

“Lessons from Paul at Prayer” | Ephesians 1:15-23
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(Discussion questions on page 8)

At one point in his long and fruitful ministry, Tim Keller was asked what had been the hardest book for him to write. His answer: “The book I just finished, because it was on prayer.”¹

Keller found prayer not only hard to write about. It was a hard discipline to cultivate, for himself and for his congregants.

He also came to believe deeply in the importance of prayer. Shortly before his untimely death, Keller was asked if, looking back on nearly five decades of ministry, there’s anything he would do differently: “Absolutely,” he answered, “I should have prayed more.”²

Reading this recently reminded me of something a mentor once said to me: “Reflecting on what I’ve done after a long and busy day, it is the time I spent praying that I am most certain was not time wasted.”

The importance of prayer came home to me again when I was in the study of another mentor of mine, this time a pastor now in his late seventies. I noticed on his book shelf an entire row of prayer journals, each marked on the spine with a date. Here was the secret to his faithfulness; here was his private source of power: he was a man of *prayer*.

It seems to me that we really can tell a lot about ourselves by our prayer life. It’s a barometer of spiritual maturity, and a window into what we most value.

How about you, Do you have a prayer life? Would you like one? Do you know how to pray? Do you believe in the power of prayer? If you do pray, do you pray for the right things?

As we return to our series on Ephesians 1-3, we come to Paul at prayer. It’s a long prayer, stretching from 1:15-23. Paul doesn’t offer us a specific prayer we are to do, as Jesus does with the Lord’s prayer. But we can learn a lot by observing Paul at prayer. How does he pray? When does he pray? Who does he pray for? Most importantly, *What* does he pray for? With these questions in mind, we’ll explore part of his prayer in Ephesians 1, drawing from it six lessons about prayer.

1. Don’t just teach, pray.

Paul spent a lot of his time teaching, preaching, and instructing Christians. That was, perhaps, his most obvious gift. But he never taught without praying. We can see from this prayer, that

¹ This quote comes from Matt Smethurst, *Tim Keller on the Christian Life*, (Crossway, Forthcoming), 117.

² Ibid.

Paul prayed before his teaching—the contents of his letter—was received by the hearers. And we know he kept praying for his readers, long after they heard his teaching. As he write here,

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 (Eph 1:15-16).

Paul didn't just teach; he bathed his teaching in prayer. And this is an important example for us, as John Calvin observes:

those who intend their labor to be profitable to the edifying of the church, and those who have true zeal, must not only give themselves to teaching, but also, at the same time, pray God to work with them by his power and grace. For often it happens that we simply beat the air...because we do not pray God to further the doctrine that we preach. For of ourselves we are but unprofitable instruments, and when he has given us utterance, he must also make it effectual, in accordance with the saying that he who plants is nothing and he who waters is nothing, but it is God that gives the increase (I Cor. 3:7).³

Whether in your own study of God's word, or in your instruction of your children, friends or small group members, or in the preaching of the word, don't just study and teach, pray—for unless God is at work, our teaching is in vain. And when you do pray, teach with confidence that God is at work.

Lesson one, Don't just teach, pray.

2. Don't just pray, teach.

While there is a danger of turning into egg-heads and teaching without the power of God, there is also the danger of valuing prayer so much that we don't think teaching or instruction are important.

But notice, Paul does not end his letter after this prayer. He goes on to offer five chapters of dense teaching and instruction. When Paul established the church in Ephesus (recorded in Acts 19-20), Luke tells us that Paul "entered the synagogue [in Ephesus] and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). After this, he reasoned daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia hear the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:9-10).

Paul was a teaching machine. Paul cared deeply about sound doctrine. Teaching without praying, risks turning the word of God into a dead letter. But prayer unaccompanied by sound doctrine, risk turning Christianity into a vague new age spiritualism.

³ John Calvin, "The Sixth Sermon on the First Chapter - Ephesians 1:15-18." Access online here: <https://www.monergism.com/sixth-sermon-first-chapter-ephesians-115-18-john-calvin>

Lesson two, Don't just pray, teach.

3. Don't just pray for non-Christians to come to faith, pray for Christians to keep faith.

Notice that Paul prays for people *because they already have faith and love*:

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 (Eph 1:15-16).

We must never take for granted our faith in Christ or love for other Christians. At their root, faith and love are gifts from God. So yes, pray for those who do not know Christ and do not love Christ's people. But also, pray for those who already have faith, for your Christian friends and family, for your ministers, for your fellow church members, that they would continue in faith and love.

Lesson three, Don't just pray for non-Christians to have faith, pray for Christians to keep faith.

4. Don't assume access to God as Father, unless you pray in the name of His Son.

Modern people assume easy access to God. No matter who you are, what you believe, if you decide to pray, God is up there, thrilled you thought of him, and happy to respond with father-like love. But this is not how the Bible presents things.

