



THE PRAYER CLOSET

Encouraging & Equipping Believers in Prayer

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Faithful In A Hostile World

Ephesians is Paul's prison letter to his spiritual children in Ephesus. Paul writes to encourage these believers in Ephesus. Ephesus was a difficult place to be a Christian. Home to the temple of the goddess Diana, this city was dominated by idolatry and paganism. Living in the shadow of the massive temple to Diana, these believers struggled to stand for Christ and to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

Paul's own trials speak clearly of the risks, dangers, and sacrifices required by those who follow Jesus Christ. When he writes to these believers, he knows well what they faced. He understood all too well the struggles and burdens these believers contended with in idolatrous and pagan Ephesus. Paul writes them to exhort and encourage them to stay faithful to Christ and His church.

What could enable these believers to stay faithful to Christ and His church? In the midst of a pagan, idolatrous society, how could they continue to live for Christ and spread the gospel? This question echoes through the ages of Christian history. Every generation of Christians has to face and answer this question.

Every generation of Christians lives in the midst of a society that is opposed to, even hostile, to Christ and His gospel. It has never been easy to be a Christian. Moreover, it never will. Jesus makes this plain, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (**John 16:33**). There should be no surprises concerning this. This is why we need encouragement and help to stay faithful to Christ.

Paul began this letter with the eternal love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. His first word of encouragement is to remember and reflect on the love and saving work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (**Ephesians 1:3-14**). Paul now turns to three truths that these believers needed to stay faithful in a pagan and idolatrous society. These words have continuing application. These truths apply to us. Our perseverance and faithfulness are strengthened by these truths. They can help us stand and continue to spread the gospel in spite of what happens.

Spiritual Support (Ephesians 1:15-16)

Every believer needs spiritual support. First, Paul begins with thanksgiving. He thanks God for their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for all the saints (**1:15**). The object of their faith was Jesus Christ and the object of their love is the saints, other believers. Their faith in Jesus Christ **separated** them from the pagan and idolatrous culture around them. Their love for the believers **united** them to each other in the midst of an unsympathetic, hostile culture.

Paul commends the Ephesian believers for their faith in Jesus Christ. By faith in Christ, he refers to their trust in Him to save them and to provide for them. They were living for Jesus and relying on His provision in the midst of a sinful, self-serving culture.

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Were the Ephesians doing this perfectly? No. They did have faith in Jesus; they trusted Him. Yet, later in the letter, Paul has to remind them that they are saved by grace through *faith* (**Ephesians 2:8-10**).

Were the Ephesians perfect in their love? No. Paul commends them for their love. They did have a love for the saints. They showed their love for the believers. Yet, Paul later exhorts them to overcome barriers to true unity, “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit of the bond of peace” (**Ephesians 4:3**).

Was Paul being dishonest when he commended the Ephesians for their faith and love when they were hardly complete in them? By giving thanks for the good in others, Paul is exercising the faith he commends in them. By faith, he sees them clothed in the righteousness of Christ. He rejoices that God accepts their faith and love through the righteousness of Jesus. Yet, He is also thankful for the fruit of the Spirit that he sees in their lives. He rejoices over the growth that they have experienced and the work of the Spirit in their lives.

Paul gives us a powerful example of how to give spiritual support to other believers. We support other believers by thanking God for the good we see in them. We are to commend other believers for the spiritual good that we see in their lives. We can give thanks for the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of believers even though it hasn't ripened yet. As the farmer gives thanks for the nubbin of corn long before the ear is full, we can commend the good we see in people, knowing that there is much growth and maturity that still needs to take place.

It doesn't take any special skill to see the faults of others and to criticize them. Paul's example teaches us to look for the good sprouting in believers and water it with commendation and encouragement, even when it is obvious that more growth is needed. This is the way that we provide spiritual support.

This text calls us to thank God for the good we see in other believers and to commend them for it. We must forsake criticism and nitpicking. I understand that rebuke and correction are still needed in the life of the church. Yet, do you see the power of giving thanks and commending others for the fruit of the Spirit cultivated in their lives? Openly

thanking God for the good in fallible people will do much to strengthen and support them.

We must see the good in other believers. We must openly thank God and commend them even though much growth and maturity is still needed. We must realize **what will be** rather than what is in people. People will not and cannot grow in an environment where only their failings are seen and remembered.

