

**Secrets of Abundant Living:
CONSTANT LEARNING**

Ephesians 1:15-23

*The Christian life is a
life-long learning process.*

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Secrets are valuable commodities. That's why cybersecurity is such a big issue nowadays. Nobody wants to get hacked and have their secrets stolen. Corporations have secrets to their products. The military has secret weapons and operations. The government has whole agencies dedicated to secrets. They have to be kept safe.

Many of us have secret recipes that must be protected. I could tell you the secret to my chili recipe, but then I would have to kill you. When I was in college, our family had a favorite restaurant, and the restaurant had a unique dessert drink called "Mr. G's Special." It was sweet and creamy and so good, but the recipe was a secret. My brother got to know the maître d', Mr. G himself, and begged him for the recipe. Finally, he told my brother that if he got into medical school, he would reveal the secret recipe for the drink. The day my brother got into med school, he and my parents went to celebrate at that restaurant, and Mr. G revealed the mystery of that delicious dessert. To this day, my brother still makes "Mr. G Specials" on occasion.

Throughout human history, there have been secrets surrounding God and religion. Spiritual knowledge has remained mysterious; the Greeks even had what they called "mystery religions." When Christianity began, one of the ways the Gospel was proclaimed was to say that the mysteries of the ages had now been revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, reminding them "*how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, ...In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*"¹ In Jesus Christ, the mystery of God was made clear; the secrets were revealed. And these secrets made it possible to live a life of abundance. Jesus said, "*I have come that they may have life in all its abundance.*"²

These secrets are valuable. They are still worth knowing, because we still want to live a life that is abundant in every way—physically, spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and missionally. So for a few weeks, we are going to walk through Paul's Letter to the Ephesians as he reveals the secrets of abundant living in Christ.

The first secret we want to reveal today is **THE SECRET OF CONSTANT LEARNING**. The Christian life is always a process of growth. We never arrive at the destination until we enter the kingdom of heaven. There is always more to learn.

Early in my ministry, one of the most influential books I read was *Leaders* by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus. While I was trying to learn how to lead a church, these guys were interviewing the top CEO's of corporations across America. They were trying to discover the secret of effective leadership (and so was I). In their interviews, they found that there was one characteristic that all of these leaders in business shared. It wasn't their family background or their personal style or their education or any other external factor. What Bennis and Nanus discovered was that to a person, "Leaders are perpetual learners."³ No matter how long you are at the head of an organization, you have to maintain your curiosity and openness to emerging knowledge and situations. You never know it all, because "all" changes rapidly.

Christians who know the secret of abundant living are also perpetual learners. The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the grace and love of God are deep and wide, and you can spend a lifetime trying to understand the concepts and implement the strategies.

It's not like riding a bike. You don't just progress to a certain level of competency, and then you quit. If someone asked me if I could ride a bike, I would tell him yes, because I can. I learned how to ride as a child, and I rode for exercise when I was younger. I haven't ridden much at all in the last thirty years. I will never enter the *Tour de France*, but when I get a notion, I can get on a bike and ride.

Being a Christian doesn't work that way. Without the Christian way as your rule of life day by day, without constantly learning and relearning the mysteries of God, you won't have the foundation in faith, the knowledge of Scripture, the well-nurtured relationship with God that will give you wisdom and hope and power you need in the difficult times of life.

You've heard people say this: "Well, I learned to be a Christian when I was a child. I grew up in church. I got baptized when I was 13. But I haven't been to church much in twenty years. But yeah, I'm a Christian, and that's my church." The

heart-breaking thing is, it doesn't work that way. When tragedy strikes—death, disease, divorce, accidents, hardship—if you haven't kept up with your training, it's like trying to ride the *Tour de France* on a tricycle. You just don't have the equipment to handle the journey.

On the other hand, if your Christian life is a process of perpetual learning, you will have what you need to live the abundant life Jesus offers, regardless of what troubles come your way. I believe that because I have seen it work.

In the opening prayer of Ephesians, Paul gives hints about what this abundant life looks like. These are the outcomes of constant, life-long learning about the faith.

Constant learning grows wisdom. Paul prays “*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.*”⁴ The more you learn, the more you know. The more you study, the more is revealed. Over the course of time, your knowledge becomes not just knowledge *about* God, but knowledge *of* God. You come to know Christ in a personal relationship. You become wise.

An issue of *Outside* magazine several years ago had an article about Reid Stowe, a 58-year-old sailor who at the time was en route to setting the record for the longest sea voyage in history without resupply. Reid told the magazine: “I've learned a lot about myself ... I've learned that we as humans must explore. We must see and discover new things, or we degenerate. My hope is that this voyage will inspire people to overcome their fears and follow their dreams to explore.”

