

God's New Community
How to pray for Christian friends
Ephesians chapter 1:15-23
October 3rd 2021
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INTRODUCTION: problems in prayer

There is an old Christian poem that lists some of the problems and joys of prayer:

*Ah dearest Lord! I cannot pray,
My fancy is not free
Unmannerly distractions come
And force my thoughts from Thee*

*The world that looks so dull all day
Glows bright on me at prayer
And plans that ask no thought but then
Wake up and meet me there*

Ring any bells? You want to pray, but for one reason or another you find it a battle?

Distractions are one problem, but so are feelings of weakness, we sense the deficiencies, the imperfections, the feebleness of our prayers. We wish we could pray better prayers!

(Of course when these sorts of discouragements come our way we should not be surprised but remember that prayer is part of the spiritual battle we must all wage against the Devil who does not want us to pray).

This morning we're going to focus a common problem in prayer—how should we pray for our brothers and sisters, our fellow Christians. What exactly should we say, what should we ask for?

The temptation of course is to pray for the immediate, visible, *material needs* in our friends' lives—family struggles, money problems, unemployment, health issues, parenting challenges and so on.

And it can't be wrong to pray those kinds of prayers! Jesus encouraged us to pray "Give us this day our *daily bread (material needs)*" (Matthew 6) and the apostle John prayed for his dear friend Gaius: "I pray that you may *enjoy good health* and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well...." (3 John 2)

But is that all we should pray? For material matters? Let's read John's prayer again: "I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, *even as your soul is getting along well.*" (3 John 2)

See John's concern for spiritual matters? John is concerned that Gaius' soul is getting along well!

The most remarkable fact about all the prayers of the apostle Paul for his Christian friends recorded in all his 13 letters is this: with perhaps the exception of Philippians 4:19, all Paul's prayers are spiritual prayers!

He prays about faith and love and hope, about knowing Jesus Christ better and about having a greater understanding of heaven to come and about more of the Holy Spirit's power in their lives!

Does that mean that Paul did not care about ordinary problems—kids, work place, ageing parents, illness? Is that why he writes no material prayers? No!

Perhaps he is trying to *balance* the material bias of Christian praying? Paul knows that all too often our prayers are too often at the material end of the spectrum so to balance them his prayers are focussed at the spiritual end? That could be one reason.

But the main reason, surely, is what Paul had learnt from his Master and teacher: "*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things (Jesus was talking about material things like food and clothes) will be given to you as well.*" (Matthew 6) Paul knew that if you get spiritual things right, everything else in life will fall into place! If we have a close walk with the Lord Jesus then when troubles come they will not unduly disturb our peace because we will have God's wisdom to handle them and his comfort to endure them.

So by praying for his friends *primary spiritual* needs, Paul was also, in a very real and powerful way, including all their *secondary material* needs!

This morning, we consider his spiritual prayer recorded in Ephesians chapter 1, verses 15-23, and our prayer and hope is that we would all grow in our prayers lives a little, by his grace.

Has this ever happened to you: You've been listening to the prayers of a brother and sister and thought to yourself "I wish I could pray like her or like him?!" Well we feel that deficiency much more when we read the prayers of Paul!

Those feelings should not discourage us but challenge us to be better students in Christ's School of prayer.

Here's Paul's model prayer, **READ 1:15-16**

The reason Paul prays for his friends, he says, is twofold. First, because he has *heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for God's people*—those two virtues, faith and love mark out true Christians: Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour? Do you love God's people, the church? The report Paul has received in his prison cell ticked both boxes: "these people are true Christians, I want to pray for them!" The other driving motive, verse 15, "for this reason", points back to the six spiritual blessings he praised God for in verses 3-14, remember? Election, adoption, redemption, insight into God's cosmic plan, sealing by the Holy Spirit and given a foretaste of heaven by the Holy Spirit. Paul wants to p[ray that his Christian friends will be able to *grasp* and to *enjoy* the spiritual blessings God has given to us.

The last Czar of Russia was Nickolas the Second. And I have read on good authority that he allowed his children to play in the royal treasury. We can imagine those little ones enchanted by the diamonds, sapphires, rubies, gold, silver and so on. But those children would have no idea of value of those treasure-toys! And we're like those children! God has blessed us with spiritual treasures, but without God's help we can't really appreciate all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus. So Paul prays that the Lord will help us understand and cherish his spiritual gifts.

READ 17-20

There are three spiritual prayer requests here:

1. We might know God better (v.17)
2. We might grasp the glory of our future inheritance better (18)
3. We might know how much power is available to live out our Christian lives (19)

And then, having reminded himself of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, Paul—he just can't help himself! - sails off on another one of his lofty worship doxologies:

READ 1:21-23

How can we pray for one another? Let's take a leaf from Paul's book this morning and learn to pray one or all of these three spiritual prayers:

#1 “May John know you better” (verse 17)

“May John, may Jane know you better.” Not know more *about God* but know God personally. Nicodemus knew about God, but he did not know God personally until Jesus told him that he needed to be born again.

