

UNDERSTANDING OUR RESOURCES

SERIES: FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE STORY

By Danny Hall

I imagine that everyone appreciates how great it is to have people pray for them. Even people who have no faith at all, while they might not want you to tell them about Jesus, will be glad to have you pray for them.

Sarah Zeisler was telling us at staff meeting just recently that she had set out to take pictures of the middle-school kids. Now, middle-school kids hate to have their pictures taken, so they were resisting her efforts. Finally they asked why she was taking their pictures, and she said, “So I can give them to people to pray for you.” Then they said, “Okay, take my picture.” Everyone feels the need to be prayed for.

What kinds of things do we normally pray for? Health, stress relief, and jobs are a few things that come immediately to mind. I notice that the things I normally pray for are the circumstances of life.

The book of Ephesians includes some wonderful prayers by the apostle Paul, and we’re going to look at one in chapter 1. In studying these prayers that Paul was praying for the people he was writing to, it dawned on me that I don’t pray like that for people. God has been opening my heart and mind with this study. Now, it’s not wrong to pray for circumstantial issues. But I think that

as we study this passage, there's something more that God wants to teach us about prayer, a whole new level of prayer. That's what we're going to look at in this message.

In the last message (Discovery Paper 4980) we looked at Ephesians 1:3-14, where Paul is praising God for the wonderful thing he's doing in salvation, from eternity past all the way to the new heaven and the new earth, step by step, seeing how we are caught up in this incredible story that God is writing throughout history.

Following this song of praise, Paul now turns his focus to the people to whom he's writing. (This letter was probably circulated among a number of churches in and around the area of Ephesus.)

Let's look at 1:15-16:

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.

“For this reason” refers back to the incredible story of God's love for the people he created. Through Christ's redemption God has bought us out of slavery to sin and placed us in this relationship with himself, and he invites us to let our story become part of his larger story. God is taking us toward a sure future of a new heaven and a new earth where we'll have eternal fellowship with him, and he has given us a little taste of it right now by placing his Holy Spirit within us. It is because of all that that Paul prays for these believers he's trying to minister to and connect with. His prayer starts from a thankful heart. He thanks God specifically for two things.

First, he thanks God for their faith in the Lord Jesus. Now, as Paul has explained already in this chapter, and as he will develop later, he doesn't just mean he's thankful that they're saved. Paul understands that faith is a much deeper thing. Faith is a mark of being part of the people of God, part of this larger story of God. So he has a deep and abiding thankfulness that they have come to see who Christ is, placed their faith in him, and entered into the story of God. That just thrills his heart.

The second thing he's thankful for is their love for all the saints. Not only have they entered into the story of God, they are actively participating in it. Now, if we're right in understanding that this letter went to churches all around Ephesus, then some of the people who would have heard this letter read, Paul wouldn't even have met. So how would he have known this? He would have known it through the stories that were being told about these people's lives. It was being reported back to him that these people had placed their faith in Christ and they were loving each other in the family of God. They were so actively engaged in the family of God that the testimony of their love was spreading around. Paul was hearing story after story about these people, so his heart is overflowing with thanksgiving.

Now Paul follows that up with several prayer requests. He prays specifically for three things.

The first is in verse 17:

**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.**

The first question we often think to ask about people is, are they Christians? But Paul asks a deeper question: Are they growing in their faith? Is God taking them somewhere deeper? Notice how he prays for them: that God would give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. Part of the work that the Holy Spirit is doing in their lives is to reveal to them ever more deeply who God is. Paul's longing is that in their spiritual formation, they will grasp more and more the wonder and the beauty and the mystery of who God is.

At Peninsula Bible Church we encourage the teaching of the Scriptures and Bible study. Now, this is not just so we can all be little Bible scholars, as if we were going to have to pass a Bible trivia test to get into heaven, and so we're cramming for it. No, the reason we pay so much attention to the Scriptures is because it's God's desire for us to know him better. The Spirit himself, the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, takes the word of God and begins to open our hearts and minds. And as we live in community and share our experience with God, the Spirit is working so that we get to know God better. Paul is not content just to know that the Ephesian believers are saved. He knows God is calling them into this personal relationship with him to relate to them, to love them at an ever deeper level, and for them to know him.

