

What Should I Pray for Others

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[0 : 00] open at Ephesians chapter 1 in the Church Bibles, it's page 1173. And as always, if you find it helpful, there's an outline inside the notice sheet that will help you see where we're going and how long's left. Let's pray, let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word together.

Heavenly Father, we pray that this morning you will open your word to our hearts and open our hearts to your word. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, what do you really want from life? What do you want for yourself? And what do you most want for other people from life? I guess for many of us, we want to feel safe in our lives, safe from harm, financially safe, perhaps safe from sickness. If we've got families, we might want our children to be set up for life.

And we kind of mean similar things by that about safety and security. And on top of that, if that sounds too limited and unadventurous, we might want a whole variety of things, including personal comfort for ourselves, friends, lots of them, success, exhilarating experiences.

There was an advert a very long time ago on TV asking what you want from life. Let's just watch it now, just to show how cutting edge I am. If you're hearing a student, you're thinking this guy is so out of touch. But anyway, I remembered that advert from when I was a boy. And it makes you think, well, what do I really want from life? Now, Paul here writes one of the great Bible prayers that we've got here in Ephesians 1. And it's a very surprising prayer. I don't know if you noticed that, how surprising it is. Because he's writing to believers who are under enormous pressure. Sometimes I hear Christians say, you know, it's quite hard being a Christian today. I wish I'd been there in the first century. I wish I'd been a Christian in those early days. But I'm not so sure that that's what we really want. It wasn't very easy to be a Christian in the first century.

[2 : 37] This is a church in Ephesus that caused a riot, literally, in the streets when people were converted. People in Ephesus hated the Christians because they were nervous that it was taking away their livelihoods. They had a business selling statues for this false god. They were nervous that it undermined the temple that they had to this goddess that they worshipped.

Not only that physical opposition, there was forceful, demonic opposition to the church as it started. It would have been very frightening to be a Christian at that time. And if we got a prayer letter from a church like that today, and we were going to respond in prayer, what would we pray? We'd pray for their circumstances to change, wouldn't we? That's what we pray for. And Paul doesn't pray for that. It is okay to pray for people's circumstances to change.

That can be a good thing. But again and again in Paul's letters, we find him praying for Christians and he doesn't pray for their situation to change. Why? Paul knows that if you don't have what he prays for what he prays for in Ephesians 1 and you have prosperity and riches and safety and comfort, it won't do you any good. You'll feel self-sufficient and you'll forget about God.

That's a great danger for us in Glasgow today. And Paul also knows that if you have what he's praying for you in Ephesians 1, you can get through whatever difficulties you face.

So it's a great prayer to inform us about what we should really want for ourselves and for others. We're going to look at four priorities that we get from Paul's prayer. And the first one is rejoice in the saving faith of believers. We get that in verse 15. Just look at what makes Paul so happy in verse 15. For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

[4 : 45] Paul probably writing from prison, almost certainly from prison, probably in Rome. And even there, he can't stop thanking God in his prayers. And I guess if you can't stop thanking God for something, it must be that it was the thing that, maybe even the thing you most wanted that God has given you.

I wonder, what would that be for you? What would it be that if you got it, you just wouldn't be able to stop thanking God? You'd be so happy. For Paul, it's that this group of people are demonstrating the two key signs that they've become Christians. They have faith in the Lord Jesus. That's what makes you a Christian, that you're trusting Jesus. And that they love other Christians. That's the kind of evidence. The marker that shows their faith is a genuine thing. That was the priority that drove Paul's life. And it should be what drives our lives as well. Why? Because of what Paul's just told us in Ephesians 1. We've been looking at that for a couple of weeks now at St. Silas. If you believe Ephesians 1, verses 3-14, then you know that what really matters is how somebody has responded to Jesus Christ. When you first hear the word of truth about Jesus in history, that he died for sins and rose again, if you believe that, Paul says you get adopted into God's family, so you know him as your father. You're redeemed by him so that you're free from the slavery of sin. The slate is wiped clean, so he looks on you as holy and blameless forever. And you're given the Holy Spirit as this guarantee of your future with God forever. We were looking at this in our growth group this week, and it starts in verse 3. God has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ. One of the guys in our growth group said, what do you think it really means, every spiritual blessing? What a great thing to discuss among ourselves, every spiritual blessing. That should be our ambition for everybody we meet, surely. That's what people need. And so our deepest longing for anyone is that they would hear the word of truth, but they need to hear it to believe it, and that they would believe that word. Think of an older Christian who I was getting to know, and I asked him about his children, and I asked him about what they were like, what his relationship with them was like, where they lived, what they did for jobs, what their family situation was. He answered all my questions, and then he said to me, but Martin, what really matters is what do you make of Jesus Christ? That's what really matters with my children.

