

## What Shapes Our Prayers: Part 1

### *Ephesians 1:15-18*

*“I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.”*

**Introduction:** With this being the week of Thanksgiving, it’s a good opportunity to stop and reflect. The act of giving thanks is not only a command that God clearly gives (*“Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever”* - Psalm 106:1, 107:1; 118:1; 136:1), but it also serves as an **antidote** to that default setting of our heart to **complain** - we want more, better, different, what someone else has or whatever else WE want according to the whims of our heart. Complaint is a universal language that reveals what we think we deserve, who we think has the greatest value, and who all of life revolves around: US! Giving thanks for everything, in every situation (1 Thess. 5:18) recognizes the source of thanks is our Lord God, who is good and a keeper of every promise to us. Giving thanks, then, is essential to our joy and turning from sin. We cannot simultaneously complain and give thanks for the good gifts God gives us, even those that are trial based or come from suffering. Since every complaint uttered out of our mouth is a criticism of God Himself, thanksgiving is an acknowledgement that He is as good as He says He is.

We come to a new section of Ephesians 1 that transitions from a eulogy of praise to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to a more traditional introduction to a letter. Here we see not only Paul’s prayer for the church, but his heart behind it, and his hope for the church itself. There is much that we learn from prayer, but it is also a great revealer of what we believe. The **amount that we pray** reveals how dependent on the Lord we are, or to say another way, how **INDEPENDENTly** we view life. A minuscule amount of prayer displays that we don’t actually need God for everything each day, only when we *really* need Him. The **content of our prayer** betrays what we truly value in life. What we will see is that Paul valued people and relationships, particularly their relationship with the Lord, and that shaped his prayer. When our prayer is primarily focused on physical well-being, health, or material gain, it shows that we are fixated on life here, believing that true comfort and gain is about the here and now, and the goal is ease in life. What we get with Paul is the proper shape of prayer, how we should be praying for our families and neighbors as a church. How much and what we pray for as a church will be telling of our future health and effectiveness moving forward. So, let’s look at this tremendous prayer of Paul, which is another monumental sentence (1:15-23), which we will look at over 2 weeks.

#### **Motivation of Much Prayer: Thanksgiving (1:15-16)**

*“For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to **give thanks** for you, remembering you in my prayers,”*

- **Foundations of Thanksgiving** - *“For this reason...”*

Paul’s typical M.O. when writing his letters was to *begin* with thanksgiving (see: Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians) and move toward exhortation or correction. But his letter to the Ephesians church was a bit different since he started with a blessing, or praise, directed toward God Himself. “For this reason,” picks up the previous statements and bridges them to his prayer of thanksgiving. This is significant for **3 reasons**: **1)** Because God is sovereign over all things, including our salvation, and the fact that He does all things to the glory of His grace, we know that we will be heard, that He is worthy of praise, and that He can actually act on our prayers. If God was NOT sovereign over all things, including salvation and suffering, there would be no point or hoping in or praying to Him. He would be like idols

who cannot hear or speak; 2) He is speaking of believers, those who heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation and believed in Him. God had been faithful to His promise and saved those who were in the church 3) Paul began with *adoration and thanksgiving before he moved to supplication*. This is no small thing. Far too often we view prayer as a conduit to ask for things, to gain the ear of our Lord to have problems solved. Now, God is the giver of good gifts, and desires to give good to His kids (like every parent), but prayer is not only designed to ASK but to OFFER, to GIVE praise, to reflect back to God the glory of His infinite worth. Before he thanked God for anything and asked for anything, Paul praised God for WHO HE WAS and what He had done. Isn't this how we mature through life in regards to our parents? As we grow in appreciation of who they are, we spend time thanking them, telling them of how much they mean to us, and less time asking for stuff like we did in our youth.

- **Grounds of Thanksgiving** - *“because I have heard...”*

Paul had not been to Ephesus in 5 to 6 years, which meant he had not met some of the believers of the church or been able to enjoy the fruit of his labors with them. To understand the grounds of his thanksgiving, we have to understand what drove Paul. Paul was commissioned by Jesus to reach both Jew and Gentile with the gospel, which would come at the cost of suffering (Acts 9:15-16). But this was not a mere fulfillment of a duty, and he never ACTED like he loved people. He had a genuine passion and love for people.

He was willing to incur the wrath of God if it meant his countrymen would believe (Rom. 9:3). The goal of his work was love, a pure, sincere, and good conscience kind of love (1 Tim. 1:5). He worked hard for people's joy, that they would find their joy in Christ (2 Cor. 1:24). He had strong affection for those he worked with, that they would grow in love, knowledge, and wisdom to be ready for the return of Christ (Phil. 1:8-10). He not only shared the gospel with others, but because he loved them, he shared his very life (1 Thess. 2:8). In other words, the content of his prayer, thanking God for others, flowed out of what was most valuable in his life: **others**.

