

A Series on Ephesians
Whys and Hows of Prayer (Ephesians 1:15-23)
February 14, 2010
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I. Introduction

Good morning! Welcome to New City! And Happy Valentine's Day! And Happy New Year! Today is the New Year according to the Lunar Calendar! So, a lot of Asians celebrate today as the New Year.

We are in the middle of a series on Ephesians. For the last 7 Sundays, we looked at the first 14 verses. Now, we are ready to go on to verse 15

Today's passage is about Paul's prayer.

I ran across an article about a research done by UCLA in which they surveyed more than 100,000 students at 236 colleges and universities and they found that 79 percent believed in God and 69 percent prayed regularly.

I remember what I used to pray for when I was in college.

- God, help me to get a good grade on this exam. I used to pray that before every exam. Ya, I know. I should have studied more. I shouldn't have cut the classes. I should have been more disciplined. But, please!
- God, give me the nerve to ask her out (I was a little shy about girls), and please make her say yes. How many of you prayed that? For single women, did you know that statistically speaking, there is 71% chance that the guy will say yes. It's much lower when a guy asks a girl out.

I heard about this atheist.

- He fell over a cliff.
- And as he was falling over this cliff he managed to grab hold of a tuft of grass. And he was holding onto this tuft of grass, dangling.
- And he could see down below that there was nothing but rocks.
- There was nothing between him and rock 250 feet below.
- So in spite of the fact that he was an atheist, he cried out. He said "God! If you're up there, help me!"

- And to his amazement he heard this deep voice: “I Am here. Just let go of the tuft of grass and trust Me.”
- And he thought about it for a moment and then he said “Is there anybody else up there?”

So, in some sense, whether we are Christians or not, we pray.

But, I want us to see how Paul prayed and see what we can learn from it.

Let’s read Ephesians 1:15-23.

¹⁵For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit^[f] of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸I pray also 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 the saints, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Today, we want to look at (1) how important prayer was to Paul; (2) why he prayed; and (3) how he prayed.

A. First, the importance of prayer to Paul.

There are two things that Apostle Paul is focused on. One, he preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ to the churches. That’s what he does in this letter as well as most of his letters. And two, he prays for them day and night. In fact, his letters are an exposition of the truth of the gospel sandwiched between two things: an assurance that he prays continually for the recipients and an appeal to them to pray for him.

In 1:16, Paul says “**I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that ...**” Then in Ephesians 6:19-20, he ends the letter by saying:

¹⁹Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Let me give you another example. In Romans 1:9-10 Paul says, "God ... is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times." Then at the end of the letter (Romans 15:30) he appeals to them, "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me" Again and again in Philipians, Colossians and other letters, we find this same pattern. The great exposition of the gospel at the center of the letter is sandwiched between this assurance that he prays for them and the appeal that they will pray for him.

Prayer and preaching are the two great emphases of the apostle's ministry.

It's not just Paul. The other Apostles had the same view. When the church was growing rapidly, the work of the church increased rapidly. So, they decided to select seven deacons to take responsibility over the food pantry ministry of the church. This is what the Apostles said to the church (Acts 6:3-4):

"3Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

So, according to the priority of the Apostles, the two most important ministry of the church is the ministry of prayer and the ministry of the word.

This is not just about the Apostles or the pastors. It is about you as well. The most important focus of your life is the word of God and prayer. I am not saying that other things are not important. I am just saying that these two things are the most important activities of your life. You can't just pray. You have to understand the word of God, which reveals God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. You can't just focus on the word of God, you have to also focus on prayer. They are interlinked and married to each other.

As Jonathan and I were praying the other day, a word of God came to me in one of those unmistakable ways: "it was that action without prayer leads to behavior without heart." If I came to Grace today and said: "Happy Valentine's Day. Here is a present for you. It is my husbandly duty to wish you Happy Valentine's Day and buy a gift for you.

So, here it is.” The act is there. The behavior is there. But, the heart was not there. She wants to know that this act came out of my heart, my love for her. If my heart of love and the act are not married to each other, the act loses its meaning. In the same way, if we are focusing on the word of God, or acting on the word of God, or even doing some great things for God, if we are not engaged in prayer, we have emptied the act from the heart.

Not only that, if we divorce prayer from action, we have emptied our action with the real power. If we are going to engage in the work of God, we can’t focus on the work without prayer. When there is an issue, I want to analyze the problem. Find solutions to the problem, and implement them. That’s my general tendency. Particularly as I was preparing for this sermon, I was convicted that my preaching, my leadership at this church, our ministries, strategies, mission—they are all useless and rendered powerless unless we couple them with prayer.

