

Texts: Ephesians 1:1-23

Sunday 24th February 2019 (evening)

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Continuing in our evening theme of “the prayers of Paul”, we gather tonight to explore a third such prayer. As with previous evenings, we are having the sermon near the start of our service so as to allow for a time of praise after the sermon and then a time of prayer around the themes highlighted for us in this prayer to the Ephesians.

I’m going to go through it portion by portion, from beginning to end, and unpack it as we go that we might catch the flow of Paul’s prayer and his concern for these people. So, let’s get into this prayer of Paul’s.

V15: “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people,...”

What we have in this letter, is correspondence from the Apostle Paul to a group of churches within southwestern Asia Minor, or what is modern day Turkey. Ephesians is really a circular letter that Paul sent to Gentile believers in that area, though Ephesus would have been one of the cities to which Paul sent the letter, for it was the third most major city in the Roman Empire at the time.

And it’s because of that context, that the letter lacks the extensive personal greetings in the opening section, which we would expect to see if Paul had been writing to the believers he had evangelised in Ephesus some years before, or if he was writing to the elders in Ephesus whom he knew so well and had met but a few years ago.

For in the spring of AD60, Paul had finally been brought to Rome, where he spent another two years in Roman detention and the vast majority of scholars think Paul wrote Ephesians during this time of house arrest.

So, he is writing to people whom he does not personally know, and yet he has heard something of their faith, of their trust in the Lord Jesus, a trust to which they are keeping faithful (v1), despite all the pressures and temptations they would have faced to put their faith in other gods or practices, such was the cosmopolitan nature of the time and place.

That faith has proved genuine because it has also brought about a love for “all God’s people”, and as a result of hearing of their faith and love,...

Paul knows these Gentile believers to be part of God's holy people, the church. And if they are part of the church, **then they share in all the "spiritual blessings in Christ" which Paul outlined in v3-14 of the opening section **of the letter**:**

- They are chosen in Jesus... "to be holy and blameless in [God's] sight"**
- They share in "adoption to sonship"**
- They have received God's "glorious grace", "redemption", "forgiveness of sins" and have been "marked...with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit"**

The opening section is foundational for all that Paul will write in the letter, but it also frames and outlines what Paul knows of God's "will...[of what God] purposed in Christ" (v9) – and so it is in light of this understanding, and in light of also hearing this good report of these

believers, that Paul knows the Ephesians truly partake in the spiritual blessings of Christ and have a place in the purposes of God.

But for Paul, simply to receive a good report is not enough, we read on...

V16: “I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers....”

In light of what Paul has heard, he is compelled into thanksgiving and intercessory prayer for these Christian believers in this difficult and confusing part of the Roman Empire. His reference to having “not stopped giving thanks” is unlikely to mean it was continuous, rather that when Paul has his regular times of prayer,...

he brings the Ephesian believers before God. Like with his prayer for the Colossians, what is noteworthy here is that, firstly, what is to follow, is not a one-off prayer for the Ephesians, but rather a summary of how he is praying for these dear people on a regular basis.

We should also note, that as with the prayer we looked at in Colossians a few months ago, which was probably written around the same timeframe, Paul is committed to praying for people he has never met, and he is genuinely thankful for them, not taking them or their faith for granted. What's more, he prays for people from whom he has received no personal benefit.

I wonder friends, can the same be said of us?

If we reviewed our personal prayers, if we reviewed our prayers in our Sunday services, if we reflected on our Thursday evening prayer meetings, do we look beyond self? Do we pray for others in our local congregation? But also, do we pray further afield? Of course, it's impossible to pray for everyone in a meaningful way, but there are ways to build this into our own and corporate prayer lives.

For example, we have recently shared in Easter and during Holy Week we joined with our brothers and sisters from other congregations, both within and outwith the Church of Scotland. Maybe we could commit to praying for them? Maybe we could ask them for prayer updates or even simply pray this prayer of Paul's in Ephesians for those congregations around us?

Or, what about praying for the persecuted church, and using the prayer resources from Open Doors or some such organisation to support these dear fellow believers in places of great opposition? Are we willing to stand alongside them in prayer whilst they forfeit their lives for the faith?

These are a few simple ways that we could intentionally, meaningfully and manageably pray for believers we really do not know and may never know.

We press on to find what Paul actually prays for these fellow Christians...

V17: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.”

