

Part 2: A Prayer for Us

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May 26, 2019

Last week we started a new series in a book of the Bible called Ephesians. Ephesians was a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church of Ephesus.

Paul knew the church in Ephesus really well, and he was for all real purposes, their spiritual father. But as he wrote them this letter, he was in prison. So here we have this small church which was formed only a few decades after Jesus was raised from the dead, in a society far removed from Israel and Jewish influence, rich in pagan worship, and facing the imprisonment of their leader due to the simple truth that he believed what they believed.

It would be natural to doubt wouldn't it? What are we doing here? Paul is gone, our culture is not a Christian culture, and our neighbors think it's silly that we worship a God who died. So Paul is writing this letter to the church to remind them of what Jesus did to save them and how that salvation changes everything in their life.

He wants them to become preoccupied with the power of the gospel so that they can fulfill the occupation of Christianity in every area of their life.

Last week Paul opened his letter by reminding them of the beautiful realities which are in Christ. Paul says: everyone wants belonging, everyone wants redemption, everyone wants a purpose and God has given you all those things in Jesus to the praise of God's glory.

And coming out of that theologically rich portion of praise, Paul now begins to pray for this church. And it's Paul's prayer for the church of Ephesus, his prayer for us today, which we are going to look at this morning.

Now, in this book, Paul uses three primary terms when talking about believers, in fact he uses all three terms the same amount of times in the book. He calls believers the church, which is a Greek word which means "gathering." Its root communicates specifically that it is a gathering of the called out ones, those called by God. He also calls believers, as the church, the body of Christ. The believers are part of a body with one another and with Christ. And lastly he calls believers saints. Which just means "holy ones." Saints in the Bible are not super Christians who have been made saints by some sort of church decision. Biblically speaking, saints are ordinary people made new in Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to be a saint.

And interestingly enough, it is in Paul's prayer for the church today that we see all three of these descriptors used when talking about believers. And what we are going to see in Paul's prayer today are these: **The Marks of the Saints, The Prayer of the Saints, and The Privilege of the Saints.**

Since this passage is relatively short, I'm going to read it in full for us one more time and I want you to see if you can identify these three substructures in Paul's prayer: **Ephesians 1:15-23**

We can learn a lot about someone by watching their habits right? Think of your habits. What are some things that you do, wear or read with frequency and what do you think that tells those who are around you?

For instance, I often go to the same coffee shop, and so I've also begun to notice other who make a habit of going there as well. In watching them I can begin to identify specific marks which give me insight as to who they are and what they are doing.

For some I can tell they are moms with young kids because they always come from the direction of the nearby middle school after morning drop off. For others they always show up in dress clothes with portfolio notebooks and meet with various other people. They bear the mark of some sort of business class individual.

And maybe for me, they see me showing up in the middle of the day, writing, reading, and meeting other people, and they might think "He must be unemployed."

Well Paul here identifies marks of this church in Ephesus which give him confidence that these men and women truly are Christians. This is our first point today: **The Marks of the Saints**.

Look at how he opens his prayer in **Ephesians 1:15-16**.

Paul opens his prayer and says, "For this reason, because I can see you are Christian, I am going to pray Christian like things for you."

And the marks that Paul has heard which gives him confidence that they are believers are two actions: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and love towards all the saints. When you think of the marks you bear in your life do you think of these things?

I heard one pastor call this the cross-shaped birthmark of the Christian. It includes the vertical beam and relationship reconciling man to God by faith in Jesus. And it includes the horizontal beam and relationship reconciling us to our neighbors, specifically here our neighbors in faith, fellow saints.

We are prone on either side to elevate one of these marks over the other. But we should be careful when we try and remove the tension that the Bible itself has put in place. We know for certain that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). But we also know that it is impossible for faith to not change our hearts towards our fellow believers: **1 John 4:7-8**.

For believers who struggle with loving others, I want you to note how obtainable these marks are. Sometimes we are defeated before we even start this venture because we think that if we are Christian we must immediately know everyone, always be happy and accept every stray cat and person into our home. Because that seems so big a step, we feel crushed when our life doesn't look like that. Those days might come, and I hope we do make remarkable steps in caring for our community. But in this text our faith in Jesus is calling us to love and care for those in here. This is the first step. Pray this week that God might show you a way to increase your love for those who are next to you today.