This is the best of the human spirit. God created us in God's image, and gave us a wonderful creation to explore. The more we explore creation, the more we know about God. The more we explore our faith, the more wisdom and revelation God gives us. There's always more. So our motto as Christians could be like the motto of the outdoor equipment company The North Face: “Never Stop Exploring.”⁵

How do you explore the wisdom and revelation of God? Look around. Observe life and creation with an openness to God. Read books, not just religious books. But also study Scripture. Be in a small group to study together. Read blogs;

listen to podcasts. You can't even scratch the surface of everything that's out there. Have deep conversations with other people seeking God. You will be wiser for it.

Second, constant learning gives hope. Paul continues to pray, “*so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.*”⁶ As you continue on the learning path, the reality of the promise becomes clearer and stronger. Eternal life is not just something far out there after we die; eternal life is something we can know now. We can get a down payment on our glorious inheritance in Christ.

All who are interested in the British royal family have been following the story of Prince Harry and Princess Megan as they have exited their duties as royalty, left England, moved to Canada, then to Los Angeles. Their interview with Oprah Winfrey in March was watched by over 17 million people. One of the questions that was asked was how they were able to do this. How could they afford to leave the financial support of the British government, move to another country, buy a big mansion, and continue to employ servants and security? The main reason is a glorious inheritance. Harry's mother, Princess Diana, left her boy somewhere around \$13 million dollars. That, along with a multi-million-dollar contract with Netflix, should get them by.⁷

Of course, we are talking about a different kind of inheritance. It's actually a more valuable inheritance than what the formerly royal couple have. It would be hard to do, but you could run through \$13 million; the supply of money could become exhausted. But the supply of hope never runs out. Eternal life is never exhausted because it never ends. The heavenly home we are promised is more glorious than any mansion on earth, even in California. This is the hope which constant learning enlightens us to see.

Finally, constant learning brings power. The longer you learn and grow, the more you see the power of God at work in your life and in the world. Paul prays for “*the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*”⁸ What is this “working of great

power?” What is Paul talking about? The greatest work of God’s power in the history of the planet was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is the foundation of our faith. So Paul goes into an outpouring of praise to God for the primary example of God’s power—the resurrection of Jesus: “*God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*”⁹

If you listen closely, you can hear echoes of phrases from Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians. This was a statement Paul made and a song he sang everywhere he proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus: the power of God in the resurrection of Jesus.

This is the secret of constant learning. It grows wisdom; it gives hope; it brings power. This is big stuff! How could we let our Christian lives become so small?

I learned an interesting thing recently about sharks. Did you know that sharks are one of the most popular fish that people buy for salt-water aquariums? If you put a small shark in an aquarium, it will only grow to the size the aquarium will allow for comfortable swimming. A shark can be six inches long, yet fully mature, because its size is going to be proportionate to its boundaries. But if you take that six-inch shark and put him in the ocean, he will grow to full size, even if he had stopped growing in the aquarium.¹⁰

I’ve seen Christians like that, haven’t you? They are the cutest little things, swimming around in their tiny little puddle of faith. (You have to be careful, though; sometimes they still bite like sharks!) What constant learning does is to put underdeveloped Christians into the ocean—the ocean of Scripture, the sea of fellowship, the deep waters of service—and soon they grow, they develop, and they become the majestic creatures God created them to be.

The point is this: Don’t be content to be small. Live life large. Live life abundantly, as God in Jesus Christ intends for you to live. This is no big mystery; it’s very practical. Read.

Talk. Listen. Keep at it for the rest of your life. And you will grow wisdom; you will know hope; you will receive power. This is no secret; in Jesus Christ, it is now out in the open, and it's yours to claim today!

¹ Ephesians 3:3, 5.

² John 10:10.

³ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders; Strategies For Taking Charge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 188.

⁴ Ephesians 1:17.

⁵ Ryan Krogh, "Adventure Icon: Reid Stowe," *Outside*, March 10, 2010. Mentioned in Justin Buzzard, "Never Stop Exploring," Justin Buzzard blog, April 11, 2016.

⁶ Ephesians 1:18.

⁷ <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/prince-harry-and-meghan-markle-could-exit-royal-family-owing-to-dianas-inheritance-heres-how-much-it-is-3521531.html>.

⁸ Ephesians 1:19.

⁹ Ephesians 1:20-23.

¹⁰ Charles Simpson, "Pastoral Renewal," *Leadership*, Vol. 7, no. 1.