

# Exegetical Brief: Ephesians 1:19

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Eph. 1:18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup>*and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength*, (καὶ τί τὸ ὑπερβάλλον μέγεθος τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς τοὺς πιστεύοντας κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ κράτους τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ) <sup>20</sup>which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.

In Ephesians 1:19, the exegetical question is whether the last part of the verse: a) describes the power by which we come to faith; or b) tells us that God's power gives us the certainty that our heavenly hope is a sure thing.

The two English translations we have used most in our synod divide on the issue. The KJV connects the κατὰ phrase at the end of verse 19 (κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ κράτους τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ = "according to the working of his mighty power") with the immediately preceding participle (τοὺς πιστεύοντας = "who believe"). The NIV has this prepositional phrase ("like the working of his mighty strength") modifying the noun earlier in the verse (τὸ μέγεθος τῆς δυνάμεως = "his great power").

A quick survey of a number of other translations (TEV, NEB, Jerusalem Bible, Living Bible, REV, CEV, Luther) indicates agreement with the NIV. Looking at a number of commentaries gives a divided result. Lenski understands this verse the way the NIV translates, while George Stoeckhardt and Irwin Habek understand it the same as the KJV.

In a case like this, how do we decide which understanding is the preferred one? We should consider at least three factors which individually or together might give us a clear answer: Greek syntax, the analogy of faith, and the context.

The first question to ask is whether both understandings are possible according to Greek syntax. Can a prepositional phrase beginning with κατὰ modify a participle in Greek? Can it modify a noun? In verse 11 of this same chapter, a prepositional phrase beginning with κατὰ modifies a participle ("predestined according to the plan"). In 4:22, a prepositional phrase beginning with κατὰ modifies a noun (the old self which is to be put off is in accord with the old, sinful way of life). Since the κατὰ phrase can modify either a participle or a noun, Greek syntax does not settle the matter.

So we move on to the next question: Are both understandings in accord with the rest of Scripture (the analogy of faith)? Or does one teach something that conflicts with some other clear statement of Scripture? This question does not settle the matter for us either. On the one hand, Scripture clearly teaches that we who are dead spiritually don't believe in Jesus and come to him as the result of our own reason or strength. Faith is a miracle worked in us by God's great power. On the other hand, it is also certainly scriptural to say that the knowledge we have of God's great power gives us the assurance that he can also raise us from the dead and take us to eternal glory in heaven as he has promised.

So we turn next to the context for help in determining the better understanding. The context definitely favors the NIV translation. In verse 18, Paul prays that the Ephesians might get to know three interrelated things as a result of God's providing light for the eyes of their heart. The *hope* (#1) to which he has called them is the *riches* (#2) of a glorious inheritance. What assures them of this hope for a glorious inheritance is the immense *power* (#3) God has and uses for the benefit of us who believe.

In verses 20 to 22, Paul expands on the idea that God's power also assures us of our hope. He points to God's clear demonstration of his power in raising Jesus from the dead (v 20), setting him at his own right hand (v 20), and appointing him as the head over everything for the good of the church (v 22).

To inject the idea into the end of verse 19 that Paul is telling us how God brings us to faith seems to be a tangent to his purpose for introducing the subject of God's power at this point in his letter. On the other hand, to take the κατὰ phrase as an assurance of our hope fits the flow of thought perfectly. This κατὰ phrase is telling us that the "incomparably great power" which is the guarantee of our hope is a power exactly like (is in accord with, corresponds exactly to) "the working of his mighty strength" in the historical events in Christ's exaltation described in the next verses.

Ephesians and Colossians often have passages whose substance is similar if not always exactly parallel. Colossians 2:12 expresses a thought that is quite similar to the passage in Ephesians under discussion. In the Colossians passage Paul says that we have faith in the power of God which he demonstrated in raising Jesus from the dead. Some suggest that the genitive τῆς ἐνεργείας in Colossians 2:12 expresses the idea that God's power is the cause of our faith, or that our faith is the result of God's power at work. Although either of those understandings is certainly scriptural, the Greek genitive doesn't express the cause of the noun it modifies nor does the genitive indicate that the noun it modifies is the result of what the word in the genitive says. On the other hand, the objective genitive with πίστις is a regular construction in the NT. Thus the translation of διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ with "through your faith in the power of God."

Bottom line? Both the context of Ephesians 1 and the similar passage in Colossians 2:12 indicate that the NIV translation is the better one for the κατὰ phrase in Ephesians 1:19.