

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious power of our grace and love surges through our souls to heal us, inspire us, and assure us of our eternal future. May this good news burst out of us, overflow from us, and touch and envelop those around us; not because of who we are, but because of Your presence within us. We offer ourselves for Your service, knowing that You do far more through us than we can ever achieve ourselves. Our joy is to do Your will, O Lord; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Health

There are a number of serious health problems in the world today and God, our healer, may well be speaking to us through them. Pray about swine flu, and any people you know who have it.

On-going prayers

- Pray about birth control and its effects on people's spiritual life
- Pray for Aung San Sui Kyi, the opposition leader on trial in Burma
- Give thanks for the Holy Spirit and His work of renewal within you

Meditation

Love is more than an emotion; God is love

Remember that sometimes, love says 'stop',
Don't hold on to the torments of the evil one;
Reject them, be humble and repentant
Let the Spirit lead your heart to higher things.

Be patient when in wisdom, love says 'wait';
Give the Spirit space to do His work unseen,
Submit to the Word, to the church, to others,
For love will guide you where you need to go.

Be ready, and rejoice when love says 'go',
Grasp the moment and seize the vision,
Use the energy and power of the Holy Spirit
In good and gracious words and deeds.

Love is more than you know, for God is love

Bible Study - Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I have not ceased to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I ask that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in your understanding of Him, ¹⁸ and that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope of your calling, what are the riches of His glory and inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the unsurpassed greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his might and strength ²⁰ which God has accomplished in Christ in raising Him from the dead, and seating Him at His right hand in heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule, authority, power and dominion, and above every name that is named not only in this age but in the one to come. ²² He has put all things under His feet and has appointed Him head over the entire church ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who brings to completion everything in every way.

Review

This great prayer comes at the end of the extraordinary opening of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In the last three studies we have looked in depth at the first fourteen verses because they are an amazing description

of the work of God through Jesus Christ, and the seal of the Holy Spirit as both the inward and outward evidence of the work of God in the life of the believer. All of these words are addressed to God as a prayer of thanks, and they are an example of how we should give glory to God for all He has done for us. However in this passage, Paul's prayer turns from thanks to intercession. Our reading is a further 'single sentence' prayer flowing from one theme to another, beginning with Paul's remembrance of those to whom he writes (1:16) and ending with a powerful call to God's people to acknowledge the presence of Christ in their midst as their supreme head as the Master of all things (1:2-23).

Those who are familiar with Paul's writing will quickly see that there are strong connection in this passage (indeed, throughout Ephesians 1) with the first chapter of Colossians. There are many similar phrases, such as 'for this reason ... I have not ceased to give thanks for You' (1:15,16 and Colossians 1:9), and '... what are the riches of His glory ...' (1:18 and Colossians 1:27). We will explore this further in the 'going deeper' section of this study. The passage is rich with meaning, and many phrases are heaped together, each of which are highly important for God's people, and Paul ends by reminding the Ephesians that Christ is their head, their supreme authority under God (1:22,23).

However, if we are to truly understand this passage, then we need help to get a good picture of how this prayer works, and I have summarised it below in 'bulleted' form. You may well feel that you could break it down in other helpful ways, however, this keeps to the proper grammar of the Greek as Paul wrote it. Different Bible versions often break up the prayer to make it more readable, but this can make the prayer less understandable as a whole. This outline enables us to see how the different points within the prayer relate to each other, and all of them are important.

Ever since I heard about your (1:15)

- Faith
- and love

I have prayed and interceded for you (1:16)

- to have wisdom and revelation in understanding (17)
- to be enlightened and that you may know (1:18)
 - the hope of your calling
 - the riches of His glory and His inheritance
 - and the greatness of His power and strength which comes (1:19)
 - through Christ's death and resurrection (1:20)
 - through His authority at right hand of God in the heavens
 - above all 'rule, authority, power and dominion' (1:21)
 - and above every name now and forever

And you should know that God

- has put all things under Christ's feet (1:22)
- and has made Him head of the church. The church is
 - His body
 - the fullness of Him who completes everything ...'

The prayer begins with Paul expressing joy in hearing about the continuing faith and love of the churches of Ephesus. His concern was that they should grow in wisdom and understanding and perceive the things of God. He wanted them to know the true value of what they had received in Christ and the power of God active in their lives (1:18,19); this was available to them because of Christ's resurrection and the fact that He reigned in the heavens with the Father (1:20,21). Who could argue with that! Lastly, to emphasise the importance of Christ, he described Him as both the 'head' of the church and also its 'body'! The two illustrations seem rather at odds, but Paul was not thinking in earthly terms but about heavenly realities. Jesus was also 'fullness ... completion ... everything in every way' (1:23); or as we might say today 'all in all'!

