

“The Best Prayers in the Bible” (Part 3)

Ephesians 1.15-23

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We’ve been talking about prayer the past couple weeks, specifically, the best prayers in the Bible. In the first week I asked for your input – which prayers in the Bible have really meant something special *to you*; and I also asked for you to tell me when you have had occasions when you feel like your prayers have really been *answered*. I’ve received a number of responses, but I could use more, so I’ll repeat the request. I really do want to hear what you have to say about prayer!

One of the prayers that one of you suggested to me was this prayer, from Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. It’s not one that I would have thought of on my own, but the person who mentioned it to me said that many years ago a Christian mentor advised her to use it to pray for people she knew who have no faith in God, or whose faith is weak. Which is great advice, because this prayer really is about *enlarging our faith*.

Let’s place this prayer in context. Paul is writing to a group of people who are already Christians; they already believe in Jesus. Paul had spent two years in Ephesus, building up the church; he knew these people. But a considerable amount of time has passed, and Paul is pleased to hear reports that the church is still going strong. “I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people,” he says; “this is the reason that I don’t stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers.” But he doesn’t just *give thanks* for these people and their faith. He asks God to make it bigger. He has two specific prayers. The first is “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you.” Think about that a second. A prayer that God would give those Christians *a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to them*. There’s a significant implication here: you can be a Christian who has *faith in the Lord Jesus* and who has *love for all God’s people*, and *not* have a spirit of wisdom and revelation, or *not* really know God. It’s like there are “levels” of Christianity. At a base level, perhaps, are people who have *faith* and *love*. But there’s a deeper level, a level that not every Christian has attained, that has to do with receiving – from God – a “spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you.” That’s how the CEB puts it. In the NIV, the prayer is that God would give them “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation *so that you may know him better*.” In the Living Bible (which is a paraphrase), the prayer is that God would give them “wisdom *to see clearly and really understand who Christ is and all that he has done for you*.” It’s a beautiful, powerful prayer. It’s a prayer I would wish for every Christian I know. It’s one thing to have faith and love. That’s a good starting point. But it’s

another thing to receive *spiritual wisdom* from God, to *hear* God, to really *know* God. It's not just a question of whether or not people have faith; it's a question of how *deep* and how *rich* that faith is – whether it is endowed with God's *wisdom*, whether it is accompanied by *revelations* from God, whether it includes a personal, firsthand *knowledge* of who God is, in the daily contours of life. I pray this for all of you – that God would grant every single one of you that kind of wisdom, revelation, and knowledge.

That was the first prayer. There's a second, and it has three parts to it: "I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us believers." The basic element here is *light*, that those Christians in Ephesus would have enough *light* in the eyes of their heart to see certain things. Again, something is implied: you can be a Christian with faith and love, and *not have enough light* in the eyes of your heart to see these things. There are deeper dimensions to the faith that are not necessarily granted to all believers. Paul expresses his desire that all those Christians in Ephesus would be able to see three specific things:

First: *the hope of God's call*. What does that mean? Some translations render it "the hope of God's calling" or "the hope to which he has called you." The critical words here are *hope* and *calling*. When we become a Christian, when we profess our faith in Jesus Christ, there is a *calling* placed upon our hearts. This has to do with being *called* to follow God's will, to do the things that God wants us to do and to avoid doing those things he wants us to avoid, but it also has to do with being called to *trust* in God's promises, to place our hope in Christ's ultimate victory over all the powers of darkness. It's easy to get discouraged and depressed in this world, but the faith that God grants us has the potential to let us see *past* all the doom and gloom of our present reality to the magnificent *beauty* and *glory* and *restoration* that God will bring about at the end of all things. The Christian story is fundamentally a story of *hope*. This is the hope that Paul hopes *all* of us will see.

