

Why is Prayer Great?

Ephesians 1:15-19

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If someone were to ask you to pray for them, what might be the greatest prayer request you could offer on their behalf? I think most of us would answer “it depends on their circumstances.” If they were facing a health problem, we would pray for healing and strength. If there were going through some great trial, we might pray for perseverance and relief. If they had some relational issue in their marriage or within their family, we might pray for understanding, change of attitudes and wisdom. If they experienced great pressure at school or work, we might pray for peace or perspective or for the pressure to stop. Each one of these prayer requests would be greatly appreciated by your friend and considered seriously by God. But are they the greatest prayer we could offer on behalf of others?

The Apostle Paul was a man of prayer. We see that throughout the 13 letters he wrote in the New Testament. So we have an opportunity to examine what he prayed about. Surprisingly to most of us, he seldom if ever asked for a change in circumstances for those he prayed about. He prayed regularly for what he considered the greatest need of any of his readers, regardless of their circumstances. This need continues to be your and my greatest need today. If we learn to pray this for each another, we will pray for what we need the most in our lives.

What is this need? It is found in the early parts of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Paul starts by praising God for who He is and what He has done for us in the 14 verses of the letter. Then in verse 15, Paul talks about his prayer life. He constantly prays for them. But then he goes on to tell them what he’s praying for them. Here we will discover what Paul considered the most important prayer he could offer up on behalf of others. We’re going to find out what he prays. This will launch us into several reasons why prayer is great. I pray that God will use these reasons to create in us a greater desire to pray and connect with him. Then we will meet at the Lord’s Table where we remember Jesus’ sacrifice that purchased for us entrance into God’s throne room through prayer. So as I read Ephesians 1:15-23 or you follow along; see if you can pick out the primary prayer request of this passage.

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 of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the 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.²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Paul tells the Ephesians that he's praying for them because he's heard of their faith. He says "I do not stop thanking God for or remembering you in my prayers verse 16. But what does he pray about? Does he pray they will have a good day? Does he pray that all their ailments will be healed? Does he pray for their circumstances to improve? No. Verse 17 – "I Pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him." Or I pray that you might grow in your knowledge of God.

The most important gift God can give to us is to know Him better. So the greatest prayer request we can make is for another is that our friends know God better. This is not just knowledge about God but relational knowing of God. You can know about some famous person. But you don't know them in the way their spouse or family knows them. We can know facts or claims about God from the Bible and other Christians. But we don't know Him relationally unless we enter into a relationship with Him. How do you get to know someone? You talk with them or communicate with them and then you listen to their response. That happens in prayer. This leads to the first reason of **Why is prayer great?**

Prayer is one of the primary ways we get to know God.

Tim Keller, in his book *Prayer: Experiencing Awe & Intimacy with God*, writes "Knowing God better is what we must have above all if we are to face life in any circumstances. Paul's main concern is for their public and private prayer life. He believes that the highest good is communion or fellowship with God.

Keller also writes, by praying this way, Paul assumed the priority of the inner life of God. Most contemporary people base their inner life on their outward circumstances. Their inner peace is based on other people's valuation of them or on their social status, prosperity, performance, and on things going well. Christians do this as much as anyone. Paul teaches that for believers, it should be the other way around. our inner peace depends on our inner life & relationship with God, then no matter what circumstances come our way, we can go through them with the peace God gives us. If we do not base their lives on God's steadfast love, we live at the mercy of circumstances.

Paul desires that Ephesians know God better. He goes on to describe specific realities about life with God that he prays they discover. So he prays in verse 19 – I pray that having the eyes of your heart enlightened, **you many know the hope to which he has called you.** God has called men and women, young men and young women, boys and girls to himself. This calling is not only for our lives on earth. It is a calling that will endure through eternity. It is that great

hope that no matter what trouble we face during our earthly lives, we have an eternal hope because of our relationship with God. This hope can sustain us even in the face of death.

