

What should we pray?

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Date: 05 May 2019

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[0 : 0 0] I'm a little bit of a kind of a numbers nerd. Nothing excites me quite as much as some good sort of statistics or percentages. So let me share some with you that I found recently last year. There was a survey done, which I thought was quite surprising, said that over half of the UK population said that there were people who pray. Over 50% of people said they prayed, even though a really significant percentage of that would have said that they weren't religious people, even though it's actually reckoned probably about 5% of the UK are regular church attenders. It's fascinating to see that despite those statistics, over half the people in this big kind of national survey who asked said that they were people who prayed.

And a general trend in that survey was that at critical moments, at serious difficulties, at kind of pressing worries were the times, as we might expect, when people turned to God, when people turned to prayer. We see that so often, don't we, in the wake of major disasters, that social media is full of thoughts and prayers for those who are involved. Thoughts and prayers from people who would perhaps very rarely be people who would say they would pray.

Well, as a church, one of our key values, alongside the centrality of the Bible, is the necessity of prayer. These, I suppose, are our two foundational building blocks. Right from the very beginning of gathering together, we've always said that if this church is to have any sort of impact, if God is going to use this church to transform people's lives, it's only going to happen if we take prayer seriously. I find it really encouraging that I've only been a part of this church for a year and a half, but we came to work with a group of people who are committed to praying. What an incredible foundation for a new congregation. And that if God is going to transform people's lives, then it's only going to happen through prayer and taking prayer seriously.

Not just in the hard times, and not just at the critical moments, although of course these are times to pray, but also for us to have just a kind of a culture of prayer, a way of living in which prayer is at the heart of everything we do. And one of the key encouragements, I suppose, for us to do that, for us to pray, is when we look at the Bible and we find it's full of prayer. And that's what we're looking at this morning. That's the passage that Chris just read to us. As in so many of his letters, Paul spends time telling the people he's writing to, in this case, a church in a place called Ephesus, telling them that he is praying for them. And not only that, telling them what he's praying for them.

And telling them not only that, not only that he's praying, not only what he's praying, but also, verse 16, that he's praying for them without ceasing. This is not a one-off thing. Oh, I thought of you guys wanting, and I prayed. No, this is an ongoing pattern of prayer that Paul has for these churches.

[3 : 13] And so I find it so incredibly encouraging that even the great apostle Paul, this is a guy who wrote a serious chunk of the Bible, a guy who was used so powerfully by God at the very beginning of the church at such a critical time, even Paul is someone who would wholeheartedly agree with that key value of the necessity of prayer. It was something that characterized his life, as it's something that we hope will characterize our life and the life of the church. But then I suppose the question comes, really, is that what is it that we're supposed to pray? And it's really easy to kind of have that as one of our values, isn't it? It's really easy to say we're going to be people who pray without ceasing, that we want this culture of prayer, that we pray all the time, and not just when things go wrong. But actually, what does that look like? What do these prayers contain? And that's the incredible thing that we see in these verses. Paul doesn't tell the church what he's praying for them just out of interest, but it's so that we can learn from him, so that we can shape our prayers to follow the pattern of his prayers. What we can be praying for ourselves, and what we can be praying for each other, and what we can be praying for those around us. And so the plan this morning, I want to start, I suppose, with the big picture of what this passage is about, and then zoom in on a few key elements. But in terms of the big picture, the key verse, really, is this, verse 17. Paul kind of sums up all that he's talking about. Paul is praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, might give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him. What's Paul saying there? Well, he's saying that he is praying that God will help this church in Ephesus come to know God better, that their knowledge of him will increase. He's praying, really, that all the great truths which are listed in the first half of chapter one that we looked at last week would become incredibly real to this church. And we saw last week how Paul begins this letter by reminding the Ephesians of the incredible blessings that they have in Christ, that they're chosen, that they're redeemed, that they have a future where they'll be united with him, that they've been sealed with the Holy Spirit as the guarantee that they'll make it to that destination. And so now Paul's prayer here, really, is that that truth and these incredible things he's written will really kind of get under the skin of this church and will really be real to this church. And how does he do that? Well, he doesn't just repeat them again. When I want people to, you know, really understand things, I just say them time and time again. It has kind of limited effectiveness. What does Paul do? Well, he prays that God would help them understand, to help them really know, help them take these truths to heart. We sometimes need that, don't we? We need that bit of help to get things from our head to our heart. I'm 100% certain, as I stand right here, that I like curry. I absolutely love it. Yet sometimes it's only when it's put down in front of you and it's hot and you take that first bite. That is when you really think, isn't it? When you really know, oh man, this is so good. You know, there's a kind of a movement there from it being an intellectual thing to an experience that really gets you. And that's kind of what Paul wants here, only something far more important than that. It is prayer, verse 18, that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened. Now, it's a weird phrase, isn't it? But the point is, Paul is not just kind of aiming for head knowledge. Paul is not just wanting people to really make sure you learn about these facts about God. Paul wants this to be something that we take to heart. In the Bible, the use of the word heart, it doesn't mean, as we often think of it, just kind of feelings or

