

## Week 3: Prayer for Wisdom and Power: Ephesians 1:15–23

### Hook



**Main Point:** Paul prayed for spiritual growth, wisdom, and power for his people.

**Q:** If someone analyzed every prayer you've prayed over the last month, what would they discover you pray about most?

A Barna survey asked Americans exactly that question. The top answers were:

- Gratitude and thanksgiving (62%)
- Family and community needs (61%)
- Guidance during crises (49%)
- Health and wellness (47%)
- Forgiveness (43%)
- Safety and travel (41%)
- Peace (37%)<sup>1</sup>

None of those are bad things to pray for. But in today's passage, we'll discover that health, wellness, safety, peace – these "usual" items – were not at the top of Paul's prayer list for the church at Ephesus. Instead, Paul prayed for things we may not think to pray for nearly as often. As we look at his prayer, it may challenge us to rethink what we pray for the people we love.

**RECAP:** In our first lesson we learned about Paul's long relationship with the church at Ephesus and how he loved them like a spiritual father. He wrote to them while he was in prison, encouraging them to live into their identity in Christ – as people transformed by the Gospel. In the second lesson, Paul praised the Lord for what He has done for us in the Gospel: He has adopted us into His family, redeemed us through the blood of Christ, and sealed us with the Holy Spirit, guaranteeing that we belong to Him and will receive everything He has promised us. In this lesson, Paul prays for the Ephesians, first a prayer of thanksgiving, then for them to have wisdom and power from Christ.

## **Week 3: Prayer for Wisdom and Power: Ephesians 1:15–23**

### **Book**

**Main Point:** Paul prayed for spiritual growth, wisdom and power for his people.

**Ephesians 1:15–16 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Paul thanked God for the faith, love and witness of the Ephesians.

**Q: Why was Paul thankful for the Ephesian church?**

**Q: Why are you thankful for your church and your Christian friends?**

**Q: Why might starting with gratitude, before asking God for anything, change the way we pray?**

Paul opened almost all his letters with prayer. If you were to look at all his prayers in the New Testament, you may find his prayers for his spiritual children are different from what we tend to pray for one another. We often pray for material things such as health concerns, new jobs and safe travel. There is nothing wrong with praying for those things, but Paul's prayers focused on spiritual growth. And he did not cease remembering them (1:16). This isn't a prayer he prayed once or twice; it was a consistent prayer. This is a pastor's heart for his people. He wanted them to grow in knowledge of Christ Himself and in the knowledge of the spiritual blessings that come from a relationship with Him. The Ephesians were already living in faith and love, but Paul prayed for their knowledge to grow deeper and wider. As he wrote in Philippians, another prison Letter, Paul knew none of us is ever finished growing in Christ in this life (Philippians 3:12). No matter how spiritually mature we are, we can always grow more. We should always want to grow more and pray the same for other believers we love.

One thing Paul consistently prayed for almost every church was a prayer of thanksgiving.<sup>2</sup> Even when he was writing to correct their behavior, in all but one of Paul's letters, he prayed thanks for his "spiritual children." They didn't have to have it all together for him to be thankful for them. In Ephesians, he was thankful because of their great faith in Jesus and great love of the saints. This wasn't about his being thankful for what they had done *for him* but for how they loved Jesus and loved others. He was thankful for the incredible witness they were for the kingdom. This supports the theme of identity in this letter: Paul was thankful for *who they were* in Christ and *the way they lived out that identity* by reflecting the love of Jesus to the world.

Paul wrote, "ever since I heard ...," but Paul hadn't only heard about the Ephesians, he knew them personally. They were one of the churches he had helped develop. He spent many years there. When Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, even though it was dangerous for him, it was the Ephesian elders who prayed with him and wept over him (Acts

20:17–38). This makes his “hearing about” comments interesting. He knew firsthand they had great faith and love, but he was emphasizing the fact that their reputation in their community was so positive that their lives were a witness for the Gospel.

Paul thanked God for both their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for all the saints—their fellow believers (1:15). These two belonged together: genuine faith in Christ produces love for His people. You can’t say you love God and not love His children. If you don’t love your brothers and sisters in Christ, you don’t really love God (1 John 4:7–21). This prayer points ahead to the overall theme of the letter: God has united believers from every background as one body in Christ, and our shared identity should be reflected in the way we love one another (2:14–16; 4:1–6). The Ephesians’ faith and love were evident enough that word of them reached Paul even in prison (1:15). When believers love one another this way, they shine Christ’s light before the world and bring glory to their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:16; John 13:34–35; Ephesians 5:8).