Second: Paul hopes that we will see *what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers*. The key word here is *inheritance*. When we become a Christian, when we profess our faith in Jesus, we become *heirs* to some magnificent treasures. We get adopted into a special family, Christ's family, and with that adoption come certain gifts. We get included in the "will," so to speak. "If you belong to Christ," Paul says in Galatians (3:29), "then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, *heirs* according to the promise." "You are no longer a slave but a child, and if you are his child, then you are also an *heir* through God." (Galatians 4:7) Again, in Romans (8:17): "if we are children, we are also *heirs*. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him." There's a *glorious inheritance* that is *ours* because we are *Christ's* – but what is it? What do we receive in this inheritance? Five times in the New Testament, we're told that we inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 25:34; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 6:10; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5); another time, we're told that we inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:29). Probably the fullest explanation of the inheritance is right here in Ephesians, in the passage just before the one we read earlier: "God destined us to be his *adopted children* through Jesus Christ ... in him we have *redemption* through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins ... he has made known to us the *mystery* of his will ... as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him ... [we have been] *destined* ... so that we ... might live for the praise of his glory ... [and we are also] *marked* with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit..." (Ephesians 1:5-14).

There's a lot here, wrapped up in this little phrase, everything from the forgiveness of our sins to eternal life to the gift of the Holy Spirit, and more – *this* is what Paul is hoping for, that *every Christian* would come to a really solid understanding of just how *incredibly amazing* all these gifts are that we inherit because we belong to Christ.

The third part of this second prayer is that Paul hopes we will see *what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us believers*. The critical word here is *power* – the incredibly *strong* power that God has, the power that enabled him to defeat death, to raise Jesus from the grave, to seat him in the heavenly realm, to put *all* things – all other beings, powers, and forces, both of good and of evil – under his feet. God took a world that was headed *wrong* and turned it *right* again. And this power is also *accessible to us*, as we get to share in the authority that Christ now wields. We'll talk about that authority more in the weeks to come. The point here is, Paul wants those Christians to have a good understanding of just how *powerful* God is.

It's quite a prayer, or set of prayers. It not only reminds us that there are different "levels" of Christianity – there is more advanced knowledge and wisdom and insight available to us than we may suspect – but it also demonstrates that there are very different kinds of prayers. We've talked some about *intercessory* prayer – when we are praying for others (and we'll come back to that again) – and we talked last week about prayers of *thanksgiving* and *praise*. In weeks to come we'll talk about other kinds prayers, like prayers of confession – but let us not neglect prayers for a *deeper* and *richer* faith.

Note what Paul is *doing* here in these prayers. He's not just expressing a *desire* for those Christians in Ephesus to experience these deeper levels of faith. He's not just *hoping* that they will come to those insights and understandings, and he's also not just *wishing* that they had a more robust faith. He's *praying* that God would *give it to them*. Does he *desire*? Yes. Does he *hope*? Of course. Does he *wish*? Absolutely. But he does more than that. He takes that desire, that hope, that wish, and turns it into a *prayer*. What he is doing is tapping into the *power of God* – the power that he talked about, at the end of that second prayer – to try to *influence* what's going on in the spiritual realm. That's what prayer is. It's not just an expression of a desire or a hope or a wish. It's *marshaling spiritual power*. Paul knows that the only way those Christians in Ephesus will move from strong faith and love to the more robust, deeper dimensions of the Christian life is if *God makes it happen*. He's praying for *God to act*. He's not just *waiting around* for God do something; he's not just *wishing* that God would do something; no, he's trying to *influence what is actually happening in the spiritual realm*. That is so critically important! Prayer is an attempt to *influence the cosmic forces in the universe*. In this case, *God*. Which raises huge questions about the role *we have to play* in the unfolding of events here and now. We have *the power to influence more than what we can see and touch and hear and taste and smell*. I'm going to talk about this more in a couple weeks. For now, just let it start to sink in. *Prayer is an attempt to influence what is actually happening in the spiritual realm*. Case in point: that *God would act* in people's hearts. Paul had the *guts* to make that kind of a prayer, and he wrote it down, with the result that future generations of Christians – people like us – can see, and take note, and *learn* from his example.

So the question is, what are we going to *do* once we are aware that we have *that* kind of power?

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