

“My dear friend Wendy has trained thousands of women in practical theology through her teaching ministry. I am delighted to see her helpful wisdom now being made available to many more women through this book.”

—**Mark driscoll**, Pastor and Founder, Mars Hill Church;
President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network;
President, Resurgence



Practical Theology for Women

How Knowing God Makes a Difference
in Our Daily Lives

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CROSSWAY BOOKS

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To my husband, Andy,
God's instrument of grace and sanctification in my life—
your wisdom and discernment constantly amaze me.
I love you!

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Preface:
Who Am I?

*B*efore we begin our discussion of why women need theology, I want to share with you a little about who I am and what theology has meant to me. My name is Wendy Alsup, and I am deacon of women's theology and training at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. I am from a relatively small town in the low country of South Carolina. My parents were saved shortly after I was born and were faithful to take us to church every Sunday. I came to understand my need for Jesus at an early age and began my walk with him. During hard times I found comfort, even as a teenager, reading Scripture. God always met me in my need through his Word. Eventually, I headed to Bible college and, afterward, on to graduate school, getting a master's degree in math education.

During the years between college and graduate school, I spent time teaching in South Korea. While there, I developed type-1, insulin-dependent diabetes. It was months before I realized what was going on, and it took another year to figure out how to regulate this condition and regain my health. It was during this time that

God convinced me of the unique power of Scripture to change lives. I was home from Korea, trying to regulate my blood sugars. On one particular day I exercised, meticulously measured what I ate, and took the appropriate amount of insulin—I did everything right. But when I checked my blood sugar that evening, it was very high. I was devastated. I had grown up thinking that sickness was God’s judgment on me, and now I thought back on all the ways I had failed God during that day. Based on my understanding of God, having uncontrollable diabetes seemed just retribution for all I had done wrong. I felt condemned.

I managed to crawl over to my one-year Bible (which actually took me three years to read) and found the reading for that day. I wasn’t searching for Scripture to make me feel better—I want to emphasize that this was the scheduled reading for that day. It was from John 9:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:1–3)

Then Jesus healed the man, giving further evidence of his power as God. I wept as I read this. In that moment I realized his Word is supernatural and living, and it is his means of speaking personally to me as an individual. And from that day on, I never again saw my diabetes as judgment from God. Instead, it was an avenue to bring him glory. I didn’t know how he was going to do it, but I trusted from that day on that he was going to use my diabetes for good and not for punishment in my life. This was a radical change to my thinking.

In time, I met my husband, Andy, whom God would use to continue to change my life. I was the good girl who did as I

was expected to do. Andy, on the other hand, was a cynic who sometimes got labeled as rebellious. He challenged a lot of the religious traditions I embraced, forcing me to think through why I did what I did. In our first year of marriage, we landed in a rural church pastored by a Reformed evangelical pastor. He preached through Galatians, Ephesians, and Jonah, and something clicked in both our heads. I had known every Bible story from childhood, but they sat in my brain like a filing cabinet full of separate folders. Under this pastor's teaching, I started to see the connections between Jonah and the gospel, between Judges and Jesus Christ. The Scripture stopped being a series of disjointed moral lessons and started being the connected, coherent revelation of the person of Jesus Christ. It was a beautiful time for both Andy and me.

In the midst of this time of growth in understanding Scripture, the Lord started working in our hearts, as a couple, about helping a new church in Seattle. After the Lord convinced us that this was his will for us, Andy and I made plans to move from South Carolina to Seattle. This began a two-year journey of faith in which God taught us many things about himself. We made plans, because that's what responsible people do. We counted the cost and had a good perspective on the way we should go. But God had a different path for us to travel, and we seemed thwarted at every turn in our attempts to make it happen.