Look around you. What spiritual good do you see in other believers? Thank God for this good. Commend them for the spiritual good you see in them, even though it still has to do a lot of ripening! Ask God to create within you this skill of seeing the good that is sprouting in the lives of other believers.

Paul tells us that we provide spiritual support by giving thanks. Now, he tells us that we provide spiritual support by intercession (**1:16**). He tells the Ephesians that he remembers them in prayer. Paul prays for others and lets them know this. Paul literally says, “I have not stopped mentioning you in my prayers.” Knowledge of this kind of intercession is an encouragement to God's people.

Again, Paul's example gives us insight on how to support other believers. We can do this by interceding for them. We are to give thanks for the good we can see while at the same time praying for the good that God has yet to bring into the lives of His people. **Thanksgiving and intercession go hand-in-hand. We thank God for the good we see; we pray to God for the growth and maturity that needs to happen.** This is the kind of spiritual support that believers need. Every believer needs this kind of support to continue to stay faithful to Christ and His church.

Are you praying for your brothers and sisters in Christ? The desperate need in the church is for believers to pray for one another. God uses Paul's example to instruct us and challenge us to pray for the spiritual growth in other believers. Praying specifically and regularly for God's people and letting them know this builds up the church. All the programs that the church has – important as they may be – are no substitute for the spiritual support of thanksgiving and intercession. This is what believers in a hostile world need the most.

Spiritual Insight (Ephesians 1:17-19)

In **Ephesians 1:17-19**, Paul teaches us to pray for spiritual insight. This insight helps us to stay faithful to Christ and His church. If the world is not to overwhelm us, we must know that what we see is not the full reality. For this reason, Paul teaches us to pray for the insight to see what is not apparent to ordinary sight. What kind of insight does he pray for?

The knowledge of God (1:17)

Paul prays that God will make Himself known to His people. He asks that they will grow in their understanding of who God is and what God can do. Knowing God intimately does make a difference. It can empower you to persevere and trust God through all the struggles and difficulties. We must pray that other believers will grow in their knowledge of God.

The hope of His calling (1:18)

Our hope is rooted in **1:3-14**. Because of the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are saved and secured in His eternal love. These verses show us that the world is Lord's and we are His forever. The universe is not random and we are never abandoned. Our God is just and gracious, sovereign and saving. There is a purpose in this world, pardon for our sin, and power for our lives provided by our God. God sustains us now and will take us to heaven one day. This is our hope! We need to see this in our daily life.

The inheritance of the saints (1:18)

Paul also teaches us to pray that we would know the spiritual inheritance that God has for His children. Commentators debate whether the inheritance is what He gives to His people or whether His people are counted as His inheritance. I lean toward the idea that believers are God's inheritance. God actually considers us His inheritance. He considers us the rich inheritance that He provides Himself. God treasures us as His children. Since He treasures us, He will provide everything that we stand in need of in this life. We are to pray that believers will see and appreciate the high value that He places on them.

Power (1:19)

Paul now prays for the Spirit to give these believers the eyes to see that power that is available to them. He longs for them to see and know the "exceeding greatness" of God's power toward those who believe in Christ. Why does Paul pray for this? It is because He wants them to face their earthly challenges with divine power. They did not have the power to stand for Christ or persevere in such a hostile environment in Ephesus. They could only do this through the mighty working of His power in their lives. Paul asks that they might see their need for this power, know that it was available to them, and to appropriate it by faith. The same is true for believers today. We cannot stand or persevere by our own power. We must have this power of God. How we must plead, that God will give this power to other believers! God's power can make the difference. We must see this and appropriate it in our lives.

Spiritual Power (Ephesians 1:19-23)

Paul has already revealed that our help to stand and persevere in faith comes from spiritual support and from spiritual insight. Now, He emphasizes our need to see the power of Jesus whom we believe and follow.

I have read that one of the treatments for autistic children is to cloud the lower part of their glasses. Certain kinds of autism apparently manifest themselves as a child becomes completely focused on some dimension of his experience. Such a child can become so focused on a habitual activity or household object that interacting with that single aspect of life becomes the child's whole world.

Therefore, glasses clouded on the bottom but clear in the upper lenses force the child to look up. It forces him to take his eyes off his own little world and to consider a greater, wider world. This is what Paul does in these closing verses. He wants us to look up! He longs for us to look beyond ourselves! He desires that we look at the power above us and the power here for us.