I could read books and listen to podcasts about David Gilmour, Pink Floyd's guitarist but I could not claim to *know him*. Knowing someone requires meeting *them*, spending time *with them*, talking with them, going on a journey with them, getting to know them better and better.

And so it is with the Lord, as we talk to him and walk with him over the years we get to know him and trust him more and more. That's what Paul wants for his Christian friends, “so that you may know him better.”

And to know God better, verse 17, we need “the Spirit of Wisdom and Revelation.”

In the OT, the Holy Spirit is called the *Spirit of Wisdom*, “*The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the Spirit of Wisdom and of understanding.*” (Isaiah 11:2), for example.

Paul calls the Holy Spirit the “Spirit of wisdom and revelation”, because the Spirit reveals what God is like, both through the Scriptures and in living daily experience with him. So Paul is asking God the Father to give his friends a *greater portion of the Holy Spirit* so that they can know God better!

What a wonderful spiritual prayer request to add to our list! “Give John, give Jane, more of your Holy Spirit so that they know you better.”

#2 “May Jane grasp the glory of heaven better”

READ 18

The “hope to which God has called us” is heaven. That word “call” refers to the way God called us individually to himself one day through the Gospel. We heard God’s call and responded in faith and repentance.

And what was God calling us to? To a new life in this present world? Yes, but is that all? No! *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” 1 Corinthians 15:19.* Why? Because the Christian life in this sinful world can be tough!

Now, when God called you to himself in 1973 or 2005 or 2019, he was calling you, not only to a new life here and now, he was calling you to a glorious new life in the world to come along with all of God’s renewed people! He was calling you to the glorious hope of heaven! *“The hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (verse 18)*

*Jerusalem the golden,
with milk and honey blest,
O City of God’s presence
His people’s promised rest
I know not, O I know not,
what joys await us there;
what radiancy of glory,
what bliss beyond compare!*

*“we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth the home of righteousness”
(2 Peter 3:13)*

With new bodies: *“The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory, it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Corinthians 15:42-43)*

And no suffering: *“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*
(Revelation 21:4)

In the joyful presence of exalted Jesus Christ: *“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.”*
(Rev 5:12)

Suppose a man is promised £500 a month to undertake a difficult job of grinding labour. My suspicion is that every day will be drudgery! But suppose he can look forward to a £50,000 pay cheque at the end of the month. The thought of that future reward will help him to whistle while he slaves away!

Why could Paul sing in prison? Because his hope was fully fixed on the certain hope of heaven that lay ahead of him! And that's what he prays for his Christian friends! “May Jane, may John grasp the glory of heaven to come.” They can't do it on their own of course! So what does Paul ask? Verse 18: “May their inner vision be expanded so that they can see the glory of heaven to come!”

What a difference to this present life hope makes! We are enabled to rise above sorrows and discouragements as we look forward to our true and final and glorious home.

What spiritual prayers can I pray, brothers and sisters? That they will know God better, that they will grasp the glory of heaven better, and thirdly, and finally,

#3 May John understand what power is available for him to live out the Christian life

READ 18-20

What kind of power is available to you and I in the present? Well this is incredible: the same power that changed the bruised and crucified body of Jesus into a new never-to-die again resurrection body! And the power that exalted him to sit at God's right hand above every power, authority, above every king, every president, every primes minister, every devil and every demon! Resurrection and exaltation power is available to God's people! They just do not know it! That is why they need the eyes of their

hearts to be enlightened!

Paul experienced God's mighty power working through him. Colossians 1:29, "I labour, struggling with all his energy which so *powerfully works in me.*" And so can you and so can I. "Lord, show John just how much power is available for him to live the Christian life. When he languishes in weakness or is paralysed by failure, open the eyes of his heart to see what power is his for the asking!"

Are you needing power? Do you find yourself saying: *I will never overcome that problem* in my life! Or, *I wish I had more energy for the ministry* God has given to me! Or, *I will never be able to resist that temptation!* Or, "*I just can't do what God is asking me to do.*"

May the Lord open the eyes of our hearts so that we may see that resurrection and exaltation power is available!

So, in summary, how can we pray for our Christians friends?

There is nothing wrong with asking for material blessings, but the Lord would have all of us step up a gear or two and ask for Spiritual blessings:

- May John know you better.
- May Jane grasp the glory of heaven better.
- May John understand what great power is available for those who believe.

May the Lord grow our prayer lives through his holy Word.