

“Lord Teach Us To Pray”

A Study in the Exposition of the Prayers of Paul: Ephesians 1:15-23¹ Two Week Study Guide

Introduction

There are times when we do not know how or what to pray. Perhaps seasons in which we reflect back on being in ruts of redundancy regarding what we express and petition to God in prayer. During such seasons, one might find that one of the best cures for this problem is a good dose of theology – a densely packed reflection and expression on the wonder of God’s works and character. Paul, not out of struggle with his prayer life, but out of the natural example of faithfulness, demonstrates this discipline of letting rich theology invigorate one’s prayer. We see this in Ephesians 1 where he begins with a tightly packed theological treatise on God’s glorious salvation in Christ. Then Paul transitions to prayer, allowing the truths that opened the chapter to plainly season and inform his prayer. We would be wise to learn first from this theologically packed thanksgiving and petition, and in assuming this discipline, of giving our attention to rich theological truths and letting them season and inform our prayers.

Paul’s Motivation for Prayer

Paul begins this section on prayer in Ephesians 1 with a statement of motivation. He explicitly states that there was a catalyst for his exercising the loving discipline of prayer for the Ephesian church. He states, “For this reason....” Now, while this statement is clear enough, what takes a measure of effort and textual discernment is determining to what he is referring to here: the theological statements of 1:3-14 or the received reports that he references in 1:15.

Harold W. Hoehner sees Paul’s reason as looking back to the short, but densely packed theological treatise on salvation that opened the letter. He states, "Because of (For this reasons) the believers' acquisition of every spiritual blessing - including election, predestination, adoption, grace, redemption, forgiveness, wisdom, understanding, knowledge of the mystery of His will, the sealing of the Holy Spirit, and inheritance - Paul now prayed that his readers might know God personally and intimately."²

I am persuaded that there is good reason for this conclusion, looking back, but I also recognize that there is an overt connection to these truths having been worked in and through the Ephesian believers so that Paul can affirm the testimony that has gone out from them. It is clear that this effectual and magnificent work of God (articulated in 1:3-14) provided the means by which the Ephesian church could then demonstrate true faith in the Lord Jesus and a love for all the saints.

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray’s Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School
ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

² The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament; John Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; Ephesians: Harold W. Hoehner; David C Cook, 1983, Pg.619

Therefore, it is again quite plain that a deficiency in theology will produce a deficiency, not only in general obedience of life and conduct, but in prayer too. Further, while it could be argued that one can benefit from that which they do not properly know or understand, it is equally clear that Paul finds no satisfaction in not knowing what *could be known*, and for the church not to enjoy the richness of knowing that which has been magnificently revealed to them in Christ. This is what he will drive to in his prayer for the Ephesians, and it is what we must also strive for in life, in obedience, and in prayer for ourselves and the Church.

The Glory of God in Salvation, Ephesians 1:3-14

As stated, the opening section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is extremely theologically dense – packing in magnificent truth upon magnificent truth, and the section as well as its components deserve significant treatment in their own right. However, because the nature of this study is not a complete exposition of various passages, but examinations of Paul's prayers, we will only give a sweeping treatment of these opening verses as they provide a necessary foundation for the section on prayer that follows.

Ephesians 1:3-6

The Church has been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. She suffers no lack, need, or deficiency. She is whole and complete in Christ who chose every one of its members before the foundation of the world when no act, conduct, or persuasion had opportunity to influence the predetermined and perfect will of God. This choice had its sure aim and outcome that the elect in Christ would be holy and blameless before God (not simply an ideal, but an expectation and sure reality). It was in love that the believers were predestined as adopted sons through Jesus Christ to the praise of his glorious grace.

Ephesians 1:7-10

Having elected and adopted those who would be his own, their redemption was made sure by the only means possible – through the blood of Christ, the perfect Lamb of God. Further, an element of God's redemptive work was providing revelation regarding his glorious work and the scope of its blessing - the uniting of all things in Christ at the fullness of time.

Ephesians 1:11-12

As adopted children of God through the effectual work of Christ, there is the promise of an inheritance because of him who works all things according to the purpose of his will. Salvation and its blessings are again affirmed not only to be wholly of the work of God, but by design to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:13-14

Upon hearing and trusting in Christ, the believer is also sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who is a guarantee of the believer's future inheritance until the day they acquire it.