emotions. The authors of the Bible didn't have this idea of kind of head versus heart, as if they were kind of polar opposites. Throughout the Bible, really, the heart is used as something that is all-encompassing, the very essence of who we are. Paul wants the church to really grasp who God is, to really get what he's done. And the only way that that can happen is for God himself to give this spirit of wisdom, to reveal this knowledge, to open the eyes of their hearts.

God has to do that. And so what does Paul do? Paul prays. Paul prays that God, through his Holy Spirit, would do that for them. And I think this is incredibly relevant for us. We said last week, one of the big reasons for us looking through the book of Ephesians was to help us as a church as a whole, but also as individuals, to hopefully help us have our whole lives shaped by the gospel.

So that the gospel, Christianity, wouldn't just be a kind of a list of things that we know, but would be something that affects every aspect of our life. It would be visible in how we live.

And later on, Paul's going to get to this kind of nitty-gritty of what that looks like in various different situations in day-to-day life. But for us to be shaped by the gospel, first of all, we need this knowledge of God, not just up here, but in our hearts, in our wills, in our motivations, in everything that we are. And so we need to pray prayers like this for ourselves, for each other, for those who don't yet know God or who are just kind of starting to investigate who he is and what he's done. Because it is God, through his Holy Spirit, who gives this wisdom and revelation of the knowledge of him. Now, how does he do that?

[9 : 05] Well, primarily through his word, the Bible, the kind of technical terms, if you're interested, are that the Holy Spirit inspires the writing of the Bible, but then we pray that he would illuminate his word to us as we read it. And so again, the Holy Spirit doesn't work kind of instead of the Bible. It's not prayer or the Bible, but these two foundations come right together, the centrality of the Bible and the necessity of prayer. And so our prayer is that as we look through books of the Bible, as we look at letters like Ephesians, like passages like this, that God would really open our hearts to the truth of this, that we would be people who really grasp the goodness of the gospel and all that God has done for us. And if that is what we want, then we need to pray. As an author, a Christian author called Don Carson, writing about this passage, he sums it up brilliantly by saying this. If we're thinking about the big picture, this is what he says, only such work by God's Spirit will enable us to know him better. Therefore, we must pray for it.

If we fail to do so, we betray our cruel interest in really knowing God better. Therefore, we must earnestly pray to God that we might know him better. I found that incredibly kind of challenging thing to read. What do my prayers look like? So often they're things that I need, situations I'm stuck in, things for other people. You know, God wants us to pray for all these things. Actually, are our prayers shaped like Paul's? Praying that God would help us to know him better? Because that is the most exciting thing there is, that the privilege of knowing God is that ultimate privilege.

