

SERIES: Ephesians: Display of God's Glory
 SERMON: *Praying to the Sovereign God*
 SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1:15-23
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
 DATE: September 1, 2013

What is the most urgent need in the church today?

This is a great book on prayer. It's by Don Carson and it's called *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. Carson begins the book with an important question. When I ask the question, I want you to write down an answer; the first answer that comes to your mind.

“What is the most urgent need in the church...today?”

Carson gives a number of possible answers to the question. Is the most urgent need greater sexual purity? Or less consumerism? Or the need for more evangelism? Or the need for more biblical knowledge? Are any of these our greatest need? Carson acknowledges all of these things are very important. But he argues that they are mere symptoms of a greater problem.

This is his conclusion. “The one thing we most urgently need in [the Western Church] is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better.”

As we learned in our study of Proverbs, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Or in other words, how we live is intimately connected to our relationship with God. What we need in the church today is the same thing that the church needed when Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians. We need a deeper knowledge of God. Only a deeper knowledge of God will bring improvement in the areas of purity, financial responsibility, evangelism, and biblical knowledge (and whatever else you may have written down).

In the early nineties, fifty students from a major seminary volunteered themselves for overseas ministry. These students were carefully interviewed to see if they were good candidates for the trip. And do you know what they found? Only three of these fifty seminary students reported spending any regular time with God through reading the Bible and prayer. And these were gung-ho Christians ready to give themselves to missions.¹

What about you? Do you identify with these students? Would you agree that the most urgent need in the church today is to know God better? Is this also the greatest need in your life?

This morning we come to the second half of Ephesians 1. In the first half of Ephesians 1 Paul began his letter with praise to God because of his sovereign work in salvation. Now he continues by asking God to *continue* his sovereign work in the lives of the Ephesians. He wants the Ephesians to know God better! And through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, God wants us to know him better as well.

Ephesians 1:15-23 (ESV)

¹⁵For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷that the God

¹ Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 16-17.

of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far 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 one to come. ²²And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

This is a prayer; a prayer that we need today in the church. A prayer that I hope you will continue to pray regularly for yourselves and for those you are discipling.

Why does Paul pray this prayer? Paul wants the Ephesians to know God better, therefore, he prays to God. I think verse 17 is the key verse in the passage. Look at how the NIV translates verse 17; I think it is a good interpretation of the original Greek.

Ephesians 1:17 (NIV84)

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 wants the Ephesians to know God better, therefore he prays to God. God is the one who gave us salvation. To review what we covered last week, God the Father chose us for adoption before the foundation of the world (vv. 3-4), God the Son purchased our redemption through his blood (v. 7), and we were sealed by God the Holy Spirit when we believed the gospel. God is the one who gave us salvation. God is therefore the one who will give us transformation. If the thing we need most urgently today is to know God better, then we need God's help. That's why Paul prays to God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and asks that God the Spirit would help us to know God better.

Here is my sermon in a sentence: **If we want to know God better, we must pray.**

We must pray if we want to know God better. But what should we pray? And why should we pray? Paul's prayer gives us a simple pattern we can follow. He tells us what to pray for. And he tells us why we should pray this way. This is not the only pattern for prayer. We have other patterns in Scripture. We have the Psalms. We have the Lord's Prayer. But Paul's pattern here is a legitimate pattern as well. And it by no means contradicts other patterns we see in Scripture.

What to pray:

- We must praise God for his sovereign work (vv. 3-14). If you're familiar with the ACTS acronym for prayer, this is the Adoration part of prayer. This is what Paul does in the first half of chapter 1. "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*" (v. 3). Paul praises God for his sovereign work in salvation. We won't cover it again this morning, but it is an important part of Paul's pattern.
- We must thank God for his sovereign work (vv. 15-16). In the ACTS acronym, this is obviously the Thanksgiving part of prayer.

- We must ask God to continue his sovereign work through the Holy Spirit (vv. 17-19). In the ACTS acronym this is the Supplication part of prayer.