In particular, despite all his best efforts, Andy couldn't find a job. He went without full-time employment for nearly a year. As the time approached for us to move to Seattle with still no job on the horizon, I came into Sunday evening worship at our rural southern church ready to throw in the towel. Nothing was going right, Andy and I seemed attacked on many different sides, and, simply put, Andy needed a job. I had talked Andy into applying for a job in South Carolina, because I had given up hope of finding a job in Seattle. Then, on that Sunday evening, I walked into

church to seek counsel on giving up the whole idea of helping a church in Seattle. I ran into one of our elders before the service. I told him my frustration, and he reminded me that God is faithful, he keeps his promises, and he doesn't lead us to places and then leave us alone to deal with the consequences. Then I ran into another elder and his wife. They told me emphatically not to give up and shared their testimony of how the Lord had used a tough financial time to mold them to his image. I told the wife that I just wanted to fast-forward to the time when this was all over. She told me, "No! The journey is as beautiful as the destination. The trials now, this entire pruning process, are a good thing." Then she recounted the blessing the Lord had worked in their lives through his time of pruning them. Next, I ran into another friend. I told her that the Lord had paid a lot of bills with a little bit of money, but surely it had to run out at some point. Her response was simply, "No, it doesn't."

That little rebuke hit me in the gut. No, the money doesn't have to run out. Yes, the widow's oil lasted until she no longer needed it. The five loaves and two fish fed five thousand plus, and then they had twelve baskets left over. I knew all these Bible stories, so why did I have so little faith? Why couldn't I believe for the long haul that God would meet every need? Why wouldn't I admit confidently with David, "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread" (Psalm 37:25)? I knew in theory that God does all these things, and yet my knowledge of God was still only just starting to meet me in the practical issues of life.

Eventually, the Lord did provide a great job for Andy in Seattle. But he did it in such a way that we would *never* forget that the job came from his hand. While we were still waiting to hear whether Andy would have a job in Seattle, we had to decide whether to go ahead with the move. We had felt strongly for several years that

the Lord wanted us to be involved with church work in Seattle. We sold our house and furniture to get ready for that move and planned to go to Seattle as soon as I finished graduate school. Yet, even after years of responsible planning, when the day came to move we still had no jobs or vehicles or the means by which to get them. Despite our best-laid plans, we were broke, paying rent for a shack in Seattle, and needing to buy a vehicle (though neither of us had any income) in order to haul our things in a trailer across the country.

Since I was in education, we had a small window for moving between the end of graduate school and the beginning of any teaching assignments I might be able to get in Seattle. As the deadline approached for moving, friends and family came to help us load up the car and trailer, which was paid for on credit extended to us by the grace of God. As we drove out of our neighborhood, I felt like I was stepping off the side of a cliff, trusting that in the mist there was something under my feet on which to step. I prayed, as we pulled out of our neighborhood in South Carolina, that God would not allow us to leave the state if he didn't want us in Seattle. We had completely exhausted our cash reserves. This truly was my crisis point. Driving out of South Carolina with all my belongings in an eight-by-ten trailer symbolized walking right off the edge of that cliff.

Two hours later, as we pulled into the Georgia State Welcome Center, Andy got a call from the company that would eventually become his employer in Seattle. They were definitely interested in hiring him and were checking his references. That may not sound like much to you now, but I can't describe how that moment is etched in my memory. All of a sudden, I felt like God rolled back the clouds for a moment and gave me a glimpse of himself I had never seen before. Was that how Abraham felt when he found the ram in the bushes and became the first to call God Jehovah-jireh,

God-provider? How did Elijah feel when God sent down the fire to burn up the altars after they had been doused with bucket after bucket of water? I sobbed the entire time we were at the welcome center, humbled not just by what God had done but also by how he had done it. We caught a glimpse of the splendor of God, his sovereign control over the details of life, and his intimate awareness of our lives. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God wanted us in Seattle and had a definite plan for us. My theology was becoming very practical.

