

Becoming Who We Are: *Our Desperate Prayer Needs*

Ephesians 1:15-23

In the 1970s, just after I had finished my undergrad degree at Wheaton College, I moved to Germany to do mission work as a soloist in German-speaking Europe. When I went, I couldn't speak any German at all. But, after only three months of living there, the leadership of the team I served with came to me and said, "Greg, we've confirmed plans for you to do your first concert in Germany. It will be an outdoor concert in a soccer field on the outskirts of Hulben." I remember saying, "What?! I can't do that. The people won't understand a word of my terrible German." But, my colleagues only said to me, "This is what God has called you to Germany to do. So, it's time to begin. Know that we will be praying for you!"

So, against my own feelings that I wasn't ready for this, I worked hard and got ready with our music team. But, more than anything, I prayed. And, even though I still think that this concert could not have been very good, and my German had to have been atrocious, God used what happened that day. People came to faith in Jesus that day, people who have remained active in their walks with the Lord.

As I was preparing to do this sermon today, I thought of that day so long ago. The passage we come to today is a prayer that Paul prayed over 2,000 years ago for a church located in the megacity of Ephesus. Last week, we saw that it had been God's eternal plan to draw together a family from people groups as diverse and divided as Jew and Gentile were in the 1st C and to place gatherings of that united family in places like Ephesus. As a part of God's mission to unite all things in this world under the Lordship of Jesus, local churches are to be the places in which people live lives of unity and thereby give witness in this world.

So, this call to live together in unity as witnesses to God in Ephesus was God's call upon that church. But, as we read through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we see that it was hard for them to live in unity. That's why we have called this sermon series, "*Becoming Who We Are*." We're going through the Book of Ephesians passage by passage to see 1) what God's Word says to us as a church family about what God has called us to be – and 2) how God is at work in us so that we will become what he says we are in Christ. Today, we see that, just as I felt in Germany that I desperately needed prayer to fulfill God's call upon me, we need prayer again and again in this world as we grow to become what God says we are.

This prayer in 1:15-23 is one Paul prayed for a church he founded -- and then served for 2-3 years. So, he knew the people there very well. And, he knew how challenging it was to be faithful to God's call, especially for them to live lives

united in Christ across the ethnic barriers that existed in the church. He may have thought, “How will this church ever be one? Only God has the power to make that happen. So, I’d better pray.” And, that’s what we read in Eph 1:15-23, i.e., Pastor Paul praying for a church he loved, a church that needed prayer.

I’m sure that the people in the Ephesian Church had many needs. Indeed, Paul himself was in prison at the time. So, I’m sure there were times when Paul prayed that God would meet the physical and material needs people have each day. But, in his first prayer, he prayed knowing that what his church people most needed was not something related to their material or political circumstances. He knew there are things that take priority over temporary things – as important as they are. In Eph 1:15-23, Paul prayed they would experience things that cannot be taken away – no matter what happens in our businesses, schools, families, etc. Paul’s prayer is a plea that, in the face of whatever may take place in this world, God’s children will know God better, and in doing so, know God’s presence, hope, love and power in ever-deepening ways.

Who Is in This Family? *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people... (1:15).*

As this prayer was read earlier in the service, did you notice that the Apostle Paul first spoke about “you” in vv. 15-18 and only began praying about “us all” in vv.19-23? Who is the “you” and who is the “us”? In case you missed last week, the early church was first made up of Jewish people who had placed their faith in Jesus. They were people like the Apostle Paul was. So, these very first Christians had grown up with the Scriptures. They knew what God had revealed about himself in God’s Word. But, God’s eternal plan was to bring people from every people group into his family – including those who before coming to faith in Jesus had not heard much about the God of the Bible. And, when Paul wrote Ephesians, this was happening in their church.

So, in last week’s text, in 1:11-12, Paul spoke of Jewish Jesus-followers as being “*we who were the first to hope in Christ.*” Then, in 1:13-14, Paul spoke of the newer Gentile believers as “*you were also included in Christ when you heard the gospel and believed.*” Today, in 1:15, he mentioned the two things that should be true of both groups, indeed, of all who say they are Christians. He said, “I have heard about...”

1. “*Your faith in the Lord Jesus*”, and
2. “*Your love for all God’s people.*”

So, faith in Jesus comes first. Notice that the Bible states specifically the faith that saves us is faith in the Lord Jesus. So, do you believe that it’s only because of

Jesus that you have a relationship with God the Father? That's the first evidence of being in the family.

But that first step of faith always leads to our lives changing. And, **the clearest evidence that Christ is in your life and that you are in his unexpected family is a growing love for "all God's people."** And, "all" means the "all" whom God adopts into his family through faith in Christ – Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, young and old, male and female, people from every people group... Do not miss it here: **When you genuinely place your faith in Jesus, you will begin to grow in your love for all God's people.** Is that happening in your life?

