

**“Prayer, Reversed Thunder”**  
**Ephesians 1:15-23**  
**January 18, 2015**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We have the great privilege today of overhearing a prayer from the great Apostle Paul. He has much to teach us about prayer. As we approach this topic, I want to draw your attention to the title of today’s sermon, “Prayer, Reversed Thunder.” It comes from a poem by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan poet, George Herbert. His poem attempts to help us comprehend prayer in only one-hundred words, none of which is a verb. It is a series of about twenty-four metaphors of prayer, one of which is “reversed thunder.” Just as thunder resonates loudly and conspicuously on the earth, so our prayers resonate loudly and conspicuously in heaven. Another metaphor is “the soul’s blood.” Prayer is as necessary for life as blood. Paul believed that, with the result that he prayed unceasingly.

As we look today at this prayer, it would be easy for us to be filled with guilt and condemnation. I rarely meet Christians who are satisfied with their prayer lives. I certainly am not satisfied with mine. I came across a statement this week by the great Puritan John Owen that brought conviction to my own heart. Owen warned ministers, “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.*”

It’s not just ministers who battle guilt about prayer. It would not be hard for me to make you feel guilty about prayer. I could simply ask you how attentive you are to the prayer ministry of this church. If everyone else in the church prioritized church prayer meetings as you do, would our attendance go up or down? I notice that our church gets far less attendance at prayer meetings than any other meeting we have. I’ve been reading a biography of Charles Spurgeon, and his biographer reports on a particular series of prayer meetings held at Spurgeon’s church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. In January of 1866 Spurgeon called for a week of prayer. He wrote to his congregation telling them of his plan to issue tickets so that people could make their plans with an assurance that there would be room for them. This was in a building seating 3,600, with standing room for an additional 2,000.

Such stories and quotes could be multiplied, and they would easily succeed in making us feel guilty about our weak prayer lives. I want to suggest to you today, though, that guilt by itself will never help us learn to pray. It may motivate us to some short-term response, but it will not change our hearts. Only the grace of our Lord Jesus can do that. So instead of approaching this passage with hearts of guilt, I would like to suggest that it would be better to

approach it with a humble heart of faith. By faith, we know that Jesus forgives us and receives us even as we struggle to learn to pray. Such faith brings humility and a teachable heart. So let's look at Paul's prayer with a goal of letting God teach us to pray.

## **I. Paul's Prayer Beliefs**

There are several beliefs Paul had about prayer that surface here. One of them is that prayer is the natural expression of love for others. I notice that Paul said he prayed ceaselessly for the Ephesians. What does he mean by that? He obviously didn't mean it literally, since such a thing would be impossible. If you've ever had a child in desperate need, you know exactly what Paul meant. A loving parent with a child undergoing surgery for a life-threatening illness will have that child on his or her heart constantly. There will be business to take care of and sleep that needs to happen. But the heart will soon return to the needy child. Paul felt that way about the Ephesians, and whenever he did so, he would pray prayers of thanksgiving and petition. His love was expressed in praying for those he loved.

A second belief Paul had about prayer was that knowing God was far more important than changed circumstances. Neither in this prayer nor in the one at the end of chapter 3 does Paul pray for the circumstances of the Ephesians to be changed. Paul wasn't against such prayers. After all, it was Jesus who taught us to pray for such things as our daily bread. Paul prayed that his thorn in the flesh would be removed. So we would be wrong to conclude that we should not pray for a change of our circumstances when those circumstances are bad. The point is that there is something far better than more favorable circumstances, and that is knowing God. So Paul prays that by the power of the Holy Spirit their eyes would be open that they might know God.

This is a very important point, so I need to say a few things about it before moving on. First, this request about knowing God makes sense in light of what Paul has already said concerning what we have in Christ. Remember that he had said in verse 3 that we have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. It is impossible for further blessing to come to us because we have already been given them all. What can you ask for in prayer for someone who already has everything? It's like the challenge of finding an appropriate gift for the person who already has everything. Paul didn't pray for additional blessing, but that the eyes of his beloved friends in Ephesus would be open to see what they already have. The battle in the Christian life is not to achieve further blessing, but to receive the blessings we already have.

A second important point about Paul's prayer for a growing knowledge of God is that the knowledge of God is more than knowing facts about God. For a Jewish man like Paul, to know God is to love God. The goal of theological

statements about God is not to become the kind of theologian who can impress others with the big words you know about God's nature. Rather, it is to love God. And Paul believed that the way we translate theological truth to the heart, so that we love God, is through prayer. To know and love God is both the greatest commandment and the greatest blessing.

John Ortberg tells the story of a woman named Mabel that he met in a nursing home years ago. It was one of those state run nursing homes, the kind that are chronically under-staffed so that soiled bed sheets don't get changed, with a resulting odor that normally makes visitors want to keep their visits brief. Mabel was 89 years old and had been in this facility for 25 years. She was blind and had difficulty speaking because her face was misshapen due to the untreatable cancer that was eating away at her. It occurred to Ortberg one day that she had very little to keep her mind occupied, a mind which was obviously still sharp. So he asked her, "Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?" She answered, "I think about my Jesus. I think about how good he's been to me. He's been awfully good to me in my life, you know. I'm one of those kind who's mostly satisfied. Lots of folks wouldn't care much for what I think. Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned, but I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus; he's all the world to me." Then she began singing, "Jesus is all the world to me: my life, my strength, my all. When I am sad to him I go; no other one can cheer me so. When I'm sad, he makes me glad. He's my friend." What strikes me about this is the fact that Jesus is all she had. It's one thing to say you love Jesus and have joy in Him when you have a wealth of good things in life, and quite another when Jesus is all you have. Paul prays for the Ephesians to know God so that they will love him and have this kind of joy.