And conversely for the believer that has great depth of relationships outside the church, we are a better church because of that. But if your love and your relational connections don't carry into this church, there might be something in your heart that God himself wants to help you address.

Outside the church it is the expectation that we affiliate with those who are like us or who are a resource for us, but inside the church we often have the hard and beautiful joy of loving those who are different from us, but who share faith in Jesus with us. And it's only when we see that we were different, we were once outsiders to Jesus that we can lovingly care for those who are united to us in faith. There is a wonderful unity inside the church. When we are united to Christ in faith we become united to people who are drastically different than us in love.

And because Paul has heard about these two marks of gospel change, he now begins to pray for them. This is where we see our second point this morning: **The Prayer of the Saints.**

Read with me: **Ephesians 1:16-18.**

Paul's prayer for the church is that God might graciously give them a greater knowledge of himself.

Have you thought about how simple and yet how profound that request might be in your life? Paul's prayer for the church is that they would know God better. Amidst all the fear, all the uncertainty, all the chaos of life Paul's prayer is that you might have a greater knowledge of who God is.

Now how do we come to know God? How do we grow in our understanding of him? I think most of us imagine it being a lot like the movie "The Matrix." In it they are training Neo to be a fighter so they download some data packet into his mind and all you see is him standing there, and then after a moment he says, "I know kung-fu." That is not how the knowledge of God works, but we can unknowingly lapse into it at times.

We can hear at some point the gospel message (at Sovereign Hope we define the gospel as the good news that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God) and we can say: I am sinful, Jesus saved me, I'm restored to God..."I know God."

Or we can grab a theology book and examine the deeper truths of God poured out in scripture. We can parse Greek verbs and follow Paul's exegetical rhythms. We can recite the Apostles Creed from memory, and we have a couple copies of systematic theology books, and all of a sudden we can say..."I know God."

Or yet a third way, we can look into the eyes of our lover, we can be fishing Rock Creek, back-packing in the Bob Marshal, or eating a good hot wing and we can say..."I know God."

While all of these things can help us understand God, these are not what Paul is praying for here. Paul is praying for something uniquely exclusive and wonderfully precious. Look back at **Ephesians 1:17.**

He is praying that we would know God relationally and through his own revelation. Relationally we know God through his Holy Spirit who reminds us of what we have in Christ, and he gives us the power to become increasingly made more like Christ.

Haven't you ever had a friendship where at some point you realized that as you began to know this person better, you began to act more like them? Maybe you dress like them, or talk like them, or start to work out like them. That is change and knowledge imparted through a relationship. And that's what the Holy Spirit does for us with God, he draws us more to God through faith, he reminds us of who God is in

scripture, and he encourages us to be conformed more and more into Christlikeness. It is real knowledge applied relationally.

And through his own revelation means that there is a place where God has made himself known where he wants to be known most clearly. It is true that because God is God he can reveal himself to anyone anywhere at any time. But what is more certain is that God has promised to reveal himself somewhere at all times. And that somewhere is God's revelation of himself in his word.

Someone can write a biography on my wife. They can talk to her family, her former teachers, her friends and they can write probably a more factual and detailed account of her life than even I can. But they still wouldn't know my wife like I would. Why? Two reasons, first because my wife has chosen to make herself known to me in a way she hasn't anyone else. That's not just in a sexual sense but in a relational sense, she has given herself to be known to me as my wife and to me alone.

Second, as I experience my wife the truth of her biographer becomes felt in the context of my relationship with her. I don't know her as generous, I have experienced her generosity. I don't know her as loving, I have been loved by her. This is why Paul uses what is a really odd metaphor: that the eyes of your heart would be enlightened. Not your face, not of your mind, but of your heart.

The gospel not only unites us to each other in love, but it enlightens us to know things beyond ourselves. Those are two buzzwords our culture wants and spends so much to obtain. But here unity and enlightenment or provided richly in the gospel because it's only the gospel which destroys the sin which divides and distracts our hearts.