The whole of this introductory section is a very Christocentric expression of God's complete and blessed salvation of his people: his sovereign work, by his good pleasure, for his great glory. Now, while this is true (note that Christ is referenced directly and indirectly in 1:3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11,12,13), there is also a consequential emphasis on the Trinity and the members thereof. The NET Bible perceptively notes that while 1:3-14 constitute one large sentence in the Greek text, there are still three distinguished parts to the section and each one focuses on praising God in the three respective persons of the Trinity. 1:6, praising the Father; 1:12, praising the Son; and 1:14, praising the Spirit.³ This again demonstrates that while there is a rightful emphasis on Christ in salvation, it is the work of the entire Trinity and worshipful affirmation should be made accordingly.

Reflection and Application

Before you begin the exercise of reflection and making personal application, it is strongly encouraged that you take the time to read Ephesians 1:3-14 and meditate on its wonderful statements. After reading and meditating on the passage's truths make a list of the rich doctrines expressed in the passage and write out what these doctrines teach us about God, man, and salvation. It was these elements that informed Paul's prayer of thanksgiving. Write out, when you have completed the first steps here, how they impact your prayers of thanksgiving and petition.

Ephesians 1:3-14 – Reflections and Observations about God.

Ephesians 1:3-14 – Reflections and Observations about Man.

Ephesians 1:3-14 – Reflections and Observations about Salvation.

³ NET Bible: Note 5 on Ephesians 1:3

How will these reflections and observations impact your prayers of thanksgiving and petition?

In view of what you have just completed in this section of "Reflection and Application," what do you see to be the connection between being theologically informed and prayer? Is it okay to *not* be theologically robust in your thinking? Please explain.

Hearing Testimony Produces Thanksgiving and Petition

This section will serve as a sweep over the primary text, Ephesians 1:15-23, addressing some thematic highlights. The next section will break the passage down in three parts with more precise examinations under headings addressing the sovereignty of God as expressed through this prayer of thanksgiving and petition.

An element of Paul's prayerful gratitude is centered on the Ephesian's testimony that was birthed out of the aforementioned Christocentric salvation experience that they share with Paul and with all the redeemed in Christ.

So, an immediate source of Paul's thanksgiving to God for the Ephesians, while rooted in their magnificent salvation in Christ, is the fruit of their salvation which was their expressed faith in Christ and their love for the redeemed. Paul's prayers for them were invigorated by the testimony that has propelled out from this body of believers: their faith and love.

Examining various Pauline letters, we observe that this was not an uncommon element of Paul's joyful gratitude to God for other assemblies of believers too. The testimony that goes forth from the people of God enlivens Paul and his prayers and gratitude for them - an expression no doubt of the Lord's good pleasure in the faithful testimony of the local manifestations of his Church. Note the following three examples from Rome, Colossae, and Thessalonica.

Thanking God for the Roman church: "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." Romans 1:8

Thanking God for the Colossian church: "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." Colossians 1:3-5

Thanking God for the Thessalonians: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything."

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, 8

In giving thanks in prayer for the Ephesians, Paul prays that they who are bearing evidence of God's magnificent work in them might have more of what God provides by way of wisdom and revelation in knowledge. Paul petitions that they might have the eyes of their heart enlightened that they may know the hope to which they have been called - the scope of the redemptive work of Christ both now and in eternity. He is petitioning that they would properly appreciate and understand the glorious truths that he has already affirmed for the church at large as vital and real elements of their own lives and let such truths work an effectual work in them. He is not simply praying for them to have greater knowledge, but knowledge rooted in the gracious insight provided by the Spirit of God, and a knowledge that *transforms those who possess it*.

Paul petitions that they might understand the magnificent scope of the glorious blessing of God's inheritance. Paul again returned to the beauty of inheritance, but whereas the references to an inheritance in 1:11,14 was that which was secured for them in Christ and which was made sure and guaranteed through the promised Holy Spirit – here it is the Church that is identified as God's inheritance, his special possession.

Finally, Paul climaxes his petition's emphasis with expressing his desire for the Ephesians to know the immeasurable greatness of Christ's resurrection power and his subsequent exaltation as it works in us for our good and Christ's glory. It is as though he were praying for them the very things that enraptured his attention and his own heart in his letter to the Philippians where he wrote of Christ's unparalleled exaltation in Philippians 2:5-11 and his zealous pursuit to know Christ and the power of his resurrection in Philippians 3:7-16.

Paul's petition was an immediate overflow of his opening Christocentric expression of God's complete and blessed salvation of his people: his sovereign work, by his good pleasure, for his great glory. It was then, upon hearing of their faith in the Lord and love for the Church, that Paul is abounding with thanksgiving and petitions that they might begin to be consumed with the glorious work of Christ in salvation from its effectual call, to its promised inheritance, and its exalted Savior.

