

“A Prayer To Know God Better”

17 May 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship:

Good morning and welcome to our second service where we continue to look at the letter the apostle Paul wrote to the city, to the Church in the city of Ephesus. At the start of his letter, of course, he is very excited about Jesus and the good news of the gospel, and he has been swept up into the story of God's great plan, now revealed in the person and work of the Lord Jesus. The story began with God's choice before time and it ends with God coming back at the end of time. We have assurance of this because of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus to heaven and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's a great story, it's a true story, and being caught up in it, Paul is full of praise for God. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). And so, like Paul, we join to praise God for the truth of the gospel. Let us sing Charles Wesley's hymn, "Rejoice! The Lord Is King!"

Praise: IPH 454(i) Rejoice! The Lord is King!

Prayers of Adoration and Confession:

Dear heavenly Father, we come to You this morning to worship You and give You thanks for all that You have done for us through Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. In this time of unpredictability and unsettling circumstances in our world, we are grateful that You are the God of hope and are in control of everything. You will fill us with joy and peace as we trust in You. We are very thankful that when we cast all our cares and fears upon You, You will sustain us. Thank you, dear Father, that You love us so much, You sent Your only Son Jesus into the world, that through His death on the cross our sins have been forgiven and You have given us the gift of eternal life. Thank You, too, for Your Holy Spirit, who prompts us and guides us. Thank You, Father, for the gift of nature, which surrounds us. You have blessed us with sunny weather to enjoy it. The lovely birdsong, which is a delight, lifts our hearts in the quietness of these days.

Merciful Father, we confess that we have sinned against You in our thoughts, our words and our choices. We are sorry that we have not loved You as You deserve – with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. Help us, we pray, in our daily routines to prioritise our time and get to know You better. Please forgive us for the times we have put other things first. Our hope is found in You, knowing that You are full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in grace and love. We trust in You, Lord Jesus Christ. And it's in Your name we pray. Amen!

Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23

Sermon:

Thank you, Alan, for reading our Bible passage today.

I believe it was Matt Redman, a well-known worship leader, who stopped the music worship in his church to refocus everybody on Jesus. He felt they were coming to church because of him (he was quite well known at the time) and to sing and to feel good, perhaps in themselves, rather than truly worship God. And from that experience, he wrote the song called, "When the Music Fades (The Heart of Worship)", stressing the importance of our relationship with Jesus. The chorus says:

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You, all about You, Jesus.
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it when it's all about You, all about You, Jesus.*

It has been my intention, and I believe that it's God's intention, throughout this very unusual time of COVID-19 and the restrictions that we are under, to focus on our relationship with God. Having removed so many of the things that occupied our time and the things we loved, God has stripped away, like old wallpaper, all those activities and revealed to us our deeper needs, the fragility of our lives, our fear of death, our dependence on *Him*. And I hope that we are being warmed as we've learned about Him - the knowledge of His love, that He chose us, that He redeemed us through Jesus' death on a cross and called us to repentance and faith and glory in heaven - that we've been warmed in the wonder of the gospel, warmed in the hope of its glorious grace as the world fades and its pleasures are taken away.

Paul has certainly been excited by the gospel and we saw that last time in vv.3-14, where he pours out in a single sentence, like an express train, his delight of how praiseworthy God is for the church in Ephesus, the saints, the faithful in Christ. And now in vv.15-23, we can hear Paul pray for these Ephesian Christians and there is much to learn. He tells us why he prays, how he prays, and what he prays for. So, let's look together at Paul's prayer and if you can, it would be good to have your Bibles open.

I. Why Paul Prays (vv.15-16)

So firstly, *Why?* "For this reason" (v. 15). Let me read vv.15-16. "*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.*" Paul is super excited and thankful to God for the faith of the Ephesian Christians and their love for all the Church members. Now it's timely to remember that Paul writes this while under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard. It's a lot worse than what we're experiencing in our total lockdown; but his mind and heart are fully engaged with God and what He is doing through the gospel in Ephesus and the church. For Paul, the gospel is a thing of beauty, a glorious grace, a wonderful plan of love and when he sees that people believe it, he is thankful to God. What thrills Paul is not only the gospel, but its expression as seen in the church. For Paul, the reconciliation of the Jew with the Gentile, was a wonderful and remarkable thing, all coming together under the headship of Jesus in a new community that welcomed everyone (vv.11-14). And Paul is thrilled and caught up in the fact that the Ephesian church is an expression

of God's glorious plan. *For this reason*, for this glorious grace of the gospel, for this glorious reality of the church, for the glory of God Himself he prays.

II. How Paul Prays (vv.16-17)

And how does he pray? Well, constantly and with thankfulness and enthusiasm in vv.16-17. "I have not stopped giving thanks, I keep asking," he says. And I'm sure that doesn't mean that he does nothing else but pray, but when he prays for the Ephesian church, he thanks God for them. And he is enthusiastic because of what has happened there is not only a wonderful thing, but it's part of a growing and eternal plan of God that will conclude, of course, when Jesus comes back and brings His church to the new heaven and the new earth that we saw last week. It's a loving plan, it's an eternal plan, it's a comprehensive and global plan, and this small church planted in a spiritual hostile city is evidence for Paul that God's plan is working and he is just thrilled by that. And that is why he prays constantly with thankfulness and enthusiasm.