Think about how kind of weak at the knees or kind of overexcited or incredibly shy people get when they get to meet their idols, George Clooney or Lionel Messi or Beyonce or whoever it is that makes you kind of squeal like a little girl. You know, if you see people kind of screaming or crying, how much better that we get to meet God and not just meet him as a one-off but know him, have a relationship with him through what Jesus has done. How much more incredible is that? If that is what is the most incredible thing to us, then like that Don Carson quote says, then we show that by praying that God would help us to know him more. So there you go. That's kind of, I suppose, the big picture, a kind of a lengthy introduction of what this passage is all about. If you only remember one thing from this morning, I hope it's that wherever you are in your relationship with God, whether it's something you're thinking about right at the very beginning, whether it's something you've been walking with God for years and years and years, if you remember one thing, it's that we would continue to pray that God would move us on in our knowledge of him, deepen that relationship with him so that we really get that in our hearts. Okay, so there you go. That's kind of the big picture. I want to spend the rest of our time then looking at three things in particular that Paul highlights that he wants the church to know about God and the gospel. And if you see these all in kind of verse 18 and 19, the first one is this. He prays that they will know the hope to which he has called you. And so that's the first thing that Paul is praying. These guys' hearts will be open to that they will really know the Christian hope. And what is that? Well, it's what

Paul's already spoken about in the first half of chapter one, this future that we have with Christ, this certain hope for those who believe in him. An incredible hope that we've been able to celebrate this morning, even as we're sad at Bob's death, even as we pray for the family, that incredible certain hope that he had, that he knew his final destination because of his trust in Jesus. We saw last week, verse 10, that God's conclusion to the universe, the ultimate goal of the gospel, is that all things being united in Christ. It's a picture of perfection, of unity, of everything being back how it should be through what Jesus has done. And time and time again, it's interesting, the more you kind of read the Bible with this in mind, the more you realize how often the Bible is pointing us forward, saying, remember where you're going, understand your destination, keep reminding yourself of that certain hope. But why does the Bible do that?

Well, the Bible keeps pointing us forwards to make sense of our life here and now. And when the Bible wants us to grasp it and look forward to and understand that hope, it's not escapism, oh, it doesn't matter about now, what will we find in the future? No, it's a hope that motivates us. It's a hope that kind of grounds us and sustains us and keeps us going in the present.

[13 : 59] I remember when I was learning to drive, I'd been looking forward to being able to drive for ages. I've got two older sisters, they could drive, I couldn't drive. And then for my 17th birthday, I got driving lessons. I was incredibly excited. I think I'd pictured driving lessons as kind of cruising around with my friends, you know, window down, heading to a drive-thru McDonald's. It was going to be great. I was really excited about these lessons. Well, it turns out driving lessons aren't like that. It was very much a stalling and doing that kind of kangaroo hop thing past all my friends, hands firmly on the wheel at 10 to 2, no cruising at all, overtaken by old ladies, not McDonald's in sight. I didn't like driving lessons, kind of a big disappointment in some ways, but I still had this hope that in the future, I was going to be able to do those things. I was going to be able to drive by myself, go where I wanted to. That looking forward, that remembering what was to come gave me that kind of focus, that motivation for the sort of mundaneness of doing three-point turns and parallel parking 15 times in half an hour. Well, the future hope of the gospel, which Christians have been called to, is far better than that. The future hope of the gospel is not that actually you better concentrate and work hard now because there's a test at the end that you have to pass, or that somehow you might just end up in this mundane state of being a learner forever.

However, the hope of the gospel is a certain hope, that it is going to happen, that God has called us to this perfection that he's going to bring in, that through Christ he has done what is necessary for us to reach it, that through his Holy Spirit we have been sealed as a guarantee that he will take us there, that one day those who are in Christ, who trust in him and the forgiveness that he offers, will have this place in perfection. And Paul's prayer, part of our prayer, should be that we truly know, that we get that with our hearts, that certain hope, our eternal home. And not as escapism, but that hope which shapes how we live here and now. Things in life can be hard, life can be a slog.

