

Sermon 2: Ephesians 1:15-23: Prayer for the Saints

OUTLINE

How Paul knows they are saints
What Paul prays for the saints

INTRODUCTION

What do you pray for other Christians? You might have found yourself in your quiet time and you pick up the church phonebook to pray through a page as part of your daily devotions. This is the third time you have gone through the book and the prayers are beginning to feel heartless and robotic. You aren't really sure what to ask for. Should you ask for happiness, prosperity, good health, emotional wellbeing, peace? These are broad categories of well-wishing which are not informed by the gospel, what you want are prayer requests that are not what any uninformed unbeliever would pray but those prayer requests which are informed by the realities of the gospel. Ephesians 1:15-23 is an example of such a prayer by the apostle Paul. When Christians find themselves in a war, in a town and environment that is hostile to the gospel like Ephesus, when they need true ballast for the storm these are the things to seek for others and ourselves.

Once again v15-23 is one sentence in Greek. And where 3-14 is praise to God for the blessings of our salvation this section is a prayer to God that we might know the blessings of our salvation. The thing to note about this section is that Paul is not asking for us to receive a second blessing or a new experience for the elite, but rather he is asking for us to come to know what is already ours in Christ. All the things Paul asks for us to know fall under the category of the assurance of our salvation. Paul wants us to know the work of the Trinity for us in our salvation and how unbreakable and certain it is. He recognizes that when a Christians knows that they are inseparably saved they will face sufferings with courage, temptation with steadfastness and persecution without fear.

We will look at these verses under two headings, firstly we will look at v15 and how Paul knows the Ephesians are Christians, we will examine the evidences of faith and love. Then the bulk of our message will be looking at how Paul prays for the Ephesians. We will see that he prays with thanksgiving and he prays for knowledge. Three things in particular are highlighted for us to know, our hope, our inheritance, and the power working for us.

How Paul knows they are saints

V15, 'For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.' Our section begins with a 'for'. Paul has been describing every spiritual blessing that the saints have in Christ, and it is for this reason, because he has heard that the Ephesians are Christians who have all these blessings, that he will pray that they would know what they have. What we want to focus on in this verse is how Paul knows that the Ephesians are Christians. How do you know if someone is a Christian?

Firstly, notice how Paul has heard the testimony about these Ephesians. He has not heard their own self-evaluation about whether they are believers but he has heard it from another's mouth. Remember that Paul had planted the church in Ephesus and spent 18 months there. He is not saying that he heard that they and prayed a sinners prayer or been baptized, but has heard from others about their continuing faith and love. He is not referring to the apparent convert who is quickly sealed in their Christianity because they

prayed a sinner's prayer. He is talking about fruit that has revealed itself over time. Are you someone who made a commitment but then time revealed that it was not true? It often happens that we can think and say we are Christians but the truth of it is seen by others. Does your family think you are a Christian? Do your work colleagues testify that you are a disciple of Christ? Do your fellow students talk about you as a follower of Jesus, a saint, someone submitted to the Lord Jesus? It is possible that someone may be in a poor spiritual condition and not have the fruit but ordinarily speaking you know a disciple of Christ by their fruit.

Paul points to two types of fruit in particular, faith and love. Please note that Paul does not say faith standing alone or love standing alone, but faith first that is accompanied by love. Some claim they are Christians but have no fruit, some point to good deeds but there is no biblical understanding, neither of these is a biblical Christian. Paul stresses that our faith is in Jesus Christ. Today many will claim to be people of faith referring to being spiritual but subscribing to a pluralistic worldview which sees all faith claims as equally valid. On the streets the other day, we were evangelizing and spoke to a professor of religion on holiday from Australia. He spoke about how he had done a study and felt that all religions have the same basic structure. This is to have faith but not faith in Christ. In a materialistic context like our own many think it a major concession to be spiritual and believe that something is there, but this is still not faith in Christ. Agnosticism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Bahai, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, all of these have faith but not faith in the Christ revealed in the Bible. The Ephesians had converted from the worship of Diana and from witchcraft; they had repented of their false and idolatrous worship to return to their Creator in Christ. Jesus Christ is the only way a sinner can come to a holy God, there is no other way in which our sins can be paid for, there is no other provision given by God that He will accept, Jesus is the only one who can die for our sins, justify us and present us holy and blameless before God. We must trust in His work alone for salvation.

This faith is also in the LORD Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus is not merely the intellectual assent that He lived and died and rose again, it is the acknowledgement that we were rebels against Him and deserved punishment because we were law breakers. We were made to live in His ways and went our own way. To believe is to believe that He is our God, that His law is the rule by which we must live, that sin is the breaking of His law, and so to believe and repent is to return to His lordship over our lives. To claim to believe in Jesus and not obey Him is to have a false faith that cannot save.

Of all the ways to describe the moral and lifestyle changes that follow salvation Paul sums it all up with one word, love. Love we know fulfils the law, it loves God and it loves others. Love is the opposite of the selfish tendency of the fallen heart. Love is what God has shown to us and the fruit of the Spirit within our loves. But in particular you can know you are a Christian if you love the saints. There are many movements that talk about love, the Hippy movement was a movement advocating free love, but that was just a cover up for lust. A true believer has love for the saints, or as Paul puts it all the saints. You see there were Jews and Gentiles who were natural enemies, but in Christ that walls have been removed. Those typical divisions of race and class and sex are overcome as we all see our equality in sin and grace. We are all equally unworthy, and all equally promoted by God's grace upon us. We are drawn to other Christians because we have the most important thing in common, we love God, we live by His word, we love holiness and truth, and we naturally unite and identify with those who are likeminded. If you see someone who calls themselves a Christian and they dislike Church, they roll their eyes at the sermon, scrutinize the saints with eyes open during the praying, mock people as they sing, gossip and slander folk from

the church, are generally embarrassed about being with believers feeling uncomfortable and unable to relate, that person is not a Christian.

