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## Paul's Prayer for the Church

### Ephesians 1:15-17

**Intro:** We have made our way through the first half of **ch1** where Paul's main overriding theme is the sovereignty of God. The 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the chapter is made up of a prayer that Paul offers to God on behalf of the Ephesian Christians. At first glance, these 2 themes may seem to be at odds with each other but Paul clearly doesn't think so and as we work through his prayer both the petitions that are in it and the motivation that is behind it, we will come to see that these 2 great theme do not oppose each other; on the contrary, they compliment each other. In fact, the one, when properly understood, actually leads us, even compels us to the other.

So, what actually is the problem? Well, as some have posed it - if God is sovereign over all and has foreordained whatsoever will come to pass, what's the point of praying? That's seems like a legitimate question but let's extrapolate it to its logical end. If God is sovereign, as the Bible says He is, then what's the point of doing anything? Why witness? Why study the Bible? Why do good works? If what is going to happen is going to happen anyway, none of these things count. We might as well do as we please and let God do what He has already determined to do.

The reasonable answer to this question is that although God does do as He pleases, He has determined to use certain means like prayer, witnessing, Bible reading, and the doing of good works to accomplish those things. So it is just as accurate to say with James You do not have, because you do not ask (**4:2**), as it is to say, Thy will be done. If we don't pray, the good things for which we are to pray for will not happen, since it is through prayer that God has chosen to bring those blessings to bear.

**Ch1** teaches this lesson clearly. We'd be hard pressed to find a passage of Scripture that stresses the sovereignty of God in salvation more strongly (except maybe **Rom 8**). Yet it also emphasizes the importance and urgency of prayer just as strongly. Indeed, those 2 themes give the chapter its shape.

In the first half of the chapter, in one long sentence running from **v3-14**, Paul

praises God for the salvation of which he is both the author and accomplisher. God the Father chose; God the Son redeemed; God the Holy Spirit applied that salvation in a personal way. But then, in the second half of the chapter we have a prayer. The gist of this prayer is that God, who has planned and accomplished this salvation, might complete it as His people grow in knowledge of Him. For Paul, the knowledge that God was working was an inducement to prayer, not an excuse for neglecting it. It was because God was at work in Ephesus that Paul could pray with confidence.

The remainder of ch1 consists of Paul's prayer. In this passage, Paul reveals his motivation for this prayer; he offers thanks in this prayer, makes 4 distinct petitions in this prayer and then spends the last few verses explaining in detail what he means in his 4<sup>th</sup> petition. There are several prayers made by Paul recorded in Acts and in his Epistle and all of them offer lessons on prayer for believers today, including and especially this one. We'll take our time in studying this prayer of Paul's and as we do so, may we come to learn both the eternal value and the divine power of prayer.

**15-16** – Right from the very start, Paul links the content of his prayer (**15-23**) with the praise he has just offered to God (**3-14**). His opening word to the Ephesians establishes this link "Therefore." You should know the old saying by now, "When you see the word therefore in the Bible, you should look back at the previous context to see what it's there for." Some translations say, "For this reason," which simply means because of this. Clearly, the word therefore refers to the line of thought in the previous verses. In those verses, God is praised because He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing...in Christ (**3**). The primary evidence for this blessing is surprising in that He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him (**4**). This was not an act of sovereign whimsy but of sovereign love – in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will (**4b-5**).

None of these blessings were bestowed upon us because of our wonderful goodness or incredible worthiness. They are all to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved (**6**). For this reason, Paul says, he has set himself to pray for the believers in Ephesus. Many commentators think Paul's saying nothing more than that since he's heard of the faith of his readers; he's decided to pray for them but that

disregards the obvious truth that Paul already knew of their faith and love because he had spent years in Ephesus winning souls to the cause of Christ and discipling believers in the service of Christ.

No, the news of their continued faith and love is something different from the reason that accounts for the content of his prayer. The Therefore of v15 refers back to all of v3-14, more specifically to its central and repeated theme. In a spirit of worship and praise, Paul has outlined God's sovereignty as the foundation for His great grace and source of all the blessings that are enjoyed by His people. As Paul considers these particular truths about God, he finds specific things to pray for. What God has already accomplished in the past constitutes a specific reason for Paul to pray now in his present. Paul can also pray in confidence because he prays in line with the purposes of God.