**Q: If we prayed for one another’s spiritual growth regularly, how might our lives change? How might our churches change? How might we impact the world?**

**Q: How often do you thank God for the faith and love of others? How often do you thank them directly? How do you think it would impact them if you did?**

**Q: How might it enrich your prayers to spend more time giving thanks?**

**Ephesians 1:17–18a (through the word “enlightened”) [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** Paul prayed for the Spirit to give them wisdom and knowledge.

**Q: How are wisdom and revelation connected in this passage?**

**Q: What does it mean to be enlightened? How are we enlightened with wisdom?**

**Q: After having the “eyes of our heart opened” what are we able to see more clearly?**

Paul prayed for his churches to have the wisdom that comes from the Spirit of God. There is a similar prayer in Colossians, in which Paul was refuting false teachers who were teaching a different Gospel. Their doctrine had many heretical teachings, but foundational to them all was the idea of a special, “higher” knowledge apart from Christ that was only available to certain people. Paul said that kind of “wisdom” only has the appearance of wisdom; it’s not the real thing (Colossians 2:8, 23). Real wisdom comes from the Lord and is available to everyone. James tells us God gives wisdom generously to all who ask (James 1:5).

Paul prayed that God would give the Ephesians the spirit of wisdom and of revelation. *Revelation* means “unveiling” or “uncovering”; using this word reiterates that true wisdom isn’t something we deduce on our own from logic or reason; it is revealed to us by God. Scripture tells us that God’s wisdom (“wisdom from above”) is not like human

wisdom. Human wisdom leads to selfish ambition, but God's wisdom leads to godly behavior – humility, peace, mercy and love (James 3:13–17). God's wisdom is so great that it makes even the greatest human wisdom look like foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18–31). His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8–9; Jeremiah 51:15–17). God alone is the source of true wisdom (Proverbs 2:6).

When God told Solomon he could ask for anything, Solomon asked for wisdom to be able to “discern between good and evil” because he knew it was the most valuable thing he could have to rule well (1 King 3:9). In the Hebrew, both “wisdom” and “knowledge” are more than just intellectual knowledge. Both words mean discernment or understanding about what is good, right and godly.<sup>3</sup> “Knowledge” isn't just knowing information, it's about knowing right from wrong; “wisdom” is the practical, skillful application of knowledge. It's not just knowing what is right and wrong but living it out.

First, Paul prayed for their knowledge of Christ Himself. This isn't just knowing *about* Jesus but knowing Him personally, which leads to wisdom. The more we know Jesus, the more we will know how to live as God wants us to live in this world. Jesus is the perfect “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). He is God in flesh, so if you want to know what God would say or do in any situation, look at Jesus – who showed how God would treat lepers, sinners and outcasts or religious leaders whose hearts are far from Him; what God would prioritize and spend His time doing. Jesus is the perfect model for godly living, but even more important than looking to Christ as a role model is knowing Christ. Paul said all he wanted in life was to know Christ. Everything else was garbage compared to knowing Him (Philippians 3:7–11).

Paul prayed that God would give them wisdom and revelation so they would know Him better. This was not merely knowing more facts about God, but growing in a personal and intimate understanding of His character and will. Bible study is essential, but study alone cannot produce genuine spiritual understanding; the Holy Spirit must enable us to understand and receive the truth revealed in Scripture. A person may know the Bible backward and forward without truly knowing Christ because spiritual truth must be spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:12–14).

Paul then described them as “having the eyes of their hearts enlightened.” “Enlightened” is passive: this was something God had done in them, not something they accomplished for themselves. The perfect tense indicates that this had already happened and that its results continued in their lives.<sup>4</sup> The *heart* in Scripture refers to the entire inner person—our mind, desires, emotions and will. Paul was not asking God to give them some new, secret knowledge. He was praying that, because God had opened the eyes of their hearts, they would understand more fully the truths and blessings already revealed to them in Christ.

**Q: How have you grown in wisdom since you started following Jesus?**

**Q: In which areas of your life do you feel you could use more of God's wisdom?**

**Q: How have you experienced the Holy Spirit's speaking to you or guiding you? What spiritual disciplines or practices have helped you hear Him better?**

**Ephesians 1:18–23 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Paul prayed they might know the hope and power they had in Christ.