What Paul prays for the saints

V16, 'I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.' Paul teaches us many things in his praying, here he teaches us who is responsible for the faith and love among the Ephesians. He is thanking God not the Ephesians for their faith and love. He is crediting God with the fruit not them. To put it another way, who do you thank for your salvation? Salvation is by grace not by works, it is wrought by God not by us. We cooperate and respond to His working, but we are not the source of the initiative nor have we the power to carry it out. We cannot start it of ourselves; continue it nor complete it; it is the work of God. The prevalence of thanksgiving in our prayers will betray to what extent we credit God for the things we are praying for.

But this does not mean that prayer is without use. God not only appoints the end but also the means to that end. He appoints that the Ephesians should be saved and grow but Paul also recognizes that this is done by his praying not apart from it, and so he endeavors to remember the saints when he prays. Paul's thankfulness to God and his ongoing prayerfulness show the perfect balance between believing in God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

V17, '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.' Paul addresses his prayers to the Father, as taught in the Lord's Prayer. But this is not just a barren reference to God, but God in relation to us in the new Covenant. In the OT He is called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, here He is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is because of Christ our Father, but He is the Father of glory. We are reminded here to think about who we approach in prayer.

Paul asks that God would give the Ephesians the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. Every benefit we receive from God is through Christ and by the Spirit. The things we need to know are not discovered by human intelligence and reasoning, they are ministered to us by the Spirit. He is the Spirit of truth, and the primary way He will speak to us today is through His Word.

Paul asks that the Spirit would give us a knowledge of God. Not just a head knowledge but a knowledge that hits the heart. Now Paul could have asked for us to know our salvation, or the nature of heaven, or a glimpse of our resurrection body and how awesome it would be, but instead takes us to the source. He asks for us to have a knowledge of God. All the things that Paul is going to ask that we know more about, namely the hope of our call, the glory of our inheritance, and the greatness of power toward us. They will only be of comfort when we see them as the hope of His call, the inheritance He is bestowing and the greatness of His power. To know Him is to know the nature of these things more fully.

V18a, 'having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.' Paul prays for the Ephesians to have deep insight into the hope to which God has called us. Now when Paul talks about the hope we have in the gospel, this is talking about the New Creation, it is talking about our new bodies, the new heavens and earth, that time when there is no sin, satan or death. He is wanting our minds to be fixed on that end to which we are headed. But Paul connects our hope with God's call. How can we know that we will gain that hope? We know because it is God who has called us to that

hope. The call of God is more than an invitation, it is an irresistible call. It is a call that is more than words but is accompanied with all the power of God to perform the will of God. Paul puts it this way in Romans 8:30, 'And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.' This is known as the golden chain of salvation a chain that begins in eternity past and stretches to eternity future. Everyone God predestines will be called, everyone who is called will be justified, and everyone who is justified will be glorified, not ifs or buts. Paul wants the Ephesians to know the certainty of their hope. If God has started a work in calling, He will complete it in bringing you home.

V18b, 'what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.' The second thing that Paul prays we might know is not only the certainty of our home coming but the richness of our homecoming. The riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints. There are two ways to understand this verse, are we God's inheritance or do we receive His inheritance within ourselves? Both are true but bring different emphases to the fore. If we are God's inheritance, then this magnifies the value He has put upon us in Christ, the way we are cherished and the protection that He gives to His own. If the inheritance is what we will receive in ourselves, that magnifies the new state of glorification which is beyond our comprehension for being so gloriously rich. This could be talking about the glorious future of belonging to God or the glorious future of God's work within us, which ever it may be the perspective is of one looking to a grand glorious future laid up for us. The word inheritance speaks of family attachment as well as a gift and not being earned. Paul himself is very taken with this reality and writes in Romans 8:17, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'

V19, 'and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might.' This is the third thing that Paul wants us to know. As with anything when it comes to God, Paul wants us to know how much we cannot know. In this instance Paul wants us to know the immeasurable power of God. We at times may think that God's plan can be derailed, that His work will fail, that things may not work out as He plans, but Paul wants you to know how unknowably powerful God really is. And that power is toward us, for us, within us. When we feel weak, this is the strength that we should consider. When we have to wrestle principalities and powers, governments and worldwide viruses, Eph. 6:10, 'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.'

Seeking to give us a sample of how powerful God's might really is Paul gives an example in v20-23, 'that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ 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. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.' You know that thing called death which defeats us all, God is stronger. You know that devil which set all of history aflame in sin, overcome, anything you can think of in this age or the age to come, Christ has been placed in authority over all like a conquering warrior king. And where is the church in all of this, where we do we fit in, Christ is the head of the church. In other words, God made Christ victorious and gave him as head over all things, and then married us to the King so that we share in this victory and reign. This is the power at work within you, do you think that this power can help you overcome a besetting sin? Do you think that this power can help you become more loving? Do you think that this power can enable you to stand even in the face of death? Our strength comes to us from God for the situations we face and His grace is more than sufficient.

So when you pray for Christians how should you pray? Pray thinking about the nature of true conversion showing both truth and love; pray with thankfulness because God is the author of their salvation; but pray recognizing that God uses your prayers to accomplish His ends of salvation and sanctification in their lives. Pray that saints would have a deep Spirit taught knowledge of God; that they may know the hope of their calling, the glorious inheritance ahead of them; and the immeasurable power of God towards them.