Why to pray:

- We must pray on the basis of Christ's work (vv. 20-22a). The only reason we're able to pray is because of what God has done in Christ. This should never be left out of Christian prayer. That's why we always pray in Christ's name.
- We must pray for the sake of God's glory and the good of Christ's church (vv. 22b-23).

This is the type of prayer we need if we want to know God better. We'll spend the rest of our time this morning looking closer at each component of this prayer.

WHAT TO PRAY FOR

If we want to know God better, we must pray.

1. We must thank God because of his sovereign work. (vv. 15-16)

In verses 15-16, Paul starts out by saying, *"For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."*

What is the reason Paul gives thanks to God for the Ephesians? He's thanking God because of *God's* sovereign work in saving the Ephesians; the sovereign work described in verses 3-14.² Paul doesn't thank God because the *Ephesians* believed the gospel and now love one another. Paul thanks *God* because *God* saved the Ephesians. *God's* work of salvation has been proven by their *"faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and love toward all the saints."* And he's been praising God ever since he heard of this faith and love (cf. NIV). But the reason *God* is thanked is because *God* has done the work!

God is the agent in our salvation and our transformation. Therefore, we must thank God. In order to thank God, we have to recognize the fact that God is at work. He's working in our lives and in our world. Have you had any God-sightings recently? We need to keep our eyes open for the work that God is doing in our lives and in our world. He's saving people. He's changing people. He's advancing his kingdom on earth.

We should expect God to work. Then we should take notice when we see God at work. And then we should thank God for the work that God is doing.

Do your prayers regularly involve prayers of thanksgiving for the work that God is doing? Paul is giving us a pattern of how to pray. His model includes a God-centered perspective which results in thanksgiving.

² Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, and D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*; contra D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Ultimate Purpose*, and John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*.

The sovereign work of God not only leads to thanksgiving. It also leads to further prayer. The God who has been at work in our lives is the God we need to continue his work in our lives.³ And that brings us to the second part of Paul's prayer in verses 17-19. If we want to know God better, we must pray.

2. We must ask God to continue his sovereign work through his Spirit. (vv. 17-19)

As we've already said, verse 17 is at the heart of the whole passage. Paul wants the Ephesians to know God better. And through Paul, God wants us to know him better. But knowing God better involves so much more than merely knowing *about* God.

Now don't get me wrong, a relationship with God does involve knowledge about God. We've already seen that in Ephesians. We need to know the significance of our adoption, our redemption, our inheritance, and the Holy Spirit's seal on our lives. And all of that is highly theological and involves learning and thinking. But the knowledge Paul speaks of here involves so much more than mere knowledge *about* God.

Those seminary students I mentioned earlier knew a lot *about* God. But it seems as though they were struggling in their relationship *with* God.

The word Paul uses here to describe our knowledge of him is the strongest word for knowledge he had available to him in the Greek language. It involves a relationship with God. It involves experiencing all that we have in Christ. It involves living out the theological truths of our salvation.

Last week we said that theology must lead to praise. This week we learn that theology must lead to practice. What is true theologically about our status before God needs to be known by us not only in our head but also practically and experientially and relationally in our lives. God wants us to really know him. But how will we get to know God better and what will that look like specifically?

Generally, we will get to know God better only if God gives us his Spirit; the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation. It's only through God's Spirit that we are saved and it is only through God's Spirit that we get to know God better.

Do you believe this? If you do then you must pray for God to continue his sovereign work through his Holy Spirit in your lives and in the lives of those you disciple. God uses our prayers to get his work done in our lives. So pray for the Holy Spirit to continue working on you and on others. One practical way you can do this is by coming to our concert of prayer this evening. If we believe that God uses prayer to work in our lives and in the lives of others then let's get together and pray! That's how we get to know God better, generally speaking.