So, it is easy to see why he thanked God continually, since what he heard about the church was positive. It had nothing to do with numbers or building size, but had everything to do with their growth. They had put their **faith in the Lord Jesus**, which not only meant that this was the source of salvation, but the word meant they were also **faithful** to the Lord Jesus Christ. Much like a parent who hears that their college student has been doing well, have been faithful to their studies and living out their faith, Paul gave thanks knowing that God had graciously kept them and matured them (Phil. 1:4-6). They also demonstrated **love toward all the saints**, which is a direct result of living out the realities of the gospel. This love was directed INSIDE the church, where God fuses together Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, Greek, barbarian, rich and poor. This love is **by definition supernatural**, a type of unity and care that the world longs for but cannot ever reach a level to get there. This love that is poured out to each other is what the world should see and know that we are Christ's disciples (John 13:35). This love is counter-cultural because it is sourced in God's love for us through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

If what we pray for reveals what we value, what do your prayers reveal? Is prayer a means for YOU to gain more? Do we spend time in thanksgiving when we pray? Do we thank God for material things or temporal comfort, or do we thank God for people and their progress? Our church will only be as effective as we are before God in prayer.

- **Constancy of Thanksgiving** - *“I do not cease...”*

Finally, how often did Paul pray? Multiple times, everyday. The idea of not ceasing to thank God was NOT that he prayed every waking minute, but as often as he DID pray, thanksgiving was a part of it, and particularly those that Paul loved made up the content. This type of prayer is the antidote of complaining, as Paul thanked God even while in prison. Thanksgiving

and complaint cannot exist together, and unceasing thanks means complaint cannot find space to operate.

**Motivation to Ask for Much in Prayer: *God Keeps Promises* (1:17-18)**

*“That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...”*

After his introductory prayer of thanksgiving, Paul spent time explaining **how he prayed for the church**, engaged in *petitionary prayer* or requesting of God on behalf of himself or others. Asking the God of the universe is a privilege that is both immense and sobering since He gives us an audience with Himself because of the advocacy of Jesus Christ (1 John 2:2). What we pray for is so important since we not only **“do not have because you do not ask, you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”** (James 4:2-3). Petitionary prayer is an essential weapon in our arsenal. We are engaged in a deadly serious spiritual battle where the stakes could not be higher, so we must make use of the whole armory, making sure we focus this weapon correctly.

Though the rest of the sentence contains many elements of this request, there is truly only one request made. The gist is that the church would comprehend what God had **already done for them in Christ** which he explained in verses 3-14. They already possess the blessings, but he wants them to grow and mature in their practical understanding and accessing the **hope, riches, and power** they have in Christ. He is not asking for new blessings, but that they would actively use what they have, not growing complacent with the status quo. Sometimes we walk through life like someone who *purchases an iPhone* and simply uses it to make phone calls without accessing all the other capabilities it possesses. Or using your brand new, state of the art computer to play solitaire. All of the options are only worthwhile if you know what they are and how to put them into practice.

**What is the one request?** That God would give them the ability to grow in their knowledge of Him

He prayed to the *“Father of glory”*, the One in whom is the source of all glory, who is actually able to accomplish the request. Here, the request is for the **Holy Spirit**, who is categorized by wisdom and revelation, to do what He came to do: illuminate our minds, guide us in truth, and point us to Christ. This is not a request for a different work of the Spirit or a new indwelling, but simply that the Spirit would have the opportunity to fill the minds and hearts of those willing to walk in the truth. What does this mean and look like? Three passages of Scripture help us understand this picture:

- 1) **Colossians 1:9** - *“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding* - A similar prayer for the church at Colossae, the reality is that without the Spirit’s intervention, we **could not** comprehend who God is, but with the Spirit’s help, we could actually **know God experientially**, to have a personal, intimate relationship with Him. We can understand and comprehend the nature of His saving plan, His purposes in this world and the one to come and His desires for us. Think about that! God wants us to **know Him, not just know about Him**; the difference between the two being a vast canyon of intimacy. In fact, a lack of knowing God will be the reason many will hear, *“Depart from me”*, since they never **KNEW Him** (Matt. 7:23). But He desires, positively, to know Him. **“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you sent”** (John 17:3). We do

this through the Word, but it is not just the Word alone, but through the work of the Spirit in us.

