



A PRAYER FOR SPIRITUAL PERCEPTION AND POWER EPHESIANS 1:15-23

STUDY GUIDE
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I don't know if you've ever had this experience, but I can recall several occasions during my educational journey in high school, college, seminary, and grad school when the professor would mention a complex idea and then move on without doing us the service of explaining what it means. It was truly frustrating when the instructor would simply assume that some profound idea or concept of great importance was self-evident and didn't need to be unpacked or explained in greater detail. On numerous occasions, either I or another student would shout aloud: "Hey Prof. What in the world are you talking about?"

I am very happy to say that the apostle Paul was not this kind of teacher. As you know, he has just finished in vv. 3-14 describing the magnificence of God's saving grace toward us in Jesus. There is hardly a more complex and eternally significant paragraph in all of the Bible. Although I tried to explain what Paul said in vv. 3-14, some of you may have remained a bit perplexed and wished that I had unpacked Paul's language in greater detail.

But this is where we encounter the apostle's genius and his pastoral heart. Immediately after writing about such things as election and adoption and redemption and forgiveness and the purpose of God to heal and restore this broken universe, Paul prays that his readers will be empowered and enlightened by the Holy Spirit to understand it all. Not only that, but he is keenly aware of how Satan and his demonic hosts will do everything in their power to undermine our understanding and appreciation and enjoyment of what God has done for us in Jesus. That is precisely the point of the final paragraph in Ephesians 1. So let's turn our attention to it without further delay.

Paul's Prayer for Enlightenment and Empowerment

Paul begins in vv. 15-16 to mention why he prays for the believers in Ephesus and how often he does so. I do hope that you remember that if you struggle to pray, simply pray the prayers of the NT authors. They are as valid for us today as they were for the Ephesians in the first century.

"For this reason" (v. 15a) most likely points back to vv. 3-14, and especially vv. 13-14. Paul's intercession is also prompted by what he had heard of them (see the almost identical language in Col. 1:3-4). Often when God blesses others, be it spiritually or materially, we begrudge it or are jealous or question their worthiness ("she doesn't deserve that!"). But Paul rejoices with those who rejoice. Nothing pleased him more than the progress and prosperity of other Christians (though he himself remains under arrest as he writes this!). He specifically mentions two things about the Christians in Ephesus.

- their *faith*
- their *love* (indeed, they loved "all" the saints)

When faith and love are mentioned, one expects to hear of hope as well, but that will come in v. 18. If "faith" and "love" were ultimately the result of something these believers had done, why would Paul have thanked *God* for them? Certainly they displayed faith and love, but Paul evidently felt that God was the ultimate source of both. Calvin put it this way:

"Now, with all this, he shows that faith and love are the very gifts of God and do not come from ourselves, as men always imagine through a devilish pride. . . . If every man was able to believe and have faith of his own accord, or could get it by some power of his own, the praise for it ought not to be given to God. For it would be but mockery to acknowledge ourselves indebted to him for what we have obtained, not from him, but from elsewhere. But here St. Paul blesses God's name for enlightening the Ephesians in the faith and for framing their hearts to make them loving. It is to be concluded, therefore that everything comes from God" (*Sermons*).

Whenever Paul prays for one of the churches that he established, he mentions his constancy, his unfailing commitment to bring them to the throne of grace. For this characteristic of Paul's prayers, see Rom. 1:8ff.; 1 Cor. 1:4; Phil. 1:3ff.; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3; Philemon 4 ("you" is singular). Of course, Paul doesn't mean that he does nothing but give thanks, but that he regularly gives thanks for them each time he prays (most likely, morning, noon, and evening, the customary three hours each day).

And we must never forget that Paul writes this from prison, in chains. He refuses to let his physical circumstances hinder his zeal to pray for the church in Ephesus. And neither should we.