What do they make of Jesus Christ? That was his priority for anyone. There's another thing here about Paul praying. There was a guy, Sam, who arrived at St Silas in January, just as I arrived, and after a few weeks of meeting up with him, he became a Christian. He gave his life to Jesus Christ. He moved to Edinburgh. He got baptised in Edinburgh in the summer. We watched his testimony at the last monthly prayer meeting we had here. It is amazingly encouraging to meet Sam, because he's become a Christian. I met him in the summer at a conference. I couldn't say to him, even though I'm so encouraged about Sam, I actually couldn't say to him, you know, Sam, since I last saw you, I have not stopped giving thanks for you. I couldn't say that, because I had stopped. Why had I stopped? It's because to say that doesn't just take passion, which Paul had, it takes discipline. It takes writing the news about a new Christian in your prayer diary, or in your prayer mate app on your phone, or however you pray, to make sure that you're actually continuing to pray for somebody. Paul's prayer shows us a burning passion, doesn't it, to see people saved, but also a discipline as well, to actually keep thanking God for them. And Paul doesn't stop there. He doesn't think, right, that's it, box ticked, they've become

Christians, I'll move on now and forget about them. No, that's when he turns to pray with a deep ambition that these believers will grow to maturity in Christ. And the big idea of what Paul prays for them here is really that what is already true of them in verses 3 to 15 of Ephesians 1, all those wonderful blessings, that they would know it at the bottom of their hearts, that they would really believe it at the bottom of their hearts. So verses 16 to 21, they naturally flow on from what he has said is true. He's praying that we'd really know and grasp the truth that he's already told us, so that it transforms us and we're ready to live for God. So our second priority from Paul's prayer is that we should long for a greater knowledge of our Heavenly Father. That's in verse 17, just have a look with me. He says, 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. And that's because real Christianity is not primarily about being part of a community, although you do join a community, it's not primarily about having a God who meets your needs when you have them. It's not about being in a special little subculture where you're known and loved. No, primarily it is about knowing God.

[10:25] Kathy and I, my wife, we're just back this morning from 48 hours away without the kids, which we've not had since the kids were born. And we went to St Andrew's and we walked along the course there. And of course when we tell people that, the natural thing to do is to ask us, how did you like St Andrew's?

What did you think of the villages? Did you like the coast? And we did like all those things. That's natural to talk about that. But really the reason we went away was to have time together, to know

each other better. And Paul knows in the same way that because the Christian faith is a relationship, what we most need is to know God better. Knowing God doesn't mean knowing lots of arguments that might persuade someone that he exists. You know, some of us get really into apologetics and learning those arguments.

That's a useful thing. But knowing God isn't about that. Knowing God isn't about knowing lots about ministry and church life. It's not about knowing lots about counselling and how to make people better.

Or about worship or about Franciscan spirituality. Now some of those things are great things to know about. But they're not about knowing God. And Paul says what we need above everything else is a greater personal knowledge of the God of the Bible. You see what he called him? The glorious father. The father of glory.

The one we've heard about in Ephesians 1 the last couple of weeks. The God who does whatever he pleases. So he's acting for his own glory in the cosmos, in the world, with an eternal plan to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. And he's doing that by choosing a group of people and blessing them enormously in Christ.

[12:15] So there are people today who think you can't know that God. That God is too mysterious. You'll hear people talk a lot about the mystery of God. But the Bible is clear that though we could never know that God exhaustively, we can know him truly. And that it's the greatest privilege we have.

And there are people today who think that spending time in the Bible is an academic exercise. That it's not real. And certainly that is a danger when we go to the Bible.

The theological faculties are full of people who've spent their careers engaging their brain with what the Bible says, but never really getting to know God of whom it speaks.

So we can fall into that trap, but it's not the normal way to treat the Bible. And true Christian spirituality involves getting to know our Father better.

So that I spend time in his word, in the Bible, where he's made himself known to me. And then enjoying and living out that relationship in trust and obedience of him.

[13:19] And that's Paul's second priority from the prayer. Long for greater knowledge of your Father. Thirdly, his prayer calls us to ponder the glorious hope of being God's treasure.

Verse 18. I wonder if verse 18 is one of the most misread verses in the whole Bible. Verse 18. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he's called you, the riches of your glorious inheritance in his holy people.

That's what we expected to say, isn't it? What I just read. That's not what it says. Did you see that? That you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.

It's the great phrase, isn't it, at the beginning of that, that the eyes of our heart might be enlightened. Not just that we know things, but that the truth would change the very direction of our lives. That our affection and our desires and our whole direction of life will be shaped by what we know of God. And the surprise here is that, as Christians, we know that we'll receive our inheritance in the future, when we meet with God, and there's an inheritance waiting for us. But here, the inheritance being described, is God's inheritance.

[14:35] You see that? God's inheritance in us. What do you get for the man who has everything? I don't know whether that's a question you've ever seen used on adverts.

Sometimes it's what we ask at Christmas time, when you've got a relative or a friend, and you're trying to work out what to buy them for Christmas, and it feels they already have everything. What do you get for the man who has everything?

Well, God really was the one who has everything. The whole universe is his. The only thing that he didn't have was us. So he sent his son into the world, so that through his blood, he could buy your forgiveness, so that you could be his glorious inheritance.

And Paul wants you to know that hope, deep in your soul, that we look forward to the day when God takes great delight in us, as he declares to the angels, these people are my most valuable thing, my glorious inheritance.

Just think what a difference that should make to you. If you really knew that God calls you to be part of his most glorious inheritance, imagine you're filing something at work, a report for the boss or for a client, and you've met the deadline, and then you go back and look at it, and you realise you've made a horrible mistake in what you've sent.

[16:00] How much difference would it make at that moment if you really knew in your heart that God looks on you as his treasured possession and will take great delight in you forever?

Or imagine you're a student, or maybe you are a student, and you look on Facebook one day and you see loads of photographs on your friend's Facebook pages of the fun they've had at a party that they never told you about and you weren't invited to.

How much difference does it make at that moment if you really know in your heart that God looks on you as his treasured possession and he will take great delight in you forever?

Or you get a letter from your bank in the post and you open it and you realise you've gone overdrawn and you're only halfway through the month and you do not know how you're going to pay off the overdraft. How much difference does it make if you know in your heart God looks on me as his treasured possession, his glorious inheritance?

So we need to ponder that. We rejoice in the saving faith of other believers. We long for it for them. We long for a greater knowledge of the Father ourselves. We ponder our glorious hope of being God's treasure.

[17:16] And fourthly from this prayer, we need to grasp the awesome power of our Saviour. If you read from verse 18 again, 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.

Now the Ephesians really needed to know about God's power. They were probably meeting, if you imagine, meeting in a little house around a kitchen table under threat. Maybe they look out the window, they can see the enormous temple to a false god.

They probably had bodyguards on the door just to check no one comes in who would try and attack them. But the truth is that we in Scotland today need to know about God's power as Christians. We face a battle every day to keep going. The culture is profoundly secular and pushes back at the idea that Jesus would be a risen Christ and Lord.

Within the mainline denominations in Scotland, we're faced with theological liberalism, that churches have moved away from the Bible and would put pressure on us to accept that and be quiet.

[18:30] And Paul knows what we need is to grasp the power of God. When he says incomparably great power here, he's using really expressive words. The first word he uses is overthrowing.

Like in cricket, you might overthrow the ball. It just goes far too far because it's so strong. Beyond the scale, in other words. Then he uses the word that we get the word mega from and then he uses the word we get the word dynamite from.

So you could read it more literally as, I pray that you may know in your heart God's super mega dynamite for you. And he breaks that down then into three key dimensions about the power of God. First of all, it's strength. He says 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.

It's interesting, isn't it? We sometimes speak about power in the world today and we talk about military power. We talk about when we see military demonstrations by North Korea or Russia, we say they're flexing their military muscles.

[19:34] And it was in the news last week, this controversy about people saying maybe we now, we lack the military power to defend ourselves if Russia was to attack us. That was in the news this week.

So what is that power? When we think about power in the world today, it's the power to turn life into death. Measured by how much life we could turn into death and how quickly.

And nobody ever suggests that a nation or a person is powerful enough to do the opposite, to turn death into life.

And so that's what God chose to do in history to demonstrate how powerful he is. To take the crucified Jesus Christ, raise him to life and raise him to heaven where he is now.

That is power that is incomparably great. And that same power of the Spirit of God is available to us as God's people today to enable us to stand firm in the faith.

[20:34] To live lives of practical holiness for God. Resisting the temptation to sin. Resisting the temptation to live for self. That's the strength that's available to us.

Paul then talks about the dominion of Jesus Christ. He goes on, verse 21. God 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.

We see people all over the world today invoking other names for power. We know from the Bible the devil is a real enemy today against the church and he will seek to pick us off one by one. He will seek to destroy our faith. But God assures us Jesus is in a higher place than the devil and than anything else. And it's not like the White House.

You know when if you're working in the White House you can think well I'm okay because I'm working for the president and he's powerful but when the elections come if the new president comes in it will be a whole new administration and I'll lose my position.

[21 : 41] Well no. Jesus Christ is on the throne now and he always will be on the throne. That will never ever change. That's how it is. That's how it's staying. So there's the strength there's the dominion and thirdly Paul wants us to grasp the aim of that power.

It's direction today. And there's another unexpected surprise. It's in verse 22. Have a look. And God placed all things under his feet 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. So it's not just that God has mighty strength though he does. It's not just that he's in this seat of authority though he is.

It's that his authority is being directed through history for the absolute good of his people. Jesus Christ cares for the church because it's his body.

And that means nothing can happen to you that Jesus isn't in control over and won't use for good if you respond to it in trust and obedience. We're going to see more in the coming weeks about why we need that power as Christians today.

[22 : 57] But I just had two implications of that just now for us to consider. The first is if it takes that much power from God to save us we are really really dependent on God.

I must be a very sinful person that it takes that much power from God to keep me going every day as a Christian. The second thing just to consider is that if that much power is being directed in that kind of way by the eternal God the church is really important the local church is hugely important. Sometimes people say what is the church for? You can't even really give a satisfactory answer to that because the church is the goal. The church is what God is doing in the world today.

No matter how inadequate we look and feel God in his power is gathering people into local churches. The church is really important. So Paul knows whether we're living in great affliction or we're living in great comfort that these are the things that we most need.

We need to prioritise the saving faith of others so that they get every spiritual blessing. That's their greatest need. We need to know God better and we need to know specifically about the hope the riches and the power that God is providing for us.

[24 : 25] So how do we attain those things that we should want for ourselves? Well first of all we need to pray Ephesians 1 for ourselves. Just pray the prayer and ask God to do this for us.

Secondly we need to meditate on the Bible. You're not going to get to know God better in the way Paul wants and to have the eyes of your heart enlightened by the truth about God if you read your Bible for five minutes a day five days a week.

It's just not going to happen. We need to weave into the rhythm of our lives the time to really nurture this kind of knowledge in us. So I've got an example here.

Why not read Ephesians 1 this week again and just read it a paragraph at a time and at the end of each paragraph write down five answers to this question.

How would my life look different if I really believed this right to the bottom of my heart? So we can pray Ephesians 1 we can meditate on Ephesians 1 and thirdly we grow into this knowledge that's being described in Ephesians 1 by remembering that Jesus Christ prayed this prayer for you and he prayed it twice.

[25 : 42] He prayed it for you the night before he died in John 17 not literally the same but very similar things were prayed for you as God's people for us the night before he died that these things would be true for us.

But he also prayed this prayer for us in reverse in Gethsemane when his prayer was not my will but yours be done to his heavenly father.

You see Jesus so wanted us to know the father that he had to be willing for the father to forsake him at the cross. He so wanted you to know the hope of the calling of God that he had to be willing

to be left in despair.

He so wanted you to be part of God's inheritance that he had to be willing to be abandoned naked outside the city. He so wanted you to know the power of God worked in everything for your good that he had to endure that power in its full force set against him as he died for your sins.

friends what we're going to see in Ephesians over the coming months is that God wants us to live completely differently for him. He wants us to lay down our lives in wholehearted practical love for him and for each other and it's when the spirit takes what Jesus did for us and really engraves it on our hearts that the truths of Ephesians 1 really transform us so that we're actually willing to do that joyfully.

[27 : 18] Let's pray together. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father we praise you that you've blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ and for this reason we thank you for saving us and we ask you glorious Father to give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation that we might know you better.

We pray that the eyes of our hearts might be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which you have called us the riches of your glorious inheritance in your holy people and your incomparably great power for us who believe.

We ask this that we might be more useful to you that by your spirit in our hearts transforming our affections and desires we would be pleased to submit our lives to your purposes and will for the glory of your holy name.

Amen. Amen.