So, with both Jewish and non-Jewish believers being in the one church family, Paul began his prayer by praying for the new Gentile believers. As I read this prayer, I envision Pastor Paul beginning his prayer by praying for people who have just been saved and baptized – and then broadening his prayer to include everyone.

What Did Paul Pray? What Should We Be Praying for Our Family Members? 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 (1:17).

So, **the main thing Paul prayed is that his church people will learn to know God better.** I'm quite sure that this was his prayer for the entire church, including his fellow Jewish believers. But, he prayed this specifically for the new Gentile believers. I think of them as being like the many people now coming into our own city from other religious backgrounds – or no religious background at all. They walk into a church like LAC that has people who have grown up reading the Bible, hearing the Bible stories and listening to teaching about God. People new to a church often don't know at first about things like -- that God has made himself known as the one God and Father over all, as both holy and loving, as both just and forgiving, etc. So, Paul prayed for the new believers, *"I pray that God will work so that you will know him better."*

Paul's illustration of adoption in 1:3-14 is a good way to illustrate why Paul prays for this. So, imagine a 12-year-old child who has been in an orphanage her whole life. She feels this life without a family is her lot in life and that things will never change. Then, she hears about a wonderful and loving couple who has visited the orphanage and wants to adopt a child. She is sure they won't want her. But then, shockingly, she is told that this wonderful couple saw her, loved her and has already done everything necessary to bring her into their family. What does the little girl do? Does she ask, "What is the extent of the family's personal assets?" Or, "what are their political leanings?" No, I imagine her running into the arms of her new parents with joy and thankfulness. This is what it's like for so many of us

when we first hear the good news that God loves us and wants to adopt us into his family.

But... early on, the little girl doesn't know much about her new parents, does she? She enters into the family and begins the process of knowing them better. This "getting to know" one another is, of course, a process. Sometimes, the parents tell their new child about the family. Sometimes, the girl simply learns about them as she lives with her new family. Do you see my point? As it relates to our eternal family, Paul tells the Gentile believers, "My first prayer for you is that you will learn to know God better."

The word Paul used in this text for knowing God (epignosis) speaks of growing to learn what God has said about himself. Notice that Paul said that they needed both "*a Spirit of wisdom and revelation*" to know God better. By that, I think he is teaching about the work of the Holy Spirit to teach us, especially as we read or hear what God has revealed about himself in his Word. Paul prayed they would learn about God in such a way that their relationship with him may deepen. He wanted them to grow in their knowledge of God and His Word – in ways that the Spirit made it all alive to them. I pray the same for you. Please know that.

It often happens like this: When you come alive to God through faith in Jesus, you experience that God's Word comes alive to you too. Many of you have told me this, i.e., that when God does a new work in your heart, reading God's Word and listening to sermons faithful to God's Word speak in ever-new-ways to you.

So, that's where Paul began his prayer. He was convinced – and I am convinced – that the better we know God, the more loving, gracious, powerful, holy, and majestic we will see him to be. We'll trust him more. Because of that, I pray this prayer for you too – that here in our church through the worship and teaching of the word in your daily lives that you will know God better – and thereby learn to love and trust him more.

Then, in the rest of the prayer, **Paul speaks of three truths we should know better about God:**

1. The hope to which God has called his children (**1:18a**). *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...*

Notice how Paul began this part of the prayer – "*that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened...*" "Eyes of your heart" is a very Rabbi-like phrase that talks about seeing realities that our physical eyes cannot see. What Paul prayed for is that we who come alive to God through faith in Jesus may see realities and truths that goes

beyond just the normal things we see with our physical eyes in our empirical world.

I remind you that, in this statement in v. 18, Paul again was praying for new Gentile believers, i.e., believers who had never heard that God has promised to work in all things to bring about his good, i.e., to make all things in our lives and in this world right. This is the great hope spelled out in many Old Testament prophecies. These new believers needed to know of the hope that we always have when our faith is in the God of the Bible.

So, let's go back to the illustration of the adopted child. What if, after she goes home, she discovers that she has been adopted by the most respected, most influential, and wealthiest family in town. One day, the new parents say, "We believe in you, Girl! We know you have some physical scars from your past. We know you have some emotional ones too. But, don't give up on yourself because we are not going to give up on you. We've adopted you into our family and will use all we are and have to make sure you become all you can possibly become." Would that renew your hope about your future?

With that in mind, what if it's God who says this to you? What if God promises to use all he has and is until you and I are holy and blameless in his sight. That's exactly what God does say. He won't give up on you. **Be assured of this: It's not just new believers who need to be reminded of this hope.** Right? When difficulties come: when your business is failing, when your family is struggling, when your friendships are fragmenting – indeed, anytime you continue to see how weak and fallible you are – I pray that the eyes of your heart may be opened to see the hope that comes only because it is God who has called you and promises never to forsake you.

