

III. Lesson 3: The Prayer for Knowledge – Ephesians 1:15-23

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Stuart chapter 3

Aim: To pray for one another that we may grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In the remainder of the chapter, Paul prays for the Ephesian church based on what they already have. This is the correct order: we pray for what we already have, and then we pray for what we need.

The gist of this prayer is that God, who has planned and accomplished the salvation described in 1:3-14, 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 that he could pray with confidence.

Paul's statements of what he is praying for follow a typical Greek construction: he says what he is praying about first; then he uses a purpose clause to indicate why he is praying in this way. He does it twice in this passage. In verse 17 he says that he is praying that God might give the Ephesians "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" *in order that* they "may know Him better." Then in verses 18 and 19 he says that he is praying that "the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened" *in order that* they may know three things. Put together, it is really one great prayer for knowledge: knowledge of God and a fuller knowledge of the elements of salvation, consisting in our hope, our inheritance, and the power available to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

A. Paul's Prayer (Eph. 1:15-16)

1. Faith & Love (1:15)

Paul the pastor has a profound and continuous sense of gratitude. What is moving him is the report that the early Christian community is not only exercising faith in Christ, but is showing that faith through love for one another. The fruit of authentic faith is always love. Paul is expressing his joy and delight that this kind of love is flowing from the faith of these people.

Faith (*pistis*) has three aspects to it. It is knowing, believing, and trusting. A person comes to know what the gospel message is; he believes it to be true; and then he commits himself to what he knows and believes. He relies upon it, by putting himself in the hands of the Christ whom the gospel proclaims. This is what had happened to the Ephesians. Faith does not think about itself. Its attention is all fixed on Christ. This is how the Ephesians spoke and behaved, and so Paul knew that they had indeed become true Christians.

In addition to their faith in the Lord Jesus, the Ephesians had 'love for all the saints.' For 'love,' Paul uses the word *agapé*. What does this mean? It means to seek another person's good, however much it costs me personally. It is a sacrificial word. It is the word usually used of Christ's love for us. It means working for another's welfare, even if I die in the process.

This is the sort of love the Ephesians had. But for whom did they have it? Paul tells us. It was 'for all the saints.' The New Testament speaks of 'saints' (*hagios*) in the plural, but never in the singular. The word refers to that whole company of people who have been set apart by God, for God. Only three times are believers called 'Christians' in the New Testament, but they are called 'saints' about sixty times. The Ephesian believers loved every one of them.

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‘Love for all the saints’ characterizes every person who has been truly converted. It is a brand-mark which is clearly visible and impossible to remove. Those who are in the family love those who are in the family. This is a fact which, for example, the apostle John stresses again and again (1 Jn. 2:9-11; 3:14; 4:7-8; 4:20-5:1).

2. Thanksgiving & Intercession (1:16)

What do you do when you hear of conversions? You should thank God. That’s what Paul did. When he learned what was happening at Ephesus, he went to God and thanked the Lord for them. Two features of the apostle’s prayer life are in evidence here. First, we see the place of thanksgiving in his prayer. He taught others that praise should be the unfailing accompaniment of intercession (Eph. 5:19-20; Phil. 4:6; Col. 3:15-17; 1 Th. 5:18).

Secondly, we see its constancy. With ceaseless thanksgiving went ceaseless intercession. He did not do this just once, or even a few times. Again and again he thanked the Lord, ceaselessly. It was a constant theme in his prayers. Paul exhorted others to ‘pray constantly’ (1 Th. 5:17; cp. Eph. 6:18; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2).

Paul was a long way away. Besides, he was in prison. He could not strengthen the Ephesians by his ministry. But he could positively help them by his prayers. He spoke to God about them; and he did not stop speaking to God about them.

B. Who We Should Know (1:17)

- *In 1:1-14, Paul gives thanks and glory to the Lord for the abundant blessings He bestowed upon the believers. In 1:15, Paul begins his prayer for wisdom and revelation for his readers in the knowledge of God. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?*
- *What knowledge is Paul speaking about in 1:17? Why then does Paul pray for revelation as well as wisdom?*

1. The Father of Glory (1:17a)

In verse 17, Paul uses Jesus Christ and glory interchangeably. If we are in Christ, we are in glory. If you want glory, you come to Christ. If you come to Christ, you get glory. The God of glory bestows glory upon us in Christ.