Emphasizing the majestic work of God and expressing thankfulness for their good testimony, Paul then petitions that this would be what enraptures them, and even further, that it would *empower* them as well. Paul understood that the powerful works of God put on clear display through Christ are available for those redeemed by these very acts of power themselves.

Speaking to this matter, Andrew T. Lincoln states, "The Church will be what it ought to be when it becomes more aware of and appropriates the privileges and power God gives his people and the benefits of its relation to the Christ who rules the cosmos."⁴

⁴ Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians; Andrew T. Lincoln; Thomas Nelson, 1990, Pg.82

Paul is praying that the Ephesian church might understand that the *unparalleled demonstrations of the power of God in and through Christ are made available to the Church*. Such language of the church having such unparalleled power did not trouble Paul. Likely what would trouble Paul would be that, whereas he prayed that the church would recognize these truths – too often the contemporary church requests power for ministry, obedience, etc. They are petitioning for that which they *already have* through him who is the head of the Church, namely Christ. Therefore, it should be our petition with Paul that the local church would simply *live consistently* as a people so uniquely empowered to accomplish the work of God in the lives of individuals and the corporate church, and *stop living* as though there is more effectual power in finances, education, government, and shows of force.

Reflection and Application

In view of the extraordinary work of God in your redemption in Christ – how do you participate and strengthen the testimony of the local church regarding its faith in the Lord Jesus and its love for the larger church?

Read Philippians 2:5-11 (Christ’s exaltation) and Philippians 3:7-16 (Paul’s zealous striving) – how might these passages inform the nature and content of your prayer?

In view of how Paul has prayed for the Ephesians and that the context was in part one of thanksgiving for them, how might you pray in thanksgiving for other believers – giving thanks not just for their work, but their position in Christ and the blessings therein?

How does the power of God through Christ in you impact your thoughts on effective and faithful living and ministry? How does this impact your prayers in such matters?

Because God is sovereign, Paul offers thanksgiving for God's intervening, sovereign grace in the lives of his readers (1:15-16).⁵

Paul prays with a robust emphasis on God and his sovereign works in and through the Church. In this there is a substantial emphasis on salvation, and Paul clearly expresses that the effective continuation of that which has been accomplished is wholly dependent on God. This understanding shaped his prayers and must also shape all believers' prayers as they petition God to continue and even complete his work in and through the Church and the local manifestations thereof.

There is also a clear emphasis on praising God, not just affirming his works and securing continued petition. This is because it is imperative to recognize that when it is God who effects the work then it is God who receives the praise. Therefore, a proper response to hearing of God's work in strengthening, maturing, and growing the church is to express thanksgiving to him for what he has done in and through his redeemed. This is theologically informed thanksgiving – recognizing that thanks for others and their progress is ultimately a necessary thanks to God.

Reflection and Application

In view of the extraordinary work of God in salvation as articulated in Ephesians 1, and in view of the fact that it is the same power of God that must be at work in his Church to continue its progressive and completed work – how do you pray for the church?

Sometimes the scope of our thanksgiving for God's work in and through his church is too limited – restricted to personal experiences and relationships. How might you expand your world and consequently your view of God's church throughout this world?

Try to identify or inquire what resources might be available to you to better expand the scope of your thanksgiving for God's work in and through his Church.

⁵ A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Praying with Paul; D.A. Carson; Baker Academic, 2014; (Hereafter: Carson), Pg.147

Because God is sovereign, Paul offers intercession that God's sovereign, holy purposes in the salvation of his people may be accomplished (1:17-19a).⁶

Paul prayed and petitioned in a manner that affirmed that which the Lord had revealed in his Scriptures: the hope to which the beloved has been called, the Lord's glorious inheritance of his people, and God's great power toward those who have believed.

D.A. Carson provides a profitable insight here when he draws out that Paul is not only praying consistently with that which is revealed in the Scriptures, but more precisely in view of what they reveal about God, "...when he asks God for something, very frequently Paul addresses God or describes God in terms that are related to the request."⁷

Prayer that expresses, articulates, and affirms the character of God is prayer that one can have the utmost confidence in seeing through. However, there is a measure of balance to be held here too as the character and revealed ways of God have their own complexities. For example, while we can affirm with James that the Lord is the giver of all good things and we can pray with confidence accordingly, we also recognize that he may be pleased to have us exercise disciplined and even heart wrenching consistency in petitioning as he is providing that which is good, recognizing that even this process itself will mature the faith of the one praying. It is also quite possible that that which is *truly good* will not be fully appreciated in the temporal constraints of our present experience, and we find rest in this. So, we petition consistent with the character and revealed will of God, and then we trust him with confidence.