In a nut shell, Paul's prayer here is a model for Christians on how to pray under the sovereignty of God

1<sup>st</sup>, because God is sovereign, Paul offers thanks for God's intervening, sovereign grace in the lives of his readers. Paul, having heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and love for all the saints, sees in their conversion and ongoing transformation a wonderful example of God's sovereign and gracious intervention in the lives of these Ephesian believers. Their faith rests squarely in Jesus Christ. Their characters have also been transformed, not in some hidden, mystical, sentimental or private way but in the public forum where they wonderfully display love for all the saints. Paul has heard of their faith and love and he gives thanks for them and prays for them.

Still, by using the word therefore, Paul links his prayer more specifically to what God has sovereignly accomplished in them rather than the reports of faith and love themselves. Paul knew that God was working in the lives of the Ephesian Christians and their faith and love was merely *evidence* of their own participation in this great work. Faith and love don't earn us any participation in God's great work; they are the evidence of our participation in God's plan.

This faith would not only include their initial faith of salvation but also their continued fidelity to the Lord. Notice, Paul doesn't mention their love for God. That would be redundant as, no matter how much we say we love

God, our true love for God is manifested in our faith and trust in God and our obedience of God. Significantly, Paul does give thanks for their love for all the saints. The real evidence of God's work in the lives of His people is not the love they claim to have for Him but the love they have for God's people...that others can see!

Paul gave thanks for the faith and love of the Ephesian Christians. In the same way, we should give thanks to God when we recognize His quiet and effective work in our own lives. We also should offer God thanks when we hear of His work in the lives of others. Whether it's a revival in of young people in Kentucky or souls saved and baptized on the mission field, we can rejoice in the news of their genuine transformations but we would never think of going to them to thank them for becoming Christians. No, we go to the Lord in prayer, thanking Him for His work in their lives that enabled them to become Christians – or better Christians.

That's what Paul is doing here. But, he's not just giving thanks for God's past work in their lives: he also prays (making mention of you in my prayers) that this work would continue with greater strength, as the rest of his prayer makes clear. Paul was thankful for what God had accomplished in the lives of these believers but he also knew that faith and love were just the beginning. There was so much more that the Ephesians needed to know about God and experience with God. This is why he prayed for them and why his pray is so important for us today.

**17** – We've come to the first of 4 petitions that Paul offers on the behalf of the Ephesian church. True to form, this petition is in line with the theme of God sovereignty. Paul asks that the Father would grant them the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. But wait; isn't that what God already wants to do? Exactly! Because God is sovereign, Paul intercedes for God's sovereign, holy purposes in the salvation of His people to be accomplished! In **Daniel 9**, Daniel prayed that the exile would end simply because God had promised that it would. In the same way, Paul prays that Christians would grow in the knowledge of God exactly because God has declared His intention to reveal to His people the glories of His grace, both now and for eternity. Even today, Christians pray, "Even so come, Lord Jesus!" Why? Is it not precisely because Jesus has promised to do just that? So, why should we not also pray that God will continue to work out His sovereign gracious purposes in those He's already begun to work in.

It's because God has chosen us in Christ (4); it's because He has in love predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ (4b-5); it's because God has lavished on us the riches of His grace (7-8)...it's for this reason that we should pray as Paul does. God's sovereign grace in our lives must never serve as a disincentive for prayer; else we risk devaluing it and taking it for granted. No, it should serve as a primary incentive for prayer, just as it is for Paul.

What is it, exactly, that Paul is asking for? Simply, Paul's prayer is that the Ephesians might know God better. Of all the things Paul could have asked for, this is what he puts at the top of his list. Do you believe you know God well enough? No thoughtful Christian would say yes to that question. In fact, the more we get to know God, the more we want to know Him better. But how does this growing knowledge of God come about? It comes about by approaching God in prayer and asking Him to give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we might know Him better.

There are 2 details here that help us understand what Paul's driving at here. 1<sup>st</sup>, when Paul asks God for something, he frequently addresses God or describes God in terms that are related to his request (Rom 15:4-5). Here, Paul addresses his request to 1) the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and 2) the Father of glory. The first expression reminds us that the One to whom we pray has supremely disclosed Himself to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Also, all of the Father's blessings are mediated through and have already been secured for us by the Son, so to pray in Jesus' name or to address God as the Father of Jesus Christ is to recognize the ground on which God answers such requests – Jesus Himself.

