

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Prayer for Spiritual Enlightenment - Ephesians 1:15-23

This morning we start a new series looking at the prayers of the Apostle Paul while he was in prison. Proving the adage that not all bad things are bad for us, the time of Paul's imprisonment certainly gave him much time to pray. His prayers are a rich source of instruction for those, who like me, find prayer difficult. The apostle who had seized the opportunity to preach in Athens, while waiting for his companions to catch up with him, was not going to sit around in prison bemoaning his loss of freedom. He might even have argued that imprisonment was a good thing as it gave him more time to focus on the vital work of prayer. Today, we need those who will make time to pray. Perhaps through advancing years or invalidity, you are not as active as you once were. Well, take your place alongside Paul and become a prayer warrior.

I don't know about you, but my prayers tend to run along the lines of asking for personal help, blessing for the family and friends, special activities and service to be performed and then, occasionally, thanks for help received. Now I don't want to diminish these vital features of effective prayer, but as we shall see over the next four weeks, there was a depth to Paul's prayers that we perhaps hear very infrequently these days. My hope and prayer is that, as a result of looking at the prayer life of Paul, we might all learn to pray a little more intimately, enjoying time spent with God and coming to know Him more deeply in our own experience.

So let us read together from Ephesians 1:15-23: *Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power towards us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*

Wow! That is not the sort of prayer you hear every time you go to the prayer meeting! In just the same way that a child learns so much by asking questions, there are six questions that we can ask as we consider this prayer for spiritual enlightenment.

- Wherefore the therefore?
- Who does Paul pray to?
- What does Paul pray for?
- Why did Paul pray for this?
- When does Paul pray this for?
- What is the end result of all that is in Paul's prayer?

Wherefore the therefore?

Paul starts this section with a "therefore" or "in the light of what has gone before". Perhaps you might be wondering if you have nodded off as it is so early and have missed something. Happily not, but what Paul has already written to the Ephesians is extremely important, and gives us the reason why Paul was moved to prayer. The answer to this question must lie in verse 3. There Paul says we have been "blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." How often do we stop to consider how much God has given to us in the person of His well beloved Son? There is not a single spiritual good that our loving Father has withheld from us. And yet sometimes we feel so spiritually empty. We live like paupers when our bank accounts are generating more interest than we could possibly spend. In case some might think that Paul is being a bit woolly with his statement in verse 3, Paul then lists just some of the spiritual blessings that belong to every child of God. So we find that God chose us (verse 4), we are accepted in the Beloved (verse 6), we have redemption (verse 7), we have forgiveness (verse 7), we have had His sovereign will made known to us (verse 9), and we will inherit His character (verse 11). Then, as if that were not enough, we have it all guaranteed by the Holy Spirit with whom we have been sealed. In just the same way that, in years gone by, a king might stamp his ring into hot wax attached to an official document, to show that all his authority was now behind what

was written, so God's imprint has been left upon us, in the person of the Holy Spirit. His presence within a believer guarantees not only the inheritance but also our ability to possess it. So in the light of all this fantastic good that God has enacted towards us, Paul is moved to pray. But there is one more thing and that we read in verse 15. You see, Paul had just heard about the Ephesian believer's faith in the Lord, and love for all the saints. True spiritual life and growth are seen when we are by experience what we are by God's making, when our condition practically equates to our position theoretically. These young believers had gone in to God in faith and gone out to man in love. What was going on internally was matched by what was going on externally, and so it should always be. And note it was love for **all** the saints. Not just those I get on with. Nor even those who see things the way I do, but all believers. It is only fitting that any individual that God has so blessed should have an expansive love for all fellow believers.

Who does Paul pray to?

So in view of the tremendous things that God has done for us, stirring up a fitting response in the lives of the Christians in Ephesus, we might ask "Who does Paul pray to?" We can ask no one greater than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is seen here as the Father of the Man who is now in heaven. All that happened to Jesus as a man, and its acceptability to God as evidenced by the fact that He is now ascended, just enhances the splendour of the person of the Father. So He is described as the Father of glory. Many thoughts can be taken from this phrase. All glory starts with Him; His presence is glorious; He displays Himself in a glorious way; our destiny is glory. So Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "we ... are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory".

