

Paul's Prayer in Ephesians

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As human beings, we recognize that there is more than one way to learn. We can sit in a classroom and listen to a teacher holding forth on some subject, but it is just as common for us to learn by watching a master of some skill practice his trade. Since Michael Jordan first set foot on the court for the bulls, millions of basketball players have thought to improve their game by studying his. Likewise, the aspiring writer learns to write from reading the work of good writers.

Even though the main characters of the Bible disappeared from the earth two thousand years ago or more, we can still study them and learn from their example today. Sometimes, this is obvious. As Christians, all of us have thought to learn from our Lord when He was faced with temptation. His example teaches us to seek refuge from the devil through prayer or through the wisdom of the word. However, not all sources of example in Scripture are so readily apparent. Unlike the gospels and the book of Acts, which are all narrative-based, we think of the epistles as more abstract, just some apostle or other holding forth in a vacuum on some strictly intellectual topic.

In reality, though, the thoughts and words and actions of the apostles as revealed in the epistles provide us with a wonderful example of how to think and speak and act today. No New Testament writer reveals himself more in this way than the apostle Paul, and in Paul's writing, no topic is more illuminating than the way he handles prayer.

Paul, of course, was one of the great Christians of the age, a man who made tremendous sacrifices in order to imitate Christ, and his prayers as he repeats them reveal his spiritual maturity to us. He was constantly focused not on the physical and temporal, but on the spiritual and eternal, and his prayers reflect that. Through study, we can learn a great deal from him about how to keep our prayers and our lives focused. Let's look, then, at Paul's prayer in Ephesians.

The First Half

Unlike most of Paul's other prayers in Scripture, the prayer in Ephesians is actually composed of two parts. It starts off in 1:15-21, but then picks up again with 3:14-21. Let's begin by looking at the first section, Paul's thanksgiving for the Ephesians. It appears in Ephesians 1:15-16. Here's one of the first places that tells us that Paul isn't just writing in a vacuum. Instead, when he learns of the continued faith and love of the Ephesians, even now that he's imprisoned in Rome, that good news causes him to rejoice. Just like brethren all over the Mediterranean, they featured in his prayers.

Today, we need to be equally thankful and prayerful for our brethren. We are blessed here with a strong and faithful church, and every member here is important. We need to bring their names before the Lord on a regular basis. This might seem like a burden to us; after all, there are dozens of Christians in this congregation. Remember, though, that Paul prayed not just for dozens of individual Christians, but for dozens of churches, in Galatia, in Philippi, in Thessalonica, in Corinth, in Ephesus, and in a host of other places beside. His discipline in prayer helped him to be more loving, and his love fueled his prayers. If we learn to pray like him, we will see the same transformation in us.

From there, Paul shifts to the substance of his prayers for the Ephesians, which begins with a prayer for wisdom. Look with me at Ephesians 1:17. At first glance, we might want to interpret this literally and think that Paul wants God to send the Holy Spirit to the Ephesians to give them wisdom and revelation. However, there are two problems with this theory. First, as Acts 19 reveals, Paul had already given the Ephesian church spiritual gifts through the laying on of his hands. They already had prophets in that congregation. Second, the text refers to "a spirit" rather than "the Spirit", and as Paul observes just a few chapters later, there is only one Spirit. Instead, the most likely interpretation is that Paul wants them to have a spirit that seeks out wisdom and revelation, so that they can come to know the Father. Concerning this knowledge, there's a nuance here that most translations don't pick up on. The word translated "knowledge" here isn't just the Greek word *gnosis*. Instead, it's the word *epignosis*, which refers to a heightened, more complete form of knowledge. The Ephesians weren't just to seek an acquaintance with God. They were to seek to know Him fully.

Paul explains how the Ephesians can come to this full knowledge in Ephesians 1:17-19. Paul wants them to have their eyes enlightened, not the physical eyes that look on the physical reality, but what he poetically calls the eyes of the heart, that inner understanding by which we see the unseen, spiritual world. Once they opened those inner eyes, they could come to know and understand three things: the hope of God's calling, the riches of His inheritance, and His power toward those who believe. By looking at those things, that's how they could arrive at a full knowledge of God.

Today, we desperately need to understand these things for ourselves and pray that our brethren can understand them too. As Christians, we don't assemble here three times a week and then spend the rest of our days striving to be disciples of Jesus because we're some kind of self-control freaks. Instead, we make the choices we make because we have a hope. Every human being out there has one big problem: the problem of death. We may put it out of our minds as much as we can, but if the earth continues, every last one of us is guaranteed to die, and for those who do not know God,

death is only a gateway to a second and even more hideous spiritual death. Our hope is that Jesus will rescue us from death, that even though our bodies may perish, He will preserve our spirits and give us eternal life in heaven.