I often give lip service to prayer, but focus on problem solving and going out there to change the world! That’s just not how the Apostles, who were personally disciple by Jesus, who received special revelation from God, who were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, who had tremendous intimacy with God—that’s not how they changed the world. They didn’t just do it! They prayed and prayed and did it.

I have to come to grip with the reality that prayer is THE real work. We have to stop thinking that prayer is something that we do to support the work of the church! No, prayer is the one of the two most important works of the church!

I know it’s hard, particularly for those of us who are activists. One of the ways that you can divide people up is: activists or contemplatives.

- Activists thrive on movement, decisiveness, and confrontation. They want to do something right now. For an Activist, prayer is often difficult.
- Contemplatives often like to pray. It comes naturally to them. They love reflection; they’re apt to be thoughtful and patient.
- Some of you tend to be Contemplatives. You like to think about things. Some of you are Activists. You like to run really hard.

- When an Activist says, “I’ll call you,” it means “I’ll call you today. I’ll call you before you get home.” When a Contemplative says, “I’ll call you,” it means, “before I die.”

When you read the NT, don’t you get the feeling that Apostle Paul and Peter were extreme activists? Apostle Peter had a temper. He was quick to act. Paul was a race-horse. He was intense and focused on the mission of God. Just look at how busy he was and how many churches he planted.

Yet, both of them considered the ministry of the word and prayer to be the two most important works God called them to do.

In his book entitled, Prayer, O. Hallesby has a great chapter which is simply called "Prayer as Work." In it, he likens the work of the kingdom to mining. He says there are two great operations: one is the extreme, exhausting hard work of boring into the solid rock to plant the explosive; the other is setting off the charge and sending the rocks flying in all directions. That's the exciting part. Everybody likes to be involved in it. But the really hard labor is boring into the solid granite in order to plant the explosive.

Hallesby compares the work of prayer to that labor. Anybody can light the fuse, he says, but the difficult work takes real commitment, real perseverance, real toil, sweat and tears. And few are willing to do it. Prayer is where the real work is done. In the kingdom of God prayer is fundamental. *The disease of modern church is that we have made it supplemental.* And this is one of the vital lessons for us to learn from Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23.

B. Second, Why Paul Prays: three reasons are given here.

(1) He prays because he is thankful.

The phrase "for this reason" at the beginning of verse 15 gives us the first key to why he prays. It refers back to the first half of the chapter. Paul is prompted: to bow down in thankfulness before God for the sheer glory of this salvation that he has been expounding to us in verses 1-14. And he thanks God for the unmistakable evidence of that salvation in the lives of the Ephesians. That evidence, according to verse 15, is twofold. First, they have received the riches of this salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus: "For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus." Second,

they have exhibited the first fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in their lives by their love for all the saints: "Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints." Saints in the Bible always means believers, not super-Christians.

They've demonstrated faith and fruit, a right relationship with Jesus leading to a right relationship with our fellow believers. Paul says he is constantly giving thanks for them for this reason that this glorious gospel has come to them and they have received its riches by faith and have shown evidence in their lives of its reality by the love that they have toward their fellow believers.

He says, **"Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you."**

Do you respond to God's grace on the lives of others with unstoppable prayers of thanksgiving? We sometimes use the phrase, "It drove me to my knees." Isn't it interesting that when we say that we are almost always talking about some crisis or difficulties? "I got into this really tough situation, and it drove me to my knees." *Isn't it strange how seldom we are driven to our knees in thankfulness to God for the glories of the gospel as we see them evidenced in the lives of his children?* We need to ask God to cultivate in us a spirit of thankfulness like this. I think if we do so, we will experience sweetness in life. Paul prayed like this because he lived like this. We, too, will never pray any other way than how we live. Our prayer life is a reflection of the whole of our life. We need to cry to God to cultivate within us this spirit of thankfulness, of rejoicing in the blessings of God's grace, especially when we see God's grace in the lives of other people.

Paul not only gives thanks but also prays for the Ephesians. In verse 16 he writes, **"I have not stopped ... remembering you in my prayers."** In verse 17 he says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you ..." and so on.

(2) He prays to pray the truth in.

That is really what he is doing in this intercessory passage. He is taking the amazing gospel that he has been talking about, and now he prays them in. His teaching are linked with his intercession and pleading with God. This is how the truth of God is bored into the hearts of people.

The best teaching in the world is useless unless the Holy Spirit takes hold of it and goes deep into our heart. And the way that the Holy Spirit does that is when the truth of God is prayed in. So, when we have taught the truth or shared Christ with people, our task is not over. We really need to go away and spend time praying that truth in.

(3) Paul prays to pray the Ephesians on.