Here I think of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10. He cried out to the Son of David to be healed, and he cried out with great persistence and confidence. He cried out for mercy... an element consistent with the character and revealed actions of Jesus, the Son of David. It is not that Jesus was obligated to act, but he was petitioned within the parameters that he had revealed of his character and ways: mercy expressed through healing. So, at the least this was a good and worthwhile petition and one that the Lord was pleased to answer.

Paul also prayed with a view for the redeemed to know God, which was a magnificent privilege afforded those in Christ who have had the eyes of their heart enlightened. He petitioned with the confidence that the Lord provides the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of God. Therefore, those who are in Christ can genuinely know him, and Paul prays that they would do just this – come to a greater knowledge of their Lord.

Regarding this Carson states, "...Paul prays not simply that we might know God better, but that God might give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to the end that we might know God better. There is a set means to the desired end. What is required is a wisdom and revelation mediated by the Spirit."⁸

Paul goes on to articulate what he desires for the Ephesians to know: the hope to which they have been called, the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward those who believe. The first two will be addressed here and the third in the next section.

⁶ Carson, Pg. 149

⁷ Carson, Pg.150

⁸ Carson, Pg.151

First, Paul wants the Ephesians to know the hope of their calling or the expectation of future glory – eschatological hope. He is pressing them in this to perceive and value life in view of the eternal.

Second, Paul wants the Ephesians to know the riches of God’s glorious inheritance in the saints. He wants them to understand that we are fully possessed by God as his own redeemed people. This firmly secures the believer’s identity in Christ as such is the only means by which we are so identified as God’s inheritance, because the believer is identified in Christ.

Third, Paul wants the Ephesians to know the immeasurable greatness of God’s power toward those who believe. This receives significant treatment in the text and will constitute the final section here.

Reflection and Application

Does your prayer life reflect the following principle? “Knowledge of the Scriptures fosters a proper understanding of God’s means and then such means are petitioned for in prayer.” In short, the Scriptures show us that God has particular means he uses to accomplish his work. Are you seeking to secure some means beyond that which is revealed in the Scriptures? Means to your own liking, means of your own preference, or means that reflect the limited scope of your understanding of God’s truth? In view of this how can you improve your petitions before God for yourself and others?

As a follow up – return to this section throughout the week while you read through the Scriptures and/or hear them taught/preached and write out what you see from the Scriptures as God’s means regarding various matters/subjects and express how such conclusions can impact your prayer life.

Because God is sovereign, Paul offers a review of God’s most dramatic displays of power (1:19b-23).⁹

Carson makes a valuable point here when addressing demonstrations of God’s power and Paul wanting the Ephesians to know immeasurable greatness of God’s power toward the redeemed. He states that there are no varying degrees of demonstrations of power based

⁹ Carson, Pg. 155

on measures of difficulty because no such variation of challenge exists for God, but variations of glory and revelation.¹⁰ In view of this Paul goes directly to the resurrection of Christ.

“The power that Christians must experience is like the power of God exerted in Christ ‘when he raised him from the dead’ (1:20). Paul thinks of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here is the undoing of death, the destruction of sin; Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruits of the mighty resurrection that will mock the death of death and inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth.”¹¹

Paul then continues on to conclude with the great exultation of the risen Lord – he was not only risen in victory over sin and death, but risen victorious over all – demonstrating an absolute lordship. However, this magnification of Christ is both majestic and mysterious in that the Church, of whom he is the head, is a direct beneficiary of this unparalleled authority and power. Paul prays that the church now might begin, by the help of the Spirit of God, to grasp hold of these truths and to this end he prays for them.

Reflection and Application

Do you give consideration to the power of God demonstrated through the resurrection of Christ? How does this demonstration of power impact the believer and, more directly, the life of prayer for a believer?

How does Christ’s absolute authority impact your prayer life, particularly with the church being an immediate beneficiary of Christ’s authority and power as he is the head of the Church?

Conclusion

A proper submission to Theology as developed from the Scriptures will inevitably produce a “big view of God” and demand a proper worshipful response. It will also demand a proper response in prayer – impacting how one entreats God and what they would ask of him for themselves and others. It is my prayer that you vigorously pursue the riches of Christ as provided in the Scriptures and that they will change how you think, pray, and live. It is indisputable that they impacted and transformed Paul’s prayers and it will do us well to follow his example.

¹⁰ Carson, Pg.155

¹¹ Carson, Pgs.155-156