This past week, I had the privilege of officiating at my Aunt Martha's funeral in Medicine Hat. The Lord gave her 93 years. She lived a good and full life. She had 6 children, 13 grandchildren, nearly as many great grandchildren. She was quite weak in the end. It was time for her to go. But in the cemetery as they laid her to rest, there was the grievous finality. It was difficult for the family. Yet they have the hope to which God called their Mom & Grandma. This hope is a great comfort in one of life's hardest moments. If the hope works there, it works in all other situations in life.

But Paul does not only pray that they might know the hope to which God has called them. He also prays that **they know the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints**. What is this glorious inheritance? It could be the adoption that we experience into the family of God and the richness of the people that become part of God's family. Following the funeral this week there were so many people there from my past. It was a rich time and I wished I had so much more time to sit down and catch up with all of them. But there never seems to be time for that in this life. Yet in the next life, we will have eternity to discover the riches of God's family.

Or it could refer to life in God and with God forever. You see God is unlike any person we have ever met. We will never come to the end of God. We will never get bored with Him or decide it's time to move on to someone else because we've seen all there is to see. The riches of our inheritance includes the absence of sin; wholeness and relationships free from any baggage, suspicion & threat. We will live in a large community free from disease and death. There will be no tears because of God. This glorious inheritance will last for eternity. Paul prays that the Ephesians will know God and the richness of this inheritance.

The third piece of knowing God Paul prays about is found in verse 19. "I pray you may know what is **the immeasurable greatness of his power**." Paul wants them to know and experience the power of God in their lives. This is the same power that God used to raise Jesus from the dead. Have you ever thought about the scale of power needed to raise Jesus? That power had to reverse the effects of death. It had to regenerate cells that died & restart bodily systems that had shut down. It had to bring Christ's spirit back from paradise into his body. All this was done by God speaking a word that is the power God worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead. It is this same power of God that Paul wants us to know through experience. We experience it when God acts in our lives or changes our heart or changes our way of thinking or changes people.

Now with whatever you're facing today, do you think it would help you to know more deeply the hope to which you've been called – a hope that might put in perspective the challenges you face in your life right now? Do you think it might help you to know more deeply how rich of an inheritance you look forward to regardless of whether you will enjoy a large earthly inheritance? Do you think it might encourage you to know that the God who raised Jesus with glorious resurrection power is willing to work in your life with that same resurrection power? This is what Paul prays for the Ephesians. This is what we must pray for one another. This is what we must pray for ourselves – that we will know God more deeply to face whatever life brings. Prayer is great because it is a primary means of connecting with God.

Prayer is also great because **it can serve as an infallible test of spiritual integrity**. Our personal private prayer life reveals much about the reality of our walk with God. No one really knows the practices of your personal prayer life except you and God. We can project the image that we're Christians and love God. Yet if we seldom ever connect with him one on one in prayer, we enter the territory of hypocritical living.

A hypocrite is someone who basically puts on an act that they are someone or something that they really aren't. Jesus had a fair amount to say about hypocrites. In fact just prior to teaching the Lord's prayer, he says in Matthew 6:5-6 – 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 others . . . , But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen . . . in secret." Keller writes "the infallible test of spiritual integrity, Jesus says, is your private prayer life. Many people will pray when they are required by cultural or social expectations, or perhaps by the anxiety caused by troubling circumstances. Those with a genuine relationship with God as Father will inwardly want to pray even though nothing on the outside presses them to do so.

Keller challenges us by writing "to discover the real you, look at what you spend your time thinking about when no one is looking, when nothing is forcing you to think about anything in particular."¹ John Owen, a puritan pastor and writer in the 17th century warned popular and successful pastors this way – "A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more."² Prayer is great because the presence or absence of it can be used by God to unmask who we really are.

Third, Prayer is great because **Prayer is hard**. Now that sounds strange at first. But I want you to think for a moment about something great that you have seen – a great monument or a great building; a great marriage or great

¹ Keller, 22.