He has seen the evidences of grace in their lives, and he has bowed before God with thankfulness. He could say with the apostle John, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 Jn 4). But Paul never confuses gratitude with complacency. He now prays them on into new depths of understanding and new experiences of God's grace and power, praying them into maturity. This is how people grow. Paul cries to God in Ephesians 4 that these Christians may no longer be mere infants spiritually but may grow up "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ," into mature manhood and womanhood in the Lord Jesus.

How do people mature? They mature by learning the Word AND being prayed on by someone who cares for their spiritual maturity. Have you ever taken somebody on your heart like that? Someone who is a spiritual infant? Babies are beautiful when they are babies (except maybe at 3 in the morning). But when they remain a baby year after year, that's a tragedy. And when people remain spiritual babies year after year, playing around with the dolls of spiritual infancy, that's a greater tragedy! We need to be given the Word of God that will put muscle into our spiritual beings and cause us to grow and go on into spiritual manhood and womanhood. One of the ways that happens is when somebody really prays us on.

I give thanks to God for my mom who for years prayed me on. Lord, take a hold of Eunnok-ee. She was a prayer warrior. She prayed for me day and night. She fasted every Friday to pray for me and my brothers. I give thanks to Grace's grandma, who is in her nineties and she prays me on everyday. I give thank for some of you who include me in your prayers and you pray me on.

I think we need to think about who God is calling us pray them on!

C. Lastly, Let's Go on to How Paul Prays: two things to notice.

(1) The first thing to notice is that he prays with perseverance and persistence.

In verse 16 he writes, "I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." In verse 17 he says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ..." In other words, his praying is not sporadic, or crisis praying or praying when he feels like it.

So he tells the Ephesians in 6:18, "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." Prayer and perseverance are therefore frequently tied together in the apostle's appeal.

We have difficulty with this. I think one of our problems arises from our failure to grasp that prayer in the Scripture is not primarily an emotional experience. It is a duty commanded by God. Have you ever really grasped this? "Pray without ceasing" is a commandment. "Men ought always to pray." Now ought is a word of duty. This is a matter of moral obedience. We cannot wait until we get some kind of tingle in our spine which makes us feel we really must begin to pray. It's a matter of obedience.

Now, don't get me wrong. Sometimes, God fills you up and lifts you up so much in prayer that you feel like you're in heaven. But when that does not happen, that doesn't mean you stop praying.

(2) The second thing we need to notice is that Paul reminds himself of God's nature and character.

In verse 17 he writes, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father ..." It extremely important in our approach to God to remind ourselves of his character, his true nature, his majesty and his glory. The power of prayer lies not in how we pray, but in whom we are praying to.

The apostle says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ..." Now there is a great phrase: You will remember how the Old Testament saints would pray to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What they were saying was that God has revealed himself in his dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had dealt with them in grace; he had covenanted with his people through Abraham. The people living during the Old Testament time reminded themselves of God's nature and character. Likewise,

they reminded themselves of his mighty acts in history. "You are the God," they said, "who brought us up out of the land of Egypt and from the house of bondage." They also reminded God of his acts in history. Now it's not that they were giving God a history lesson. They were saying, "This is the God you are. We have seen you in days past. We have proved you in the days of our fathers, and we come to you today and plead with you on the ground of your character." Now that's the great ground of prayer. That's how God's people come to him and plead with him.

Where do we see God's character most gloriously revealed? It is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Where in history has God manifested his glory most perfectly? It is in all that he has done in the coming, living, dying, rising and ascending of the Lord Jesus. And so Paul said, we come to you as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then he says God is "the glorious Father" (v. 17). The reference is to the infinite majesty and excellence of God. Paul is not only encouraged to approach him by this, he is also awed before him. He is the Father of glory. He is concerned about the glory of God. That is the great underlying burden of the prayers of men and women in Scripture. That needs to be our great concern and longing too.

But as he reminds himself of the majesty and glory of God, he is also reminded of the power and resources of God. Do you see how important it is to pray with this picture of the character of God in our hearts? Jesus taught us to pray in the same way. He said to pray, 'Our Father in heaven.' " This means that God is our father, intimate abba, and that he is in heaven. Heaven is not a place far away. It means that he dwells in the place of unlimited, unbounded power and authority.

But, what does he pray for?

It's interesting that he does not pray for persecution to stop. He does not pray for material blessings. He does not pray for people's troubles to go away. He does not pray for change in life circumstances. Now, there is nothing wrong with doing that. But, Paul prays that they will have deeper knowledge of what they already have. That they may know God better. He says:

¹⁸I pray also 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 the saints, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

He says that God has already given us our greatest gift. His prayer is that our eyes will be enlightened so that we may know the hope, the riches, and the power.

Share the cheese and cracker story to finish off.