



# A Prayer for the Church

Ephesians 1:15-23

TRINITY PULPIT

**H**ow do you pray for the Church? How do you pray for our church? I know that many of you, if not most of you, include your church in your prayers. When you teach your children to pray, you teach them to pray for our church. You might teach them to pray for me, their pastor, or for the ministerial staff. Maybe you teach them to pray for their Sunday School teachers. When we pray for our church, many times we pray for specific individuals. We pray for one another. Do you ever pray for our church as a collective whole? Do you ever lift up prayers for our church's effectiveness or for the Church's work around the world? How do you pray for the church?

Today, in our series on prayer, we are looking at Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesians. We have already discovered in our passage from last week that when Jesus chose to pray for the church, he chose to pray that we might be one in unity. When Jesus could have prayed anything, Jesus prayed that the church might be one, that they might reflect the nature of God, and that they might, with one voice, share the gospel that is preeminent to anything that might divide the church.

In Ephesians 1, Paul voices one of his many prayers for the church. Paul many times, as well, prays for the unity of believers. Later on in Ephesians 3, Paul will pray for the believers to fully comprehend the love of God and its richness. Here, in Ephesians 1, Paul prays for the church.

The book of Ephesians is an interesting book. It is tied closely with the book of Colossians that sets up for the supremacy of Christ. Both books are written in prison. I find it interesting that Paul is writing about the power and supremacy of Christ while in prison. When his world has come to a stop, and he is facing all types of ter-

rible circumstances, he still maintains Jesus is Lord and supreme. It is just a reminder that our circumstance does not define God but God can re-define our circumstance.

The book of Ephesians is a very impersonal letter. It does not have the greetings that we find in other letters. Many scholars suggest that this letter was written to people Paul did not know personally but had only heard about their faith. Paul would have known personally the people in the church and Ephesus, and it is strange that he is not more personal in this letter. In addition, in the earliest of our manuscripts, the location of Ephesus is not found. The earliest manuscripts simply say, "To the saints... the faithful in Christ Jesus."

Not to belabor the point, this letter could have been intended for Ephesus and the church there; but, most importantly, it is for all of us. It is for the church, those who are the saints, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

To the church Paul writes:

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.

Paul says, I am grateful for the church. The church that is loving God and loving others. Because of this, I include you in my prayers. Paul writes, "I keep on asking." The prayer for the church is a continual prayer because it is a prayer about characteristics of the church that are always growing with possibilities. Let's look at Paul's prayer for a moment.

First, Paul prays that the church might always be growing in their understanding and experience with Jesus. Here is how

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Paul writes it in verse 17:

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.

Paul mentions two words in this first part of his prayer for the church: "I pray God will give the church wisdom and revelation." Those are interesting words. The word wisdom means more than knowledge about a certain subject. The word means discernment. It means to be able to look at life, and all that we experience, and realize there is something more than just what we see and experience. The Psalmist says that the beginning of wisdom is reverence for God. Wisdom is to view life and what we know with a lens of eternity.

Paul prays for revelation. Revelation is an act of God. Revelation is God revealing self to us. God reveals self in the Bible in various ways. God reveals self in nature and creation. God reveals self in special moments, like a burning bush, an angel's appearance, and even the voice of a prophet. Fully and completely, God reveals self in the person of Jesus. So we know that God is a revealing God. Paul prays that we might know the revelation of God.

Now if we put these two together, we have what we can call a growing faith. Paul prays that we might know that God is revealing himself and that we might have the wisdom to see that there is more happening in life than we might at first notice. Paul says when we receive revelation and we use wisdom, we will know God better. This is the way God works through the Holy Spirit in our lives. God is revealing and God is giving us wisdom to see where God is working and moving.

I wonder if we sometimes ask the wrong question when it comes to God's work in our lives. Many times we ask God, "Show me what you want me to do." Maybe the question we should be asking is, "God, show me where you are at work so I can join you." Our mission statement as a church is, "Joining Hands with God." That phrase comes from the book, "Experiencing God." In that book, Henry Blackaby outlines an understanding of experiencing God in our lives. His first premise is that God is always at work. His second premise is that God invites us to join in that work.

Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury once wrote, "It is not the church of God that has a mission, it is the God of mission that has a church."

The immigration debate is one of the hottest debates in our nation. People on both sides of this debate are very certain that what they believe is the most important for our nation. Christians are divided on this debate as well. You have heard me say in the past that how to fix the nation's broken immigration policies are beyond my pay grade. Here is what I know in our community. In this prosperous, middle to upper-middle class area of Raleigh, we have elementary schools that have nearly 50% ESL students. One of the largest refugee populations is located only a few miles from our church. God has sent to us missionaries who have served around the world to come home to Raleigh and minister to the world right here in this place. God has put us right in the back door of this people group.

What is the question for the church? Is the question, "What in the world is happening to my neighborhood?" Or is the question for the church, "God, what are you doing and how can I join you?"

In the past 15 years we have seen an explosion of development and population in our immediate neighborhood. The change in Midtown/North Hills is nothing we could have envisioned when I came to be your pastor 18 years ago. Within a mile radius of our church is over 20,000 people. The majority of which are unchurched, dechurched, prechurched or post-church. Just so we know, it is not going to stop. North Hills is now the center of population, and it will continue to grow.

How will we respond? We can say, "Well the traffic is horrible, there are strangers everywhere, and this is not North Hills as I remember it. What is going on?" Or, as a church and God's people, should we be asking, "God, what are you up to? What does it mean, God, for us to be here in the middle of it all? God, what are you doing and how can I join you?"

Like Paul, we should be praying this prayer. We must keep on asking that we might have wisdom and that God might reveal himself to us, that we might know him more. That we might experience God right here in this place and time.

I was once in a Bible Study class with a young woman who was 33 years old. When we were studying the life of Jesus, she realized that Jesus died at 33. The statement was made that Jesus had fulfilled all God had for his life in 33 years. At that point, the woman burst into tears. She was distraught. When she could finally speak, she said, "I am 33, and I feel sometimes that God has nothing more for me." Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel that your

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best experiences with God are in the past? Do you ever feel that there is nothing more to know about God? You have heard it all before. Paul says, "I keep on asking that the church might have wisdom and revelation to know God better." You are not finished. There is more to know. There is more to experience. Trinity, your best days are not behind you. Don't you know that in Christ our best days are always ahead, if we will keep praying for wisdom and revelation.

Paul prays that the church might be enlightened to know the hope to which we are called.

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,

Paul wants us to understand that as the church, we live life with hope. Remember that hope in the Bible is not a wish. Hope is something that is as true as this present reality and yet not experienced. Thus, we talk about the hope of heaven or the hope of the resurrection. We are not saying we wish heaven to be true or resurrection to be true. We are saying that in Christian hope, they are true and we have yet to experience them. So, we need to realize that we have been called to a hope.

Let me mention one part of this hope. I think one part of this hope to which we are called is to believe that we can be changed and that others can be changed. There is a tendency in our culture to simply say, "This is who I am and I am never going to change. In fact, it is seen as strength in our culture to dig in your heels and say, 'I am never going to change.'" How foreign is this to the gospel of Jesus? The gospel of Jesus is all about change. It is all about being open to the work of the Spirit in our lives. The hope we have is that people can change. We can change.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul has one of his vice lists. He lists all types of sins. He lists sexual sins, idolatry, greed, drunkenness, slanderers, swindlers and thieves. Then, after he makes this list, Paul says something interesting about the church. He writes, "and so were some of you." Paul is saying, before knowing Jesus, we all had sin in our lives that defined us and beset us. Yet, here is the hope: we can be changed.