Paul is praying that we would become as believers a society which shows this gospel change in all of life. That by God's grace we would know God more as we walk with him. Last week Paul said this: **Ephesians 1:9-10**. If God's goal for all time is that all things would be united with Christ, then Paul's goal for us is that we would be increasingly united to God as well.

Two quick points of application here before we move on. The first is that as we pursue prayer and Bible reading, and all those means of growth that we should have, I want to encourage you to perhaps pray this prayer when you do those things. Pray that as you pray you don't pray only because you know you should, but you pray to a God who wants to know you and be known by you through Jesus. As you read God's word, ask God to reveal to you bits and glimpses of who he is.

The second is that may we be a church which frequently prays this prayer for others. May we be a church that seeks to not only help each other grow in their knowledge of God, but that we are praying that God would work a gracious miracle in their hearts through his Spirit.

As Paul prays that we might experience these things, he changes his tone in verse 18. He goes onto say if God does this then you will come to know these things. Look at **Ephesians 1:18**. That term know isn't conditional, it's not that you "might know," but in the Greek it expresses that you will know with complete certainty. You can have total confidence in what is to follow.

Because God has been gracious to his people, Paul provides three concrete truths that we should hold dear in our life. This is our last point: **The Privileges of the Saints**.

In the closing part of his prayer Paul offers three rock-solid privileges which the saints can be certain of in the gospel. And interestingly enough they are three truths that we are seemingly most prone to forget today. But Paul is showing here that true knowledge of God is always practical, it always brings with it relational change, practical hope and heartfelt worship.

I'm going to read the text here in a moment, but first I'll point out these three privileges. Paul introduces each of these with the phrase *what is*: what is the hope you were called to, what is the glorious inheritance, and what is the immeasurable power. Read with me: **Ephesians 1:18-23**.

The first privilege you have as a believer is *knowing **the hope** to which Jesus has called you*.

Everyone loves the idea of hope, but the problem of hope is that it easily and often disappoints. Your long hoped for job didn't satisfy. Your carefully planned adventure didn't enlighten you like you thought. Your hope didn't do what it was supposed to.

But as we know God more, we come to know more and more the certainty of the hope to which we have been called. God called us to new life, and all we have to do is look at Jesus to see how concrete this hope is.

Jesus died for our sins and he came back to life. He rose in a new body, he ascended into heaven. Christians have a cheat code for hope because it's not totally unfounded. Jesus has lived it and proved it for us.

If our hope is in this world we will know only disappointment. But hope that now we can be made new in Jesus, and that later all things will be made new in Jesus provides for us a hope which cannot be crushed even though the world wages war against it.

This is what Paul speaks about in **Romans 8:38-39**. This unshakeable hope in Christ is the first privilege of the believer.

The second privilege is the ***glorious inheritance***. Read with me again: **Ephesians 1:18**.

Now there is something really remarkable in this text. And it's actually this privilege which shapes the tone of what Paul is going to spend the rest of his book unpacking for us.

Paul says that we should know, undoubtedly so, the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints. Now it is true that in other places the church is described as God's own inheritance. This is true. God didn't need to save anyone, he wasn't obligated to provide salvation. He wanted to. Isn't that a profoundly wonderful truth? God wanted to save you. He wanted to make us his own cherished possession. That's a loving God.

But this is not the type of inheritance Paul is speaking to. He is saying something almost more unbelievable. He is saying not that the church is God's chosen possession to himself, instead he is saying that God has left us a rich and glorious inheritance in his saints.

Paul wants you to know with great certainty the blessing that God has left for you in the fellowship of the saints. Last week we saw that there is a great inheritance held up for us in the future, but here Paul is pointing us to the inheritance that God has given to us now: the church.

This is why the author of Hebrews warns and encourages us to not neglect meeting together. It is in the lives of believers and their gathering together that God has given us to experience his own rich inheritance.

Now this might seem silly. It might be the completely opposite experience you've had with the church. But as the eyes of your heart begin to be enlightened you might realize that it is in the church that, in broken and not yet perfect ways, we actually get to glimpse into heaven itself.