## II. Paul's Prayer Requests

Paul makes three specific requests around this theme of knowing and loving God, the last of which he gives the most attention to. He prays first that the Ephesians would know **"the hope to which he has called you."** He's praying that they would know the bright future they have in a new heaven and earth. Paul says we have been *called* to this bright future. This word is often misunderstood to mean something similar to an invitation. We think that God calling us is like him inviting us into this future. It is a much stronger word than that. God's call is God's spoken word of power. It is like the word of God at creation when God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. It doesn't say that after God spoke that he then went about creating light. His word of power brought it about. If I'm sitting in a dark room and say, "Let there be light," I must then go and turn on a light switch. Not so with God. His word of power alone brings it about. So when God calls us to this hope, this bright future in the new heavens and earth, his word of power actually brings it about. When God says, "I call you to the full rights of a son of mine and make you a co-heir with Christ," it is the same as God saying, "Let there be light."

There is nothing in the universe more secure than the word of God calling us to our good future with him, and Paul wants the Ephesians to rest in that future.

Paul's second prayer request is that they would know **“what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints”** (v. 18). Surprisingly, the pronoun “his” refers to God. The saints are referred to as God's glorious inheritance. What does this mean? Throughout most of the history of the world, there was only one way a person could become wealthy, and that was through an inheritance. There was no such thing as the opportunity we have in America for a person to make a fortune through hard work and making the right moves. In a world where wealth could come only through an inheritance, one's inheritance would be his most valued possession. Amazingly, God says that we are just that to him, and Paul prays that these Ephesians would know that. Most of us instinctively think that God's attitude toward us is like Jacob's attitude toward Leah. He thought he was marrying Leah's sister, Rachel, but Laban tricked him and he was stuck with Leah instead. We think God is stuck with us, and delights instead in some of the Rachels he has but not us. But remember that Paul has already given the basis for God delighting in us. In the previous section he spoke eleven times of our union with Christ. It is because we are “in Christ” that God delights in us.

Paul wants the Ephesians to see God's treasuring of them with **“the eyes of your heart”** (v. 18). He knows that many of our sinful behaviors come from not seeing this. Why do I get defensive with Wendy? Because it is in my heart to want to be right and to look good, because I'm not believing that God delights in me. Why do I boast about accomplishments and want the approval of others? Or, on the flip side, why do I get a sick feeling in my stomach when people disapprove of me? Because it is in my heart to use people to feel good about myself because I don't believe that God delights in me.

Paul's third request, and the one he spends the most time on, is that the Ephesians would know the power of God for those who believe. Paul piles up synonyms to speak of the greatness of God's power. He wants us to know deep in our hearts **“the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might”** (v. 19). For God to act on our behalf, he must be both able and willing. In the previous request we learn that he is willing, for we are his treasured possession. Now we learn that he is able, for his power is not just great, but immeasurably great. And that power is for us who believe. It is his power to fulfill his promise to redeem us and to transform us.

The final four verses of the chapter describe what Paul regarded as the most astounding displays of God's power. What would you have pointed to in order to illustrate the power of God? I think I would have pointed to creation, to the way God spoke into existence the vast universe we observe. Or perhaps I would point to the marvel of God bringing rain to the earth, being able to move

through the sky many millions of tons of water and having it fall to the earth to water it without destroying it. Paul doesn't point to anything related to God's astounding work of creation. He mentions three powerful demonstrations of God's power, the first of which is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jesus wasn't merely raised back to life, but he was given a different kind of life, a body that would never die.

He then mentions the ascension of Jesus, and the fact that Jesus is now seated **"at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion"** (v. 20-21). Paul is referring here to evil, heavenly creatures, fallen angels and demons. These are frightening creatures who are far more powerful than us. Further, they are bent upon our destruction. They hate God, and they hate mankind, especially Christians, because we are God's image bearers. But Jesus has complete authority over them. These are our two greatest enemies, death and evil. Thank God that Jesus has already conquered them both.

The final two verses of the chapter mention a third display of the immeasurable greatness of God's power. Jesus has been made **"head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."** This sentence is one of the more difficult ones in the entire letter. We don't have time for me to do anything beyond giving you my conclusions about its meaning. Paul is saying that the church, which is Christ's body, is filled by Christ. Christ himself is filled continually and completely by God. The basic point is that Jesus has power over all the evil forces of the universe, and since the church is his body, we too will be victorious. Think of it like this. The fullness of God the Father dwells in Christ. The fullness of Christ dwells in the church. The fullness of the church will one day dwell throughout the earth. Let me make one important application from this truth about the fullness of Christ dwelling in the church. The application is to give yourself for that which will endure, and the church will endure to the end.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I heard an interview this week with a woman named Jessica Lamb-Shapiro, who has written a book about the self-help movement. In the interview, she described a self-help seminar with a well-known speaker. He charged \$1000 for people to attend the weekend seminar. But if you were willing to pay \$10,000, you could have a more intimate gathering with this speaker. And if you were willing to pony up \$15,000, you could have a private interview. We have something so much better. We have access, without cost, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. And he doesn't simply tell us what to do in order to help ourselves. He gives us every blessing in Christ. And when we have a hard time receiving that, we can come to him in prayer and simply ask him to open our eyes to see all we have been given.