Most of Paul's readers came from Greek or Roman backgrounds, so they had plenty of gods and said plenty of prayers. So praying to a god was not something new. But notice what Paul says in verse 17, that he prays "to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:17). Paul approaches God through Jesus Christ, and teaches his readers to do the same. And as he explains later in chapter 2, before they knew Jesus, "they were without God in the world" (Eph 2:12).

The Bible presents a picture where although God is omnipresent, and hears everything, he does not respond to just anyone in a father-like way. In fact, there are many who though they may approach God, are described in the Bible as "enemies of God."

Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world, writes James, makes himself an **enemy** of God." (James 4:4). Paul speaks of those "who walk as **enemies** of the cross of Christ" (Phil 3:18).

Access to God as father, comes only through Jesus Christ His Son, because only through Jesus can we approach God with our sins forgiven, reconciled to him. Paul makes this precise point in chapter 2:

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:13, 18).

Let us not take access to God as father lightly. It has been purchased for us at great cost to God's Son. Only when we are forgiven of our sins against God in Christ, then reconciled to God through Christ, can we pray to in the language that Christ taught us, saying, "Our Father."

Our fourth lesson: Don't assume access to God as Father, unless you pray in the name of Jesus His Son.

5. Don't settle, keep praying for more of God

We start to come to the heart of what Paul is praying for in verses 17-18, and it can be summed up as a deeper knowledge of God. He writes:

....remembering you in my prayers,¹⁷ 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 (vv 16-17).

This certainly includes a better and better understanding of who the true God is, and of his plan to bring salvation through Jesus Christ. But this knowledge entails more than just head knowledge—it has something to do with the heart. We can see this by what Paul goes on to say in verse 18,

.... having the eyes of your hearts enlightened (v 17-18).

Paul is praying that God, by the work of the Spirit, would open they eyes of their hearts to see more and more of God.

What does it mean to know God in your heart, rather than just in your head? I think it's like the difference between knowing that honey is sweet because you read about it in a nature book, and knowing honey is sweet because you've put a spoon full of it on your tongue. Like the Psalmist, Paul wants to "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8).

A few things to notice about this point of his prayer.

First, God is most important for Paul. There are many things Paul could be praying for his friends. And Paul at times pray for his own health (1 Cor 12), his deliverance from trouble (2 Cor 1); for boldness in his preaching (Eph 6:19); for strength in the face of spiritual attack (Eph 6:18). But I think this prayer tells us that for Paul, nothing is more important for a person than knowing God. So, in whatever situation you may find yourself in, amid whatever prayers you are praying, pray that God would use your current situation to grow your heart in the knowledge of him.

Second, We need the help of God to know God. I think Spirit here—"may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation"—means the Holy Spirit, who often is pictured in the Bible as conveying both the knowledge of and the presence of God (see Rom 8:14-17; 2 Cor 2:10-13; Isa 11:2). The Spirit opens the eyes of our hearts to see more and more of God.

Sometimes the Spirit awakens our hearts to know God in an instant, like a lightning strike, like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Other times, the Spirit's work in opening the eyes of our heart is less spontaneous and instantaneous, but more **gradual**. It is like the cultivation of an enjoyment of classical music, or poetry, or fine art. Slowly, gradually—as we walk in obedience, as we spend time in God's word, as we pray with others—the Spirit sensitizes our hearts to the surpassing greatness and beauty of God.⁴

Third, Paul's prayer assumes that growth is a part of the Christian life. Paul is not praying for people to come to know God who *do not know* Him. He is praying for people who *do* know him, to know him more deeply. This is a pray for increase, for growth.

If you are a Christian, are you growing in your (heart-) knowledge of God? Yes, you have been born again. But the Bible calls us again and again not merely to be born anew, but to grow:

Let the wise hear and **increase** in learning... (Prov 1:5). **Grow** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord (2 Pet 3:18). Long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may **grow** up into salvation (1 Pet 2:2). We are to **grow** up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (Eph 4:15).

Let us pray earnestly, for ourselves and our Christian friends, that God would grow us up in our heart-centered knowledge of him.

That is the fifth lesson, Don't settle, keep praying for more of God.

6. Don't live by your own steam, but pray you know the Hope and Power that come from God.

In verses 18-19, Paul deepens his prayer about knowing God, praying that this knowledge would lead to a deeper grasp of hope, of future inheritance, of God's power:

...having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might (Eph 1:18-19).

There is much we could talk about in these verses. But I want to underscore that this part of Paul's prayer involves how we hope, and how we understand God's power. These things touch on our deep motivational center: what we are living for, what strength we are walking in.

⁴ Anthony Thiselton, when writing about the gifts of the Spirit listed in First Corinthians, notes: "Such gifts as teaching and critically evaluating can hardly be 'spontaneous,' but are habits of trained judgment marked precisely by a continuity of the Spirit's giving as a process over time (cf. Rom 12:7–8; 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:11). "Almsgiving and works of mercy (Rom 12:8) may well seem 'more excellent' if the use of the gift is planned, deliberate, and entails a conscious act of will and service rather than a spontaneous welling up of a gesture without reflection" (Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 937).