It's a good question to ask, what is it that is going to keep us going for however many years we have here on this planet? It's so easy on the kind of the journey to just spend our time looking at our feet and putting one foot in front of the other. And there are times when that is kind of, we feel that's all we're capable of. And there are times when that will be the case. But Paul's prayer is that we would grasp just how great our destination is. That those who trust in Jesus would know just the incredible place that they're going as they follow him. And that would be something that gives this life real purpose, real meaning, real cause for joy and celebration, even in the difficulties and the struggles and the mundaneness. So that's the first thing, specific thing Paul prays that we will get, that will kind of capture us, will overtake us, is our future hope. And then the next thing, carrying on still in verse 18, he prays that we'll understand the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. And now perhaps you might think, well, we're still kind of looking forward, our hope, our inheritance. Is this not just another way of saying the same thing? Am I just going to repeat myself again for the next five minutes? Well, actually, no, look really carefully at what it says there in verse 18. This is not speaking about our glorious inheritance. Verse 18 is his glorious inheritance in the saints. And what Paul is speaking for here, praying that we'll understand, is about God's inheritance. What God is looking forward to claiming and possessing at the end of time. Well, what's that? Well, it's his inheritance in the saints.

That means it's his people. It's his church who are God's glorious inheritance. That God has called us, he has redeemed us, he has sealed us, so that in the future he can say, look, look, these people are mine. Nothing was or is able to take them away. I've done all that's needed to bring them to me. I don't know about you, if I think of myself, if I look around, you know, I don't particularly feel all that glorious. If I was God and I found out my inheritance was going to be Ali Sewell, I'm not sure if glorious would be the first word that would kind of spring to mind. But Paul says actually it's the church, it's all these individual saints brought together. And remember that word, the saints, is just Paul's word for kind of average Christians. It's the church, it's ordinary Christians brought together that are God's glorious inheritance. Now the big kind of story of the Bible can be described as God rescuing a people to worship him. And that people is the church.

At the end of time, it will be this incredible gathering of mixed people. Revelation, the last book of the Bible, talks about people from every tribe and tongue and nation, people from every corner of the globe, people from every kind of strata of society, all being brought together to worship God.

[19 : 26] And that is what will demonstrate his glory. That is what will be the fulfillment of his eternal plan. That is what Jesus Christ came and achieved. And Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, for us, for the local church, wherever it's found, is that we would grasp something of the significance of the church. That we would see the church as God sees the church. Again, we talked last week about how the church in Ephesus most likely felt very weak compared to everything that was going on around it.

There was a kind of worship to the goddess Artemis was kind of the big thing in Ephesus. There was a lot of magic and other kind of spiritual stuff. And the church, and the church that Paul had kind of started and then moved on from, was very much the outlier. It was very much on the margins of society.

It would maybe very much would have felt as we feel as a church in Scotland today. And we recognize that, you know, the church that holds to the truths of the Bible and tries to live that out, will find itself kind of marginalized and feeling slightly on the outside.

We'll get told that we're irrelevant or weak or outdated. And yet the reality is, Paul says, the church is the crowning glory of God's eternal plan. The church is something incredibly special.

Special not because of anything that we've done, but because God has done something special. God has done something incredible through Christ. He has redeemed us. He has paid that price to make us his. And it's that that gives us this incredible value. It's a really challenging question, I think, for us to ask. Ask of ourselves. Ask of other people, those around us. Where does your value come from?

[21 : 17] You know, what are you worth? Are you only worth what you earn? Is your value depending on how much you've managed to sell in the last month? Is what you're worth dependent on what people think of you?

Is that a friend or a parent? Is your value based on how closely you match up to the pictures that you see in the magazines? People go to such incredible lengths to try and prove that they are worth something, that they've got a value. People find themselves in such incredible despair because the world has told them they're not worth anything, that they have no value. But the gospel says we have incredible value. Not in a way that makes us proud, not that says, you know, look at me, but a way that says we have value because of what Jesus has done for us. And whether we have value, but that also makes us incredibly humble. And yet we have that incredible value because of what he has done, because we are God's glorious inheritance. The creator God values each one of us. The creator God looks at the average, ordinary local church and sees it as a glorious inheritance. Sees it as something worth something.