Andy and I basked in the beauty of God's provision of a job for a while. I started a new job as well, teaching math at the local community college. We enjoyed our first few weeks in Seattle, began attending our new church, and got settled into a community group. We had learned profound lessons and thought we had conquered the worst in life by surviving a year of unemployment. Then, six weeks after Andy began his job, we entered the next phase of testing and strengthening.

We found out that what we originally thought was asthma was actually a life-threatening heart condition that required immediate surgery for Andy. As Andy, pale-faced with wavering voice, informed me of the prognosis from his doctor's visit, we were both confronted with our need to claim, in that pivotal moment, all we knew about the character of God. Andy was twenty-five years old. We had been married for just a few years. We weren't supposed to be dealing with open-heart surgery at this stage of life.

The morning of Andy's surgery, I had to say good-bye to him at 6:30 AM. The nurses dropped me off in the surgery waiting area before they rolled him into surgery pre-op. I sat in the darkened waiting area completely by myself, stunned and numbed by the enormity of what we were facing. To my surprise, just fifteen minutes later, at 6:45 AM, the first couple from our community group at church walked through the waiting room doors. Kevin

was a medical student at the hospital and later had to leave to begin his rounds. His wife, Missy, brought muffins and stayed with me for several hours. More friends, all new acquaintances from community group, came in during the morning. Some had to leave, and new ones came to take their place. At any one time, we probably had at least four people from our church talking and laughing with Andy's parents and me during the entire surgery. After the surgeon finally came out to give us a report, our friends thanked God with us, promised to be back the following day, and went home.

Before I could see Andy, he had to be moved to the cardiothoracic intensive care unit and stabilized. So I went outside the hospital to use my cell phone to call friends and family with the news that he had made it through surgery. As I walked back into the hospital lobby after making my calls, I heard two frantic announcements over the loud speaker for Andy's surgeon to return to the intensive care unit STAT. I knew immediately that something was wrong. What I didn't know was that Andy's heart had stopped, and he had to be revived and taken back in for another open-heart surgery. I was alone in the hospital lobby when I heard the calls to Andy's doctors to return to his side STAT. That was a freakish, surreal moment—I knew that something had gone very wrong by the sound of the announcements, but I went up the wrong elevator at the hospital, and it took a very long time to get to the right place to find out what was happening. The Lord and I had a frank encounter in that lobby as I tried to convince him I couldn't live without Andy, while he reminded me that he is holy, and the outcome of this thing would be good and right for his name's sake. Again, the practical nature of theology became extremely important to me.

By the time I finally found the intensive care unit, Kevin, the medical student from our church, was in the waiting area with

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Andy's parents. He too had heard the announcement and was able to go behind the scenes and find out for us what was happening. He let us know the specifics of the problem but protected us from the knowledge of how close Andy was to dying. Later that evening, after Andy was stabilized, one of the pastors from church came by to see us. I had never met him before, but he lived close to the hospital and talked with me for a long time. He gave me his cell phone number and told me to use their home for showers or rest any time. I smiled politely, thanked him, but never considered taking him up on the offer. Honestly, I just didn't know him or his wife well enough to impose on them.

Like a good wife, I planned to spend the nights with Andy. I made it through one night in the hospital, but around 10 PM on the second or third night, Andy's heart got off rhythm. It wasn't incredibly serious, but on top of my sleep deprivation, it sent me over the edge. I humbly fished out the cell phone number for the pastor who lived around the corner from the hospital, though I was formerly too proud to even contemplate inviting myself over. I was barely coherent as I sobbed my need for a place to sleep. He had me walk to their house. It was the night before Thanksgiving. He and his wife put a fire log in the fireplace and made up their sofa bed with lots of comfortable blankets. They made me a cup of tea, put their arms around me, prayed with me, and tucked me into bed.

That was an important week in my life theologically. Not only did our church in Seattle constantly meet our needs, but several elders from our church in South Carolina flew out to be with us as well. I finally began to understand the theological concept of the body of Christ. These Christians—the body of Christ in Seattle, Washington, that I barely knew, and the body of Christ in South Carolina that I knew well—were Christ's hands and feet.