The power above us (1:20-22)

Paul wants us to look up and see Christ seated at the right hand of God. He exhorts us to look to our reigning Savior and Lord who is exalted over all. He tells us that our God has three kinds of power:

(1) **Resurrection power (1:20)**

This tells us that God has the power to save us completely. He has the power to enable us to overcome sin and temptation. By this resurrection power, we can say no to sin. We can resist and overcome temptation. This same power can enable us to spread the gospel. We can maintain our witness before our adversaries. No adversity in this life can crush us. Our God has power to give and sustain new life in Christ. He will sustain our faith by His mighty power.

(2) **Sovereign power (1:21-22a)**

In this verse, Paul mentions virtually every dimension of strength and authority that we would recognize in this life. He lists everything from political rule to physical might to spiritual forces in this age and in the age to come. Then, He says that Jesus is greater than them all! Jesus reigns over everything. He is Lord of all! Our Savior, our Friend, is the King over the whole universe and every power that is.

(3) **Church power (1:22b)**

This tells us what Christ is doing with His power. He is working in and through His church with His power. His resurrection and sovereign power is exercised for the good of His church. God works all things for the good of His church. We might not always see this or perceive this, but almighty power of God is being used for and in the church.

The power here for us (1:23)

This is an amazing verse. It reveals that Christ is accomplishing the eternal purpose of God through the church. The uncompromising nature of Paul's words has caused some commentators great consternation. Yet, we must see that the church is God's instrument to touching and reaching the world. The church is the primary instrument of the glory of Christ in the earth.

I realize that the church can be an ugly bride of Christ sometimes. Nevertheless, the church is beloved of Christ and will be used by Him to fulfill God's purpose in this earth. No other institution has been given this purpose or the power to do it. Who has been called by God to be salt and light? The church. Who has been called by God to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth? The church. Who has received power from God to do all these things? The church.

This leads to a major application. This truth should deliver believers from despair. For all of her weaknesses, she is the means that Christ will use to fill this earth with His glory. Despite her setbacks and her apparent losses, the church will not be stopped. Those who serve her can have no higher calling. Despite all her weaknesses, there is no greater organization or institution of hope in the world than the church of Jesus Christ. That is why the church is worth our effort and worth the dedication of our lives.

Kings and kingdoms have come and gone. Governments and philosophies have risen and fallen. Oppressors and dictators have ruled and faded. However, through it all, the church of Jesus Christ has continued to carry the message of God's love and forgiveness to the world. The gates of hell have not prevailed and they never will. Jesus Christ reigns over His church and it will carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, bringing people from every tribe, race, nation, and color to faith in Christ. Why? It is because of the "exceeding greatness" of His power.

Be encouraged! In the church, we may feel that our influence is small. Our efforts may be opposed. Our strength may seem weak. Nevertheless, we belong to the church – the church that God has determined to display His power and might in and through! Look beyond yourself. Look to the Lord Jesus Christ with His power above us and His power here for us!

Praying Through Ecclesiastes

The Same Old Same Old

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Ecclesiastes is Solomon's sermon to the gathered people of God (1:1). It's an important sermon because it took Solomon a lifetime to prepare it. In this sermon, he takes the whole of

human existence and declares that it is utterly meaningless, "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (1:2).

Notice his emphasis on "all." There is not one single aspect of human existence that is not frustrated by futility. It is all empty, pointless, useless, and absurd. Solomon takes the next 12 chapters to prove this.

Since everything is meaningless, this leads to a powerful question, "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" (1:3). If everything is meaningless, what's the use? What's the purpose?

The key to understanding this book is the phrase "*under the sun*." Solomon uses this phrase to indicate viewing life solely from a human perspective. It means never lifting your eyes to heaven, never contemplating God and His purpose. It is life lived without God at the center.

Solomon wants to drive home the point that a life without a personal relationship to God is utterly meaningless. It is empty, pointless, and useless. Only by having a personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ can a person know true purpose and meaning in this life and the life to come. Solomon gives three reasons why life without God is utterly meaningless:

The Unyielding Rhythm of Life (1:4-7)

In these verses, Solomon shows that life has an unyielding rhythm that doesn't stop or slow down. He gives a variety of examples of this.