2. ‘The Spirit of Wisdom and Revelation’ (1:17b)

Paul’s prayer for wisdom and revelation is similar to his other recorded prayers (cp. Col. 1:9; Phil. 1:9). After Paul blesses God for choosing us in Christ, he prays that his readers may grasp the fullness of God’s riches through Christ Jesus. Paul is always concerned that the saints grow in the knowledge of Christ, which produces growth in holiness. We’ve already been told in vv. 8-10, that we’ve already been given wisdom and knowledge. Because we’ve been given it, we can ask for it. We’ve been given it, so now ask for it, that it might come in its fullness.

Paul asks for a ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*) of wisdom and revelation. Sometimes in his letters the word ‘spirit’ refers to the human spirit (e.g., 4:23; Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 7:13), or it may refer to a quality of mind or soul that a person may receive or show, in particular a spiritual attitude or endowment (cp. 1 Cor. 4:21; Gal. 6:1; 2 Cor. 4:13). But here, we should understand these gifts of wisdom and revelation to be possible only as the gift of the Holy Spirit whom makes wise and who alone reveals the truth (cp. Jn. 14:26; 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:12).

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Paul is speaking to believers, so we have to understand that he is not talking about the initial opening of the eyes of the Christian to the truth of the gospel. Although they have been sealed by the Spirit, they need the Spirit to be their ongoing teacher, instructing them by giving them ‘wisdom (*sophia*) and revelation (*apokalupsis*) in the knowledge (*epignōsis*) of Him.’ Paul is not saying that Christians can expect to receive new revelations from God and so become contemporary apostles. No, he is saying that the Spirit works in Christians to help them understand the revelation (the Bible) God has already given.

What is the difference between ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*) and ‘knowledge’ (*epignōsis*)? Although Paul wrote in Greek, his concept of wisdom comes from a Hebrew perspective. Wisdom is insight or perception into the nature of things that leads one to action or use of knowledge gained. Knowledge, on the other hand, is the absorption of things perceived or learned. *Epignōsis* refers to the detection, noting, or recognition of facts or truths. A person may know many things and claim to be an authority in many areas. Yet, without wisdom, knowledge makes one arrogant (1 Cor. 8:1) and can even become dangerous.

Wisdom gives knowledge its proper perspective and is the catalyst for putting one’s knowledge to meaningful action. Wisdom is the ability to activate knowledge in a sensible and competent manner. The Hebrew concept emphasizes experience more than understanding. The Greek has in mind absorbing facts and cataloging information rather than using the information. Paul prays that his readers would not just retain facts about God, but rather that their hearts (1:18) would experience God personally.

Psalm 111:10 says that ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ People only have true wisdom when they look at everything from God’s perspective. Authentic wisdom begins when we understand that God is to be the object of our devotion, our adoration, and our reverence.

3. The Knowledge of God (1:17c)

The chief idea is that we might know God, not more *about* God, but that we might know *Him*. Knowing Him and knowing about Him are quite different. What matters supremely is not that fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that *He knows me*. This of course, is the perspective of Paul in this opening chapter of Ephesians. He prays that we might know God precisely because it is God who has first set His love upon us and elected us to know us savingly.

C. What We Should Know (1:18-19)

- *Paul proposes three things that spiritual people learn. What are they (see 1:18-19)?*

The second time Paul prays for knowledge for the Ephesians he shifts his focus slightly, turning from knowledge of God Himself to knowledge of those elements of salvation He has achieved for us. Paul highlights three such elements.

1. ‘The Eyes of Your Heart’ (1:18a)

What does the apostle mean when he refers to ‘the eyes (*ophthalmos*) of your heart (*kardia*)’? He means that by nature we are closed to the things of God. But the *heart* in New Testament terms refers to the central disposition, inclination, bent, or proclivity of the human soul. The heart is not simply the seat of emotions, nor the seat of the intellect or understanding, but it is the center of the personality. Our natural inclination or prejudgment of reality in our heart is against God.

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To receive the truth of God requires that our ‘anti’ bias be changed. The key work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration is not giving new knowledge to the brain, but changing the disposition of the heart, renewing our personality.