Paul's Prayer for Enlightenment (vv. 17-18)

It's important that we be imitators of Paul not simply in the fact *that* he prayed for others but also in *what* he prayed for them. His *content* is no less normative than his *constancy* (at the same time we acknowledge that on occasion Paul's prayers are uniquely related to the circumstances of his readers). Be it also noted that Paul evidently believed that the spiritual growth of his readers was wholly dependent on God who gives generously to his people when they call

upon him in prayer. Furthermore, although they had already received “wisdom” (1:8), Paul knows there is always an ongoing need for more!

His prayer is that God would act in such a way that they might more fully grasp and understand the implications of the many spiritual blessings with which God has already blessed them in Christ. Paul doesn't assume that simply because they have been so richly blessed that they need no further understanding or growth or application of these truths.

Paul prays specifically for enlightenment concerning three things.

First, he asks God, the Father of glory, to give them “the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (v. 17).

Here God is referred to as “the Father of **glory**” (v. 17a), which might well be translated, “the *glorious Father*.” Or it may be that the Father is the *source* of all glory. As Eadie points out,

“the three preceding paragraphs are . . . each wound up with a declaration of the final result and purpose – **the glory of God**. And now, when the apostle refers to God, what more natural than to ascribe to Him that glory which is His own chief end, and His own prime harvest in man's redemption?” (81).

Note the word, “**give**” (v. 17b). ***The knowledge of God is the gift of God***. See Matt. 11:27; 16:17; 1 John 5:20. Human genius cannot account for the knowledge of God. Neither native abilities, education, nor human will power can attain insight into the character and heart of God. The simple fact is that you are utterly incapable of knowing anything about God unless God himself enlightens you. God is known by what the puritan pastor Jonathan Edwards referred to as “**a divine and supernatural light**”. The youngest and lowliest of children can exceed the oldest and most elevated of scientists when it comes to the knowledge of God! The purpose of the Spirit's revelatory activity is to increase our *knowledge* of God (see Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9-10; Philemon 6). Contrast this with what we typically pray for ourselves and for others!

To what does the word “spirit” refer? Is this the Holy Spirit or the human spirit (cf. Eph. 4:23; Gal. 6:1)? Undoubtedly, the former:

- The Holy Spirit is the agent of revelation (cf. John 15:26;) and illumination (1 Jn. 2:27). Indeed, “revelation” always finds its source in either the Father, Son, or Spirit (see Mt. 11:25,27; 16:17; Rom. 2:5; 8:19; 1 Cor. 1:7; 2:10; Gal. 1:12,16; Eph. 3:5).
- One telling argument against taking “spirit” as a reference to the human spirit is the word “revelation” itself. As Fee notes, “whereas one might be able to understand ‘a spirit of wisdom’ to mean something like ‘a wise disposition’ or ‘a wise spirit,’ to speak that way of ‘revelation’ is to speak near nonsense. What, one wonders, can ‘a spirit of revelation’ possibly mean in *any* sense in English?” (676).
- Consider also the trinitarian structure of Ephesians 1. It seems also to appear here in v. 17 where we find reference to Jesus and the Father. How appropriate, then, that the Spirit should also be in view. In this regard, see especially Isa. 11:2.
- The parallel in Col. 1:9 points to the Holy Spirit as does the close verbal parallel in Rom. 8:15 (“Spirit of adoption”).

If the “spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit, as I believe it does, we should understand the verb “**give**” to mean an increased activity or deepening experience or intensified ministry of the Spirit. After all, believers already have the Spirit, as vv. 13-14 make clear. In the words of Fee, “the prayer is not for some further Spirit reception, but for the indwelling Spirit whom they have already received to give them further wisdom and revelation. The emphasis, therefore, is not in receiving the Spirit as such, but on receiving (or perhaps realizing?) the resident Spirit's gifts” (676). In summary, Paul's prayer is that God would grant us his Spirit who in turn will supply the wisdom to understand what he also reveals to us about the character and purposes of God and our role in the latter.

Note well: here we have an unmistakable reference to **revelation** being given to non-apostolic Christians, **revelation** that is, therefore, non-canonical. Contrary to the cessationist argument, **revelation** is not restricted to the biblical authors or to the biblical canon. God can and does speak and grant knowledge and insight and illumination and truth to the average believer without such revelatory activity threatening the finality or sufficiency of Scripture!

