

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY in CHRIST

A PATTERN OF PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

(PART I)

Ephesians 1:15-23

15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 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.
Ephesians 1:15-17

For several years our family lived in Texas, a part of the country well-known for its oil fields. In west Texas there is a particularly well-known field called Yates pool. Maybe you've heard of it. During the depression years it was a sheep ranch, owned by a man named Yates. However, because he was not able to make enough money on his ranching operation to pay the principle and interest on the mortgage, he was in danger of losing the ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family had to live on government subsidy.

One day, a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and informed Yates that there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease.

At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve, giving 80,000 barrels of oil a day. In fact, thirty years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed that it could still produce 125,000 barrels of oil a day! And Yates owned it all. The strange thing is, the day he purchased the land he received the oil and mineral rights. But for years he was living on relief. He was a multimillionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn't know the oil was there. He owned it, but he didn't possess it.¹

This is not unlike many Christians today. We own great wealth in Christ, but we aren't aware of what we have been given. Or we are aware of it, but are not laying hold of it. A few weeks ago we mentioned Benjamin Disraeli, the one-time Prime Minister of England, who said, "The greatest good one

can do for another is not just share your riches, but reveal to him his own.” And that is what Paul is doing for us here in chapter one of Ephesians. He is spelling out for us the incredible wealth that you and I have in Christ. In verses 3-14 Paul has spoken out the truth of all that we have in Christ; now he must pray it in. Verses 3-14 are benediction; Paul now moves to intercession. Verses 3-14 are praise; Paul now bows his knees in prayer. In 6:18 Paul tells us to pray ... with variety, with regularity, and with tenacity...for all the saints. And in this same letter he has given us two spirit-inspired model prayers (both here and in 3:14-21) that serve as a model. In both of these prayers we find a pattern of prayer for the people of God.

Now if you're like me, you struggle with this whole area of prayer. Prayer doesn't come easy for me. In fact, I know of no one for whom prayer comes easy. It certainly didn't for the disciples. As I've been reading through the gospels lately, I've been impressed with the fact that just about every time Jesus is in prayer and his disciples are near, they are falling asleep! More than once my wife has been fervently interceding for some people as we go to bed, and I'm already off in a deep snore! Yes, I struggle with this area of prayer. But I have found some awesome truths in this passage that motivate me to follow the pattern of prayer that Paul lays out for us here.

WHY SHOULD WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER?

For example, Paul first answers the question of *why* he prays for the Ephesians and *why we should we pray for one another*. Notice how he introduces his prayer in verse 15: “*For this reason...*” Those three introductory words send us back to verses 3-14. Ever since verse 1, where Paul identifies himself as the author of this book, he is totally hidden from view. He is hidden behind the awesome character of the God in three persons that he describes in these verses. God the Father *planned* our inheritance (3-6); God the Son *purchased* our inheritance (7-12); and God the Holy Spirit *protects* inheritance (13-14).

So what does that have to do with prayer? Why should we pray for one another? We should pray for one another because of our shared wealth in Christ. This is important, for we face two dangers in light of all we have been given in Christ. First, we may be tempted to constantly ask God for his blessings, rather than take hold what he has already given us. But Paul avoids this error. He doesn't ask God to give more blessings to these

believers, but asks rather that they might come to experientially understand all the spiritual enrichments they already have. We are spiritually poor because our treasure is buried in Christ in the sky, but our treasure maps are of the earth.ⁱⁱ It is prayer that can turn this situation around, both for you and for others.

On the other hand, some may place such an emphasis on what they have in Christ, that they fail to take up their privilege and responsibility in prayer for themselves and other, asking God to grant spiritual insight. Praise and prayer, benediction and intercession go hand in hand. They are inseparable. So I say it again: *we should pray for one another in the Body of Christ because of our shared wealth in Christ.*

But there is another reason that Paul prays for the Ephesians and why we should pray for one another. Paul prays for these believers, giving thanks for their progress in Christ. What Paul has heard about the Ephesians prompts him to give thanks to God for them.ⁱⁱⁱ

For this reason, ever 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, Ephesians 2:15,16a

Apparently, the Ephesians were strong in the areas of faith and love, and for this Paul gives thanks. But as the rest of Paul's prayer demonstrates, they needed to go further in the nurture of their hope (vv 18-23).