The Holy Spirit must illuminate (enlighten) a person to possess wisdom in knowing God, in grasping His revealed truth, and in realizing God’s eternal purpose and plan for His chosen ones. Paul thus shows us what is the greatest need of every new believer. He did not pray that the Ephesian Christians should be baptized in the Holy Spirit, or that they should be sealed by Him. He did not pray that they should come to an experience of ‘full surrender,’ ‘entire consecration,’ or ‘victory.’ It was not his prayer that they should have exalted experiences, heightened emotions, or even, at this stage, some usefulness in the church. Rather, he prayed that each and every believer should *see* certain things. The first need of the young Christian is understanding.

2. ‘The Hope of His Calling’ (1:18b)

First they learn what the hope (*elpis*) of their calling (*klēsis*) is. Hope is called the anchor of the soul (Heb. 6:19) because it gives stability to the Christian life. But hope is not simply a ‘wish’; rather, it is that which latches on to the certainty of the promises of the future that God has made. It is a word used of certainties that we do not yet possess. The Christian’s hope is the hope of death in communion with Christ. It is the hope of the resurrection of the just. It is the hope of acquittal at the judgment seat. It is the hope of heaven—it is the hope of getting home safely. By knowing the hope that is set before them, believers are motivated by the certainty that their work in this world and their care for people in the here and now, is not in vain.

The call of God is grounded in His choice from the foundation of the earth (1:4). God gave us every spiritual blessing because He chose us or called us in the past (2 Tim. 1:9); but He continues to call us in the present (1 Th. 2:12; 5:24), which involves a life-long vocation of service and sanctification (4:1; Phil. 3:14; Heb. 3:1). But also, because it is the call of the eternal God, we have the hope of an eternal destiny. That is the hope of His calling. Our hope is that God will complete that calling that He has begun.

The call of God, in other words, is effective not only in life now (cp. 1 Cor. 15:19), but it gives the sure promise of life with Him as His people forever, and this hope in its turn should vitally affect life for the Christian in the here and now (1 Jn. 3:2-3). God has a great purpose for us. That is why Paul prays that we might know the ‘hope of our calling.’ We need the Spirit, however, to grant us discernment in order to understand and seek God’s plan for our lives. Once we do personally know the Lord, we must submit and commit our works to Him.

3. ‘The Riches of the Glory of His Inheritance in the Saints’ (1:18c)

Second, believers learn of the riches (*ploutos*) of the glory (*doxa*) of God’s inheritance (*klēronomia*) in the saints (*hagios*). Paul talked about that inheritance in vv. 11-14, but here he wants us to know that we have it. If you lose sight of heaven, you will quickly be swamped by other things. Materialism will wash over you and your Christian life will sink. Only heavenly-mindedness can stop this happening. We are to set our affections on things above.

But whose inheritance is Paul talking about? Is it God’s inheritance, that is, the inheritance He receives, or is it our inheritance, that is, the inheritance God bestows? The Greek reading of this passage could mean either one. Some commentators believe the first rendering is correct, for God’s people constitute His inheritance or possession, and this is consistent with 1:14. Others believe the second view is correct, for it parallels Colossians 1:12, which suggests that the saints

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are qualified to share in the inheritance that God graciously bestows upon those who belong to Christ. In either case, as God's possession or Christ's co-heirs, we will still experience the blessings of eternal reward. We, God's adopted children, shall have our inheritance; that inheritance is glorious, because it is God's. And He shall have *His* inheritance—us.

What is the difference between this petition and the first petition in which Paul asks that we might know the hope to which we have been called? In the first case, the emphasis is upon hope, which is a certain thing. The issue is assurance. In the second case, the emphasis is upon riches. Here the issue is the scope of the blessings God has for us. How little we know of those blessings!

4. 'The Exceeding Greatness of His Power toward Us Who Believe' (1:19)

Third, Paul wants us to learn the surpassing greatness (*megethos*) of God's power (*dynamis*). In order to understand God's call, the saint must look backward toward election, which is from the foundation of the earth. To understand God's inheritance, the believer must focus on the culmination of history and heavenly rewards. In other words, a believer has been taught to look at the beginning and at the end, but what happens in between? What does a Christian focus upon in the interim? How can we live as citizens of heaven in a world whose citizens do not acknowledge God's sovereignty? Paul answers this by praying for the saints to be enlightened in the knowledge of God's power, for it is His surpassing power that spans the period from election to inheritance.