But what will it look like specifically? Paul lists three things he wants the Ephesians to know as they get to know God better. He wants them to know God's hope, the riches of God's inheritance, and the greatness of God's power.

³ D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 170.

First, we need to know God's hope. We live in a difficult world. There is so much to discourage us on a daily basis.

What we see in our country can sometimes be discouraging. What we see in our work and schools can sometimes be discouraging. The conflict we see in our relationships can be discouraging. And the sin we see in our own lives can be discouraging.

But God wants more for those of us who are in Christ. In Christ, God has given us hope in our calling. In Christ, we are called to be citizens of God's kingdom in the midst of a messed up country (2:19). In Christ, we are called to good works in the midst of frustrating jobs (2:10). In Christ, we are called to be a part of the household of God and to live at peace with one another in a world full of conflict (2:19; 4:3). In Christ, we are called to live holy and blameless lives, in a world that constantly indulges "the passions of the flesh" (1:4; 2:3). And in Christ, we have the hope of eternal glory.

For those of us who are in Christ, God has given us a hope for more than what this world has to offer.⁴ If we want to know God better, we need to get to know the hope that he has called us to better in our daily lives. Therefore, we must pray for God to continue his sovereign work in us through the Holy Spirit. That's how we'll get to know God better.

Second, we need to know the riches of God's inheritance. Last week we spoke about our inheritance. That is part of our hope. But in this passage, Paul is speaking about something different. He says we need to know "*the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints.*" What does that mean? Quite simply it means that we belong to God. We are his inheritance.

In the Old Testament, Israel was called God's inheritance. Deuteronomy 4:20 says, "*The LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day*" (cf. Deut. 9:26, 29; 2 Sam. 21:3; etc.)⁵ Now, in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles are God's inheritance. We are the people of God. We belong to God. We are members of the household of God. This is a rich identity. And theologically speaking, this is our primary identity.

But is this our primary identity *practically*? Or is our primary identity bound up in our work? Or our family? Or the friends we hang out with? Or the school we go to? Or the sports or instrument we play? Or the ministries we're involved with?

If we want to get to know God better, we need to get to know our identity as God's people better. Therefore, we must ask God to continue his sovereign work through the Holy Spirit. That's how we'll get to know God better!

Third, we need to know the greatness of God's power. This world is full of powerful people. And our sinful nature is still powerful. And this world is full of spiritual powers of darkness. All of these powers – the world, the flesh, and the devil – can wage war against us. They threaten to undo us and to call us away from the hope of our calling. But in Christ, we have great power. Do you know this power in your daily life? If we want to get to know God better we need to get to know the greatness of his power better in day to day life. Therefore, we must ask God to

⁴ Cf. John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*.

⁵ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*.

continue his sovereign work through the Holy Spirit. That's how we'll get to know God's power better.

When you pray, do you pray like this? You can! Paul has given us a great pattern for prayer. This isn't just some neat acrostic either. This is God's inspired Word. This is a pattern for prayer that is breathed out by God. We should be praying this way. If we want to know God better, we must pray this way.

WHY TO PRAY THIS WAY

We've seen what to pray. We must give thanks to God for his sovereign work and we must ask God to continue his sovereign work through the Holy Spirit. Let's turn now to see why we should pray this way.

3. We must pray on the basis of Christ's work. (vv. 20-22a)

Obviously we pray on the basis of Christ's shed blood. This is how we have access to the throne of grace. But there is more. We also pray on the basis of Christ's resurrection and exaltation. Look at verse 20. God's power was "*worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand.*" We pray to the powerful God to work powerfully in our lives because God has a track record of working powerfully.

In Christ's resurrection, God has exercised power over death. Think about that. Regardless of how healthy we are and how far medical technology advances, death will still have the last word in all of our lives. But Christ has defeated the grave. He has power over death. And for those of us who are in Christ, we will be raised from the dead. In Christ, we have power over death too.