- *Generations come and go (1:4).*

The rise of each generation gives the impression that something is actually happening, but

nothing really is. There is seemingly an endless procession of people who come and go but the earth remains the same. The world is a very repetitive place. Nothing ever really changes.

- *The daily journey of the sun (1:5).*

The sun's daily journey seems pointless. Around and around it goes, without actually ending up anywhere. Day after day, the sun rises and sets and rises again. Its movement is repetitive but not progressive, just like life. The word "hasteth" means to pant. The sun grows weary of its slow and endless journey across the sky, just as we can grow weary of the daily repetition of life.

- *The wind (1:6)*

In Palestine, the wind sometimes comes from a northerly or southerly direction. It blows past and comes again. Around and around it goes, following its circular course but never reaching a destination. For all its constant movement, there is never any progress.

- *The flow of water (1:7)*

In this verse, Solomon refers to the way that all rivers and streams flow forever to the seas. There is an especially vivid example of this in Israel. The Dead Sea is landlocked. It has no outlet to another body of water. Yet, for all the centuries that the Jordan River has been flowing into the Dead Sea, it is not yet full. The water continues to flow into the Dead Sea but it is never full.

Solomon uses these examples to show that life has an unyielding rhythm about it. Life keeps going and going and going. Yet, there is no profit, no progress. Everything seems to be in a rut. What do you really have? What do you really gain? There will always be more work, more bills, more chores, more burdens and on. It never stops.

Do you see the difference that knowing God makes? Apart from a relationship to Him, life is a meaningless repetition of events, an unyielding, meaningless rhythm that goes on and on. Yet, when you know God, your life is under His control. Because of God's love and purpose, every moment in your life matters. By knowing Him, all things work together for your

good and are preparing you for eternal rest and reward.

Father, help me to remember that my life is under your control. I trust in You to guide my life according to Your wise purpose. Remind me that every moment in my life matters because of my relationship to You.

The Unceasing Dissatisfaction of Man (1:8)

In verse 8, Solomon takes what has learned from nature and summarizes it, “All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it” (1:8a). Life is such a toilsome, wearisome trouble that is hard to put in words. Man cannot put into words how difficult life is. Yet, Solomon is not finished making his argument. It’s not just the natural world that shows us just how meaningless life is. Man’s dissatisfaction proves this. He declares that man is always looking and listening, “the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (1:8b). This is especially true now in the information age. Yet, even after all our looking and listening, our eyes and ears are never satisfied.

We still want to see and hear more. We can never get enough. There is always one more show to watch, one more program to hear, one more web site to see, one more game to watch, one more song to listen to. There is no end to it. We are never satisfied. We can never get enough.

There is absolutely no satisfaction in anything under the sun. Name anything you want; there is no lasting satisfaction in it. Nothing, nothing under the sun can satisfy the heart and soul. No matter what you see, hear, experience, or possess, you will have no lasting satisfaction. It’s all meaningless. You can’t get enough to satisfy you.

Do you see why a personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ gives true meaning and satisfaction? It is only when we come to Christ that we can find true satisfaction and meaning. Jesus is the Bread of God that satisfies us, “I am the bread of life; he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

Have you ever been hungry? Then you ate something and yet you wanted more. You

felt like you needed something else. But, have you been hungry and ate and said, “That hit the spot; I’m full.” That’s the way it is when you come to Jesus. He is the meal that fills the heart and soul. Moreover, it is only as we continue to seek Him and depend on Him that we find genuine satisfaction and meaning.

Father, teach me to find my satisfaction in You. Deliver me from trying to find satisfaction under the sun. Help me to continue daily to find my joy and delight in You. Thank you for all your blessings. Don’t let me elevate any of them above You and Your Word.

The Weariness of Human History (1:9-11)

In 1:9, Solomon looks at the weariness of human history. He declares that nothing is new. There are only reruns. This is such a sweeping claim that some might be tempted to think of a counterexample. After all, look at all the advances in technology. Surely, there must be at least one thing that is new under the sun.

For a moment, Solomon seems almost willing to consider this possibility, “Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new?” (1:10a). Yet, just as quickly, he denies the possibility, “It hath been already of old time, which was before us” (1:10b).