² Ibid.

scenery; a great piece of art or craftsmanship or a great athletic performance. Now with that in your mind, do you think that greatness came easily? Keller writes, “I can think of nothing great that is also easy.”³

Prayer then must be one of the greatest things in the world because it is hard. If you think that hearing a couple of messages on prayer this fall is going to transform your prayer life in 3 easy steps, you’re mistaken. Prayer requires a great struggle. Yet when we admit this, we can gain encouragement because we’re together in this struggle. Some of you might be thinking “prayer comes easy for that person over there. But not for me. But I haven’t found anyone who says prayer is easy.

Prayer is hard. To go deeper in prayer will require perseverance, lifestyle changes and struggle. Part of the reason why these need to take place is because we can fill our lives with trivial and spiritually empty activity. We think we’re full when we’re actually empty. So we have no time to pray even though we’re spiritually empty.

Keller quotes 19th century theologian Austen Phelps’s book on prayer called “the still hour”. Phelps explains numerous reasons why there is such dryness in prayer and how to endure through it especially as we start out. “The first thing we learn in attempting to pray is our spiritual emptiness – and this lesson is crucial. We are so used to being empty that we do not recognize the emptiness as such until we start to try to pray. We don’t feel it until we begin to read what the Bible and others have said about the greatness and promise of prayer. Then we finally begin to feel lonely and hungry. This is an important first step to fellowship with God. . . In the beginning the feeling of poverty and absence usually dominates, but the best guides urge us not to turn back but rather endure and pray in a disciplined way until we get through duty to delight.”⁴ So why attempt such a difficult journey. Keller writes “the vivid reorientation of our minds and the overall sense of God on our hearts, comes more frequently and sometimes in startling ways – interspersed with times of struggle and even a sense of absence. But it eventually bears fruit – because God seeks for us to worship him and because prayer is so infinitely rich and wondrous.”⁵

Why is prayer great? **#4 – Prayer is central to the Bible’s storyline.** God’s people prayed throughout the Bible. In Genesis, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob prayed with familiarity and directness. In Exodus, Moses secured Israel’s liberation through prayer. King David composed much of the Bible’s book of prayer – the Psalms. Hannah prayed for a son who became Samuel. Mary prayed her way through the news of bearing God’s Son as a virgin. Jesus offered fervent cries

³ Keller, 24.

⁴ Keller, 25.

⁵ Ibid.

and tears in prayer. Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Jesus healed people with prayer. He insisted some demons could only be cast out with prayer. He sometimes prayed all night. When he was in his deepest and darkest hours. He prayed to His Father and asked the disciples to join Him.

Immediately after the Lord's death and resurrection, the disciples prepare for the future by gathering together in prayer. Leaders of the New Testament church are selected by prayer. All Christians in the New Testament are expected to have a regular, faithful, devoted, fervent prayer life. Prayer is so great that wherever you look in the bible it is there. Keller writes "Everywhere God is, prayer is. Since God is everywhere and infinitely great, prayer must be all pervasive in our lives." Keller, 28.

Lastly, why is prayer great? **#5 – It is the pathway to inexhaustible riches with the Lord.** Keller quotes poet George Herbert who lived in the early 1600's. He wrote a poem entitle "*Prayer*" that tackles prayer in 100 words without using one verb. Instead of defining & narrowing prayer ot one description, he wants to open up our hearts to the vastness and greatness of God that can be discovered through this gift called prayer.

So as I share this poem, maybe you want to close your eyes and ask God to just pick out one of these 26 imagesof prayer that He wants to impress upon you as you go forward this week.

Prayer – the Churches banquet, Angels age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plumb line sounding heaven and earth;

Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;

Softness and peace and joy and love and bliss,
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed;
The milky way, the bird of Paradise.

Church bells beyond the stars heard, the souls blood,
The land of spices, something understood.⁶

⁶ George Herbert (1593-1633), Prayer (I), quoted in Keller, 28-29.