Here Paul begins to outline what he petitions God for on their behalf, although the prayer is actually interconnected and flows from one clause to the next and is actually one complete sentence in the Greek from v15 to v23.

So, Paul begins by relaying that he asks “God...the glorious Father”. Because of the emphasis on God’s power in this prayer and throughout the letter, this characterisation of God as “the glorious Father” should really be understood as an expression of God’s omnipotence more than His splendour, holiness, or honour. Paul wants the Ephesians to know he is praying for them by coming before the one true God, the One who has given so much spiritual blessing through Jesus, the Lord and Messiah.

Paul petitions the glorious Father for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that the Ephesians may know God better. Paul knows that they can and should grow in their knowledge of God, that this will be for their benefit, especially in such hostile circumstances. But growing in this knowledge will also be to the “praise of [God’s] glorious grace” (v6) because the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, is now our God and Father because we are now in Christ and thus adopted as sons and daughters of God too (v5) – so growing in knowledge of God, is to grow in knowledge of our heavenly Father, and that will lead to greater praise of His grace, as we understand all we have received in Christ and the God who has been so effusive in grace, so prodigal, as we thought about this morning.

But Paul also knows that the kind of knowledge of God which the Ephesians need, does not come through simple human hard work or study – instead, it must come by the Holy Spirit and so he prays that the work of the Spirit will be granted to them, the same Spirit whom Jesus spoke about during His earthly ministry: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you...when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” [John 14:26; 15:13]

Twelve times in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul will refer to the Holy Spirit, and as the prayer we looked at last time in Ephesians 3 makes clear, it is by the Spirit that any growth in understanding is going to come about.

I again wonder friends, how do we expect to grow in knowledge of God? Or how do we expect the members of our congregation to grow in knowledge? Do we think it will simply be by our hard work, our good teaching, our extensive reading that will ensure a deeper knowledge? Now these things it can be profitable and helpful, but it is very easy for learning to simply puff up and not change very much in an individual, and ultimately, God isn't really after a bunch of "now it alls": as the opening section outlines, He is after a people who are His children, who live in relation to Him and are part of His eternal purposes.

What's more, information and knowledge are very different things: genuine wisdom and revelation go deeper than knowing the facts of something, for wisdom leads to appreciating the will and purposes of God in Christ,

And how to live in light of that, whilst revelation leads to a fuller appreciation of the person and character of God Himself, and who we are in Christ. And for that we need the Spirit's help.

Paul says as much to the Corinthians: “we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began...as it is written: ‘What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived’ – the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their

own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”

(1 Cor. 2:7-11)

Similarly, **Isaiah speaks of:**

**“the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord”**

(Isa. 11:2)

Brothers and sisters, you know me a little by now, you know that reading and learning are important to me, and I put a good bit of effort into studying for sermons, so I am not saying that we shouldn't read or learn and put in some graft. But, for information to go deep, for it to become wisdom and revelation, such that it affects our

minds and our hearts and so our lives – well, that takes more than what we can humanly do, because how many of us can really change another’s heart, or even our own?

And so, we need the help of the Spirit, the Spirit of God who will lead us into all truth, and whether it be for ourselves, or for our young people, or for the churches in our area, we need to pray and ask for God’s provision and enabling, so that our preaching and teaching and reading or our devotional times and opportunities for fellowship might be more than human words or information, but rather wisdom and revelation of God’s will, purposes and character.

In that vein, Paul continues...

V18-19a: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

Here Paul elaborates on what he has written, in that as he prays for the Spirit’s work in the people of God, Paul expects that the “eyes of their hearts”, the instruments for receiving and understanding spiritual truth and reality, will receive light by which to see. Or in other words, the apostle prays for the lights to go on inside people so that they know God and understand what they have in Christ. Specifically, Paul outlines three key realities for the Ephesians to know.

Firstly, the reality of “the hope to which he [God] has called you”. Paul believes they should know the significance that God’s call has for their future - the call of God calling them into relationship with Himself as sons and daughters through Jesus. Paul wants these believers to know that God’s call makes a radical — and positive — change in what the future holds for them and that as a result this hope can, and should, change the way they live now.

Hope was as rare a commodity in the first-century world which Paul addressed, as it is today. Fate, determinism and despair dominated the ancient world. People felt manipulated by unseen forces, and they sought protection from bad luck, sickness, and evil powers.