Don't we see here an important principle for our prayer life? We should never be so need oriented in our intercession that we fail to give thanks to God for the work that he is doing in the lives of other believers. Notice, Paul continually gave thanks. This spirit of thanksgiving permeated his prayer life for others.

How often do we give thanks for others in our prayers? But more than that, how often do we encourage others with words of thanksgiving for what God is doing in their lives? Yes, Paul thanked God. But then he wrote down his thanksgiving and sent it on a piece of parchment to these believers as an encouragement! So encourage one another with words of thanksgiving. Tell it to God first. But don't stop there. Let others in the church know that you are thanking God for them.

Paul is thankful but not satisfied. Paul is thankful for their *position* in Christ and for their *progress* in Christ, but he's not satisfied; he now he wants them to realize their full *potential* in Christ. One has put it this way, "God is easy to please, but hard to satisfy."

I well remember the first tottering steps of my four children. How pleased I was when each was able, for the first time, to take three steps...then four...and finally make it across the room! I cheered them on as ecstatic pleasure filled my being. But as they grow older, I relentlessly expected more and more. They all managed to master walking; now they're learning to master relationships and life.

But think of this. At conception each child is in possession of his full potential. Everything is there (though not fully developed), provided for in the genes and chromosomes of the individual. Likewise, when you and I are "born again," conceived in Christ, we immediately possess all the spiritual potential that Paul details for us in the beginning of this chapter. It is all there in our spiritual DNA. But it is now our prayer for one another that enlightens us as we discover who we truly are and what we truly have in Christ.

Easy to please, but hard to satisfy. God is so pleased even by our most fragile steps of growth in faith, hope and love. But He also hard to satisfy. He wants us to go deeper and further. And that is why Paul prays. He has laid out for these believers their *position* in Christ. He praises them for their *progress* in Christ. But he also longs for them to experience their full *potential* in Christ. These believers were experiencing faith (which looks upward) and love (which looks outward), but needed to grow in that aspect of hope (which looks forward).

Before moving on, just a word about these qualities of faith, hope and love. Here Paul mentions two of the three qualities that mark a mature church. These qualities are found side by side time and again in the New Testament and often as a measure of maturity. For example, in Colossians 1:3-5 Paul brings out these same characteristics of maturity:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints- the faith and love that spring

from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth...^{iv}

This is a great motivation to prayer for one another. Our primary concerns should not be building, finance, programs and activities, but these three qualities of what makes a great local church: faith, hope and love. These three qualities should also drive our intercession for one another.

How do we do this? Take, for example, our weekly prayer sheet here at CB. I've been challenged recently to go through these requests and pray for each one according to this passage in Ephesians – praying faith, hope and love into each person mentioned. This helps to take our prayers out of the realm of a felt need (such as a job, finances, or health) and transform them into “kingdom prayers” for growth in Christ-likeness. I encourage you to do the same.

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER?

Not only does Paul talk about *why* we should pray for one another; he also models for us *how* we should pray for one another.

Notice that Paul prayed *continually* for these believers.

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking... Ephesians 1:16, 17a

Elsewhere, Paul urges us: “...pray continually... for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18). It seems that the model prayer Paul gives us here in Ephesians 1 is only a summary of the kinds of prayers he was praying constantly for these believers.

When Paul says to pray continually, I don't think that he's encouraging us to hold up in some monastery and become isolated from real life. Paul certainly didn't do that. If anybody was an activist, it was the Apostle Paul – constantly on the move caring for the churches that had been planted under his ministry. I personally believe that Paul had developed the art of what Brother Lawrence has more recently called “practicing the presence of God.” It involves an on-going communion with God throughout the day, in which God is invited into every activity, every relationship, every discussion. It involves turning every thought *of* others into a prayer to God

for others. It can also mean coming up with practical ways of regularly praying for the people that God has brought into your life. I personally keep an ongoing list of people for whom I pray. I divide it up into different days of the week. When I'm made aware of a personal need, I try to always write it down and follow through by praying for that person or that need. The approach may be different for everyone; but the principle remains the same – our continual prayers for one another are indispensable to growth in Christ.