Paul uses four different Greek words for 'power' in verse 19, to bring home to us how great this power is. The 'power' (*dynamis*) of God is not just an abstract quality, but it is known 'according' to its 'working' which can be seen and realized. The Greek word for 'working' is *energeia*, from which our word 'energy' comes, and the phrase used here is found again in 3:7, 4:16; Philippians 3:21 and Colossians 1:29. Moreover, it is His great 'strength' (*kratos*), that distinctive attribute of divine nature, that is praised in the New Testament doxologies (1 Tim. 6:16; 1 Pe. 4:11; 5:11; Jude 25; Rev. 1:6; 5:13); and it is His 'might' (*ischys*) which He possesses and is also able to make available to us (cp. 6:10; 1 Pe. 4:11).

D. The Demonstration of God's Power (1:20-23)

- *What is the chief demonstration of God's love and God's power? See Romans 5:8 and Ephesians 1:19-20.*

In speaking of Jesus' present exaltation Paul referred: 1) to His resurrection from the dead and ascension; 2) to enthronement over evil; and 3) to His headship over the church, His body.

It is impossible to look at the previous verses (vv. 17-19) without realizing that Christianity is a religion of knowledge. It is for the head as well as for the heart. But having said this, we must also stress that Christianity is not just 'head' knowledge. It is not a religion of ideas only. It is not merely a philosophy. For important as sound theological and doctrinal knowledge is, it is given that we might know God better and thus live in His power and be victorious over sin in this life. Christianity is knowledge, yes. But it is also power, power from beginning to end. Without the power of God not one individual would ever become a Christian. Without God's power not one individual would ever triumph over sin, live a godly life, or come at last to the reward God has for all His own in heaven. So we begin to see why this is so important and why

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Paul develops and emphasizes it as he does. It is by the power of God displayed in Jesus Christ that we are to live Christianity.

1. The Resurrection & Ascension of Christ (1:20)

The power which thus is made available to men and women is the power demonstrated, and known in its true measure, by God's own working through two decisive acts. First, He showed this power when He raised Christ from the dead. Secondly, that power is shown in that He 'set Him at His own right hand' (cp. Ps. 110:1). The ascension may not often be described in the New Testament, but it is constantly assumed, and its significance stressed (e.g., Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 1 Pe. 3:22). To Paul and in the New Testament generally, the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension are considered as three parts of one great act of God.

God has given a public demonstration of His power by raising Jesus Christ from the dead and exalting Him in the heavenly places. The power of Christ's resurrection also demonstrates God's love, because in order for the resurrection to have occurred, Christ had to experience death for all of us (Rom. 5:8).

How great is this power that is working within the lives of Christians? Sometimes believers feel so impotent. The answer to this outlook is to understand the greatness of this power. The power within us is the same as that which God used when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him as His right hand in the heavenly world. In other words, Paul is referring to the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. The Present Rule of Christ (1:21-22a)

The thought of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ leads to the declaration of Him as Lord of all. The Holy Spirit not only raised Jesus from the dead, He raised Him to the seat of cosmic authority in the universe. He is above all 'principality' (or 'rule,' *archē*), 'power' (or 'authority,' *exousia*), 'might' (or 'power,' *dynamis*) and 'dominion' (*kyriotēs*). Paul is stressing that, at this very moment, Christ reigns in heaven as the King over all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords. He is now the supreme Lord over all things. Christ's exaltation over "all rule and authority" involves all earthly powers and angels. But in the context of the Christian's struggle to live a godly life, the emphasis is certainly upon the hostile spiritual powers of the corrupt world system (cp. 6:12).

The Father 'has put all things under His feet.' This is an allusion to Psalm 8:6. Being under the feet is a picture of absolute power. When all things are under Jesus' feet, He has the power to kill anything he wants to or make it alive. He is the head, and all our heads and necks are under His feet.

3. Christ is Head of the Church (1:22b-1:23a)

There is nowhere that Jesus Christ does not rule. He is over all. But for whose benefit does He rule the universe? Verse 22 says He does it for the church. God put all things under Christ's feet for the church. He reigns in order to further the interests of believers. We are His body (*sōma*) and He is our head (*kephalē*). Christ and His people are bound together by an inextricable link. We belong to each other, and His life is our life.