And nothing can take that value away. So those are the first two. Paul wants us to grasp the great hope that the church has, the great inheritance that they're part of, their value and significance to God. And lastly, he wants them to know, verse 19, the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. So the Christians hope God's inheritance and then thirdly God's power, God's incredible power.

Have a look down if you want at verses 20 down to 23. Paul kind of lets us know just the scale of this power. It's the power that raised Jesus from the dead, but not just that. Also raised him up and put him at God's right hand. Put him in that place of authority in the heavenly places where he rules over all things. And note, Paul's really keen to stress that this isn't something that's just a bit better than everything else. But verse 21, he is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. And that incredible power that God has. And the kind of idea here, I suppose, is, you know, imagine you work for a large company. You have a kind of middle management position. You know, you have influence over those who are underneath you. You can promote them. You can move them to new areas of responsibility.

What you can't do is kind of stroll into the chief executive's office and say, I think you should do this and this and this and this and I want it on my desk by tomorrow morning. That's probably a good way of making sure you don't work for that large company for very long. But, you know, our power, our influence is limited, isn't it? And the point here that Paul's making is that God's power is able not just to kind of raise Jesus up a little bit, but to give him ultimate or ultimate eternal authority over everything.

[24 : 28] That there is no limit to God's power. And yet the incredible thing here, as we draw towards a close, the incredible thing to see is that Paul doesn't just want us to know how great God's power is. But back to verse 19, that his power is toward us who believe. This power is there for the church, which is, as Paul goes on to say, is Jesus's body.

This power is not just some kind of abstract truth about God, like on a top trump's card, power 100, he's like, amazing. This is a power that is used for us, for his people.

And so what does that mean? How does God use his power toward his body, the church? Should we be expecting kind of bolts of lightning? Should we be looking for kind of dramatic signs and wonders? Well, we're going to see as we carry on through the book of Ephesians. That's not the direction that Paul goes. It really is, as God's church, we receive his power in two critical ways. Firstly, as Paul said, it is the power that raises Christ from the dead, which also raises us from spiritual death to life in Christ. In the gospel, we see God's incredible power for his church. As Jesus dies but rises again, he breaks the power of sin and death. And God's power there is used toward his church so that we can have this hope, that we can be part of this inheritance. And we see God's power in his rescuing of sinful people to become his people. And yet more than that, Paul prays that we'll know God's continuing power in our lives that will enable us to live as his people. That like the Ephesian church, as we live perhaps on the margins of society, as Christians are distinctive and stick out and are kind of under pressure to conform, well, it is God in his power that enables us to live ordinary day-to-day lives as his people. That God will give us the power to treat people well, even though we might not get anything back from them. And that God will give us the power to speak the truth about people and resist gossiping or spreading bad reports that we hear. That God will be with us to give us the power to kind of submit to other people, rather than always wanting to be kind of top of the tree and in charge.

These are not just examples that I'm kind of making up or plucking out thin air. These are the examples that Paul is going to go on in the rest of Ephesians to speak about what marks out God's people, what God's people need this power for. Now his point is this, that however mundane these things sound, that we cannot do them in our own strength. That it actually takes the incredible power of God, that power that is brought to us through Jesus, to be able to live out this life in the here and the now as we wait for that incredible promised future. And Paul's prayer is that we would know that deep within our hearts. It would be incredibly real to us. Now how do we do that? Well, as we've seen throughout this whole section, we pray. We pray that God himself would open the eyes of our hearts to see it, to know it, to live in this incredible power that God has for his church. And we want to be a church who takes seriously the necessity of prayer, praying for ourselves, praying for each other, praying for those who aren't yet part of the church. What is it that we want to pray as we follow Paul's example? Well, we pray that God would enable us to know him better so that we could live for him better through his power in light of the eternal hope we have of being part of his glorious inheritance. Let's pray together now.