Consider hope. Hope speaks to our expectations about our future. What we are looking forward to; what we are expecting to eventually happen. People hope for a career, a vacation, a marriage, children, grandchildren. These hopes buoy us up.

Paul is not against such hopes. But Paul is praying for a deeper, a surer hope: that they would know “the hope to which he [God] has called you” (v 18). This is the hope of your life with God. Your eventually union with God in heaven. Your resurrection. It is the hope of eternal life with God.

This type of hope is not natural. In our Western world especially, our hearts are almost 100% temporal in how they hope. It will take a work of God to open the eyes of our hearts to the hope of our calling—eternal life, total peace, full joy, with God!

And then there is power. Paul prays that his friends would know the power of God—“what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might” (v 19). He illustrates the immensity of this power in verses 20-23, by noting how this power worked to raise Christ from the dead, and seat him in heaven above all other powers.

What is this “power of God” Paul prays for? What will it look like to know it?⁵

It certainly includes the power of the resurrection—that one day they would experience death merely as a passage way to God, and the final resurrection and restoration of their bodies. But this power has a present experience, too.

Later in the letter, Paul calls them to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power” (Eph 6:10)—a present empowering. Paul also breaks out in praise in chapter three, saying, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph 3:20)—again, a present empowerment.

Paul wants the Ephesians to walk in the power of God. A power that will help them stand strong in the face of temptation; a power that will help them in the fight against spiritual forces.

But I think one of the reasons Paul needs to pray that they would know this power, is because often, God’s power works in our world and our lives in mysterious ways. God’s “power is made perfect,” He tells Paul, “in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). His power, as displayed in the Cross, appears to the world as “foolishness” (1 Cor 1:18).

⁵ The power of God works in various ways in Christians’ lives. The power of God in their resurrection one day (Phil 3:10). The power of God working through them to break strongholds (2 Cor 10:4), or bring about healing (Acts 3:12), or to withstand spiritual attack (Eph 6:11-18), or to bear up in difficulty (Col 1:11).

Paul is praying that his friends would have total confidence in the power of God, even when circumstances around them or within them, would suggest that God and His plan are being defeated.

E.g., College Experience: The first time I learned about this strange ways of the power of God was in a season at the end of college. I had only begun following God seriously my junior year, and I'd spent the last year-and-a-half of college praying earnestly that God would show me the path I was to take after graduation. I had done an internship at a Pharmaceutical company, who'd kept me on part time, and they had all but hand-crafted a position for me. It was in the bag.

Then, just two-and-a-half weeks before graduation, I was called in for a meeting and told they were giving the job to someone else, an internal hire with more experience. So close to graduation, I felt like God was totally dropping me. For someone so young in their faith, this suddenly shut door was confusing, and even felt cruel. God certainly did not feel very powerful to me.

But in the weeks that followed, one unexpected event happened after another. And six weeks later I was working for an organization I'd never heard of before then, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and I was set to coach basketball in the Philadelphia Public League. All this turned out to be the onramp for a vocational call into Christian ministry. Without that other job falling through, I am not sure I ever, in my own power or courage, would have made such a move.

This is the power Paul wants us to have total confidence in. The power of God that can “do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20), even when circumstances suggest otherwise. The power of God to bring about his purposes no matter what, even when we don't know what the right decision is.

Paul is praying that his friends would have a deep conversion of their inner life—how they hope, what power they trust in, that these things would become the hope and power that are from God.

This, then, is the **sixth and last lesson: Don't run your life on your own steam, but pray that you would know the hope and power that come from God.**

The seventeenth century puritan and church leader, John Owen, once said that what a man “is on his knees in secret before God almighty, that he is and no more.”⁶ May we follow the example of Paul—and so many saints after him—and give ourselves to a life of prayer. Amen.

⁶ Cited in Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 22.

Small Group Questions for Ephesians 1:15-23

1. Read Ephesians 1:15-23. List out what Paul is praying for. Are these things that you pray for?
2. Do you have a regular prayer life? If so, what does it entail? How often do you pray? Share with your family or small group a few practices or disciplines that have helped you cultivate a prayer life.
3. Paul is praying that the Ephesians would grow in their knowledge of God (Eph 1:16-18). Do you pray that you would know God more? Do you pray before you read the Bible, or before you come to church, that God would reveal more of himself to you? What would it look like to incorporate prayer into your learning and studying about God?
4. How have you seen your knowledge of God grow in the past months, or years? What might you do to lean into Paul's pray for growth in the knowledge of God?
5. In this passage Paul is praying for other Christians, not just for himself. Do you pray for Christians in your church community? Would you consider making a list of a few Christians in your church that you can pray for this week?