**Q: How does the grandeur of the language in this passage compare to the last section?**

**Q: What things did Paul pray for them? How are they connected to one another?**

**Q: How does knowing Christ holds all authority shape the way believers face circumstances that feel out of control?**

Paul's prayer in this section used just as grandiose language as the hymn of praise in verses 3–14. He "never ceases" giving thanks for them (v. 16) and described God as "the Father of glory" (v. 17) and our future as the "riches of the glory of His inheritance" (v. 18). His language only got bigger and bigger when he talked about God's power – "the immeasurable greatness," "his great might," "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion," "every name," "all things under his feet," "head over all things," "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (1:19–23). This prayer leads into a hymn of praise, too. We can hear Paul get more and more excited as he talked about his desire for them to know Christ and the power of His Resurrection.

Paul prayed for wisdom and knowledge for his beloved spiritual children because he knew the incredible value of knowing Christ. He knew the difference it makes in the way we live, the peace and abundant life we experience, and the hope we have. These are three things he specifically prayed for them to know and understand:

The hope of His calling (v. 18): The word for "calling" here isn't a calling to a career or feeling called by God to do something. It's the word for divine calling or "invitation"; every time it is used in Scripture, it refers to God's inviting us to salvation in Christ. Paul used it again later to invoke them to "live in a manner worthy of the calling" and to talk about the unity of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1, 4). What Paul was praying for them to grasp was the incredible hope they had in Christ. Those of us who know Jesus have a hope unbelievers do not. When our loved ones die, we grieve, but "not as those who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14). Our hope is knowing that when we die, we will rise again to new life with Jesus in heaven (John 11:25–26). And not just hope in the future kingdom but hope in an abundant life with Him in the here and now, too.

The riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints (v. 18): The word for "riches" means an abundance of wealth. It is sometimes used in Scripture to talk about physical wealth, especially when talking about trusting in riches rather than God.<sup>5</sup> But in Ephesians, it is used to talk about the abundance of God's grace (1:7; 2:7; 3:8) and glory (1:18; 3:16).

Paul used a word for wealth to emphasize that our inheritance in Christ is worth far more than any wealth we could ever have on earth. The kingdom of God is like a pearl of great value that is worth trading everything you have for (Matthew 13:44–46). The sufferings of this world are nothing compared to the glory of heaven (Romans 8:18). Jesus called us to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth (Matthew 6:19–21). Paul was praying we might understand just how great the riches of His kingdom are, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven (Luke 12:33). And not just a future inheritance in heaven but the spiritual blessings He gives us in the here and now, too.

The immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe (v. 19): Paul added the word “immeasurable” to “greatness” to describe the power we have in Christ – not just greatness, but immeasurable greatness! This is a compound word. Paul often created these to describe something about God that is beyond regular language. It literally means “to throw beyond” the usual mark as in an athletic competition, above and beyond or exceedingly more. It’s used twice in 2 Corinthians to describe the grace and glory of God (3:10; 9:14) and three times in Ephesians to describe the greatness of His power (1:19), the riches of His grace (2:7), and His love beyond all human comprehension (3:19).

Paul used big language to try to help us understand something bigger than we can really imagine. Even though it’s beyond our understanding, he still spent five more verses elaborating on this amazing power. God demonstrated this power in Christ by raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms—the place of supreme honor and authority (1:20). His description becomes a hymn of praise to Jesus, which, like his last hymn, also builds phrase-by-phrase in glory: far above rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age, but in the age to come (1:21).

Paul’s description of God’s power reaches its climax in Christ’s universal authority. God placed all things under Christ’s feet and gave Him as Head over all things to the Church (1:22). Christ has been exalted as Lord over all creation, and no earthly or spiritual power rivals His authority. But this exalted Christ is also Head of His Church, which Paul calls His body (1:23). Christ fills His Church with everything it needs as His body.<sup>6</sup>

This is all about Christ. The One who is Head of the Church is also Lord over all creation, and we are His body. We have no need to fear, even when our circumstances are uncertain and our lives are threatened. Paul may have been writing from a prison cell, but his hope was anchored in the exalted Christ. Our future is secure and glorious beyond human comprehension. The One who holds us in His hands is the One who holds the stars. The One who conquered death. The One who rules over all things on earth and in heaven.

