

I suppose my first lessons in prayer came at bedtime when I was a child. Invariably, my mother prayed with me. I am deeply grateful. I don't remember who taught me the written prayers of the Bible and the Church. I am deeply grateful to that person. Spontaneous and written prayers shape the way I pray. Ephesians models both. Paul actually wrote two prayers into this letter. I use both when I pray for BVBC. We will look at the first one today in Ephesians 1:15-20.

### **The Background of the Prayer**

Let's start with verses 15-16. **For this reason** – what reason? Why did the apostle pray for the Ephesian Christians? Recall for a minute what precedes this prayer. God made the decision to create a community on earth He could call His people. He made that decision before the creation of the world, and love prompted Him to make it. Jesus Christ carried out His decision by emancipating His followers from guilt and lies and estrangement from God and constituting them as God's chosen people, the Church. As a result, God began to unveil **the mystery of his will**, which is **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. Those are some of our spiritual blessings in Christ, and they make the Church more than a match for the spiritual forces of evil that make war against the Church and against all human flourishing.

That's heavy. It's heavy now; it was heavy then. But one group of people in Paul's day got it fast: Jews. Look back at verse 12. When Paul wrote: **we who were the first to hope in Christ**, he meant **we Jews were the first to hope in Christ**. All the first Christians were Jews, and language that baffles us – election, saints, redemption – was language most Jews grew up understanding.

Then, in verse 13 Paul wrote this: **And you (Gentiles) also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation**. Every time we read the pronoun **you** in Ephesians, it means new, Gentile Christians; and the language of Ephesians would have baffled them as much or more than it baffles us.

Their understanding was still elementary, but they had two virtues that would support all the understanding they could ever have. Those two virtues are the reason Paul prayed for them. Verses 15-16 explain: **For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers**.

Paul knew those new, Gentile Christians didn't know much. It was all so new to them. They needed help in learning the language of their new faith and the meaning of that faith. They needed help that only God could give. And so Paul prayed for God to give it to them, and what a prayer!

Here's the underlying logic behind Ephesians 1. "I know I am overwhelming you Gentiles with saints, election, redemption, and the mystery of God's will. But I also know about your loyalty to Jesus and the way you love other Christians, and it fills me with thanksgiving and causes me pray that you will know God better. Knowing God is where understanding your faith comes from." That brings us to Paul's prayer in verses 17-20.

### **Knowing God**

Verse 17 will keep you coming back for more. **I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better.** Let's cut to the chase. You can know God. Paul took it up a notch. You can **know him better.** Many of us, like the Ephesian Christians, are new to that. We've only just begun. We've barely dipped our toes in the water. Paul prayed for them and for us to keep going.

I am bewitched by the process of knowing anybody, especially God. Think about your experience of knowing your spouse, child, friend, colleague. There are three ingredients in knowing another person: information, impact, and time. On one hand, we amass an amazing amount of information about the person: appearance, background, quirks, hobbies, tendencies, favorite foods, and on and on. On the other hand, that information has an impact on us. We are shocked to learn that the other person likes the same music as we do or was once a bank robber. You find you can trust the person not to hurt you and to keep a promise. You can let down your guard, be yourself. But the impact of information on us requires a lot of time for shared experiences with the person.

Knowing God works the same way. We amass information about God. What we know has an impact on us, but the full impact requires a lot of time for shared experiences with God: worship, scripture, obedience, serving, and suffering. The content of Paul's prayer invites us to know God better. His invitation in verses 18-20 spreads before us a feast, a heavenly buffet. Reading them is like moving along a buffet table, and we see in quick succession top round sirloin, lobster tail, and lump crab cakes. What are we going to do? We are going to sample each.

### Knowing the Church

Let's start with the crab cakes in verse 18. **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 first delicious bite is those words: **he has called you.** What do they mean? The explanation begins back in verse 13: **And you (Gentiles) also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.** That gospel invites people to believe in their hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, to say publicly, "Jesus is Lord," and to be baptized in His name. God calls people when they hear the gospel. You have heard it. Have you answered God's call? You could do it right now by saying, "Yes. Count me in!" Then be baptized and say publicly, "Jesus is Lord." That will include you in Christ, make you part of God's chosen people, and send you on the journey of a lifetime.

It is a journey of hope. Can we know that hope in the sense that we have talked about knowing? Verse 12 gets us started: **we Jews were the first to hope in Christ.** God called us to a hope that is centered in Jesus Christ. Think of what we have read in Ephesians so far. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. God chose us before the creation of the world in Christ. God predestined us to sonship through Jesus Christ. Some day all things in heaven and on earth will be brought together under Christ. We are amassing information about Jesus Christ.

