

HOW TO PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul continues his chain of thought following his outburst of praise in Ephesians 1:3-14. In those verses he calls us to take a look at how the world really is, the reality of being in Christ, that God is at work and that we are blessed, valued and have a purpose. He now makes a clear connection between this view of the world as it really is and his prayers for the Ephesian Christians – ‘for this reason’. Because we are in Christ, because God is powerfully at work in this world and in our lives and because God has blessed us Paul never stops to give thanks for them and remembers them in his prayers.

The first lesson we can learn about praying for one another from these verses is that prayer is based on God’s love, power and glory, and not our need. Before we look at the specifics of Paul’s prayer we need to grasp this foundational fact and ask ourselves if this is what motivates our prayer life. Do I come to God with my intercessions because I am overwhelmed with need, either my own or that of others, and know of nowhere else to go for help. Or do I come because God has brought me into Christ (13), because he is working all things according to his plan, and in conformity with the purpose of his will’ (11), because we have been marked with the Holy Spirit (13) and because we want to see all things bring praise to his glory (14)?

Paul’s prayer starts with thanksgiving (16). He remembers them in his prayers (16). Given that it is likely Paul did not know these people personally, remembering here means to keep in mind. It is an act of the will, not simply a mental picture stored in the memory. We also note that Paul prays directly to God the Father (17). This is the great wonder and privilege of prayer, that we can go straight to the very centre of all things. Because a new and living way has been opened for us (Hebrews 10:20) we need not lurk in the wings, hoping to find favour or even be noticed. We go straight to him.

Paul's makes a single request on behalf of the Ephesians. He asks that God may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better (17 NIV). It might be that Paul is asking that God would give his Holy Spirit to these Christians, and that would not be out of keeping with this letter. But the language is not that clear. We may read this as asking God to 'give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God' (17 NLT). The difference, though small, is important. In one the emphasis seems to rest on God's gift of the Holy Spirit (already commented on in 14). In the other the emphasis is on growing in our knowledge of God. Given the way Paul now expands this prayer, this reading seems more likely.

Verses 18-23 are an explanation and expansion of this simple prayer. Paul has two requests that grow out of his one overall request. First, that the Ephesians' eyes will be opened so that they may know the hope to which they have been called (18). This is no small thing. Paul asks that they will come to understand the wonderful privilege of being God's holy people who, he says, are God's rich and glorious inheritance. Here, perhaps, is a reference to Isaiah's prophecy (8:18), quoted in Hebrews 2:13, that God's children are signs and symbols of God's almighty power.

Paul's second expansion is that the Ephesians' eyes will be opened so that they may know 'his incomparably great power for us who believe' (19). Paul wants these Christians to know the full measure of God working in and through them. He again branches out into an explanation (19b-21), tell the Ephesians that the same power that raised Christ from among the dead and seated him at God's right hand is the very power which is at work in them. In which case, Paul implies, nothing can keep God from fulfilling his purpose in them. This is a theme he will continue in the next section (2:1-10). For the moment Paul is lost in praise as he reminds himself of these thing. In 22f Paul gives a short summary of his hymn of praise found in Colossians 1:15ff.

There are, of course, many lessons to be learnt from this short passage, but following on from our thoughts this morning as we considered Jesus' 'new command' to love one another it is useful to pause and think about what these verses tell us about how to pray for one another. It can often be difficult to know just what to pray. We delight to pray for one another, but we like something specific to cry out for. Paul did not know most of those he was writing to, nor did he have specific prayer requests from them, but his prayer, recorded in these verses, is a model of intercession.

Firstly, Paul gives thanks for them. He praises God for their faith and their love. Here is our starting point as we pray for each other. If you read through this letter you will see that Paul has points to make, presuppositions to challenge and behaviour to direct. The Ephesians were not perfect, but Paul gives thanks anyway. They had much to learn, but Paul praises them for their faith. They lived in a harsh world but Paul congratulates them for their love. It is all too easy to see the weaknesses and failings in others, but a good starting place as we pray for each other is to give thanks.

Secondly, Paul prays for them. He takes the time to remember them before God. It is a great encouragement just to know someone is praying for you. They don't need to know all the details but it is good to know that someone is carrying you in their heart before God. Let's not forget how important the simple act of praying for one another can make a real difference to us.

Thirdly, there is the content of Paul's prayer. Basically it is a prayer for growth: "I keep asking that God will help you to know him better." (17) What greater request can we make for one another than this? All other things fall into place behind this simple request. Knowing Jesus is the centre of the Christian life. As Paul says, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Philippians 3:8).

Paul expands this prayer in two directions: that we may know what is the hope to which he has called us, and that we may know the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. He doesn't expand here on the former, though we may well discover something more of the nature of this hope as we continue to study this letter, but he mentions it here to remind them, and us, that we can be confident in God. Such hope as the Gospel offers does not leave us ashamed. Yet such hope often ebbs low in our hearts. It may be that things are going badly for us and the cares of this life threaten to overwhelm our hope. It may be that things are going well and hope for the future seems unimportant in the light of our current situation. In both sets of circumstances, and all in between, we need each other to pray that we will not lose sight of the hope to which we are called.

However, if he quickly passes over the question of hope, Paul pauses to dwell on the second half of his prayer. What they, and all Christians, including us, need is to know that God is in control. Like soldiers in a battle, we can put up with danger, discomfort, even personal defeat, if we know we are on the victory side. We need to pray for each other that we will have the assurance that "he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). This is so important to Paul that he details exactly what he means. In 19-21 he uses at least six different words to describe power, both worldly and spiritual, all of which are under God's ultimate control, and all of which are dwarfed by the power of God that was a work in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

We need to keep reminding ourselves, and each other, that this power is the same power that is at work in us who believe. This is one reason why we regularly share around the Lord's Table, as a reminder of God's love and power. But we can also pray for one another, that in both small and big ways, in the spectacular as well as the mundane, we will know this power of God working in, through, around and sometimes despite us.

A glaring question remains. If God's power is directed at change in his people, why do we not see that change more frequently in people's lives – including our own? The question is painful and cannot be set aside, but it is also – at least implicitly – the problem this letter addresses. Ephesians shows us what God intends. May it also be an instrument through which God's intention is made reality.

Amen.

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