Second, he prays that they might grow deeper in their grasp of the hope to which God has called them (v. 18a).

Here in v. 18a Paul further defines what it means for the Spirit to give us wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God: it means **having the eyes of one's heart enlightened**, i.e., receiving spiritual insight (contrast this with their former, unenlightened condition in 4:18 and 5:8). All the study in the world will avail little in the true knowledge of God apart from the energizing, enabling, enlightening ministry of the Spirit! Note too, the relationship between “knowledge” of God and the “heart” (vv. 17b-18a). Here “heart” refers to the core of both the spiritual and mental life of a person, including emotions and will.

The “hope” of which God’s calling is the source or cause is our anticipation of the inheritance referred to in the verses that follow. But it also refers back to the “summing up of all things in Christ” which is the ultimate purpose of God’s saving activity (1:10). This hope, says Clint Arnold, “is more than a faint wish. Paul wants it to become a sure foundation for them” (107). The “calling” Paul has in mind is related to divine election in 1:4. In other words, ***Paul is praying that we will know the significance and implications of God’s sovereign, pre-temporal choice of us. God’s sovereign saving purpose for you is something God wants you to know and appreciate, not ignore.***

Often, we all find ourselves feeling hopeless. Nothing is working out as we had planned. Every project comes to nothing. Relationships are shattered. The future looks like a black hole that threatens us with eternal demise. That is why Paul prays that the Spirit would open our spiritual eyes and enable us to understand and enjoy the unshakable, immutable, glorious hope that we have in Christ!

Third, he also prays that the Spirit would enlighten the eyes of their heart to understand the profundity of the riches of God’s personal inheritance in the saints (v. 18b).

Once again there is ambiguity in the word translated “inheritance”. Some contend that the inheritance is ours and that God is the one who *gives* it (cf. 1 Pet. 1:4). What might our inheritance entail? Eternal life (Titus 3:7), glory with Christ (Rom. 8:17), immortality (1 Cor. 15:50), the kingdom of Christ (Eph. 5:5), and the heavenly city (Rev. 21:2-7), just to mention a few. But more likely this is the inheritance God ***receives*** (namely, us). Note well, Paul says it is ***“his”***, that is, ***God’s*** inheritance. We are God’s inheritance (see Deut. 4:20; 9:26,29; 2 Sam. 21:3; 1 Kings 8:51,53; Ps. 28:9; 33:12; 78:62,71; 106:5,40; Isa. 19:25; 47:6; 63:17; Jer. 10:16; 51:19; etc.). Paul would thus be praying that we might be enabled to understand the glory and honor and wonder of that privileged status, to understand and reflect upon the spiritual wealth of what it means to belong to God, to be his people. God wants us to fully understand and grasp and experience ***what we are to him!***

Do you know how precious you are to God? Do you understand how deeply he values you? Have you even begun to grasp how much God cherishes you? All that God has done through Jesus that we read about in vv. 3-14 was designed so that God might gain us, might inherit us, all for his enjoyment and glory.

Note well: Paul declares that there is ***glory*** in being God’s inheritance. Indeed, there are spiritual ***riches*** or great ***wealth*** in this glory. Such is what it means to be chosen by God (1:4) and predestined to adoption as his children (1:5). We are the principal means by and through which God now and forever after will display the indescribable splendor of his resplendent beauty! Paul’s prayer is that the Spirit might enable us to appreciate and enjoy and celebrate and marvel at this unfathomable value which God places on us.

Paul’s Prayer for Empowerment (vv. 19-23)

Paul also asks God to enable his people, that is not just the Ephesians but you and me as well, to know the immeasurable power that he imparts to us who believe in Jesus (vv. 19-23).