Perhaps it would be possible to think of some discovery or invention that represents a real advance in knowledge or technology. However, even the latest developments fall into the same categories of human experience. Wireless communication may be a legitimate advance of the twenty-first century, but there is also something familiar about it. People felt the same sense of progress when the first telegraph wire was connected or the first telephone call was placed. At the same time, the people who come up with these inventions and use them have the same fallen nature. They have the same basic problems, the same moral deficiencies, and the same insecurities that people have always had.

In other words, the more things change, the more they stay the same. If it ever seems that there really is something new under the sun,

it's only because we have forgotten what happened before us. Solomon says that we suffer from historical amnesia (**1:11**). How quickly people forget!

This applies to us personally. One day we will be forgotten. What we have accumulated will be lost. What we have accomplished will be forgotten. Our descendants will not remember us any better than we remember our ancestors. Even more difficult for us, it will be hard for us to remember. We all have to face the memory loss that comes with old age.

Again, this points to why a personal relationship with God makes life meaningful, why it gives purpose to life. There may be nothing new under the sun. Yet, God is doing many "new" things. He gives people a "new" heart. He gives a "new" self to those who come to Christ. He will one day make a "new" heavens and earth.

At the same time, God never forgets His people. Even though others may forget you, God never will. Nor will He forget your labors for Him. He records them and will reward them. Apart from God, life is meaningless and a person will be forgotten over the passage of time. However, by knowing God through Jesus Christ, God remembers and rewards His people for eternity.

Father, thank You for remembering me. Thank you the hope that I have in this life and in the life to come. I praise You for keeping me and all that I do for You in this world. I am secure in You. All my labors for You are secure in You.

The Two Threats To The Church

Our God is at work in and through the church. Yet, our enemy Satan is equally active. Where Christ is building His church, Satan actively labors to dismantle it brick by brick. Satan chisels away at the church in two ways:

The External Threat – Ungodly Authorities

Believers in every era have squared off against those in authority who demanded disobedience to God. Moses' parents resisted Pharaoh's command to kill their son (**Hebrews 11:23**). Daniel resisted the government's decree that forbade him to worship and pray to the true God (**Daniel 6**). Paul stood firm in the face of those who could take his life for preaching Jesus Christ (**Acts 25-26**). As history unfolded, we saw the likes of Martin Luther, John Hus, John Knox, and many others who clung to the Word of God in spite of the threats of earthly authorities.

Don't misunderstand. Believers are to obey the earthly authorities (**1 Peter 2:13-17**). Christians are to be model citizens. We are to submit to the governing authorities unless doing so requires disobedience to God. At that point, we must be willing to obey God rather than men (**Acts 5:29**). At the same time, we must be willing to bear the consequences (**Acts 5:40**). In spite of the intimidation and suffering, they continued to preach the good news of Jesus Christ (**5:42**).

J. Vernon McGee once said this about Daniel, "The reason the lions didn't eat him is because he was three-fourths backbone and the rest gristle." This is the way the apostles were. They could not be intimidated. They couldn't be silenced. They couldn't be stopped. The reason? They reported to a higher power! Their faith and loyalty was in God.

Father, grant my church fresh boldness. Give us the grace to submit to earthly authorities. Enable us to be model citizens. Yet, give us the strength to stand firm for Christ. Set us free from being intimidated into silence.

The Internal Threat – Integrity

We have a tendency to think that the early church was pure and perfect. Yet, depravity was alive and well in the early church.

The early church faced an internal threat almost immediately after its birth (**Acts 5:1-4**). Satan attempted to penetrate the early church with hypocrisy. However, the Spirit of God dealt immediately with this hypocrisy (**Acts 5:5-11**).

This shows us that God takes sin seriously. Thank God that He doesn't deal with us in this way today. If God acted in this way today, as Vance Havner put it, "every church would need a morgue in the basement."

However, don't think for a moment that because Christians don't fall over dead after sinning, that He turns a blind eye to sin in the lives of His people. God still hates sin. He longs for His people to walk in righteousness. He still disciplines His children in His time and His way.

Satan wants the church to believe the lie that personal integrity doesn't matter. Yet, our personal integrity is a public matter. As Christians, we represent Christ. Our reputation is a reflection of His reputation.

Father, I ask that my church will walk in obedience. I plead that our words and lives will match. Empower us to live righteous lives that reflect Your greatness and grace.



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