Not only does Paul pray *continually*, he also prays very *personally*. The NASB translates verse 16 as “making mention of you in my prayers.” The expression “making mention” is in what is called the middle voice, emphasizing Paul's personal interest and involvement in praying for the Ephesians. Paul prayed for them by name, very specifically.

Pray generally and you'll get general answers; but pray specifically and by name and you'll get specific answers. I've recently been keeping a record of how God has been at work in the lives of individuals for whom I've been praying. It's awesome to see God at work! In the time that I've kept this journal, I've seen 36 specific answers to prayer in the lives of individuals.

Paul prays continually for these believers, and personally; but he also prays *biblically*. Notice what he says in verse 17 – “*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father...*”

You might ask why Paul talks about the “God” of Jesus Christ. Paul is here describing Jesus from the perspective of his humanity. In John 20:17 Jesus says:

"Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" John 20:17

Friend, the biblical model of prayer is Trinitarian. Just as all of verses 3-14 of chapter one focus on the work of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, so too these three play a vital role in our prayer life. Paul describes here all three persons of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words, the Christian life and faith are essentially Trinitarian. The Father calls us into blessing received through His Son and imparted by the Spirit, and in turn we approach Him in prayer through the Son and by the

Spirit. We are to address our prayer to the Father, in the name of the Son and in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. This is the biblical model of prayer.

WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER?

Up to this point Paul has told us *why* we should pray for other believers and *how* we should pray. We now see also *what* we should pray. Notice verse 17 again:

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 first asks that these believers might receive a “spirit” of wisdom and of revelation. The translation of the NASB is probably better here, translating “spirit” with a small “s.” In Paul’s language there is no article before the word “spirit.” Also, Paul is writing to and praying for believers who already have the Spirit of God (Romans 8:9). What he is asking is that they have a “disposition” of wisdom and of revelation.

What is wisdom? It is knowledge digested and put into practical use. That’s why it has been said, “*The wise man reads both books and life.*” In the OT “wisdom” often had reference to “cleverness” and “skill” in handcraft and art.

Wisdom is the ability to take spiritual truths and apply them to practical everyday situations. But also the ability to take spiritual truths and apply them to situations that aren’t of the everyday variety. After all, it’s not every day that you’re trying to decide whether to get married or a spouse asks for a divorce or a child is flunking out of school or your employer lays you off or a family member dies. We need wisdom everyday because not everything we face is an everyday situation.

There is a marked difference between my thoughts and God’s thoughts. A situation can take place in my life and I can give you my opinion in a heartbeat. I am learning that my opinions and judgments are oftentimes wrong. What I need is wisdom, and wisdom concerning life begins and ends with God.

But Paul also prays here for a spirit of “revelation.” We have the revelation of the Spirit in the Word, but we must also allow the Spirit of revelation to open our eyes to see and understand and apply what is in that Word. Paul doesn’t pray for a “second blessing”, but that we might appropriate all the blessings already given us in Christ.

And finally, this spirit of wisdom and revelation is in the “knowledge of Him.” Paul doesn’t pray for a knowledge of a book about God, but for knowledge of the God of the book. Some can study and specialize in specific subjects of biblical truth. For example, one can be a ‘specialist’ in the truth of Christ’s second coming, without having appropriated the blessings of His first coming.

As we move out into this new week, let’s take this pattern of prayer for the people of God and put it into practice in our own lives. In fact, let’s do that right here, right now this morning. I invite you to turn to your neighbor and ask God to enable him or her to grow in the knowledge of God. If you don’t feel comfortable praying with someone else, or you simply feel the need for a personal time in prayer, then take what you have heard this morning and pray for someone near to your heart. It might be a family member, a friend, or a colleague at work. Let’s pray.

Notes

ⁱ Cited by Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations and Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 75.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Calvin Miller, "The Finale." *Leadership*, Vol. 4, no. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps Paul had received this news of their faith and love through Epaphras (Col. 1:7): “You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.”

^{iv} Cf. ... *remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father*; 1 Thessalonians 1:3 ASV