Note how Paul piles up words in v. 19 to highlight the magnitude of God’s power. It isn’t enough for him simply to refer to God’s ***“power”***, so he refers to the ***“greatness”*** of God’s “power”. Nor is it enough for him to refer to the “greatness” of God’s “power”, so he refers to the ***“surpassing greatness of God’s power”***! The best part is that this power is not an abstract energy or a theoretical assertion of what God *can* do but a declaration of what God *actually does* ***“toward (or unto or for) us who believe.”*** This indescribably great and awesome power of the great and awesome God is intended for and on behalf of you and me!

This declaration would have had special significance for the people living in southwest Asia Minor who “lived in a milieu characterized by flourishing magical practices, the renowned Artemis cult, and a variety of other Phrygian mysteries and astrological beliefs” (Arnold, 167). In the midst of this religious diversity there was a common fear of hostile religious (i.e., demonic) powers. Paul’s prayer, notes O’Brien, “presupposes and emphasizes the supremacy of God’s power, which was shown particularly in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation to a position of authority over all things. In the light of this superior power of God, who works all things in accordance with the purpose of his will, there is no longer any reason for the readers to fear tyrannical evil powers” (138). What application might this have for us today?

I often get angry with myself when I resign my soul to live in fear of what people or demons might do to me. It’s crippling to live with that sort of anxiety and intense concern. But listen to what Paul is saying. The omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all things, wants you and me to experience for ourselves the surpassing greatness of his power! It’s ours for the taking. Don’t ever, ever, just give up, acquiescing to your circumstances or the promptings of your sinful flesh or the temptations of Satan. You have abiding in you the self-same power that God exerted when he raised Jesus from the dead!

This power was manifested in three ways:

First, God's power was manifested in the resurrection of Jesus (vv. 19b-20a)

Note again in v. 19b the piling up of terms. The power that is designed for believers is none other than the power by which God raised Jesus from the dead. Again, it wasn't just God's "**might**" (*ischus* = ability, latent strength), but the "**strength**" (*kratos* = power in action) of his "might." In addition, it is in accordance with the "**working**" (*energeia* = the efficiency of the power) of the "strength" of God's "might"! And all this . . . for believers!

Some have questioned why Paul doesn't mention the death of Jesus. There seem to be at least two reasons. First, the resurrection and exaltation are more suitable expressions of divine power than the cross, the latter typically portrayed in the NT as an expression of weakness ("For indeed he was crucified because of weakness, yet he lives because of the power of God" [2 Cor. 13:4].) Second, it is usually in relation to the *love* of God that Paul mentions the cross.

Second, God's power was manifested in the exaltation of Jesus (vv. 20b-21)

Paul alludes here to Psalms 110:1 and 8:6 (for the exaltation and ascension of Jesus, see Acts 2:33-35; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 3:21).

To be seated at someone's "**right hand**" was to be afforded the highest of honor, privilege, and authority. In the OT, God's "right hand" symbolized many things: victory (Ps. 20:6; 44:3; Isa. 41:10), the position of favor (1 Kings 2:19; Ps. 80:18; Jer. 22:24), and power (Exod. 15:6; Ps. 89:13; Isa. 48:13). O'Brien reminds us that "although Ephesians will later assert that God has seated believers with Christ in the heavenly realms (2:6), significantly there is no mention of their being placed at 'his right hand'. Christ's exalted status cannot be shared" (141).

The four words in v. 21a translated "rule", "authority", "power", and "dominion" are among several typical Pauline terms for demonic spirits found in Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10,15; Rom. 8:38. It is actually quite stunning to see the role that demons play in Paul's worldview. Here are the terms he employs:

Demons / Spirits / Spiritual Forces / Principalities / Authorities / Powers / Dominions / Thrones / Angels / Rulers / World Rulers / and Elemental Spirits.