The church is a place where you are aided by God's Holy Spirit, and his holy people. The church is where we hold onto hope together and remind each other of what we can know for certain.

Paul is going to talk more about this in chapter three, but this is a wonderful truth that God wants you to know right now. That neglecting the fellowship of believers is to neglect part of the rich and glorious inheritance that God has graciously given to you.

And lastly, and more profoundly Paul wants you to know *the immeasurable greatness of his power:* **Ephesians 1:19-23.**

As outrageous as it is that Paul calls the church the riches of God's glorious inheritance, he doesn't stop there. He calls us to know not just God's power, not just God's great power, not just God's immeasurably great power, but he calls us to know the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe.

Paul wants believers to know with certainty the stunning power not only that God has, but that God has employed towards us. Power that is not only immeasurably great and directed towards us, but power, that in case you missed it, was worked according to his great might.

If there is one thing that God is making me painfully aware of lately, it is my powerlessness. And I imagine that you too have felt alone in moments where it seems that nothing goes as planned or intended. But for us, this text is the warm blanket that we get to know for certain.

That all the power of God himself has been availed for our good, towards us who believe. Name a religion that promises that! Christianity is a religion that we saw last week is bound to praising the glory of God, but part of God's glorious goodness is that he is for us. That is power is directed in all of its splendor to our weaknesses.

And look at what Paul points us to prove this power: **Ephesians 1:19-20.**

Now let's consider this for a moment. Here we have Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, who came to earth and was crucified for sin. Where on the cross he bore not his own sin for he had none, not just the sins of his disciples, not just the sins of those who were alive at his time, but he bore the weight and death of every sin committed by every believer throughout history.

No one was more wrought with death than Jesus was. And God raised him in one moment of glory. Consecutive life sentences were nothing compared to God's power. Death was twine to God's might. Sin was kindling to God's radiant glory. Raised from the grave, restored to life, risen to the right hand of God the Father.

Our world has never seen an output of power like the power which raised Jesus from the dead. And yet Paul here is saying that the same power which physically raised Jesus from the dead is the same power which brings your heart to life through faith.

The same power which raised Jesus saves us. We can talk about bringing a knife to a gunfight, but this is bringing an ice cream sandwich to a global thermo-nuclear war. Our sins, our failings, our problems do not stand a chance when compared to the power that God has joyfully given his saints in his salvation. This is an embarrassment of riches given to God's people in Jesus.

In grace we are embarrassingly overdressed at every occasion. Do you know that? Do you believe that when you feel alone and isolated from God?

You see living life in this world means that we will come face to face with weakness and hardship and Paul is calling us to come face to face with God himself. This is the privilege that saints have, this is what you can bank your life on.

And this is the hope which Paul leaves for the church. Look again: **Ephesians 1:20-23**.

Paul wants us to the many ways God is for us.

God has held out a certain hope for you. God has graciously given us a place to experience his inheritance in the church. God has flattened us with his loving power in Jesus Christ, and here we see that Jesus has been given over to triumph over all things. And that Jesus, Jesus unrivaled, undead, and unthreatened, has been given as a head for the church.

Made no mistake, the Bible speaks about the trials and sufferings the church will endure. There will be times when we feel like we are the most pitiable people. But the unrivaled Christ is our head.

He is not the head emeritus like you might have at a university. He is not the honorable head that we like to recognize because of the role he had in founding the church. He is the head in the truest sense of the word, he controls, leads, guides, and cares for his whole body with unparalleled power.

For centuries physical buildings and eternal people have been slain by wicked men, and yet the church has continued to grow. Christ's ruling head endures us. Because the ruling Jesus is our head, the church never has to make compromises for its own longevity. To be part of the church is to be on the right side of history.

In writing to the church Paul wants you to know God better so that you might see with enlightened eyes the hope that awaits us at every turn. That for you individually and for the church corporately we have blessing after blessing after blessing even in a world which is chaotic and unsettled.

That even though it will not be in this age that Jesus unites all things under him, it is in the salvation of the church that we can taste the wonderful hope of unity to Christ and to others. Let us together know these truths not in our minds, but let us together experience them in our hearts as walk with God together.

