

The Right Thing to Pray

Ephesians 1:15-23

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**September 24, AD 2023
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

How do you usually go about praying for people? Have you ever told someone you'd pray for them, then forgotten to do it? That is, until you see the person coming around the corner. You pray as fast as you can, "Lord, bless Jessica." You pray just in time to say, "Hi. How's it going? Been praying for you." I confess that my prayers for people are often rather anemic. I say their names and hold them up to the Father for a second. Now I think that's valid prayer. God knows what they need, I'm just making the connection. But I wonder if my prayers could be a lot deeper. And if my prayers were more engaged, maybe I would grow in love both for people and for Christ.

In today's passage, we get a glimpse into Paul's prayer life. We see the beautiful way he prayed for the believers in Ephesus with whom he had lived and shared the gospel for many months. Let's walk through this prayer.

1) Thanks for faith and love. He writes, "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." Paul's prayers for the Ephesians begin with thanksgiving. And linger in thanksgiving. He takes time to remember the people he shared life with. He visualizes them. He notices before God the way they showed their faith in Jesus. He recalls the way they loved each other. And then he cannot help but give thanks. So often I just think about someone's need, then toss off a prayer that God would meet that need.

But then I tried Paul's method. I visualized someone in our church. I thought about the way she has joy in worship. Or the way he speaks about Jesus in Bible study. I recalled how sincere is their trust in Christ. Then I thought about how she loves other people, always inviting others to share what's going on. I thought about how he loves his wife and his children, how he figures out how to serve others. I remembered folks. And it moved me to give thanks. It filled me with wonder at what extraordinary believers I encounter.

Has someone come to your mind while I've been speaking? Go ahead, think of another believer you know, maybe someone in this room. Think about how

you've seen or heard his faith. Think about how you've seen her show Christ's love to others. Pick one, and recall them before the Lord. Give thanks. Even right now! This method of holy remembering will deepen your love for others. It will increase your joy.

2) Prayers for Spiritual Sight. Paul in gratitude and joy goes on to say what he prays for them, "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 heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you." Paul prays for spiritual eyesight. He asks God to open their spiritual eyes to see how great is their hope in Jesus.

Now there's nothing wrong with praying for healing from illness, or about a test in school, or an interview, or just for strength for the day. God loves us to tell him about what people need. But this prayer of Paul's takes it deeper. The beginning of really wanting the best for someone else has to do with having the eyes of their heart opened to see more clearly all that Jesus is. You can get better from Covid, ace the test, or secure the new position, but if you don't know of the hope you have in Christ, you remain empty and lost. If you do know the hope we have in Jesus, you can go through the suffering of illness and still have joy. You can handle success or failure with a peace that passes understanding. You can see your life with a bigger vision than personal success.

Paul adds a specific vision he prays for them to see: "what are the riches of [God's] glorious inheritance in the saints." We talked some about this last week. We who belong to Christ await an eternal inheritance. We will receive the glory of an everlasting life lived in communion with God and one another in a renewed creation. The joy, interest, wonder and delight of our inheritance will be glorious.

But we also talked about Paul's teaching that the Triune God himself also awaits an inheritance. He expects a treasure at the end of days. God's store of riches will be all of the redeemed joyfully surrounding him. Lost people who come home. Doubters who come to faith. Thieves that become philanthropists. Betrayers who become bedrocks of faithfulness. The proud who become meek. Discards who discover they are beloved. All the ways people get redeemed in Jesus. This is God's treasure. These stories of grace will be the symphonies of heaven.

Paul prays that the Ephesians will have their eyes opened to this astounding truth. God prizes the faith and love of his people over anything in the universe. To a people who often felt like pawns in the games of the powerful, this is a great

discovery. I am not a pawn. I am a beloved jewel in the crown of the God who gave his life for me. Think of what we are praying for people if we ask God to open their eyes to this truth. “Father, let her see what a jewel she is in your crown. Lord Jesus, let him see how his young faith is the treasure your prize above all else.” That kind of praying would let us into participating in all the ways God is shining his jewels into splendor.

3) Discovering the Power of God. We will linger over this third aspect of Paul’s prayer. “That you may know the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might . . . when he raised [Christ] from the dead.” Paul prays that they would discover that the same power which raised Jesus from the dead is at work in the lives of believers. The Father sent the Spirit to raise his Son from the deepest, darkest depths of forsakenness and depth to the most exalted heights of heaven. This just sends Paul into an outburst of praise. Jesus who was rejected and crucified is now “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.” That power to raise and lift from death is available to Christians.