They were being exactly what the church is commanded to be in 1 Corinthians 12:24–27:

But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (NIV)

When my personal pride threatened to curb my willingness to accept help, the Lord reminded me of Matthew 25:35–40:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

Each gift of coffee and muffins, each offer of a meal or errand run, each dish washed and cycle of laundry done for me, all of these were ministries directly to Christ as well as to me. It was neat to meditate on the mystery of Matthew 25 as I watched the body of Christ serve Andy and me over and over again.

As only God can do, the months of sickness, worry, and recovery actually were a very sweet time for our marriage. By the time Andy had recovered from that surgery, we were well convinced of God’s uncanny ability to turn horrible circumstances into precious treasures. The process of learning to trust God continued

as we miscarried our first child a few months later and entered a season of infertility. Once again, our brothers and sisters in Christ ministered to us in ways that revealed precious glimpses of God's character and splendor. Looking back at those trials, I am reminded of the truth of God's character that I so often forget. Our trials, though painful for us, brought about wonderful fruit in our lives. Like Moses in Exodus 33, we caught a glimpse of God's glory, and it was the most beautiful thing we have ever seen.

Before moving to Seattle, we had the novel idea that we wanted to help start a church that would communicate sound theology in a culturally relevant way. Then we stumbled upon one and realized God was well ahead of us in that plan. I began volunteering there shortly after we moved to Seattle and continued throughout Andy's convalescence. The church intrigued me. It looked like a well-oiled machine from the outside, and I wondered about its secret to success. I soon learned there was no magic formula. I found a group of humble servants who believed Scripture, submitted to the Holy Spirit, and willingly endured the chaos that followed. During this time I got to know two deacons, who later became elders. After several months of conversations with them, we began to sense the Spirit leading me toward a leadership role in our loosely organized women's ministry. In time, I became deacon of women's theology and teaching.

Those months of volunteering in the church office were of immense value to me. I had walked into the church thinking I had something to offer them. After all, I was raised in the church and had even attended Bible college. After listing my spiritual résumé to the office staff, they nodded politely and stuck me in a windowless room filling out bank deposit slips by myself. It was humbling that they didn't immediately ask me to counsel women or teach a class. But they had enough experience with so-called mature Christians to know I needed a season of testing. They gave me a

job that I couldn't ruin through a personal agenda. That allowed me to come to a better understanding of the church culture and allowed church leadership to get to know me. I needed that time to get to know the people of Seattle to which our church ministered. It was a culture that was very different from the one in which I was raised. I learned during this time to shut my mouth and listen to the ideas of others instead of projecting my preconceived notions onto them.

In my years of listening to the women here, I have come to dearly love and respect their stories of redemption and transformation. My sisters in Christ fit no stereotype. Purple hair, nose rings, and tattoos aside, our women have a variety of backgrounds, interests, and struggles. But their lives testify consistently of the power of the gospel to radically transform lives. One woman in a class I recently taught first came to church to rescue her boyfriend from our church, which she thought of as "this cult." He had come home after attending a service and informed her they could no longer sleep together. This local college student figured if she listened to the preaching for a few weeks, she could eventually disprove the pastor. Instead, she came to Christ, went through our gospel class, and ended up in the Practical Theology for Women class. Now she and her boyfriend are married, growing in Christ, and preparing for future ministry. Her testimony is just one of many. God has shown his power to radically transform lives again and again through the women of this church.

I thank God daily for the gift of ministry he has given me in my church and home. God has called me to be a wise and prudent helper to my husband (Genesis 2:18; Proverbs 19:14) and a faithful mother to my boys. I am often tempted to find my identity and value in ministry outside my house, but God regularly reminds me that finding my identity and value in anything other than

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him is idolatry. I seek to be a good steward of my ministries in the order of priority God has set—husband, children, and then outside ministry. My husband highly values my opinion, but when we disagree, I willingly submit to him (Ephesians 5:22–33). I love our elders and submit to their leadership as well.