Some would link the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with His human nature, and the Father of glory with His divine nature. Whatever the full meaning of these terrific phrases, what is clear is that with God all was, is and will be glorious. Without God, all is mundane and hopeless. God has revealed Himself to us in the person of His Son. All that we have, and all that He has for us comes to us through Him. So when we pray let us be bold! We ought not to limit our prayers by what we think possible. We are talking to the One who is truly glorious, who is able to do far more than we ask or think possible. What is more, from the day when He tore open the curtain of the most holy place in the temple, that curtain that separated man from His glorious presence, He has opened the way for all believers to come to Him every day. We all have the tremendous privilege of access to the Father. But with privilege comes responsibility, for none of us can say "I can't", when Paul could say "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me".

What does Paul pray for?

Thirdly, we might ask what does Paul pray for? Quite simply Paul prays that the glorious Father may "give (them) the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened". In order that we may come to know God more, Paul prays for spiritual enlightenment. Note that Paul does not pray that the Ephesians would get to know Him more, but rather that through the work of the indwelling Spirit they may grow in wisdom and revelation. Paul prays for the means rather than the end. You see the Bible is not like a chemistry text book. I could read the latter and learn all the chemicals and their reactions and properties and soon become an expert chemist. But to read the Bible frequently is not necessarily to get to know God better. There is a definite path to follow to reach the goal of knowing God better. Studying theology at University is not necessarily the way to a closer relationship with God. Spiritual things can only be taught by the Spirit, energised by the Spirit and applied by the working of the Spirit. Once the Spirit is at work in my life, then there is nothing that I need to know that is beyond me. The only limit is my readiness to learn from Him. Wisdom is the application of knowledge, the living out in godly obedience of what I have learnt of God. Revelation is the making clear of all that God has for me. In one sense, the Bible is now complete and cannot be added to. So the Spirit is able to take what has been written for our learning and cause me to understand, as well as giving the necessary energy to live out what has been learnt. But there is also the sense of the daily revelation of His will in a particular circumstance. How often has the child of God cried out, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" only to be answered by the Spirit taking a verse, and showing an answer just right for the occasion.

What a change was to be effected in the lives of these believers! In 4:18 we read that the Gentiles, as these Ephesian believers were, lived with their understanding darkened, and in 5:8, Paul says that they had been "darkness." Now they were to have Spirit enlightened hearts. As believers, we are radically different from non-believers. We are not the same but with just a different set of beliefs. Christianity has its own culture and we ought not to follow the world. What God has said is right for the Church is right whether this is fashionable in the world or not. Our attitude to money, sex, power and life itself is fundamentally different from that of the rest of the world because we are no longer in darkness. Nobody in their right mind would ask a blindfolded person to lead them. We ought not to mould our mind set, our attitudes and our behaviour to those who are still in spiritual darkness. The work of the Spirit is to enable us to see clearly, to understand what really matters, and then to pursue that path with the goal of coming to know God better in our every day experience.

Why did Paul pray for this?

Our next question must be why did Paul pray for this? In a life so busy, with so many legitimate demands upon these Ephesian believers, what good would come from this spiritual enlightenment? The answer to this question is threefold:

1. that you may know what is the hope of His calling
2. what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints
3. what is the exceeding greatness of His power

These three statements of truth are so majestic that language hardly does justice to the thoughts involved. Oh, that the Spirit would truly enlarge and enlighten our hearts so that day by day we would be guided in all that we did by the reality of what Paul lists here! Firstly then, we need to better understand what is the hope of His calling. It is not obvious whether Paul had in mind what we are called to i.e. conformity to Christ, or the fact that we are called. Surely both are necessary for the believer. Is it my daily experience to wonder at the fact that from before the creation of the world He had chosen me and has so worked to call me to Himself. In his book, "A call to spiritual reformation," DA Carson recalls the words of an anonymous hymn-writer:

*"I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my heart to seek Him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Saviour true:
No, I was found by Thee".*

How profoundly moving to understand just how much He wants me! But then to know the reality of that calling. One day we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. His love for me is such that it will not be satisfied until I am like Him. Surely I should not settle for less now.

Then, secondly, we have what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. Again, the language used is vague enough to suggest two thoughts. What is obvious is the riches of our inheritance in Him. A home in heaven, a new body, Christlikeness and so much more besides make any human inheritance seem paltry by comparison. But the text also suggests that we ourselves are His glorious inheritance. That in a day to come, as a result of His work at Calvary, Jesus will inherit us to add to His glory, that we are what He is looking forward to receiving. There is a day coming when we will be presented to Him, without blemish, and He shall be complete! Under such a glorious weight, I can but fall down and worship Him who has done all this.