1. To know God's rich inheritance in us (1:18b). *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know... the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people...*

The Jewish believers in the church in Ephesus had often heard this teaching that Israel was God's inheritance. God had said that to them for centuries. But, the new believers had never heard that. Of course, people's inheritance is something that we value greatly. It's something we have invested in our whole lives. I'm learning the importance of that more and more as I get older. We hit a point in our lives in which we say to ourselves, "Times is going by quickly! I have more years behind me than I have ahead of me. What should I invest the rest of my life in?"

Even though God doesn't say, "I only have a certain amount of time left so I want to do the most important things with my life" – still, this is the image that stands behind this idea of inheritance. In Eph 1:4, before the creation of time, God

considered what would be the most important thing to do in creation. The Bible says God chose to do something that would declare to all the universe his love, grace, holiness, power, i.e., his glory. What God chose to do was to call together a family made up of every people group, language and nation – an unlikely family of people whose lives lived in unity would declare his glory to the universe. Look again at **v. 18**, *“I pray that... you may know... the riches in his glorious inheritance in God’s holy people!”* When God asked what was worth investing in, he declared it was a family of people like we find assembled at the Lake Avenue Church. It was a costly investment for God, i.e., the death of his Son, and it was for us!

Paul prays here specifically that these newer Gentile believers might know that they too were a part of that inheritance. In other words, he prayed that they would learn that they too belonged fully in God’s family. I imagine that the Gentiles sometimes felt that they didn’t really belong even though they had trusted Jesus.

Pastor Jeanine Smith helped me understand the enormous encouragement this is when we know that we belong fully to a family. This is the story she told me: *“When one of my children was struggling with a serious medical issue, my brother, who is a doctor, did some research about her condition and some networking. He found a fellow co-worker, another doctor, whose child had the same issue and said that this doctor was willing to spend time preparing me and my husband on our next steps to care for our child. So, my brother texted me that he had found a doctor who would be willing to meet with her. Then, he closed his text message with this: ‘This doctor could be a good resource for us.’ Of course, what people typically write is ‘this doctor could be a good resource for you.’ But instead he said, ‘us’ and in so doing, he communicated that we were in this problem together.”*

I pray that you will experience that kind of belonging here at LAC. One of the main points of the Book of Ephesians is that God brings us into a church family so that **we are together his inheritance. Together, we belong to the family.** Together, we experience God’s presence and God’s hope. I am praying that our fall series in Ephesians will be one in which we together experience that we are God’s rich inheritance.

1. To know God’s power at work within and among us (1:19-23). *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know... his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

In v. 19, the Apostle Paul specifically changes from praying for the new believers to praying for the entire church family. The prayer he excitedly breaks out into (for that’s what he does) comes from the question, “Can our Father do all

this?” We know our own lives. Can God actually forgive us all and make us holy and blameless? Can he work in our lives life so that past failures do not continue on as present and future failures? Can he do that with a whole church of imperfect people like we have at LAC and bring us into complete unity in Christ? Does God have the power to accomplish what he calls his eternal plan? He can!

Just look at the **four different words about God’s ability that Paul used in v. 19:**

- * Power -- “*Dunamis*” = Raw energy or strength
- * Working – “*Energeia*” = An inward propulsion of power
- * Mighty – “*Kratos*” = Ability to conquer anything
- * Strength – “*Ischus*” = Physical and demonstrable force

It’s as if he’s saying to us in v. 19, “I want you to have no doubt! God will finish his work in us – and he surely has the power to do so!” And then, Paul drives home the truth by telling us of the power that comes to the church through Jesus. We can almost hear the congregation shouting out questions as he prays in vv.20-23:

Question: *Does God have the power to overcome the things I deal with?*

Answer: *The greatest enemy this world can throw at you is death – and the power to overcome death is available to you through faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus (V. 20a)!*

Question: *But that happened so long ago. Is that power still available to us?*

Answer: *Jesus did not rise from the dead and then go into retirement. He is now seated at the right hand of the Father and is advocating for us (v. 20b)!*

Question: *But what about the devil, the world’s unjust systems and my own human sinfulness?*

Answer: *God seated Jesus far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, both now and forever.*

Question: *But how can I be sure this power is available to me?*

Answer: *Because you and I are the people of God through faith in Jesus. God’s incomparably great power is for us who believe (v. 19).*

Like for the new believers in Ephesus, it still takes a while to grasp the scope and beauty of what God makes available to us when we trust Jesus. But, as your Sr. Pastor, I want you to know this: I pray for you. I pray you’ll know God better. **I pray you’ll know the certain hope that is his calling**, i.e., God will finish in you what he’s begun. **I pray you’ll know the riches of being his inheritance**, i.e.,

God says you belong! You're a part of the family. And I pray you will know the incomparably great power available to all who believe. I pray these things so that you and I together will be who we are, a highly unexpected family that brings glory to God!