Nor is this eternal life desirable just because it beats the alternative. People always wonder, “Well, aren’t you going to get bored in heaven?” Not at all. As best as I can describe it, heaven is like the best times we spend with our families and friends here on earth, only better. We spend eternity sharing in that intense enjoyment and intense love, which is only made sweeter by its permanent nature and by the presence of God, who is better than all of us.

This tremendous reversal of fortune, going all the way from death and eternal death to eternal life with our Lord, is made possible through the power of God. None of us would have the foggiest idea how to win eternal life by ourselves, but through God, all things are possible. God has proved this already, as Paul explains in Ephesians 1:20-21. We can know that He will do such great things for us because He has already done them for Christ. Jesus was dead, but the Father lifted Him up to pre-eminence in the heavens. As followers of Jesus, we have that power on our side.

The Second Half.

At this point, Paul begins his two-chapter digression on the subject of grace and God’s eternal purpose, but when he returns to his prayer, he does return to the subject of power. This begins in Ephesians 3:14-16. Because God has already given so much to and for the Ephesians, Paul wants to see God’s work in them completed. Likewise, friends, we need to be conscious of the price that has been paid for every Christian here, and the yearning that Christ has for all who are not, and put that perspective in our prayers. The fate of each one of us is that important.

The first step on the Ephesians’ road to heaven is that they be strengthened with power by the working of the Holy Spirit in the inner man. This doesn’t mean that the Holy Spirit is going to come along and zap all of us holy, nor is it talking about the imparting of miraculous spiritual gifts. Neither one of those things fits with the context. Instead, it points to the working of the Spirit through the gospel, which is the power of God to salvation. When we read the Bible, it doesn’t just fizzle. Instead, it makes us strong, so that we are able to overcome all of the obstacles of this life and follow Christ to heaven. We need that power at work in our own lives, and we need to pray for it in others’ lives.

The further steps on this heavenly trail are outlined in Ephesians 3:17-19. As a result of the working of the Spirit within us, Jesus is able to dwell in our hearts through faith. This verse gives us a marvelous opportunity to explore the Biblical concept of indwelling. This verse does not mean that we have a little chunk of Jesus plopped inside our chests, or our brains for that matter. Instead, here as elsewhere, when the Scripture speaks of indwelling, it refers to influence or control. All this is saying is that when we believe in Jesus, He influences and controls our thoughts and actions. Notice that in the text, the indwelling of Jesus is made parallel with being rooted and grounded in love because those two parallel concepts are essentially the same thing. When Jesus controls us, He establishes His love within us.

The next step in this progression is to comprehend the breadth and length and so on, and to know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge. The point here is that without Jesus and His love operating in our hearts, there are some spiritual concepts we cannot understand. The Scripture isn’t meant only to be read, to be mined like some trove of trivia. Instead, it is meant to be lived, to be experienced, and when we return with that experience of discipleship to the word, that unlocks new doors of comprehension. We know things about the Bible that some academic atheist cannot know, simply because we’ve made it a part of our lives and he hasn’t. It takes effort to reach this point. It takes discipline and holiness. However, as we work through this process, we gain a constantly richer appreciation of Jesus and His love for us, not just the things that the word expresses, but things that neither it nor we can put into words.

The end of this journey comes when we are filled with the fullness of God. In some ways, this is even harder to wrap our minds around than knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. How can something as finite and limited as we contain the fullness of an infinite Being? How can our imperfection become the temple for perfect holiness? Honestly, I think this is something we only understand fully once we reach that point. I’m certainly not there yet, nor even close, but every now and again I get a glimpse of how wonderful that must be.

Paul addresses this paradox in the final portion of this prayer, a short section of praise. It appears in Ephesians 3:20-21. How can I know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge? How can I be filled with the fullness of God? I don’t know. I don’t get it, but God does. He is able to work in me, and to work in all of us, superabundantly beyond what we ask, superabundantly beyond what we even think to ask. God sees possibilities in us and for us that we haven’t even guessed at yet. The measure of the greatness of His power is that in His time, He will make all of those possibilities real, if only we allow Him to do it. For that great work, He deserves all our glory, both now and through all eternity.

I have to tell you, friends, every time I study that prayer, I come away from it dazzled. You can read through that whole thing in a couple of minutes, and yet Paul says more there than I say in hours of my prayers. I pray for Little League stuff, but Paul is looking for nothing less than the eternal glorification of God through His church. Not only can our lives be like that, but our prayers can be like that too. We can be using our time spent with God to gain real, tangible, eternal benefits both for ourselves and those we love. If we pray like that, the results will be beyond our imagination.