But not only is Christ more powerful than death; Christ is more powerful than any human or spiritual authority. Look at verse 21. Christ sits in ultimate authority right now at God's right hand "*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 one to come.*" Christ is more powerful than anyone. He is the authority over all things. Look at verse 22. God has "*put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things for the church.*"

The main thing in Ephesians 1:15-23 is that we might come to know God better through God's work in our lives. If we want to know God better, we must pray. But while this is the main thing in this passage, it is not the most important thing. The most important thing is the fact that God has done a powerful work in Christ's death, resurrection, and exaltation. This stands at the center of all history. It is the most important event in the universe. The main thing in this passage – that we might know God better – is grounded on the most important thing in this passage – that God has worked powerfully in Christ. And we have access to this power!

When I arrived at church this morning, the electricity was out. Immediately I thought to myself, how will I plug in my computer and how will I brew my coffee. I needed to work on my sermon and I needed to be awake. Therefore I needed power – electrical power and caffeine power. But I had no access to power here, so I went to Starbucks. The most urgent need in the church today is to know God better. And in order to know God better we need the power of God. And we have constant access to this power in Christ. The power is never out. That is why we can pray with

confidence that God will continue to work powerfully in our lives to accomplish his purposes for us his church.

We don't simply pray that God might possibly, maybe, someday, do some work in our lives. God has already done a work in our lives. And God's final victory in Christ is sure. So we pray in confidence in God's power and promises. The one who began a good work in us will complete it. He is a powerful God.

That's the first reason we should pray. The second is this.

4. We must pray for the sake of God's glory and the good of Christ's church (vv. 22b-23)

Look again at verse 22. "*He put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.*" Again, the NIV gives the right interpretation of this verse. It says that God "*appointed him as head over everything for the church.*" Christ's authority over all things is for the good of the church. That's why we must pray for God to continue his sovereign work through the Holy Spirit.

We live between the already and the not yet. Christ has *already* won the victory over sin and Satan. But at the same time we have *not yet* seen the complete defeat of sin and Satan. We still war against the powers of sin and Satan. When Christ returns, all things will be finally subject to Christ. The powers of the world, the flesh, and the devil will no longer have any power over us. And this will be for the good of God's people. This will be the realization of our hope. But now – between the already and the not yet – we still pray for victory. And as sin and Satan come increasingly under Christ's authority, even now, as we get to know God better, this too is for the good of Christ's church. And that is one reason we must pray. We must pray for the good of Christ's church.

The other reason we must pray is for God's glory. Our passage tells us that "*Christ is the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*"

What does it mean that Christ is head over all things for the church? And what does it mean that Christ fills all in all? This is a difficult verse to understand. But it's important for us to understand. And it is easier to understand if we place it in context within the broad sweep of the entire Bible.

This is a reference to the Old Testament.⁶ When God created man, God commanded him to rule the earth and to fill the earth with his glory as his image bearers (Gen. 1:26). But man sinned against God. And in sin, man failed to rule the earth and fill the earth with God's glory. The first man, Adam, failed to fulfill this commission. And all people since have failed to fulfill this commission. That is until Christ came.

When Christ came – the God-man – he fulfilled the command to rule the earth and fill it with God's glory perfectly. We have already seen that Christ rules over all things through his resurrection and exaltation. He is the head or authority over all things. He rules over all the earth. But how does he fill the earth with God's glory? Well that's where the church comes in. Christ is

⁶ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*.

head over the church. And Christ fills the church with God's glory. The church is the fullness of Christ who fills all in all.

And so as God continues to exercise his sovereign work in us – Christ's church – by his Holy Spirit, we are the means by which Christ fills the earth with God's glory. As the church spreads the gospel throughout the earth abroad, the earth is being filled with God's glory. That much is plain. But there is more. As we get to know God better – as we daily experience in increasing measure the hope of God, the riches of his inheritance in the saints, and the greatness of his power – we become a display of the glory of God. We are Christ's body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

God's great plan in salvation is the fulfillment of his great plan in creation. God wants to fill the earth with his glory. That's why we must get to know God better. As we get to know God better we display his glory better. And that's why we must pray for God to continue his sovereign work in us, Christ's church.

Why do we pray to know God better? Because it is only through the power of God that he will save us and transform us. And this is for our good. But it is also for the display of his glory in this earth he has created.

The greatest need in the church today is the need to know God better. That is why we must pray. And thank God that we have been given a pattern of how to pray and strong reasons why we should pray.

- We must praise him for his sovereign work.
- We must thank him for his sovereign work.
- And we must pray for God to continue his sovereign work through his Holy Spirit. We need to know God better.
- We pray this way because God is powerful and he uses prayer to accomplish his sovereign work.
- We must pray this way for the good of Christ's church.
- And ultimately we must pray to know God better for the fame of his glorious name in all of the earth until Christ returns in glory!

I want First Free to know God better. I want to know God better. Will you join me in praying for God to continue his sovereign work in our lives!

References

- Calvin, John. *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*. Calvin's New Testament commentaries. Trans. Parker, T.H.L., Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1965.
- Carson, D. A., *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1992.
- Lloyd-Jones, David Martyn. *God's Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1-23*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1979.
- O'Brien, Peter Thomas. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Pillar New Testament commentaries. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*. The Bible speaks today commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984.
- Hughes, R. Kent. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1990.

The prayers are often misdirected and very shortsighted and, in fact, selfish. Christians typically pray for health and happiness and success. They pray for personal benefit. They pray for comfort. They pray for solutions to fix all of the little problems of life. They pray for a healed body or a home or food or a job or a car, a husband, a wife, a promotion, more money. Those things, while they certainly make up part of life, are very low on Paul's priority list. The church is finally awakening to the fact that God is an absolutely and utterly sovereign God, that God controls all things by the word of His power, that God will do what He will do when He will do it the way He will do it because He has so ordained and because He is absolutely in charge and because He has. Moses prayed, and God relented. God changed His mind because a believer prayed! Just the word, "sovereign", all right? Then you break it apart. You've got S-O-V-E, and the word, "reign". The reason to pray is because we are praying to the supreme ruler of the universe, who can do something about it, who can hear from heaven and forgive our sin, and heal our land. "If My people will pray". "If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin, and I will heal their land". So, the reason to pray is the sovereignty of God, because we're praying to the One who's in charge. We're praying to the One who has the power t A new MP3 sermon from Reformed Baptist Church is now available on SermonAudio.com with the following details: Title: Praying to the Sovereign God, Pt.2 Subtitle: Praying with Paul Speaker: Derek Reid Broadcaster: Reformed Baptist Church Event: Sunday School Date: 9/9/2018 Bible: Ephesians 1:15-23 Length: 52 min. If God's will prevails, is it pointless to pray for what I want? This is a really good question from a podcast listener named Andrea. "Pastor John, hello! Why should we pray for things we want" happiness for ourselves, or healing for others " if we know, in the end, God's will will be done? I struggle with praying for what I want because I know, in the end, God's plan will prevail anyways. And besides, he knows better than me because he's sovereign. I feel like this thought sometimes inhibits my prayer life. Isn't it pointless for me to pray for what I want? Now, I don't know the way the sovereign will of God may work itself out in my life or your life in any certain situation. It may be crucifixion. That's not peace. This God he describes is the sovereign God of history; the centre of every thing that happens; the God who has set an eternal plan in place to be fulfilled when the time is right; who's sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to bring about the fulfilment of that plan. And as part of that plan he's chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world (v4). Some people would suggest that if God is sovereign then there's no need to pray to him. After all didn't Jesus say that the Father knows what we're going to ask even before we ask it (Matt 6:8)? Won't God act to carry out his plans whether or not we pray? Well, I'm not going to answer those objections in great detail today, but let me say first of all, that that quote from Jesus is in the context of teaching his disciples to pray the Lord's prayer.