- 2) **1 Corinthians 2:6-16** - *“But as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him’ — these things God has revealed to us through **the Spirit**. For **the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God**...Now we have received not the spirit of the world, **the Spirit who is from God**, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom **but taught by the Spirit**, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”* How do we connect the dots of Scripture with reality or take the deep things of God and comprehend them with our puny minds? The answer is: **the Holy Spirit of wisdom**. He is the difference between words that fly off and over our heads to seeing and savoring the Truth of Scripture as life giving. Before we are saved, we cannot see Christ or know God through the Word, but once we have experienced redemption and the indwelling of the Spirit, these things begin to light up. Again, we often think of the Holy Spirit in terms of emotional or ecstatic interactions instead of helping our minds and hearts comprehend. Now, for sure, when we comprehend God and His plan, we should have new emotions and affections, but the Spirit is Who works in our hearts. The question is: *are we giving the Spirit fuel to work with? The things freely given to us by God reside in His Word, so that is the access point.* To try to comprehend without it is foolishness and impossible.
- 3) **2 Kings 6** - The Spirit gives us new lenses to see life through. As we get older, our eyesight changes, things get blurry, and it’s a strain to see near or far (or anything in between). The Spirit is like Lasik surgery or having our cataracts removed. Paul put it this way:” having **the eyes of your hearts enlightened.**” That is a fantastic word picture. Our hearts are viewed as the seat of our emotions, volition, and decision-making centers. When our hearts are enlightened, we see EVERYTHING differently. There is a story in 2 Kings 6 when the king of Syria was warring against Israel and was continually thwarted through the prophetic ministry of Elisha. Finally, the king had enough and sent his army to get rid of this annoying prophet. So, he sent an army of horses and chariots to surround the city where he was staying, and in the morning, Elisha woke up to the terrible reality of being outnumbered with no way out. His servant said what we all would, **“Alas, my master! What shall we do?”** (6:15) But Elisha was unusually calm. His response: *Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who with them!*” (6:16). What? Was this misplaced bravado? Had the prophet finally lost it, the stress getting to him? No, he prayed and said, **“O LORD, please open His eyes that he may see!”** The LORD answered and what he saw blew the roof off the place: the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (all running in slow motion). When the eyes of our hearts are enlightened through the Holy Spirit, we start to see life differently:

*“The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.”*

**Psalm 118:6**

*“What shall we say to these things? **If God is for us, who can be against us?** He who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”*

**Romans 8:31-32**

*“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”*

## 1 John 4:4

Paul asked that the Spirit would do His work, to open up the eyes of the hearts of the church to see, know, and comprehend God, living with confidence and joy. He then **asked for 3 specific aspects of this wisdom and knowledge**, 2 of which we'll cover this morning: hope, riches, and power.

- **Know the hope to which He has called you** - This is a specific prayer for hope, and it is NOT the hope of **your** calling, but the hope of **his calling**. What's the difference? The first is narrow and individualistic, and the other has to do with the saving purposes that originated in God's choice of His people before the foundation of the world. Hope is not only directed to the future, but it deals in the unseen, which is so hard for us. ***"For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."*** (2 Cor. 17-18). We place our hope in the unseen, but sure reality that God has called us, redeemed us, made us His adopted sons and daughters and has secured us in Christ. This level of **security and purpose** is rare in our world. It means we know exactly what is happening around us, that what has been done for us cannot be taken away or snatched away and we can live freely and confidently. Think about how we are so often compelled to keep our life in this world, to try to hold onto what we have, and to find security in all kinds of temporal things that will only fade away. Hope in His calling of us frees us to live differently and make categorically different decisions than those who have no hope
- **Know the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints** - Again, this is not focused on our inheritance, but on His. This should illicit an immediate, emotion packed, worshipful response to us. God has made the church His own prized possession, His treasure for the future that He secured through the redemption of Jesus Christ. God has brought all people and nations, Jews and Gentiles together, into His family to display to the universe what are the riches of His glory. **What does this mean?** The fact that God put such a high value on a community of sinners redeemed out of slavery, but still bearing far too many traces of our former life, might seem too incredible or impossible if not clear that He sees us through the lens of Christ and His righteousness, since He chose us, imperfections and all, in Christ. Folks, that means we have incredible value in His sight. He wanted us even though He knew ALL of our gross, perverse, hypocritical sin. We have value because He gives it to us in Christ.

All of this reminds of this reality: Our life and mindset should be Godward in all things, including our prayers. When our life and prayers are shaped by us, the amount of prayer is diminished and the content of our prayer is focused on ourselves or temporal comfort. Our goal is to know our God, to have a growing knowledge of Him, to comprehend our hope and the fact that we are His inheritance so that we can be confident and and free in this life to make much of Him. Now all we need is power, which we will look at in a couple of weeks.