As you will see in the following chapters, it is my deepest conviction that what God teaches about himself in his Word is of utmost importance to the issues of my personal daily life. That's the heart of my ministry to women. As you read this book, I hope you too catch the vision of the power of theology to transform us as women where it counts most.

Part *one*

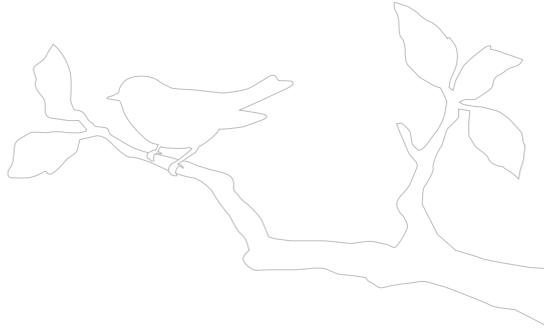
What Is Theology?

What exactly is *Practical Theology for Women*? As a starting point for this discussion, I'll use a conversation I had with a friend one Sunday afternoon when we talked about what we were learning at our respective churches. When I brought up a doctrinal issue my pastor had mentioned in his message, my friend, who attended another good church in our town, said to me that she studies the Bible only for its practical application and avoids getting involved in discussions of the deep things of the Word of God. She did not feel it was wise for her personally to dive too deeply into the Bible. She simply wanted a “thought for the day” from her Bible reading, kind of like a cheesy Christian desk calendar. During our conversation, I realized that she, like many Christians, viewed the Bible as two separate tracks—the simple, practical, everyday application stuff for the average Christian, and another, perhaps higher, level of spiritual study reserved for pastors and seminary graduates. While that may reflect what we see playing out in the church today, it is *not* a biblical concept.

Perhaps you ask, why write a theology book specifically geared toward women? Is this theology different from what should be in a book for men? Absolutely not! But for some reason, most theology books are written by men and aimed at a predominantly male audience. With this book, I hope to fight the unspoken mentality that theology is for men, while parenting, sewing, or dieting classes are for women. I have heard some

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women argue that they don't want to know more theology than their husbands know. They seem to fear that studying theology will turn them into theological Amazon queens who naturally relegate their husbands to some second-class position in the home. But this is a terrible way to think about theology. God forbid that women should avoid studying the deep things of the Word lest they surpass the understanding of the men in their lives! Studying theology—such as the Holy Spirit's role in convicting man of sin, and God's sovereignty over all creation—will curb, not enhance, a woman's sinful tendency to nag and manipulate her husband. My husband can bear witness to the fact that a better understanding of God's character, that is, theology, makes me a better wife. No matter where our husbands, fathers, or pastors may be in their spiritual journey, when we ladies grow in our understanding of God's character and attributes, it can only be a blessing for our homes, our marriages, and our churches.



1

Why Should I Care?

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, *theology* is defined in three ways:

- 1) The study of the nature of God and religious truth.
- 2) A system or school of opinions concerning God and religious questions: *Protestant theology*; *Jewish theology*.
- 3) A course of specialized religious study usually at a college or seminary.¹

The definition begins by stating that theology is “the study of the nature of God.” However, many Christians perceive theology as just part 3 of the definition—“a course of specialized religious study usually at a college or seminary.” Is that what the study of

God should be? Should the study of God and deep religious truth be restricted to the academic elite at colleges and seminaries? Why do so many Christians believe that theology is a special topic for a select few in the body of Christ and not meant for the average man or woman sitting in a church pew?

No one can say for sure why so many Christians (like my friend whom I mentioned in the introduction) are content for the pastors and elders of a church to be the keepers of the deep knowledge of God, so long as they pass along a practical tidbit each week to help the average church attendee through his daily life. Perhaps the key is that Christians today often believe that the deep things of God—doctrine and theology—are not practical, and that the practical things of the Bible are not deep. But this type of thinking flies in the face of simple biblical principles, two of which we'll look at now.

