope. Seeing as how Thanksgiving is just around the corner, it's appropriate to recognize that Paul first gives thanks for these believers in Ephesus. He prays for them daily, but we also see that he is encouraged by them. Paul was certainly able to seek out the good around him, and his faith kept him filled with a keen sense of hope despite the dire situation in which he found himself. Talk about seeing the glass half full!

We would be wise to learn from Paul, as I believe we all can use a good dose of perspective – daily! We need perspective in our personal lives and we need perspective as a society. We must teach perspective to our children and grandchildren. If a child has perspective, a tantrum won't be thrown over a lost toy; if a teenager has perspective, a break-up won't be considered the end of the world; and if an adult has perspective, a lost job or a divorce doesn't mean one is a failure. Change, losses and other disappointments become manageable when we have perspective.

The past ten years have certainly ushered in a whole new reality in the US. Our society has been forced to deal with a lot of changes. Our nation's security is threatened by shady enemies without borders. Our economy has weakened. Many good jobs have moved overseas. The list goes on and on. Here are the kinds of sound bytes we hear or read daily:

“We are on the brink of economic Armageddon.”

“If the Euro fails, Europe fails.”

“Will we ever be able to right our sinking ship?”

These kinds of headlines make us anxious. My heart starts beating a bit faster. My mind begins to race and envisions wild scenarios. The anxieties we all ready carry around are exacerbated. It becomes downright hard not to become depressed and hopeless amidst this continual flurry of alarms and negativity.

So how can we muster up enough perspective to combat all the hype and negativity? After all, as Christians, aren't we supposed to be a hopeful people? We are meant to be a thankful and joyful people. I think we can gain more perspective if we pause and put the intensity of the moment into a larger context. There is always this idea that things were better “back in the day.” But, I always ask myself, “when exactly was life so perfect in the US or anywhere?” In the past century we have at least a war or two per decade. I think the 50's are often idealized, but this decade still had its problems. It was a time of great conformity,

with little tolerance for diversity. Racial segregation, either formal or informal, was the norm for most of the nation. Many economists argue that during the 50's and 60's we were living in a false economy. Our businesses and industry were thriving because much of Europe and Japan had been completely destroyed during World War II. I guess that every decade and every year brings its share of highs and lows. At no time has life ever been perfect.

And, today is probably no more volatile than any other time in history. Unemployment is hovering around 9%. That's high, but on the other hand, that means that we have 91% employment. That's not bad at all. Despite some flaws and need of reform, many of our government agencies are functioning quite well. We have not had another attack on US soil since 9/11. We might all do well to take a weekly Sabbath from the news, and learn that, in fact, the world isn't coming to an end. It only takes a quick trip beyond our nation's borders to remember how what a blessing clean water, decent roads, internet, libraries, social security, etc. are.

I'm in no way trying to gloss over many of the issues that we face as a nation. The issues are incredibly important. We need to reduce our spending and live within our means. Our role as being the world's consumers isn't sustainable. Surely something can be done to share the wealth and resources of this nation in a more just and equitable way. I'm encouraged that so many people getting out into

the streets, protesting for change and working to get the country back on the right track. I am just advocating that, in the midst of all of the changes, the turmoil, we remember what the bottom line of our existence is: that we are the beloved and redeemed people of God, and we are always in God's care – in this world and in the next.

This is what today's text is all about. We are able to gain perspective from it (and so much more) because it is a poetic blessing concerning all the things God has done for believers. It is chock-full of good news! This blessing moves from faith and love to hope, showering the reader with these life-giving truths.

I am drawn to the way in which Paul notes that we, believers, are on a faith journey. Paul prays that, "God 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." We are on the way to fuller understanding, but we have not yet arrived. God is still very much at work in each of our lives, molding us, filling us and carrying us through each day.

As we journey together, we should keep some crucial points in mind. First, Paul asserts that, "Christ is at God's right hand," and thus, God and Christ are with us wherever we are. How comforting to know that if we are alone, if we are in a hospital bed, if we are far from home, if we are even in prison, God is with us.

This being Christ the King Sunday, this text affirms that it is Christ who is over all other ruling powers, leaders and authorities. We are no longer - in any ultimate sense - under their control, whether they be understood as supernatural or earthly. We are freed from them and freed for love of God and love of neighbor. What wonderful news!

Finally, this passage pulls out all the stops as it depicts the heavenly status of Christ. Christ breaks every spatial barrier that we can imagine and every temporal barrier as well: "not only in this age but also in the age to come." So, we are under Christ's loving care and providence in this world and in the next.

When I was growing up, nearly every weekend my family celebrated what we called, "Party night", on Friday night. Our dear family friends, the Cashings, either joined us at our place or we went to theirs for pizza. Afterwards, while we kids were off playing somewhere, the adults all sat at the kitchen table playing a few hours of "500." Have any of you ever heard of this game or played it? Well, if you have, you have a partner in me, as my brother, his wife, and anyone else who spends some time with our family quickly becomes indoctrinated to this game. We play whenever any members of our family get together.

It's a lot like Hearts or Spades or even Euchre. You have a partner and you are trying to take tricks. Bids are made and a trump suit is determined. Trump

cards are the power cards. A trump card can be played and they override the power of other suits. It's a very good thing to have a hand full of trump cards.

Today's text reminds us that we have a pocket full – or rather a life full – of trump cards wherever we go. Christ is in control. We are under his care. When our perspective shifts to the profound blessings we all have in Christ, then instead of scarcity we have the abundance Christ promises. All conflicts lose their significance when Christ becomes the all in all.

As we celebrate the Reign of Christ, we are reminded, through this great prayer in Ephesians, of an inheritance that is much, much more than individual riches or even a beautiful heaven that awaits. It is the gift of being loved by God, joined to Christ's body, becoming an authentic community, to journey alongside one another in the way of Jesus Christ. The next time the news seems too depressing or you're your life is out of control – remember to seek perspective. These trump cards declared in Ephesians should help. Hallelujah! Amen.