In summary, Paul's prayer was the people of God would remain completely focussed on Christ. No doubt, he needed to emphasise this, and we need to hear this prayer today, to make it our own.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about these subjects:

- How does this passage connect with Colossians 1 and what does this mean?
- Why did Paul pray for the Ephesians to have wisdom and revelation (1:17-19)?
- Why does Paul finish the prayer by emphasising Christ's supremacy (1:20-23)?

Notes on the text and translation

V16 *'... making mention of you in my prayers'* The Greek could read 'making remembrance in my prayers', so you will find that some Bible versions use the word 'remember' here. I feel that the phrase

'make mention' reflects the sense of the Greek better. In addition, I have placed a full stop at the end of the verse. Most translations do not, but because there were no punctuation marks in the Greek original, we cannot tell what the author's intentions were.

V17 *'a spirit of wisdom and revelation in your understanding of Him,' I have added the word 'your' to this sentence to help it make sense. In this way, the apostle speaks about wisdom and revelation being an important part of how God's people gain knowledge about Him (see study).*

V18 *'riches of His glory and inheritance' Many Bible versions have 'riches of His glorious inheritance'. However, although the Greek is not all that clear at this point, both the words 'glory' and 'inheritance' are separate nouns; and because each has a distinct meaning, I have kept them apart. Each word has special significance in the New Testament, and the meaning of God's glory is lost if the word is merely appended to 'inheritance' as an adjective.*

Going Deeper

How does this passage connect with Colossians 1 and what does this mean?

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is very similar to that for the Colossians (see Colossians 1:3-21), but it seems to be a shortened version. Both prayers begin with Paul's commendation for faith and love in the believers (Eph 1:15, Col 1:3), as the comparison below shows:

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints. I have not ceased to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.' (Eph 1:15)

In our prayers for you, we always give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and the love you have for all the saints (Col 1:4,5)

Some people have suggested that one greeting was copied from the other, but it seems more likely that Paul did indeed look for evidence of faith and love within the fellowship of believers. This is why he began so many of his letters with some mention of these two, not just these two letters, however close the words he used (e.g. see also Phil 1:3f. and 1 Thess 1:3). Faith and love are surely the vital ingredients of any church fellowship, expressing our relationship with God by faith in Christ, and the love for each other that must flow from our faith. This is not new teaching, but standard New Testament doctrine, and it is better if we see it as this.

Other similarities between our passage and Colossians in particular are listed below:

Eph 1:16,17	Col 1:4	'give thanks for you ... praying'
Eph 1:17	Col 1:3	'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'
Eph 1:18	Col 1:27	'hope ... what are the riches of His glory'
Eph 1:19	Col 1:29	'power ... according to the working of His might ...'
Eph 1:21	Col 1:16	'rule, authority ... dominion'
Eph 1:22-23	Col 1:24	'the church, which is His body.'

These quotes only give a snapshot of the two passages, and we can see them by reading the full text of both, side by side. However, it is worth considering how these connections come about. Some suggest a variety of literary reasons, such as copying, or even that Paul was using some form of words or 'liturgy' used in the church. Personally, I think it too soon for the church to have such elaborate liturgies as would affect someone like Paul, and it is more likely that the connections reflect the regular prayer life of Paul himself. He is known to have been a man of prayer, and it does not take much to imagine that just like all of us, he had 'habits' of prayer and the use of words.

Paul prayed out of a sense of concern for the churches to which he ministered, but the prayers have become important because they have come to us within scripture, and they can now help us consider how we might pray for the churches of Christ. Certainly we should pray that they be filled with faith and love, but the rest of the prayer has more to say.

Why did Paul pray for the Ephesians to have wisdom and revelation (1:17-19)?

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in verses 17 to 19 flows from one point to another conveying two complex requests; one in verse 17, and one in verses 18 and 19 which is itself split into three parts. All of the prayers continue to use the same confident and flowing spiritual words which have inspired us so far in Ephesians. The first prayer was that God (described uniquely in scripture as 'the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory') would bless the Ephesian Christians with a 'spirit of wisdom and revelation' as they sought to learn and understand more of their Lord. Wisdom and revelation are a fascinating combination here, and Paul does not mention them casually. He knew that people learning about God, need to engage their minds in a search for wisdom and also keep their spirits open to God's direct revelation. The combination of earthly and spiritual quest is the key to fulfilment in discipleship and faith.

The second prayer Paul said for the Ephesians was that they would indeed benefit from wisdom and revelation, and that the 'eyes of [their] hearts' would be 'enlightened' (1:18). Not enlightenment for the sake of enlightenment, but so that the Ephesians might experience and know three things; firstly the 'hope' of their calling (1:18), secondly the 'riches of His glory and inheritance' (1:18) and thirdly the 'unsurpassed greatness' and 'power' of God (1:19). Note how all these wonderful treasures keep the Christians looking forward. Hope, in Christian terms, is a confidence in the eternal future promised by Jesus to all who believe (John 14:1f.). The 'riches of His glory and inheritance' are all benefits a Christian may experience now, in part, but fully when Christ comes in glory; and to know the incomparable greatness of God is surely to have confidence that God is able to help and deliver even in the midst of present difficulties.