Notice Paul says, "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit...." As we saw earlier in the chapter, he brings together the totality of who God is: Father,

Son, and Spirit. Paul reminds us that the whole of God's being is actively engaged in this initiative to draw us ever closer to him.

The second thing Paul prays for is 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 riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints....

He prays that they will understand God's grand story. He wants them to grasp the great and glorious plan of God that he summarized in verses 3-14. Later on in the book he's going to fill in a lot of the blanks in this marvelous story of God's calling out a people for himself. That story includes hope, he says, because we look at what God is doing, and we see that he's taking it toward a conclusion in which we have a rich and incredible inheritance with all the saints. That inheritance is God himself, a new heaven and a new earth in which to dwell in fellowship with him forever. History is marching surely toward that culmination, and Paul prays that they will understand the big picture.

Part of the problem when you and I stay at the circumstantial level in our prayers is that we often don't see the big picture. Our focus is on somehow managing the surface issues of life. Then we get so overwhelmed, and sometimes it's perfectly understandable. It's sometimes very difficult for us to see that God is forming us into the people he wants us to be, and he's called us to be a part of his kingdom, which is proceeding toward this sure conclusion for his glory, and he invites

us to enter into that with him. Paul understands that we need God's help in understanding this larger picture of what he is doing, so he prays for that.

Then in verses 19-23 Paul prays one last thing for them (the sentence begins in verse 18).

I pray...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 and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

As is typical of Paul, he gets so fired up about this, he can't stop! He wants you to understand that God's power is in your life. When you came to faith in Christ and entered into the story of God, and your life was transformed, and the Holy Spirit came to live within you, the power of God became resident in your life. And he wants you to understand just how great that power is. It's not any ordinary power. This is the same power that God used to raise Jesus from the dead all the way to the place of total exaltation! He's seated on the throne of God, and one day everyone is going to figure that out and name him King of kings and Lord of lords. The power that raised him from the dead and that is doing all that—*that's* the power that's in your life!

Paul wants us to grasp what it means to be a follower of Jesus in terms of the resources of God himself to live out our calling in every arena of our lives, as we face challenges, as we try to live for the glory of God. God's power is there. We're not left to our own resources. It's true in our relationships, in our ministry, in our walk with God.

Let me illustrate that from my own life. God has been teaching me this recently. My wife Ginger's mother just had heart surgery, and Ginger has gone to be with her parents to help. For the couple of weeks leading up to this, our lives were pretty intense. She was trying to do a million things. Our son is getting married in a few months, and there were things to do for that. And she's going to be gone for quite a long time, so she was trying to get a lot of things done before she left. There were all kinds of things going on, and I had things going on in my own life. It felt as if we were burning the candle at both ends, going a million miles an hour, not just in terms of activity, but also emotionally. There were ups and downs, and every day seemed to be different. Ginger was worried about her mother, and also about her father and his care during her mother's recovery.

With all that happening, I kept thinking that she needed me to be there for her. But the scariest question any man can ever ask a significant woman in his life is, "How was your day?" We're really afraid that you're going to tell us! And then when you tell us, we'll have no clue what to do next! Ginger and I had a lot of those moments over that last couple of weeks. There were so many times when I just didn't want to ask that question. I'd want to go crawl in my own little hole somewhere. But I kept thinking, "This is a really tough time for my wife, and I need to be there for her." And so I kept praying, "God, you've got to help me do that!"

It was amazing how much peace came over both of us during what were probably the most stressful two weeks we've had in a long time. All I can say is that it was God's power at work. God helped me to understand that my wife needed me to go beyond just whining and going along with the program. She needed me to be present and active in this, and somehow God supernaturally gave me a joy in it, an extra strength that I didn't think I had, and in the end, a great deal of peace about it all. That's not from me. That's because God's power is alive, and we can trust him. I wish I could say that every time I was in such circumstances, it was like that. But God was very gracious in this recent season to show me again that he is faithful, and his power is available to live out the kind of life he wants me to live.