Knowing God Is Practical

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov. 9:10). Most church attendees admit that they need wisdom. Each Sunday many come to church hoping for the preacher to give some principle that they can apply to their lives in the coming week that will make them a wiser parent, spouse, employer, or employee. Proverbs 9:10 holds the answer. The Bible repeatedly says that wisdom in practical daily living is preceded by “the fear of the LORD” and “the knowledge of the Holy One.”

“And he said to man,
‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom,
and to turn away from evil is understanding.’”
(Job 28:28)

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The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever! (Psalm 111:10)

The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom,
and humility comes before honor. (Proverbs 15:33)

It's obvious from these Scriptures that wise, practical daily living is preceded by a knowledge of God that leads to fear, awe, and reverence of him, his power, and his purposes. In other words, *theology is the root, foundation, and framework for practical living that reflects wisdom and understanding.*

Christ Is Our High Priest

“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

I'll sum up the second biblical principle on the importance of theology with the phrase “the priesthood of Christ.” Hang with me while I explain. In the Old Testament, God set up a system for entering into his presence in the temple. His dwelling place was called the Most Holy Place and was separated from the rest of the temple by a heavy veil or curtain. Once a year, only the high priest could pass through the veil and enter the Most Holy Place. This high priest was the mediator or middleman between the average Jew, who remained in the outer part of the temple, and God, who dwelled in the Most Holy Place. Before entering the Most Holy Place, however, the high priest was required to offer a blood sacrifice “for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people” (Hebrews 9:7).

In the new covenant (New Testament), Jesus Christ has become our great High Priest. Hebrews 8–10 tells us that Christ's death on the cross satisfied the penalty for the sins of mankind. His death fulfilled the bloody sacrificial system, making Christ the

final perfect sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Rather than doing away with the Old Testament system, he fulfilled it (see Matthew 5:17–20). Now, Christ is the mediator—the middleman between all Christian believers and God. Hebrews 10:19–22 reveals the implications of this truth:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Through Christ, each of us has access to God's throne room and can boldly draw near to God in full assurance of faith. Upon salvation, we have Christ as our mediator and intercessor before God. He is our High Priest. We are not dependent upon another priest, pastor, the Virgin Mary, or any other spiritual authority figure to intercede on our behalf before God. If you know Christ as your Savior, you have the same Holy Spirit residing in your heart, the same Word of God at your fingertips, and the same access to the presence of God as the wisest and most godly spiritual leader you know of today. It's a copout to leave the deep things of God to the pastors and seminary graduates when, in Christ, we have the same access to God that they do. That was never what God intended.

Don't be content with the Christian desk calendar approach to Christianity. Don't be satisfied with a daily practical saying or some three-step process for being a good wife or a better friend. God has both called you and equipped you to know him. We have no excuse to remain ignorant of his character. Seek God's face. Understand his character. Pursue knowledge of him, for apart

from the “fear of the Lord” and “the knowledge of the Holy One” (Proverbs 9:10) we have no hope for being a wise mother, sister, wife, or friend.

So, what is theology and why should I care? Theology is basically just the study of God—who he is and what he does. Proverbs says that such knowledge of God is the foundation for wise living. So we study theology that we may know God and be enlightened to the benefits of our relationship with him. This is a supernatural journey with God. As Paul prays for believers in Ephesians 1:17–20, we are dependent on God our Father to give us “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,” that we may “know what is the hope to which he has called [us], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe.” I hope you will adopt this as your prayer as well, for you cannot unlock this on your own.

Paul goes on to explain that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is the power at work in us who believe. So our journey now, in prayer to God and study of his Word, begins with learning of his character and work and then examining our lives to see if our responses daily reflect belief in our glorious inheritance in him. This leads us into the next chapter.