Why does Paul finish the prayer by emphasising Christ's supremacy (1:20-23)?

Underneath the beautifully expressed words of our reading lies Paul's uncompromising belief that the Gospel message was effective in this world because the power of Christ was greater than anything else on earth or in heaven. It is worth our while dwelling on these words because phrases such as 'seated ... at His right hand in the heavens' are frequently part of the liturgy of the church, either formally or informally. It is possible to read this entire passage as part of a prayer of glory to God and our Saviour Jesus Christ without taking on board what it really means. In the world of the first century when people commonly believe in many gods and there were many religions to choose from, the Christians boldly claimed that there was only one God, supreme in the heavens. They took their language from Psalm 110, a passage used extensively in the New Testament:

*The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand
Until I make your enemies your footstool ...' (Psalm 110:1)*

In this passage, Paul gave a reason why people could be confident in the promises of God of an eternal future (1:18, see above). He explained that by His death and resurrection Jesus (1:20) had overcome the final enemy of humanity, which is death, and was therefore higher than any other imaginable 'rule, authority, power and dominion'. When we read these words today they sound dramatic, but each of them refer to various pagan ways of understanding heavenly places and the being that inhabited them. We hardly need to know the details of what ancient people thought 'rulers' were or 'powers', because Paul's point is made. Christ is above all of them because He is God.

In addition to this, Jesus has not just risen to heaven to be absent from us here on earth, but by means of His Holy Spirit is both head of the church as its founder and inspiration, and the 'body' of the church because He encompasses everything. Jesus is present in His world, but most completely in those who own His name; people who will one day be 'completed' and made perfect in heaven through His ministry. This is what is meant by the slightly mysterious verse at the end of the passage; 'which is His body, the fullness of Him who brings to completion everything in every way' (1:23).

Paul was not using beautiful words and expressions merely for the sake of poetry and liturgy; he used them because he was overcome by the profound truth of what he had discovered about the Gospel. His words remain powerful and authoritative.

Application

Paul's prayer is a great reminder to us of where our faith should be. I have visited or been a part of many churches today who seek to find out what they think they stand for by asking congregations to fill in questionnaires, or discussing 'vision statements' in leadership teams or elders meetings. I understand that church congregations need focus and direction, but I fail to understand why godly people do not point out, as Paul does here, that we already have everything necessary to be totally motivated by our faith in Christ. In addition, it is patently clear that we have trouble loving one another, so there is plenty of work for us to do if we are to begin to fulfil the existing criteria for God's people as set out in Scripture.

It is often argued that we always need to focus the Gospel according to our culture. Having read through Ephesians and knowing its power over the centuries to motivate God's people to faith, evangelism and mission in all its forms, I am more convinced than ever of the importance of what it says. If we want to find out how to be relevant to our culture today, then we will find the answer not by examining our culture, but by being immersed in Christ. He will guide us into what He wants us to do in His world, and if we attempt to focus on the world rather than on Him, we will simply end up becoming like the many religions of the world which simply peddle religiosity rather than engaging with the only living God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How do we keep ourselves open to both wisdom and revelation within the church today?

2. Read through the prayers Paul says for the Ephesian churches, and discuss what you feel you might add to what he says if you were praying for the church today.
3. If Christ is 'seated in the heavens' above all things, how is it that we can have a relationship with Him?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This prayer is difficult to follow, but this may be because it is like so many prayers, and it is a concoction of many things that were going on in Paul's mind and heart as he wrote. He did not have the benefit of a word processor to change anything once it was written down! What inspires me most is the feel of exuberance and joy found in this passage. Sometimes my own prayer is rather 'tongue-tied' by comparison! Yet this passage encourages me to focus on the Lord and let everything be seen in the light of His glory, and this enables me to pray with greater freedom and spirit.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How often do you pray? Try disciplining yourself to a set time each day, or pray while you are doing your various tasks in the midst of the day. Try praying about people and things in general, and pray for the church of God just as Paul prayed. The church is essential to your own spiritual health!*
- *Read through this passage several times until you can see the patterns within it. You should find yourself encouraged in faith and blessed through assurance that God has a future for you.*

Final Prayer

Bless the special time we set aside to spend with You, Lord God. If we have been challenged, guide us in our response; if we have been blessed in Your presence, move us on to greater things. May we always be responsive to the movement of Your Spirit, and return to You each day with hope and confidence that You will guide us without fail throughout our lives: AMEN