And of course the first question I have to ask is, “If that’s true, why am I still so pathetic? If God’s great power is available to me, why am I so anemic in my love, my service, my faith, my holiness?” I’ve got three responses to this question for us to consider.

A. God’s Power is for His Will, Not Mine. There is a corruption of Paul’s teaching about God’s power in believers. It can be said in many different ways. But gist of it is this, “Ask God to give you your best life now, and claim his power to help you realize your dreams.” In other words, because God loves you, he wants the best for you, so whatever you are lacking, claim the resurrection power of Jesus in order to obtain it. Health, prosperity, achievement of dreams, overcoming obstacles, authority, prestige. Just name it and claim it. Yes, we can ask God for what we want. We can ask God to help us in what we’re going through. But we have to get the order right. Father, I ask that your will be done in my life. I ask that you would fulfill *your* purpose for my life. Make me more and more a jewel in your crown. Let the result of my life be to the praise of your glory. That’s what God’s power is for. To form us as a new creation in Christ. To increase our participation in his mission. To discover how whatever we do in the world is ultimately for God’s purposes. When we are in alignment with giving our wills and desires to the Lord, then we will see more of his power.

B. God's Power Works Over Time. The resurrection was dramatic. A dead Jesus got up. A sealed tomb opened. The risen savior emerged in the world. The miracles of Jesus and the apostles were also dramatic. Exorcisms and healings. All those things can still happen. But they are rare. That doesn't mean God is not powerfully at work. He is. But normally he works in us over time. If you go to the theatre to see a drama on stage or screen, there are only a few hours for the story to be told. Events of a lifetime happen in mere minutes on stage. The transformation of decades happens over an hour. In daily life, God's power more often works like a tree root under concrete. The root of your live oak is more powerful than the cement of your driveway. It can crack right through. But it doesn't happen like a jack hammer breaking up concrete. It happens slowly, incrementally, over years.

Jesus accelerated the process of transformation in the three years of his ministry. We get God's power in concentrated form during Christ's days among us as well as in the early days of the apostles. But through the decades and centuries, we realize that the Spirit grows fruit through us. It's a seasonal, sustained process. Usually, God seems more interested in growing the fruit of patience in me than he does in getting me instantly out of a jam. He seems intent in creating a joy that suffering cannot destroy than he does in giving me happiness that can vanish in a moment. He wants to grow faith in me by inspiring a history of little faithful choices more than just instantly making me believe everything.

God's goal is that we should be willing participants in his transforming us from coal into diamonds for the praise of his glory. He only rarely gives shortcuts. Usually, his mighty power flows slowly, almost invisibly through us, shaping us as a new creation.

C. Our Cooperation Matters. The spiritual masters teach us the hard truth. We experience so little of God's power because we submit so little of our wills to him. Of course he has power to fix us in a blink. Of course he could overwhelm us. But he does not. God desires children, not slaves. Jesus wants brothers and sisters, not robots. Yes, he brought us to life and faith by his resurrection power. But he shapes and grows us for eternity through teaching us, slowly, the way of faithfulness.

There are lots of metaphors for this. The Spirit is a mighty river within us. But we can open or lower the gates that keep that living water from flowing through us. The Spirit is an electric power for change in our lives. But we can switch off the flow. We can unplug from the source. A great ship can traverse oceans, sailing safely over great deeps and through mighty swells of waves. But a single thin rope can keep the ship stuck in the harbor.

The power available to Christians is as mighty as the resurrection. But it usually works over time. It usually only flows as we offer ourselves in obedience and faith to be part of God's plan, not ours. God waits for us to draw upon him. He waits for us to ask that his will be done and that he empower us to do that will. But how he longs for us to ask him. Jesus said, "If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

And that brings us back to Paul's prayer. Prayer is the means of aligning our will with God's will. We reach upwards towards God. We orient ourselves to Jesus. We remember Jesus Christ. We give thanks. We pray to know more fully our hope and our inheritance, to receive the power that enables us to be shaped as jewels in the glory of God.

But this is not just for us. Paul holds up these Ephesians Christians before God. He remembers their faith and their love. He gives thanks. He asks God to be at work in their lives. He prays for the eyes of their hearts to be open to all they have in Christ. He intercedes with Jesus to give these young believers awareness of the power at work in them. For once they see, they will exult in the Lord Jesus who reigns over heaven and earth. We can pray that way too!