But it's the stuff of hope. We don't see it. No one stamps you across the back: "Blessed with every spiritual blessing!" No one issues you an ID card that says: "One of God's holy people, redeemed, forgiven, and reconciled." The world with its chemical weapons, secular

trends, and economy that won't get better seems far from being united under Christ. The evidence of these realities is our faith, and faith is the evidence of things hoped for. (Hebrews 11:1) That's why Paul prayed for God to help us to digest all this in order for it to impact our attitudes, choices, dreams, and self-understanding; and for that we need years of shared experiences with God: worship, scripture, obedience, serving, and suffering.

Can we move on to the lobster? Verse 18 again: **I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know . . . the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.** There's that pesky word **saints** again. Any time you see the word **saints** in the Bible, it means the people of God.

The apostle called the people of God **his glorious inheritance**. It stops you in your tracks. Paul knew the Jewish Bible from stem to stern. He would be familiar with many passages like this one from Deuteronomy 32:9: **For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob** (another name for Israel) **his allotted inheritance**. The Lord made the decision to create a community on earth He could call His people. Here we are, and He owns us and stands by us and treats us as if we were some priceless treasure He inherited.

He says His inheritance has within itself unimaginable **riches**. And all we think about are the failures of the Church and wonder if Paul had gone off the rails. But maybe that's why he prayed for people like us to have the eyes of our heart enlightened so that we would know better. We will delve into those riches as we move through Ephesians. Today, we focus on this prayer.

It's time to taste test the sirloin. Verse 19: **I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know . . . his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead.**

Excuse me for restating the obvious, but it's breathtaking. The power of God the apostle had in mind is unmistakable in verses 19-20: **That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead.** That power is directed toward the Church, toward us. The apostle prayed that the Ephesians and all of us would know that power, and for that we need years of shared experiences with God: worship, scripture, obedience, serving, and suffering.

What is that power like, or what parable shall I use for it to awaken our imagination? The power of God is like the energy grid that lights up home, business, and civic life. I cannot fathom the power in a nuclear plant like Salem or Peach Bottom. They light up not just cities but regions. Now, step into the entryway of our home. To the right is an old hall tree that I inherited and refinished. Underneath it, near the floor a 7-watt night-light is plugged in. We turn it on at night to guide us in our nocturnal wanderings. Where do you think power for that night-light comes from? It comes from the same source that lights cities, but it is adjusted to the capacity of that tiny light bulb.

The power that raised Christ from the dead is at work here in this congregation, but it has been adjusted to your capacity to handle such power. You may be a 7-watt bulb or a halogen light or a power tool or a hair dryer or an oven. In each it's the same power of God that raised Jesus from death that is at work. We need the **eyes of our heart to be enlightened in order** to know the impact of that power on our life together.

**Take-aways**

Don't cut yourself off from the power source. Staying connected really matters. I recently heard Dr. Brené Brown, ([www.ted.com/playlists/8/a\\_better\\_you](http://www.ted.com/playlists/8/a_better_you), accessed May 4, 2013) a research professor at the University of Houston say that American adults today are the most in debt, obese, addicted, and medicated adults in U. S. history. She says those are ways people are trying to numb the pain and fear in their lives.

Here's what I propose for your serious consideration. People have gnawing pain and fear, because they push God out of their lives. The hope that God calls people to is being forgotten. People laugh at the truth that God treats the Church like a treasure He inherited. The power of God can cure our pain and fear, but God doesn't force Himself on us.

I think I have a handle on part of the reason for pushing God away. The only thing that makes sense to many people is their feelings. They are not sure something is true unless they can feel it deeply. That makes them feel alive and authentic. It doesn't matter if they get the feelings from Jesus or from pot, pornography, or skydiving. They are pursuing visions of the good life, which are different from the vision of the good life God calls us to pursue. So, they push God away, and they are building their lives on sand. They do that because they have been envenomed from the snakebite of that old serpent, the devil.

The anti-venom starts with Christian doctrine, and Ephesians is full of it. I'm not trying to stuff your heads with knowledge and say, "That's all you need. Forget about your feelings. Remember: there are three ingredients in knowing God: information, impact, and time. The information, the doctrine, is necessary for the impact on our lives. The devil has promised impact without truth, and the result is debt, obesity, addiction, and over medication.

We are reading our way slowly through Ephesians, because I want us to build our lives on God, and that begins with doctrine. I know I am throwing a lot at you. Don't be put off by it. Don't run. Don't miss a Sunday. You will get to know God better and build your life on rock.

I'll leave you with this. We read Ephesians throughout the month of April. I'd like to give you another step you can take to make Ephesians more personal. Starting today, Mother's Day, through June 16, Father's Day, take the prayer of Ephesians 1:15-20, put it in your own words or use it like it is, and then pray it several times a week. Pray for yourself, your family, and for BVBC.