When we really know and trust in this, our lives will be different. We won't worry about the things of this world because our treasure is in heaven. But trusting in our future inheritance isn't about sitting around and waiting for heaven. It affects the way we live now. Living with an eternal perspective means prioritizing the things of eternity rather than the temporal things, focusing on the things above, not the things of this world (Colossians 3:2). It means living as kingdom people now, here on earth (Philippians 3:20). Being ambassadors of Christ's kingdom, bringing His light to this dark world (Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 5:8). As Christ's body, we represent our Head in the world. The power that raised Christ from the dead is the same power available to us in the Holy Spirit. God is ready to work in us with His incomparably great power to grow us into the people He wants us to be. He is also ready to work through us with His incomparably great power to change the world. Imagine what we could do for God's glory if we really understood His incredible power, if we really believed He could do mighty and awesome things through us?

**Q: How do you think God wants to work *through* you with His great power – in your church, community, family, workplace and other places you live, work, and play?**

**Q: What does it look like, practically, for us to put our treasures in heaven and live with an eternal perspective in our day-to-day lives?**

## **Week 3: Prayer for Wisdom and Power: Ephesians 1:15–23**

### **Took**

**Main Point: Paul prayed for spiritual growth, wisdom and power for his people.**

This week don't just think about your prayer life – change it. If you'd like to pray more like Paul prayed, consider adding some of these elements:

- **Pray Scripture.** Turn passages like Ephesians 1:15–23 into prayers for yourself and others.
- **Pray for people by name.**
- **Move from needs to growth.** After praying for health, safety, provision or guidance, add prayers for wisdom, spiritual maturity and a deeper knowledge of Christ.
- **Keep a thanksgiving list.** Paul began with gratitude. Write down believers you're thankful for and regularly thank God for them.
- **Create a weekly prayer plan.** Assign different days to pray for family, church members, missionaries, friends and community leaders.
- **Pray consistently, not just reactively.** Paul said he “never ceased” and “kept asking.” His prayers weren't driven only by crises.

This week, choose three believers – family members, friends or church members – and pray Ephesians 1:15–23 over them every day. Thank God for their faith and love. Pray that they would know Jesus more deeply, grow in wisdom, understand the hope and riches they have in Christ, and experience His power in their lives. As you do, ask God to accomplish those same things in you.

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Evaluate your current prayer life. How often do you pray? How do you pray? What types of things do you pray for? Whom do you pray for and what do you pray for them? How does your prayer life compare to Paul's prayers in his letters and Jesus' prayer life in the Gospels? How might God be leading you to change the way you pray, the frequency of your prayers, or anything else about your prayer life?

**PRAY:** Pray for yourself and your Christian friends and church family the same things Paul prayed for the Ephesians:

- Thank God for the faith and love of Christian friends and family who are living out their faith in a way that reflects God's character to the world.
- Pray for yourself and other Christians to know Jesus more.
- Ask to be filled with supernatural knowledge from the Holy Spirit.
- Pray to know how to live out that knowledge in wisdom.

- Ask to know just how great our riches are in Christ, both the spiritual blessings in the here and now and the blessings of our future inheritance. To value the blessings of Christ so much that we are willing to trade anything we have in this world for them.
- Pray to understand God's incredible power, not only that He will raise us from the dead but that He can work in us and through us with that same power here and now.

**ACT:** Create a prayer plan. If you don't already have an intentional plan for praying for your friends, family, church, the Church universal and the world, create one. If you do have one, tweak it to better fit what you learned from the model of Paul's prayers for the Ephesians. Paul's prayers for his churches were regular and intentional, not just whenever he happened to think about it or only when a specific need arose. Create a weekly plan that covers all these people and areas in prayer regularly. Be sure to intentionally thank God for them and pray for spiritual growth, wisdom and knowledge of Jesus.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/silent-solo-americans-pray/>

<sup>2</sup> The only letter in which Paul didn't give thanks for the recipient was Galatians. That church had begun to follow "a different Gospel," and he considered that so grievous that he went straight into condemning it instead. He wasn't just correcting behavior or finer points of theology; they were following a different Gospel.

<sup>3</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, "Ephesians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 620.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14; 2 Corinthians 8:2; 1 Timothy 6:17.

<sup>6</sup> Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 40–41; Hoehner, "Ephesians," 621; The ESV Study Bible, 2264. These sources discuss the difficult phrase "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" and understand Christ as filling His church, though they differ somewhat in emphasis.