III. What Paul Prays (vv.17-23)

What is Paul's intention? He wants us to see, understand and feel our involvement with God in this plan, and he continues to work out the reality of the gospel for the church in the world and that is what we see in the content of his prayer. So what does he pray?

A. Know God Better

Well we see that in vv.17ff, "that you may know God better, and that the eyes of your heart might be enlightened." The means to make that happen is by the Holy Spirit (v.17). And He asks God that He would give them this Spirit of wisdom and revelation. Christian believers already have the Holy Spirit, but his prayer is for the *work* of the Holy Spirit in us, helping us know God better. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we have the revelation of God in Scripture and using that knowledge, we build on our relationship with God so that we might know Him better. His prayer is that we would have a better, stronger, more knowledgeable relationship with God.

B. Know Our Hope

And he prays as well that, not just for that, but he prays that they may see, understand, and feel - that's what it means to have the eyes of your heart enlightened - with their whole inner self, the reality and the impact of the hope that we have in the gospel (vv.18ff). Sadly, I haven't had time really to explain what I know of the situation in Ephesus and what it was like to be an Ephesian Christian living in that city. Acts 19 and 20 give us something of the background, and you can read around that. But simply to say that it was not easy being a Christian in Ephesus at this time. So, Paul prays they would have **hope** and to have hope they need to see. They need to see with the eyes of their hearts, and that means that they would understand, that they would know, that they would experience, and that they would feel the reality of God.

And so in v.18, Paul prays they would hope because they see, understand, and feel the gospel, that they are chosen, that they are redeemed and called to a glorious inheritance. That they would know that they are saints, holy and blameless in Christ and that they have this treasure, these riches in Christ. And in vv.19-20a, Paul prays they would hope because they see, understand, and feel the power of God, that is incomparably great power. And if you want to know what that power is like, you see it in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the promise of resurrection in our lives. And in vv.20b-21, Paul prays they would hope because they see, understand, and feel the authority and rule of Jesus in the heavenly realms, that is that God is in control in a sovereign and loving way. And in vv.22-23, Paul prays they would hope because they see, understand, and feel the importance and the centrality of the church in the world. Verse 22 is a remarkable verse, which says God did everything and put everything in place “*for the church*”! God is working in society now *for the church*. He submits everything in the universe *for the church*.

And I think that Paul is then saying: what would such hope do to our prayer life? How would it change how we pray? If we could see that we are part of this wonderful, amazing plan of God for the salvation and the renewal of people and the world, would it not change the focus of our prayers? If we were to pray that we and others would know God better and the eyes of our hearts would see, understand and feel, the glory of this great work of salvation, would that not change the way we pray? I believe that it would and I hope that we will really want to pray as Paul prayed. So let's pray together.

Dear heavenly Father, I pray that we would have our eyes opened to see You, to see Your plan in the gospel and the outworking of that plan in the church. Forgive us when we have been caught up with lesser things. We repent and ask You would turn us to You, so that we might be captivated as Paul was with You and Your glorious grace. We are thankful that our current difficult situation has helped us reconsider our lives and what is central and important, and we are grateful for how loving and patient You are with us. We praise You that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Thank You for the work that You have begun in us and for the promise that You will complete it in Christ for Your glory. We pray in Jesus name, amen.

Let us sing our next song written by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, “Speak, O Lord”. It's a prayer echoing the truth of Paul's prayer: *Speak, O Lord*.

Praise: Speak O Lord

Prayers for Others:

Our loving heavenly Father, Paul urges in his first letter to Timothy that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people, and so we pray globally, in a way that perhaps we have never prayed before. First, for those across the world who have lost loved ones from coronavirus or other causes and have not been able to attend funerals, or have attended

funerals with only a handful of people present: this is grief upon grief, and we ask You, the God of all comfort, to assure them of Your presence in all its fullness. We pray for all medical staff, hospital and nursing home workers, and first responders, thanking You for their bravery, devotion to duty and steadfastness in protecting us all. We pray especially for those who belong to our own congregation.

For researchers, that a vaccine breakthrough will come soon, and for the wisdom of Solomon for those taking political decisions in appalling circumstances, that they can balance the need to lessen restrictions with the responsibility for saving human life. We pray for Mervyn and (*name*) with Christian Aid in London, and for all worldwide relief organisations whose job was already difficult before the virus outbreak: for safety for workers, for funds to get through, for refugees, persecuted minorities and victims of war, national disasters and famine to get the help they need speedily and effectively. We particularly pray for Terrie Colman-Black and all the ACET care team as they seek to take care of clients at a distance, which is the exact opposite of what they want to do.

Lastly we pray for our own congregation, thankful for all internet support given and received, especially that enabling midweeks to take place, and for the untiring work of Sam and his team in producing the online Sunday services. We pray for those who are suffering financially as a result of the pandemic and the anxiety this brings, for those who are lonely, fearful and questioning. Assure us of Your loving presence and be close to those grieving recent and not-so-recent loss, for those who are ill with non-coronavirus diagnoses, for William Brereton in hospital, and for Karen Mawhinney and all those with elderly parents who are declining and finding things difficult. We pray for families who are in unplanned and lengthy separations, here and across the world, remembering that You are a global God, that the psalmist tells us that, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). And we ask all these things in the name of Jesus, who died and rose again, and ever lives to make intercession for us at the Father's right hand, amen.

Closing Praise: IPH 491 Be Thou My Vision

Benediction:

And as we finish let me bless you with some good words from Romans 11, known as the doxology. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?' For from Him and through Him and for Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.