The second expression (Father of glory) simply means glorious Father. But, glory is often associated not just with God's domain but also with His gracious self-disclosure. In Stephen's sermon (Acts 7:2) it was the God of glory who appears to Abram in Mesopotamia. When Moses wants to know more of God, he begs God to show him His glory – and God does, even if it's just the trailing edge of it (Ex 33). Jesus wanted to return to the domain of His Father; to the glory He shared with the Father before the world began (Jn 17:5). Even still, what Jesus was doing on earth, what He did supremely on the cross, is manifest (reveal) God's glory. Glory is the Christian's ultimate destination, even though we are already being transformed into His same image, from glory to glory (II Cor 3:18). So for Paul to pray to the

Father of glory is to confess his awareness of God's proper domain, to verbalize his gratitude for God's gracious self-disclosure and to uphold the Father's domain as the believer's ultimate hope.

How is this tied to Paul's petition? Paul prays that God would give his readers the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so they might know Him better. What kind of God would answer that prayer? Clearly, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ because all of God's blessings have been won for us through Christ's work, a work performed at the behest of the Father. Also, unless a God whose domain is glory, graciously reveals to us more of His glory, how could we press on to know Him better so we can be prepared for the day when we will enter His glory also?

2<sup>nd</sup>, Paul doesn't just pray that we would know God better but that God would give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we can know God better. This is the established means to the desired end. What is required to know God better is wisdom and revelation mediated by the Holy Spirit. This is not just a body of truth that's acquired by reading a book on systematic theology (though that couldn't hurt). This is growth in wisdom (how to live in God's universe so as to please Him) and in revelation.

Some people get nervous when they hear Paul speak about more revelation. Wasn't God revealed supremely in Jesus Christ and completely in His word? Yes, but Paul's use of revelation isn't meant to imply additional but rather greater illumination of the revelation we have received ([Phil 3:15](#)). Christians need the Spirit of God to reveal more of Himself and His ways to us, if we are to know God better, because it's the Spirit's divinely appointed task to take things that belong to God's domain, the domain of glory, and bring them to us so we can receive them ([1 Cor 2:9-16](#)).

It is only through this work of the Spirit that enables us to know God better. Thus, we must pray for it. If we continue to fail to do so, we will only reveal our shameful lack of interest in knowing God better. It's shameful because there is nothing more important in God's universe, both in time and in eternity, than knowing God better.

Sadly, not many Christians are taught the need for this. Our Christian life should be centered around this glorious purpose – to know God as He is in truth, as He has been revealed by His Son and in His Word, so that we



might finally correct our false, idolatrous ideas of who God is. This should be the chief pursuit of our Christian walk and the reason it is important to state this is because we often settle for something that is quite less. Some believers settle for very little knowledge. "All I need to know is that Jesus died for me!" That is critical to know but that's not all you need to know. Some people want to go to heaven ignorantly.

Some settle for simple knowledge of the Bible. This knowledge is good, since the Bible is God's Word and there's no knowledge of God apart from it. Still, although we must know Scripture, this in itself is not the fullness of what God has for us. Others settle for knowledge about God. They're theologians of sorts. They can discuss God's attributes. But it's possible to know a lot about God without knowing God. It's possible to know theology and still not be saved. Paul wasn't praying that they would know more about God but that they would know God.

What does it mean to know God? The phrase implies a personal experience of God and with God. J.I Packer, in his book: Knowing God states that it's a matter of personal dealing - of dealing with God as He opens up to you, and being dealt with by God as He takes knowledge of you. It's a matter of personal involvement, in mind, will and feeling. The believer rejoices when his God is honored and vindicated, and is distressed when he sees God flouted. The Christian also feels shame and grief when convicted of having failed his Lord. Knowing God is also a matter of grace. It's a relationship both initiated and completed solely by God—as it must be, since God is so completely above us and we have so completely forfeited all claim on His favor by our sins.

How well do you know God? Is your knowledge of God simply information about God? Information is good but it doesn't necessarily change your life of itself. Bible study is critical for the Christian walk and that's what we do here at Grace Chapel but here's the real question: has the information you've gained from Bible Study filtered down from your mind into your heart and been allowed to change you? Has the information you have learned about God had any positive impact on your life? It should and it must! If it hasn't, then you need the Holy Spirit's presence in your life, either for initial salvation or for continued sanctification. Neither can be achieved without Him. ☺