These are the spiritual forces that constitute Satan's army with which we are engaged in constant battle. That can be more than a little frightening, until you hear what Paul says that God did to them through Jesus. As for the four that Paul mentions here:

- 1) rule (*archē*) - a ruler must have someone or something over which to exercise dominion (Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10; Rom. 8:38).
- 2) authority (*exousia*) - again, authority, by definition, demands a subordinate (Eph. 1:21; 3:10; Col. 1:16).
- 3) power (*dunameōs*) - Eph. 1:21; Rom. 8:38. In Mark 9:29 Jesus refers to a type of demon that "cannot come out but by prayer and fasting." The point seems to be that some demons are stronger and more powerful than others. Hence, there is implied a hierarchy or differentiation based on spiritual strength.
- 4) dominion (*kuriotēs*) - again, "lordship" or "dominion" over what, whom, and where (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16)?

If all angels and demons are of the same type or rank or carry the same authority, why are they described by such a variety of terms? It would also seem that with difference in rank comes difference in power, task, etc. These four words are not intended to be exhaustive, hence the phrase "every name that is named" which encompasses all other intelligent beings, whether good or evil, human or angelic.

The reference to the "heavenlies" "heavenly places" (v. 20b) indicates that for Paul "Christ had not simply disappeared, nor had he evaporated into a universal spirit, but he had departed to a new sphere, that of heaven, which would be appropriate to his transformed body's mode of existence" (Lincoln, 62).

Third, God's power was manifested when he subjected all things under his feet for the benefit of the church (vv. 22-23).

Not only has he been exalted overall, but all have been placed in subjection to him. This is a *present reality* and not merely a future hope. See Ps. 8:7; 1 Cor. 15:27; Heb. 2:8. "The brow once crowned with thorns now wears the diadem of universal sovereignty; and that hand, once nailed to the cross, now holds in it the sceptre of unlimited dominion. He who lay in the tomb has ascended the throne of (an) unbounded empire" (Eadie, 104).

I'm going to get a little ahead of myself in saying this, but we must not stop with the truth that God has exalted Jesus and put in subjection to him all demonic spirits, including Satan. Look with me at Ephesians 2:4-6 –

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and **raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.**"

Don't ever cower in fear or allow yourself to be intimidated by demons. They have been subjected to the authority of the risen Christ. But more than that, they have also been subjected to you! God reckons you to be one with Jesus, such that if demons are under his authority they are also under ours. See Luke 10:17-20. If demons are under the feet of the risen Christ, they also are under our feet! It reminds me of something I read in one of Neil Anderson's books: ***"Spiritual warfare is not a horizontal tug of war. It is a vertical chain of command!"***

Paul also declares that Jesus in his exaltation over the universe is God the Father's gift ***to the church!*** Thus, not only is the greatness of God's power "toward us who believe" (v. 19) but so too is Christ's cosmic dominion.

What does Paul mean by "all things"? All things are under his feet. All things are subject to his authority and Lordship. Can you comprehend what this means? It means that Jesus Christ is the sovereign, ruling king over every human being on earth, even over those who refuse to recognize this authority and live in active defiance of him. He is head over Atilla the Hun, Machiavelli, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Pol Pot, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, as well as the smallest and least significant unknown person in the outback of Australia. He is head and sovereign ruler over Covid-19, polio, all forms of paralysis, and every disease known to man. He is head and sovereign ruler over hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires, lightning and thunder. He is head and sovereign over every bug and sub-microscopic germ and all the ants on the face of the earth. He is head and sovereign over Wall Street and Hollywood and the NFL and the NBA and the OKC Thunder! He is head and sovereign over every government throughout the world, every dictator, every Senator and Governor and local councilman. He is head and sovereign over every star in the distant galaxies, over every atom and quark and electron and proton. He is head and sovereign over every educational institution, every elementary school, over the Internet, over every corporation and political party and military force.

And Paul is telling us that God wants you to see this and rejoice in it. But we are dull and blind and absorbed in our little worlds. So, if we are to see the truth about what God has done through Jesus in raising him from the dead and exalting him as head over all demons and angels and humans and animals, the Holy Spirit has to empower our hearts to see it and feel it and worship him for it.

