

A Prayer for Wisdom

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of January 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Prayer for Wisdom and is from Ephesians 1.15-23.

Christopher Robin is saying his prayers. God bless mummy and God bless daddy. And then he gets distracted and then he comes back to praying for them again.

Some of you will remember that little rhyme by A.A. Milne, Vespers it's called. I wonder when the last time was that you prayed like that. God bless mummy, God bless daddy, God bless all the people in the world, amen.

Well, take this prayer for example. I pray that with the eyes of your heart enlightened you may know what is the hope to which he's called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe according to the working of his great power.

[1 : 1 2] When was the last time you prayed like that? Well, I expect that most of us, myself included, more recently prayed like Christopher Robin than we did like St. Paul.

We tend to pray, I guess, short-term prayers, single-issue prayers, small-focused prayers, and probably like Christopher Robin, rather distracted prayers.

God bless mummy and then our mind gets distracted and we doze off or watch the TV and we come back and realise that we haven't got very far with our prayers. But Paul's prayer here for the Ephesians is deep, it's clear, it's focused, it's big, and it's full of confidence for the issues of ultimate importance.

His prayer here arises out of what he said last week in the beginning of chapter 1, his appreciation of the sovereign grace and goodness of God and his purposes for us.

We haven't got time to read all those verses through again, but as we saw last week, they are rich in deep theological thought. And as Paul has, I think, got carried away with himself, praising God's glory for all God's goodness in the Lord Jesus Christ, now he comes, as a result of reflection on that, to pray.

[2 : 3 5] You see, the sovereignty of God, which is one of those themes that we saw last week, does not give way to complacency. Sometimes people think that if God is so sovereign and everything is predestined and everything is under God's eternal plan and hand, then why bother praying?

Why not just keep our mouths shut and let God do what he's going to do? But that's fatalism and that's not Christian thinking. You see, an appreciation of a big God leads to big praying.

And Paul is a great example of that. You can hardly get a bigger picture of the sovereignty of God than the first part of Ephesians 1, as we saw last week. And you hardly get a better example of a big prayer in the second half of Ephesians 1, as we see this week.

You see, we saw last week that God has blessed us already with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that God has destined us in Christ to be his children, adopted us into his family, that he's bestowed, even lavished his grace upon us in Christ, and that he's made known his will to us in Christ.

So to that God, and for those reasons, Paul now prays for the Ephesian church. I've heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, he says, and your love toward all the saints.

[4 : 04] And for this reason, I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. You see, the praise of the first half gives way to prayer in the second half of the chapter.

That's a good example to us that praise and prayer go hand in hand. That as we praise God for what he's done, so in a sense, almost automatically, ought we to flow into praying the appropriation of the things that God has done.

It's worth asking a question though. If God has already given us every spiritual blessing in Christ, as he enumerated through the first half of Ephesians 1, is there anything left to pray?

If every spiritual blessing's ours, what more is left to pray about? We can't pray for another blessing because every spiritual blessing's already ours.

Well, the first thing Paul does is give thanks. And he gives thanks for the Ephesian church. I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

[5 : 09] And in particular, the things that he's commented on about them for which he gives thanks, he mentions in verse 15, are your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.

Faith and love are typically two key marks of Christian life. They're essential characteristics, if you like, of being a Christian. Our faith in the Lord and our love, not only for God, but for others as well.

But notice what he says about the Ephesians' love. It's not just their love for one another or for their family. He's heard of and gives thanks for their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love toward all the saints.

That little word, all, is probably the biggest challenge there for us. See, a lot of people are easy to love. And most of us love a number of people. But Paul doesn't give thanks for the Christians in Ephesus loving some other people and Christians.

He gives thanks that their love is for all the saints. And that's the hard thing. When I came here as the minister at Holy Trinity nearly five years ago, a retired clergy friend in England wrote to me a letter and he said, my one piece of advice, love them all.

[6 : 33] And I realised that that's probably one of the hardest things to do because many people, if not most people, are relatively easy to love.

But in any church, in any Christian fellowship, there'll be some who aren't. And that's when, in a sense, the rubber hits the road. Love them all.

And Paul's giving thanks that this Ephesian church is expressing love for all the saints. That doesn't mean that we intimately know every detail of each Christian's life. We can't possibly do that even in a relatively small congregation like this.

But it does mean a practice of love regardless of who the person is, newcomer, stranger, old-timer, different generation from us, different language from us.

There are all sorts of reasons and barriers that socially come in the way of loving each other. But none of those are barriers for Christian love. Notice that Paul does not thank the Ephesians for their love.

[7 : 38] He doesn't write to them and say, thank you for the love that you show to all the saints. But he says, I thank God for the love that you show for the saints. That is, he's not congratulating them, but he's thanking God because he knows that in the end love derives from God.

And so it's God's love being expressed by Ephesian Christians so Paul goes to its source to express thanks to God. And I think it's actually a good habit to be in with our own response and encouragement of each other.

That we don't just stop at thanking each other for the things we do, but we thank God for each other and the way that we live our Christian lives as well. So there's the first comment about Paul's prayer.

He gives thanks for them, for their faith and their love. And it's worth pondering even at this point, when was the last time we prayed like that?

Well the key to the actual request part of his prayer is the key for knowledge. Paul goes on to pray in verse 17, I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him.

[8 : 58] And then there are some outcomes of that we'll come to in a minute. Now Paul here is not talking about an intellectual pursuit of knowledge. He's not talking either about a natural process of knowledge.

Rather he's talking about knowledge being the fruit of divine revelation that God reveals himself as we saw last week and as a result of that we know him, a personal relationship.

So in verse 17 he talks about the fact that God will give a spirit of wisdom and revelation and in verse 18 that the eyes of the heart will be enlightened.

That is that God is the one who is active here. It's not human beings so much attaining knowledge so much as God giving it. So Paul is praying to God that God will give the right knowledge, insight, wisdom, discernment, enlightenment etc to these Ephesian Christians.

Because he knows that unless God acts, unless God reveals himself, there's no knowledge of God in the world at all. But it's already clear that God has revealed something of himself as we saw last week.

[10 : 12] So there's a sense in which when Paul is praying for knowledge he's not just praying for God's revelation but the reception of that revelation. So that God has revealed himself, he's praying for the Ephesians that they will receive that revelation and Paul knows that not only does God need to reveal himself but that God actually needs to open hearts and minds and eyes for that revelation to be received.

So God actually needs to work in two places to reveal himself in the world and then inside people so that they appreciate and see his revelation. I mean the difference is between a Christian and non-Christian who go and see a beautiful sunset or something.

A Christian will say oh isn't this a great sign of God's handiwork? The non-Christian will say no it's just a sign of nature. So it's God's revelation but it's not necessarily for both people the reception of that revelation.

That comes again through God not human beings. God is the source both of revelation and its reception in human hearts and minds. So Paul rather is praying here in the context of the blessings we saw last week that God's blessings will find reception in human hearts and minds in the Ephesian church.

Now more than that though the end of the blessings we saw last week have very much a future focus. the spirit is given as a down payment of the inheritance of God's glorious riches that awaits us in the future.

[11 : 41] So Paul is also praying here that that future inheritance will be realised by the Ephesian Christians. That it won't just remain something in the future but that there will come a point when the Ephesian church actually appropriates that future and receives it or is part of it.

Now three things come out of this prayer for knowledge and wisdom and insight in verses 17 and 18. The second part of verse 18 the middle bit of the verse is the first of those three.

He prays that their heart may be enlightened etc so that firstly you may know what is the hope to which he's called you. Now again he's not just talking about knowledge here in the sense of an intellectual understanding as though he's going to give every Christian a 4,000 word essay to say what is the hope to which God has called you.

But rather he's praying that that hope will be realised in their lives that they will meet it one day. The hope of God's glorious riches and inheritance in the future in heaven. He's praying in effect that they'll get there that it'll be realised in their lives that they'll reach the goal of the Christian life namely to be in heaven.

He's praying in effect that what God's begun he'll complete. He's promised this inheritance he's given a down payment of it by the Holy Spirit so he's praying that God will be faithful and the Christians will be kept for that final day for that hope to be realised.

[13 : 07] So he's praying that hope becomes a reality. When was the last time you prayed like that? Well the second part of this purpose of this prayer comes at the end of verse 18.

Secondly he prays all this enlightenment and reception of revelation so that you may know the hope that is you may know what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

Now in part that explains what the hope is. It's a future inheritance as we saw at the end of last week yet to be possessed but he's praying that these Christians in Ephesus will one day possess and attain that future inheritance.

Now in a sense we've seen that the Holy Spirit is a down payment of that. Some years ago my grandfather gave each of his three sons some money saying this is your inheritance.

Well it's not the total bit but it was sort of like a down payment. I'm not quite sure why he did it and I didn't stand to gain anything from it but he started to sort of get rid of everything and he gave them each some money.

[14 : 12] Of course when he eventually dies there will be in a sense the fullness of his inheritance passed on to his three sons and in a sense God has given us a down payment by the Holy Spirit.

Now Paul is praying that the fullness of that inheritance will be experienced one day by the Ephesian Christians. He's praying that God's purposes will one day be completed. They're not yet completed.

Now that's a good thing to pray. It's a good thing to pray not because God is unfaithful and will somehow abandon his purposes but it's a good thing to pray because I'm sure that many if not all of us know of people who've been Christians and started the Christian walk and have somehow given up on it.

And I can think of many people I've known like that. One chap I studied with at theological college. He was ordained the year before me. He worked for probably five or six years as an Anglican minister and then about five years ago I suppose left the ministry, left his wife, left his children, moved in with a non- Christian woman and gave up the Christian faith.

It's a big change of life in one day but that's what he did. Now there are plenty of people like that. Such an important prayer to pray that yes we've received every spiritual blessing, God has done all this for us yet we've got to pray that what God has begun will be completed for us.

[15 : 43] So in a sense Paul is praying for the perseverance of these Christians in Ephesus here. None of us is invulnerable to that sort of threat. It's a very good thing to pray but when was the last time we prayed that for each other?

Well the third part of this prayer is in verse 19. He's praying all this, the heart to be enlightened and a spirit of wisdom etc. so that you may know thirdly what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe according to the working of his great power.

Now we'll come back to this power later in chapter 3 in some weeks to come but the power that Paul is talking about here is resurrection power. He goes on in verse 20 to talk about God put this to power, this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead.

So he's not talking about the sort of spiritual heavyweight wrestlers or the spiritual gladiators that you can see in the early hours of the morning I think on TV so I'm told.

He's not talking about that sort of physical power in any way. He's not really talking about spiritual power in the sense that you know you've got a spiritually powerful person. He's talking about the resurrection of Jesus being in a sense again appropriated in the lives of Christian people.

[17 : 02] That they will know resurrection life. That's the power that Paul is praying for for these Christians here. Now again in one sense it's a future notion. He's praying I think that beyond their physical life they will know the fullness of resurrection life one day.

Now it's all part and parcel of receiving the fullness of heaven and the glorious riches of his inheritance. But Paul is praying that what Jesus has begun in the resurrection and the Holy Spirit's a down payment of it they will experience fully when they themselves one day rise from the dead to the glory of God's heaven.

When was the last time you prayed that for each other? Well this prayer finishes in a sense with another statement of praise about Jesus.

And time and again in Paul's prayers in scripture that's what happens. He starts praying but he doesn't get distracted like Christopher Robin onto the trivial things of life or he doesn't doze off like perhaps some of us like me sometimes do in our prayers.

But Paul gets distracted in the sense of going into another statement of praise about the glory of Jesus. I guess if we're going to digress from prayer Paul's example is rather better than my own or Christopher Robin's.

[18 : 23] The passage concludes with a great statement of the supremacy of Jesus. God put this power to work he says in Christ in verse 20 when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places.

This is the power not just of resurrection but the power of ascension and exaltation of Jesus to heaven. That's the power that Paul is praying for will come to work in Christian people.

But then he goes on to talk about Jesus who is 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 age to come.

Here's a statement similar to the first hymn that we sang tonight similar to Paul's statement in Philippians chapter 2 where those words came from. Jesus is above every name.

Jesus is above every power. Above every authority. Above every dominion that there is. And he has put, God has put, all things under Jesus' feet and has made him the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

[19 : 32] There's nothing above Jesus. There's nothing even level with him other than God himself. God the Father I should say. Everything else is under the feet of Jesus. And that's where Paul has ended up with his prayer.

Because so great is Jesus that he cannot help but proclaim him and exalt him. There's no authority greater than him. There's no power beyond his. There's no threat to his sovereignty at all.

He's indeed Lord of all. And yet perhaps one of the most intriguing words in that last couple of verses, one that is almost hidden as we read this doxology of praise about Jesus, is that God has done all this for the church at the end of verse 22.

God has put all things under his feet, has made Jesus the head over all things for the church, for us. For the Ephesian church, for us today and every other church in every place that it meets.

All of God's sovereign power vested in Jesus is for our benefit, for the church. That's an extraordinary little statement.

[20 : 46] But it's certainly one that should fill us with gratitude and inspire us to pray and praise. You see, this church, like the church universal and the church in every place, is the church which Christ himself fills.

It's not just a human institution. It's Jesus' church and everything that God has done in Christ is for the church. You see, it's not just for an individual.

God's got a bigger picture than that. God is acting in Jesus for the sake of the church. Not just for the sake of you, but for the sake of us in this world.

So Jesus is the head of the church, the source of it, the goal of it, the Lord of it, the life of it, the power of it, the hope of it. The church is his, you see. It's not ours and it's not mine.

It's not the bishops or the archbishops. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. It's bought by his blood. Now that I think, though Paul doesn't elaborate on that here, some of this comes out a bit later on in the letter, but some of this has implications for the way we respond to the church.

[22 : 00] I know that many of us periodically get very frustrated with the church. Never quite seems to do what we think. Well, let me say to you that I get more frustrated than probably anybody because I'm involved in it all the time and I'm just as frustrated sometimes.

And this sort of point is a good reminder to me, as it should be for each of us. This is Jesus' church. We should treat it as belonging to him bought by his blood. It's not a human institution.

It's not mine or it's not yours. We're not involved with power struggles because Jesus is its Lord and head. So let's pray for it because it's Jesus' church.

Let's pray for it, not like Christopher Robin, but like St. Paul. Let us, like St. Paul, have a big picture of you and our prayers generally for each other, but our prayers for the church as well.

It's easy, you see, to pray for the sick people at church and the leaders of church and the building program and the groups that meet. But Paul has taken a step back from that and seen an even bigger and more glorious picture and there's something about what he prays for the Ephesian church that should be part and parcel of the way we pray for ourselves as well.

[23 : 15] The sovereign God under whose control lie all things and at whose son's feet lie all things. Sovereign over everything.

Nonetheless, ought to inspire us to pray bigger prayers. What an incentive for us to pray that we may know the hope to which he has called us, the glorious riches of his inheritance among the saints and the immeasurably great power of him who raised Jesus from the dead in us who believe.

When was the last time you prayed like the death of his inheritance. So all of you were just doing it with our His ■■■ly power of the ape he was gone. Everything can be said like that.

Alright. trailblazer I'll do the same worship or something to show? Have a great point in another daqui of to date that impacts of the epidemic sow. Subscribe to these two letters and works and the secret studies and■■ where the network has not a behalf of her overwhelming or hints, process with the grosseim or