But God's work in Christ gives hope to the believer, because life is not a meaningless accident of molecules, and the problem of evil and death will not have the final say, for as Easter reminds us, death has been conquered and we can look forward to a glorious life with God. And so, Paul prayed that the Ephesians might know what God's call meant for their future and, therefore, for their present.

In our society, people — including Christians — care a lot about the present. But if God has called us to be among his future people, then hope changes everything and becomes the basis from which we live in the present. Indeed, and I found this **a startling idea in my reading: Christians live from their future, the future God has established for them.**

What might happen if we lived from our future? Not FOR our future, but from our future? Would we have greater hope and perseverance? Would we be more open handed with our time and possessions? Might we be less precious about things in church? Would we lay down our agendas and priorities to focus more on God's? To live FROM our future could radically change our lives.

The next clause in the prayer reads: “the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people”. This literally reads, “the wealth of the glory of his inheritance in the holy ones.” That’s right – we, God’s people, us bunch of messed up, selfish individuals – we are God’s glorious inheritance, we are His riches, for we are His holy people, His set apart ones.

It is a staggering thought and reality, but it's one we looked at this morning in the parable of the prodigal God – Father God delights in us, in you and me. We are what God is going to inherit in the age to come and that excites God! I wonder, what might happen in our churches if that information became revelation and affected our self-identity? Might we grumble a bit less? Might we be less irritable and much more generous with one another? Just a thought.

Lastly, Paul adds that through the lights coming on by the Spirit's work within the Ephesians, he expects them to know God's "incomparably great power for us who believe."

With the mention of “power” Here, Paul makes explicit a subject that has been implicit from the beginning and is central to the letter, for Ephesians focuses on words for power more than any other New Testament letter. In the next part of verse 19, four different words for power will occur, emphasizing God’s activity in His people’s lives. In praying and writing about this, Paul desires for believers to know this great power that is available for them and to help the Ephesians understand it, Paul elaborates by giving four actions of God in Christ...

V19b-22a: “That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age

but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet...”

Here the apostle emphasises what God’s power has accomplished in the resurrection of Christ and in his exalting of Jesus to God’s right hand. God has raised Jesus from the dead, conquering death and sin itself – no mean feat – and the language of God’s right hand reveals that Jesus is in the highest position of authority and power, such that He is central to all life, and Lord over all. The terms “rule”, “authority”, “power”, “dominion” and “every name” are Paul’s way of stacking together categories of power so as to emphasize that Christ’s victory is total. In all of this, Paul seeks to make it clear that whatever powers exist — whether spiritual or otherwise, human or nonhuman —

they are all less than Christ. The powers do not have the final say, Jesus does; the powers are not equal combatants on the stage of life, they are inferior to Christ, they are under His feet.

The statement that “God placed all things under [Christ’s] feet” naturally leads Paul to the thought of Christ as “head” and to the image of the body...

V22b-23: “...and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

The second half of v22 emphasises that Christ is “head over everything for the church” and whilst the idea could be “head over all things in relation to the church” several

commentators agree that it should be understood as: “Christ is head over everything *for the benefit of the church.*” As such, the church is in a position of privilege because Jesus Christ is her Lord.

Paul’s focus here is on Jesus and so the main point is that Jesus’ position as “head” stresses that he is Lord; whilst the image of the “body” stresses his unity with believers, that Christians live in Christ and thus He is their life.

The idea is that with Christ as our head, we are under His protection and authority, and we partake of His God-given power, the very power that raised Him from the dead, such that we participate in His very life and reign.

This power is therefore available to all God's people for their protection, for their growth in the fruit of the Spirit, and for their resistance of evil.

And how much do we need that power? Don't you need power, to curb your tongue and grow in gentleness, patience, love, or self-control? I know I do, and thank God He makes it available in Christ that we might have all we need to grow into the life He has called us to live.

But we cannot mix faith in Christ with some other ingredient, not any other name, or power, or means — rather if we understand that Christ is sufficient and that nothing else is needed, then we will truly know His power at work in and through us,...

for to attempt to add to Christ is actually to take away from Him and the Spirit of God will not partner in that.

For Jesus is, as Paul concludes, “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” Here there are echoes from the Old Testament, but understood now in what has been achieved in Christ: that whereas in the Old Testament God’s presence, power and salvation filled the temple, **now God fills Christ,** “for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col. 2:9), and then Christ in turn fills his own people so that the church partakes of the divine fullness, the divine presence and power and saving work, such that we mature as sons and daughters of God, attaining “to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” as Paul will write in Ephesians 4:13.