This is the first time in Ephesians that the word "church" (*ekklēsia*) has occurred, but from the beginning Paul has had the church in mind. The church (community of believers) is the new

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society that God has called into being. God appointed Christ as supreme head and ruler of this new society, the individual members of which constitute His body (1:23). The church has authority and power to overcome all opposition because her leader and head is the Lord of all.

The conception of the church as Christ's body is a Pauline illustration (cp. Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12, 27; Col. 1:24; 2:19). This picture expresses the essential union of His people with Him—the same life of God flows through all; and it speaks of the whole as functioning in obedience to Him, carrying out His work in the world.

The church is not an institution but a vital organism that exists and functions by reason of the resurrected Christ. Since the church is the complement of Christ, it must actively perform the dictates of the head. Hence it is important to understand the power of God, because the power that raised Christ from the dead is the same power that works within believers (3:20). It is the power to turn from sin, to walk with Christ, and to build up other parts of the body in preparing them as effective witnesses and warriors for Christ.

4. 'The Fullness of Him Who Fills All in All' (1:23b)

Paul uses a term, a form of *plērōma*, which refers to the fullness of things. Some interpret Paul as saying that Christ's fullness is completed by the addition of the church to Himself. For example, Bentley says: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ regards Himself as incomplete until every person whom the Father gave Him has been joined to Him in living faith.' This view does not teach that Christ is incomplete ontologically: since Christ is God, there can be no real incompleteness or imperfection about Him. But that is not what proponents of this view mean. They only wish to carry out the images of the church as the body or bride of Christ, which this letter develops. A head without a body is incomplete; a husband without his wife is incomplete. John Calvin held to this interpretation. It is felt that this interpretation gives a truer meaning of the word *plērōma*, that which fills, rather than that which is filled. However, nowhere in the New Testament is it said that Christ finds His fullness and fulfillment in the church. (The nearest that we come to such a concept is in Col. 1:24).

The reverse is the more natural idea, Christ filling all things and bringing all things to completeness of being. Christ fills the universe because He Himself is the *plērōma*, the fullness of God. This fits the context here better, and it is one of the great themes of this letter (1:10; 4:10, 13, 16). The Scripture nowhere says that the church completes Christ, but it often says that He fills it. It is more natural to say that Jesus fills the church as He also fills the universe, than to say (unnaturally) that the church somehow completes Him. Since Paul is talking about God's power displayed in Christ, it is natural for Him to portray Christ as filling and thus empowering the church which is His body.

The sequence of thought in this last section of the prayer seems thus to be: by His resurrection and ascension Christ is exalted to be Lord of all, He is head of all things for the church; the church is His body intended to express Him in the world; more than that, the church is intended to be a full expression of Him by being filled by Him whose purpose it is to fill everything there is.

5. The Meaning of God's Power

Paul's point is that the power which raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the lowest place to the highest, the very power which sustains the wonderful relationship that exists between the ascended Christ and His people – *that* power is the power which has worked in you as a

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Christian. The power that did all this for Christ is the very same power which works in a man, woman, or child at conversion! Conversion is a spiritual resurrection (Eph. 2:1). But the dead cannot raise themselves. An outside power must do it. And the outside power which converts us is exactly the same power that resurrected and exalted the Lord Jesus Christ! What power it takes to bring about a single conversion! No wonder we cannot convert anybody.

Those who see conversion as a thing of small wonder are always stunted in their spiritual growth. Some of them even begin to chase after dramatic post-conversion experiences, believing them to be greater than conversion itself. All who have ever done this have ended up with a deformed view of the gospel. They stop asking, ‘Why me?’ They cease to be filled with amazed thanks at the way the great God has worked in their lives. By devaluing conversion, they devalue the power of God. They are thus easy prey for any error that may attempt to seduce them.

E. Application Questions

- *I will obtain the highest knowledge possible, which is to know God personally. How can I achieve that? Am I willing to set aside time each day for reading and meditation on God’s word?*
- *I am convinced of my inheritance with God and am assured of my salvation. Because I am convicted and assured of the sufficiency of God’s grace and power, how will I share my faith this week?*

For next time: Read Ephesians 2:1-10 and Stuart chapter 4.