In a recent sermon on hope the pastor wrote:  
Hope ruins your life, because once you ex-

perience hope, you can't go back to life as you used to know it. I have a friend who has been visiting Cambodia and Thailand with a Christ-based ministry that works in some of the most wretched places of the earth. This ministry rescues young girls and boys who are trapped in the global sex trade. Many of them have been prostitutes from a young age, but this ministry intervenes by setting up safe houses where they can find freedom, faith in a loving Heavenly Father, deep cleansing of their shame and guilt, protection, housing, education, and training. My friend has seen horrors and brutality beyond description. But he's also been touched by hope. He's watched other people who have been ruined by hope minister to these children. He's watched defiled and used children become new creatures in Christ—and all of this has ruined him. He can't go back to his old life anymore. Now don't misunderstand: he still has the same job and the same wife and the same family and church and small group. But he can't approach life the same way anymore.

When God says, "Better days are coming," and we really start to believe it, it will change us. We start to align our lives with the hope we have. And of course, we don't have to go to Cambodia to start this.

Paul prays that we might know the hope to which we are called.

Paul prays we might know the power of God in our lives. Paul writes:

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, 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. 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.

Paul prays that we might have resurrection power. The kind of power that raised Jesus from the dead, which is a power that has only once been demonstrated, is the kind of power that God promises to

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us. I think the church has a power problem. Most of us feel like we are either unplugged, or the switch is off, and we can't figure out how to plug into the power of God. In fact, I would think that most of us, when we think about the power of God in our lives, probably feel either indifferent or frustrated.

N.T. Wright tells about looking through the lens of a powerful telescope. He first looked toward the sea unaided and saw nothing, but then his friend said to look through this telescope. When he did, he saw things he had not seen. He saw ships and even people sitting on the ships. The power of magnification had allowed him to see what was there, but could not be seen with the natural eye.

Paul is suggesting that when we pray, we might see life through the power of the resurrection. When we do, we might see life in a different way. We might actually begin to believe that there is power within us.

In fact, Paul speaks of the church in lofty terms when there is power. Notice how Paul ends this prayer. First, he says God raised Jesus from the dead and now, Jesus is seated in heavenly realms with all authority. He has every title and dominion now and that will come. God placed everything under the feet of Jesus. But notice these last words of the chapter. Jesus is head over everything for the church, which is the body of Christ and the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Those are lofty words about you and me. Everything is under the power of Jesus and Jesus is head of everything "for the church." Jesus is head and is filling everything and in every way. What is amazing about this is that Paul is asserting that Jesus is bringing everything under his authority, and Jesus is using the church to do this. You talk about lofty ideas. You talk about a true mission. Barclay writes on this passage: "It means that God's plan for the world is in the hands of the church."

Today, in the church in America, we hear a lot of "woe is me" and "woe is we." It is true the culture has shifted, and the church is in a new place in this shift. However, let me ask you, do you really believe that Western Civilization has the power to be the demise of the Church of Jesus?

We might say we are living in Post Christendom. This means that the culture no longer has the church as its center. Good, that simply means that those who were simply cultural Christians and not followers of Jesus will be defined. Cultural Christianity does nothing but offer a false gospel that requires no discipleship. God is at work.

As Christians, sometimes we feel out of step with others at work and in our community. Good, that is the way it should be. Peter said we are aliens. We don't belong to this world.

We feel powerless. Good, that is probably the beginning place. God demonstrated his greatest act of power when Jesus was powerless in the grave. There, God raised Jesus from the grave by working God's mighty strength. When we are weak, then we are strong. In the very moment when we feel powerless, God is readying us for true power.

All we have to do is to look through the lens. Look at life through the power of the resurrection.

What is your prayer for our church? Our prayer should be the prayer of Paul. Let us pray that we might see God at work and join in so we might have a growing faith. Let us pray that we might realize the hope we have in Jesus. We can be changed and so can others. Let us pray that we might see life through the power of the resurrection. God has a plan for the world and has chosen to use the church to fulfill that plan.

Would you, like Paul, keep on asking God to grant to us a growing faith, hope, and power? ▲



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