Let me review for a moment. Paul prays for three things for the Ephesian believers: that they will know God better, that they will understand the big picture of where God's plan is heading and all the blessings associated with that, and that they will understand the power that is available to them. Notice that Paul is praying for the work of God in their lives to deepen their relationship with him, deepen their understanding of him and his purposes, and deepen their understanding of the resources that are available to them. Paul is praying for them at a level beyond the circumstances of their lives. I would argue that his prayer reflects that he wants God to use those very circumstances to do this deepening work in their life. Sometimes when we're so focused on the surface level, we don't allow God to work in our lives and the lives of others. And so I encourage you to begin to go deeper than circumstances as you pray for yourself and for others.

There's one more thing I want you to think about, and that is what Paul's prayer shows us about our own prayer life as it regards our relationship with God. I think Paul teaches us that the way we pray is a reflection of our understanding of God and his purposes. It's a circular thing: the more we understand about God, the more we pray for understanding of God, because we come to realize the riches in him. But when we have a relationship with God that is superficial, then we tend to pray that way. So our prayer is both a means to deeper understanding and also a reflection of where we are in our walk with God.

Prayer is also a reflection of how we see each other. This is where God has really been working in me. I'm afraid that the reason that I pray at a circumstantial and superficial level is because that's the level at which I know people. It's going to take a work of God for me to look in people's eyes and see what God is doing in them, how God is forming them into the people he wants them to be. That requires a level of community and commitment to one another that I'm afraid we don't often have. I've found that I pray very deeply only for those whom I know well, and even then it's hard.

As I mentioned, our son Christopher is going to be married soon, and we have lots to pray for. He's also in a never-ending quest to find a better job than the one he has, and that's been frustrating for him. We were talking recently, and all of a sudden it dawned on me that I've spent a lot of time praying that God would give him the right job, and not enough time praying that God would use the process of looking for a job to form him into the man that he desires him to be. Even with someone as close to me as my own son, I have to force myself down below the circumstantial level to pray that God will do his work.

Perhaps you're wondering why prayer is so difficult. There are many reasons why it's hard to pray. For myself, I find that even when I do pray, it's hard to pray well because other things are more important to me too much of the time. That's probably true for all of us.

God has been working me over left and right as I tried to prepare to teach this. My challenge for us is that he is calling us to a deeper level of fellowship, a deeper knowledge of one another, and out of that, a prayer life that reflects a concern for the deeper work of God. I think we're hungry for that. There's got to be more to this than just superficial things like going to church on Sunday and saying we're Christians. There's got to be something underneath that's more profound. But it's going to have to be important enough to us to put God first, and put deep, committed, community-life relationships over all the things that keep us at this circumstantial level. And I believe God can work mightily in our lives.

There are many things I'm thankful for in my own heritage, and one of those is my parents. They're not perfect people, they're just regular folks who have been faithful to God their whole lives. I became a Christian when I was eighteen years old. I had grown up in the church, but somehow I had missed what it was about. I was just kind of hanging out at church. But right before I started college, God got hold of my life, and I came to faith in him. That radically turned my life around in a hurry, and I was involved in all kinds of Christian activity and ministry. One night when I was still living at home, during my first couple of years at college, I came in really late. I assumed my parents had gone to bed a long time earlier. I came bounding up the stairs, and all of a sudden my mother stepped out of her darkened bedroom into the hallway and scared

me to death. She looked me in the face, and said, “I want you to know that you’re an answer to prayer. All those years when you were running around chasing this and that and the other, your dad and I prayed every night that God would show you the truth of who he was.” Then she turned around and went back in her room. That was it! I stood there in the dark stunned, and stayed up a long time that night thinking about that.

The reason I share that story is because when they were praying, I’m sure some of their prayers were, “Please don’t let him kill himself in a car accident,” and, “Please don’t let him doing anything stupid that’s going to ruin his life,” and so on; but what they were really praying for me was that I would find the truth. Their prayers weren’t just that God would protect me and help me get into the right college and all the other circumstantial things. I’ve always appreciated that they prayed for the deeper things, in their own simple way. “God, let him know you.”

That’s what God is calling us to—a level of understanding of what it means to walk with him that allows us to have the kind of community that takes us deeper than merely caring for the circumstantial. It’s not that the circumstantial things aren’t important. We need to care for each other and pray for each other at that level. But let’s never be satisfied with that. Let’s make it our prayer that God will take us deeper with him and with each other.

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Catalog No. 4981

Ephesians 1:15-23

Second Message

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March 12, 2006

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