In verse 7 we read about the riches of His grace, and we have all experienced something of that in the present. Here it is the riches of His glory, and again we shall all experience something of that in the future. But for the one whose eyes are spiritually enlightened, in increasing measure, the glory will be experienced now, as also we shall experience His grace in the future. We are to enjoy our inheritance now although its full appreciation will await a future day. How marvellous if the Lord Jesus could enjoy His inheritance in us a little more now!

Thirdly, we are to understand what is the exceeding greatness of His power. This verse is full of the greatness of God. Here we have combined the supreme power of God not only in terms of who He is but also in what He has done. Perhaps you may have seen the world's strongest man competition at some time. There we have an example of tremendous strength, but all they do is lift some heavy object, or move a great weight. Great strength used for a tiny purpose. But in all that God has done, we have the highest purpose performed with the utmost vigour, backed by the greatest might.

Imagine being far below ground at a coal face. Well, I could go to mine some coal and half-heartedly chip away, wishing I was some place else. But that would be to do the job poorly. No, I need to be there with a real desire to get the coal dug out. So in all that God does, He is wholly committed and never half-hearted. Now I could go with a pick axe and blow by blow cut away, but surely a pneumatic drill would be far better. So with God the strength with which He performs His work is of the greatest power. And finally, if a seasoned miner, full of hardened muscles was to use that drill, rather than I, then that would be best of all. So behind all the work of God lies the enormous might of an omnipotent God, who created and sustains all things. As we go out to serve Him in whatever way He calls us to, let us always remember the exceeding greatness of His power, coupled with the tenderest heart of a loving parent, for "a bruised reed He will not break".

When does Paul pray this for?

Then we must ask when does Paul pray this for? Simply, now and in the world to come. God's power is seen supremely in the fact that He raised Jesus from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand. Those are actions that are complete and in the past. But His dominion is not just for now but also future. Human governments come and go, despots rise and fall, but His authority rises above them all and outlasts them all. To mis-quote a certain advertising

slogan, the future is not a colour but it is full of Christ. The crumbling walls of Hadrian stand as a silent testimony to the power of the Roman Empire. The overgrown jungle temples speak of long past civilisations but of His kingdom and authority there will be no end. It would be quite wrong, however, to think that all this is very well for a day to come, but has no bearing upon my life today. No, His authority is for this age also. That men disobey Him and abuse power for their own ends only confirms their guilt before Him at the judgement. Let us never forget that we live in a world where He is sovereign. God's response to events is no spur of the moment reaction. He is not caught out by circumstances, or surprised by catastrophe. Like a giant ocean liner on a stormy sea, He makes His straight path to the future in His own way, at His own time and for His own purposes. As those who belong to Him, we ought to be able to rest assured that all that happens to us now is within His keeping. In just the same way that Jesus slept in the middle of a storm, as Peter slept on the night before His possible execution, so we can live with a serene calmness even in the most trying of circumstances, as we get to understand with enlightened minds the power of God.

What is the end result of all that is in Paul's prayer?

And finally, this morning, we might ask what is the end result of all that is in Paul's prayer? It is that we may realise that all this power has ensured that all things are put under His feet, so that Jesus might be the head of the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. What a privilege it is to be a part of the universal church. He has only one body. He alone is the head of it. There never has been, and there never will be a job vacancy for head of the Church. Mankind has invented all sorts of denominations and positions of authority but none of this has anything to do with real Christianity. We have only to recognise His authority and follow His commands and all will be ordered. To do otherwise is to ask for confusion.

But what is absolutely remarkable is that we are described as filling Him up, or completing Him. From the time when, in the Garden of Eden, God found it not good that Adam was alone, He has sought a suitable helper for His Son, the Man Christ Jesus. In the church, spotless and without blemish or wrinkle or any such thing, God has found someone suitable for Christ, to complement and complete the One who fills all in all! Dear brother and sister in Christ, as we realise how God has raised us up to the very highest heights of glory, let us gladly fall down at His feet and worship Him. Let us serve Him with renewed enthusiasm and commitment, and let us likewise pray for spiritual enlightenment in our prayers that we may increasingly realise who we are and worship Him for what He has done!

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