Most often in Paul the Greek word *ekklēsia*, translated "church," refers to actual concrete gatherings of Christians in a local setting (see 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1,4; 2:14; Gal. 1:2; Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2). But on occasion, especially in Ephesians, it appears to refer to an entity that is much broader than any one local congregation. Such texts as Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:32; 12:28; 15:9; Phil. 3:6; Col. 1:18,24; and especially Eph. 3:10,21; 5:23,24,25,27,29,32, as well as here in 1:22, seem to have in view ***the universal Church***, the one unified "body" of all believers.

Observe Paul's use of the word "head" (*kephalē*) in this passage to indicate the authority of Jesus over the entire cosmos, including the church. The "head" is the ruling, guiding, and sustaining power over its body. This will become important later in Eph. 5 and Paul's discussion of the relation between husband and wife.

Whereas it is clear that "fullness" (4x in Ephesians – 1:10,23; 3:19; 4:13; 2x in Colossians – 1:19; 2:9; 6x elsewhere – Rom. 11:12,25; 13:10; 15:29; 1 Cor. 10:26; Gal. 4:4) further defines "body" (see esp. Eph. 3:19), which is the church, the meaning is ambiguous. The term "fullness" probably refers to the glorious revelation of God's presence and power. Or, as Snodgrass says, fullness "refers to God's making his presence and power felt" (80). The church now embodies, expresses, and mediates that glorious presence to the world. Having said that, there still remain several possible translations:

- "The church is that which fills up or completes Christ, he himself being the one who fills all things." The first half of this rendering is theologically inconsistent with what Paul says elsewhere of Jesus.
- "The church is that which fills up or completes Christ, he himself being the one who is filled by all things." Both halves of this rendering are heretical!
- "The church is the fullness of Christ, i.e., the church is filled by him, he himself being the one who is filled by all things." But Christ is already the fullness of God (Col. 1:19; 2:9) and it would be improper to speak of him as dependent on all things; indeed, he himself is *head* over all things!
- "The church is the fullness of Christ, i.e., the church is filled by him (his fullness having been imparted to it), he himself being the one who fills all things." The last option is the most likely one. Be it noted, also, that only the church, not the cosmos, is said to be Christ's body. Although Christ rules over the cosmos, he sustains a relationship of loving and leading intimacy only with his church, filling it with his Spirit, grace, and gifts. As for the idea that Christ "fills all in all," i.e., fills all things in all respects, O'Brien explains:

"Christ is the one who completely fills 'everything', that is, the whole of creation, the earthly and the heavenly, comprising all of humanity as well as the entire angelic realm, especially the rebellious powers. The nature of this filling is not to be explained in a physical or spatial sense: Christ pervades all things with his sovereign rule,

directing all things to their appointed end (cf. Heb. 1:3), and this entails his functioning as the powerful ruler over against the principalities (1:21) and giving grace and strength to his people, the church (4:13,15-16)" (151).

We must not overlook the final three words of v. 22. God has done all this, that is, he has exalted Jesus in absolute authority over everything in the universe, both good and evil, ***for the benefit of the church!*** When God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him above all demons and angels and earthly powers and put all things under his feet, he did it with us in mind! He did it for the church, the body of Christ. He did it so that we might live with complete confidence that he will bring all things to their proper consummation in Christ (v. 10). He did it so that we might serve and minister to one another and to a lost and dying world knowing that we have not only been commissioned by God but also empowered by him to bring all things, including demons, under the authority of the Lordship of Jesus. In other words, what we must understand is that this exalted status of the Lord Jesus Christ and the power that he exerts over the entire realm of Satan and his demons is ours as well!

And for how long will this last? Look again at v. 21. Christ's sovereign authority and rule over everything and everyone is not merely in this present age "but also in the one to come." In other words, don't ever live in fear that someday Christ's rule and authority will come to an end. It will exist for all eternity!

In conclusion, I trust that you can now see that Paul's primary emphasis in this paragraph is two-fold. First, he wants us to understand more deeply who God is as well as the glorious saving grace that is ours in Jesus. Second, he wants the Holy Spirit to awaken us to God's power that is always available to us in our battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil.