

1 Preamble

So far in our walk through Ephesians we have spent quite some time looking at **1:1-14** which means we've now reached the point where we can move on to the next section in **1:15-23**. Those fourteen verses at the beginning of the first chapter formed a single sentence in Greek although obviously they have been written into a number of sentences by modern translators. This next passage in **1:15-23** is also a single sentence in the original Greek which follows on neatly from that opening sentence.

In those verses **1:3-14** Paul reminded the Ephesian church that they had been blessed in the heavenly realms by God and continued to receive many spiritual blessings each day. He then explained to them that since God loved them so much He had chosen and predestined them to be adopted into His family and then to be sealed by His Holy Spirit as a guarantee of what was to come.

In these next verses Paul prays for them in a relatively short prayer that is of great depth and significance. As he had done in the past, Paul gave thanks to God for them and for the faith and love that they had. He then prayed that they would know more about God and so grow in their faith and draw nearer to Him. It is that prayer that we will look at in some detail.

2 Introduction

I'm sure many of you will agree with me when I say that some of us may struggle with prayer; we mean well when we try to come before the Lord in prayer and yet we frequently make a good start before running out of steam without any idea how to proceed. Not everyone is like that; I've met many people over the years who have been great prayer warriors and have been able to pray many beautiful prayers. The rest of us though worry about the words we use and how we put them together although we should remember that whilst our prayers don't need to be eloquent they do need to be humble, sincere and from the heart. For example, when Jesus was discussing prayer with His disciples He said to them "... *when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*" (**Matthew 6:5**) He went on to add "... *when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*" (**Matthew 6:7**) It was during that exchange that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray as they too struggled, and as a result Jesus taught them what we know as the Lord's Prayer.

You don't need to read much of Paul's writing to realise he was a great man of prayer, particularly for those he met on his travels as well as all the new believers in the churches with which he was involved. Just take a look at **Romans 16:1-15** where Paul lists all those who sent greetings as well as those to whom he wants to send greetings. I don't think it is a stretch of the imagination to see them all on his daily prayer list; and that is only one church! Prayer is a powerful tool which is all too frequently ignored or underused. That could be because some are good at prayer whilst some really struggle. However, we should never forget that the Holy Spirit is always there to help us. Paul told the Romans: "*In the*

Paul's Prayer of Thanks

same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." (Romans 8:26)

In the current world climate there is plenty for us to pray about and plenty of people who need our prayers whether we know them or not. Paul obviously felt the same and I've often wondered what kind of prayer list he kept given that he knew so many people and wanted to pray for them and others. I have this vision of something like the old London Telephone Directory which consisted of four volumes with each being about an inch and a half thick. If you don't remember telephone directories then ask an older person as I'm sure they'll be able to help you!

3 Prayer to God

Here in 1:15-23 Paul gives us an example of how he prays and we could do worse than follow him in his approach. He begins by addressing his prayer to God. Note the words of 1:17 and observe that Paul is bringing these prayers to God Himself and not to the Lord. The NLT translation of the verse seems to make it a bit clearer when it says, "*asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*"; it is God he is asking and not the Lord. God is the Creator and He is the Father of our Lord and Saviour and it is the Lord's role to lead us to faith in God His Father and that is why we should direct our prayers to God and not to His Son. We should certainly invoke the name of the Lord and the Holy Spirit, but the prayers themselves should be directed to God.

4 Faith & Love

Paul's prayer has come about because of what he has heard about them; that is, the believers in Ephesus. Although Paul was in prison when he wrote this he was allowed visitors and they always brought him news of what was happening in the various churches he had planted or visited. With regard to Ephesus, it had been at least four years since his most recent visit and in that intervening period the church had probably grown quite considerably and there may well have been new churches planted in the region. That meant that there would have been plenty of new believers who Paul had never met. Amongst other things the Apostle tells the Ephesians that he had heard of their faith and love, two vital aspects of life as a believer in Christ that are inextricably entwined with one another. Consequently his spirits would have been lifted to hear of the growth of the church and how the believers, both those he knew and those he didn't, had grown in their faith in Jesus Christ. As they grew in that faith in Jesus they would also have grown in their love for their fellow believers.

Let's think about love for a moment given that the world is sadly lacking in love; real love. With so many forms of modern communication available today we seem to be constantly bombarded with words about love, many of them too trivial to worry about. Going back to the 1960s The Beatles recorded songs titled *Love Me Do*, *Can't Buy Me Love* and *All You Need is Love* amongst others. There is a TV show called *Love Island* which I've never watched but which I'm told should be called *Lust Island* as it has little to do with true love. All of these have trivialised love since true love requires faith in Jesus Christ and without

Paul's Prayer of Thanks

that faith love is shallow and ultimately meaningless. In this Epistle Paul is writing to Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, to encourage them in their faith. Very interestingly Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones, probably the greatest preacher of the 20th century, asks the question as to how Paul knew that they were Christians¹. From Paul's time onwards there have been many, many people who have claimed to be Christians when in fact they never really know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour. Far too many think that attending church every week, giving to charity and being polite to people, amongst many other things, makes them a Christian. That simply isn't true and until anyone repents of their sins and comes to faith in Christ as their Saviour they are not a Christian. Dr Lloyd Jones further suggests² that many non-Christians are neither happy nor comfortable in the company of Christians; they regard them as being stuffy, narrow minded and not interesting to talk to. Paul was fully aware of such a situation which is why he included a comment in his Epistle to Titus where he said, "*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.*" (Titus 3:3) However, as people come to faith in Jesus their attitudes change and slowly but surely they grow to love their brothers and sisters in Christ. Dr Lloyd Jones gave his own definition of a Christian when he wrote, "*A Christian is a man whose life and in whose whole outlook the Lord Jesus Christ is at the centre.*"³ Does that apply to us? Is Jesus at the centre of our lives or is He just on the periphery? Returning to the thought of loving one another, the Apostle Peter wrote in his first Epistle, "*Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.*" (1 Peter 1:22) The Apostle John reiterated that thought in his first Epistle when he wrote "*this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them.*" (1 John 3:23-24) That depth of love increases as we grow in our faith.

True love can only come through faith in Christ and faith must come first. Whilst the Apostle Paul wrote a great essay about love in 1 Corinthians 13, my personal favourite passage on this subject comes in 1 John 4 where John talks at length about love and gives us the shortest definition of love that I've seen: "*God is love*". John added: "*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*" (1 John 4:10-11) We are able to love because Jesus first loved us and died for us as that atoning sacrifice and it is His abiding love for us that compels us to love our fellow believers just as Paul has observed in 1:15. Another very important point to note in that verse is that their love was "*for all the saints*"; that is, as the NLT puts it "*God's people everywhere*" whether they knew them or not. It is not selective whereby they only love those they like or who are nice to them; this love is universal and is intended for all believers. The Ephesian believers had

¹ Lloyd Jones, Martyn, *God's Ultimate Purpose - An Exposition of Ephesians One*, The Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, 1978, page 314-317

² Lloyd Jones, Martyn, *God's Ultimate Purpose*, page 322

³ Lloyd Jones, Martyn, *God's Ultimate Purpose*, page 317

Paul's Prayer of Thanks

placed their faith in Christ, had drawn nearer to Him as they walked with Him each day and as a consequence their love for one another had grown. As their faith in Christ grew so did their love for their fellow believers in Christ; something else that would have pleased Paul.

That Beatles song *All You Need is Love* trivialises love and fails to mention God in any way. The world does indeed need love but it should be a love that is based on faith in Jesus Christ and without Him there can never be true love.

5 Thanksgiving

It is because he had heard of their faith and love that Paul is bringing this prayer which is why his opening words in **1:15** say, "*For this reason ..*" His prayer now looks forward to the hope of their calling; the riches of their glorious inheritance and the almighty power of God that is available to them. As he brought these prayers to God, Paul was also looking back to what he had told them in **1:3-14** about the glorious inheritance that awaited them as believers in Christ something he discussed in **1:14**; and as he looked forward again in **1:18** to that glorious inheritance and all that it entailed.

This prayer is so packed with what Paul wanted to share with the church that I intend to talk about a couple of those points now and rest of it next month. Before we get to that however, Paul begins by giving thanks for them. In the NIV translation of **1:16** Paul tells them: "*I have not stopped giving thanks for you ...*". The ESV translation says "*I do not cease to give thanks for you ...*" (**1:16**). That ESV wording reminds me very much of **1 Thessalonians 5:17** where Paul says quite simply "*Pray continually*" whilst the ESV of that verse says "*Pray without ceasing*". I don't think that that means we should pray uninterruptedly but that we should pray regularly and frequently during each and every day. Whenever we do pray we should always include thanks for our fellow believers and their faith in Christ. For instance this is what Paul said to the Romans: "*God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.*" (**Romans 1:9-10**) He said something similar to the believers in Philippi when he wrote: "*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy*" (**Philippians 1:3-4**). You will find that he expressed similar sentiments in **Colossians 1:3-4** and **1 Thessalonians 1:2-3** amongst others.

In **1:16** we read that Paul is giving thanks for "*them*", that is the members of the church in Ephesus. He knew many of the early members having worked with them and he was always anxious to support and encourage them, especially as many of them had worked with him in building the church. At one stage in the early days of my life in ministry I visited a number of different churches and met many wonderful, devout and hard working Christians. Names tend to escape me but that doesn't stop me remembering them and the help they gave. Paul was no different since he always prayed for each of the churches that he founded or planted. If you look at the end of each of his various Epistles you will see lists of names of people he wishes to remember. I've already mentioned Romans but there are always plenty of names mentioned at the end of each Epistle. I've no doubt that Paul prayed regularly for each one of them.

The thought arises as to how often we thank God for all that He does for us. I'm never sure if we do acknowledge that He is with us each and every day and constantly provides us with what we need to live our lives. He provides the food we eat; He provides the homes we have; He provides the families we love; and most importantly of all He has provided us with life in and through Jesus Christ. Do we remember to thank Him for these things or do we simply take them for granted? We can see from this prayer and others that Paul constantly thanked God for everything he had and equally importantly he gave thanks for the people he had met and knew in the various churches that he founded during his missionary journeys.

6 Enlightenment

Having opened his prayer by giving thanks to God; he moves on to what Scripture calls petition where he asks God for various things. In his Epistle to the Philippians Paul gave the church great advice when urging them to rejoice in the Lord. He went on to add: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*" (Philippians 4:6) Notice that, he urged them to bring their petitions to God, in other words their requests for whatever was on their hearts. In Paul's case he prayed that the Ephesian Christians may be given "*the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they may know God better*" (1:17b). In wanting us to learn more about God and all He does for us, Paul prays that we may be given the "*Spirit of wisdom and revelation*". The original Greek isn't clear as to whether this refers to the Holy Spirit or our own spirit. Whilst the NIV translators imply that it is the Holy Spirit Who Paul is talking about, a number of other translations including the ESV, KJV, NASB and NEB do not. The American preacher and commentator John MacArthur suggests that "*The spirit of wisdom is given through the Holy Spirit, but this spirit does not refer to the Holy Spirit Himself, as some interpreters suggest.*"⁴ That may be why the NLT talks of our being given "*spiritual wisdom and insight*" which may make more sense. However, we mustn't lose sight of our need for knowledge as the preacher and theologian the late John Stott suggests, "*the essence of his prayer for them is that you may know (1:18)*"⁵ Stott goes on to add "*We must not overlook this emphasis. Growth in knowledge is indispensable to growth in holiness.*"⁶ We must never lose sight of the fact that Jesus Christ is our personal Saviour and we need a close personal relationship with Him. This isn't always appreciated by non-Christians who tend to see Christ in a different light as Someone Who is far away from them. That is why it is vital that we grow in our knowledge of God if we are to serve Him as we are expected to, and that is why MacArthur argues that "*We must know and understand our position in the Lord before we are capable of serving Him. We must know what we have before we can satisfactorily use it.*"⁷ Paul expands on the thought of our gaining wisdom and revelation when he prays in 1:18 "*that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know ...*" He wants the Ephesian believers, and us, to be more informed, more knowledgeable and more aware of God.

⁴ MacArthur, John, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary - Ephesians*, Moody Publishers: Chicago, 1986, page 44

⁵ Stott, John, *The Message of Ephesians*, Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, 1984, electronic version

⁶ Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*

⁷ MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary - Ephesians*, page 44

Paul's Prayer of Thanks

Paul is anxious that the Ephesians continue to grow in their faith and for that to happen they need knowledge of God and His Son and to gain that knowledge needs them to open *"the eyes of their hearts"*. We need our heart's eyes open to take in all that God has to say to us and to grasp all that we need to know to grow in our faith. We may stop growing physically at a certain age but we should never stop growing in our faith in Christ. Later in this Epistle Paul reminded the Ephesian believers that they needed to change the way of living and thinking. He reminded them that *"you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."* (**Ephesians 4:17-18**). Although there were many Gentile members in the church in Ephesus, Paul now regarded them as believers and so when he refers to *"Gentiles"* in **4:18** he is actually referring to non-believers. Before they became believers in Christ that was the state in which the Gentile members of the church found themselves. The same was true elsewhere which is why in his second Epistle to the Corinthians Paul told the believers in Corinth: *"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."* (**2 Corinthians 4:6**). That is what he is praying for on behalf of the Ephesian believers, that they would receive *"the light of knowledge of the glory of God"*. Without that light shining in our hearts we cannot grow in faith in Christ.

7 Prayer Summary

So far we have seen Paul praising their incredible growth in faith in Christ and the love that the Ephesian believers now had for their fellow believers. Having heard about them even when he was in prison, Paul prays a short prayer of thanksgiving before bringing a prayer of petition. In his petition the Apostles prays that the eyes of their heart may be opened so that they may learn more about God and as a result draw nearer to Him. He prays in particular for three things which we see in mentioned in **1:18-19a** where we read: *"I 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, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."*

As the eyes of the Ephesian believers' hearts were opened Paul wanted them to know and understand, firstly that they would know the full meaning of the hope to which God had called them; secondly, to appreciate the riches of the amazing and glorious inheritance that awaits them; and finally, to know God's great power that works in the lives of believers.

7 Conclusion

Since there is so much to think about with these three prayer points, I propose to look at them in detail next time. In the meantime let's just meditate on opening the eyes of our own hearts by reading Scripture, bringing our prayers to God as we draw ever nearer to Him and placing Christ at the centre of our lives.