

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Speaker: Mr. Arthur Goodwin

The Epistle to the Ephesians: Ephesians 1:15-23 - The First Prayer

Those of you who listened to the “*Truth for Today*” programme last week will have heard an exposition of Ephesians 1:1-14. There we learn something of the will and purposes of God for the Ephesian Christians and, of course, for us too. We learned of being chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, the position that we have as sons, that we are accepted in the Beloved, that we are redeemed and forgiven, that we have an inheritance in Christ and that we are indwelt and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

In today’s meditation on Ephesians 1:15-23, we will be considering the first of two prayers recorded in this letter that the Apostle Paul requested of God for these Ephesian Christians. The second is in Ephesians 3:14-21 and, if the Lord will, we will come to that in due course. The object of this first prayer is that these believers may know and understand the truths they had already been taught, and further ones that the epistle would communicate to them.

Love for all Christians

Ephesians 1:15 indicates the good start that they had made in their practice of the Christian faith. This faith was well known and was demonstrated by the love they had for all the saints. Notice it is “all the saints”, not just those with whom they were well acquainted in the city of Ephesus.

This is in accord with the Lord’s own words for, in that last upper room discourse with His disciples, He had said to them, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). Love for the saints is clear evidence that we are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. How difficult it is for us to embrace this concept. Those in our own fellowship, perhaps a few in a limited wider field. But “all the saints” are those referred to by this same Apostle in his letter to the Corinthians, “All them that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Begin by giving thanks

So, in Ephesians 1:16, Paul commences his prayer but first of all he gives thanks. This again is in accord with his own exhortation, for, in Philippians 4:6, he writes that they should “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make their requests known to God”. Prayer should always be accompanied by thanksgiving and surely this latter should come first.

How easy it is to come to God with our shopping list of requests and immediately begin to pray for them and forget to give Him thanks for all his goodness to us, and for all the answers to previous prayers. Prayer is a serious exercise for the believer. It should be carried out in a thoughtful way and our approach to God should be orderly. First we give thanks, then we make our requests, and no doubt worship should also form part of our address to God. But all should be distinct and not jumbled up in a disorderly way.

The God of our Lord Jesus Christ

So in Ephesians 1:17 Paul begins his requests for them. Notice that he addresses the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this prayer the Lord is regarded as man, not as the Son of God. It speaks of His death, it speaks of His being raised from the dead, it speaks of Him being set at the Father’s right hand, all things are put under His feet and He is the Head of the assembly.

It is in perfect manhood that our Lord embraces all these acts and positions, and it is vital that we understand when the Lord is being addressed in Scripture as “Son of Man” or “Son of God”. The Jehovah Witnesses are propagators of fundamental error because they fail to distinguish these two estates of the Lord. On the Cross, the cry of the Lord is “My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). Here He is dying as Man: as God He could not die. So, He is addressing His God.

The Father of Glory

Paul not only addresses God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as such but he also speaks of Him as “the Father of Glory” (Ephesians 1:17), the only occasion when this title is used. We do have “the glory of the Father” but not, as here, “the Father of Glory”. What grand thoughts does such a title conjure up? The Lord tells us that He is going to take us to the Father’s house (John 14:1-3) - what a scene of glory that will be. And the Father is the source and strength of it all.

Paul’s first request is that God would grant these Ephesian Christians the spirit of wisdom and revelation, and the purpose of this is that they might enter into all the counsels of God. Now all of these are made known to us in Christ and through Christ. He came to reveal the Father.

In His prayer to the Father in John 17, the Lord Jesus says that He has given His disciples Thy name, God’s name (John 17:6). Again “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me” (John 17:8). Hence if we are to know the counsels of God, we need to have a “full knowledge”, for that is how the word in Ephesians 1:17 should be translated. A full knowledge of Him - that is Christ. Not just a superficial knowledge but a full understanding of His Person, His glories, His work, all that He is, all that He has done, all that He is now doing. Even the great Apostle’s desire, as he records in Philippians 3:10, is “that I may know Him...”

Heart Exchanges with Christ

In Ephesians 1:18 we learn that this understanding and knowledge of Christ is not to be merely of the mind; the text is better rendered “that the eyes of your heart being enlightened”. God would teach us through the affections and not simply through the intellect. So often did Christ teach during His days of ministry upon earth. He had compassion on the widow of Nain and raised her son from the dead (Luke 7:11-18). What an effect that must have had upon her. The woman with the alabaster box of ointment - we read that she loved much (Luke 7:36-50). What must have been her feelings as she left the presence of the Lord with His words still in her ears “Thy sins are forgiven”? (Luke 7:48).

The Jews in John 11:36 testified for His love for Lazarus and how much Mary Magdalene learned as she stood weeping at the tomb on the day of resurrection (John 20:11-18). She supposed Him to be the gardener (John 20:15) but the Lord revealed Himself to her with the one word, “Mary” (John 20:16). Then He touches her heart with the words, “My Father and your Father, My God and your God” (John 20:17). We will learn much more by heart exchanges with Christ than by reading about Christ. So in Ephesians 1:18-19 the Apostle makes three great requests:

1. That they may know the hope of His calling
2. That they may know the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints
3. That they may know the exceeding greatness of His power exercised on their behalf

Let us look a little into these.

1. That they may know the hope of His calling

The hope of His calling, that is God’s calling. What is it? It is not the return of Christ at his second advent. In the Ephesian epistle the saints are looked upon as already in heaven, in the heavenlies. Actually, of course, they are still upon earth but with a great heavenly sphere before them. Paul, in Philippians 3:14, speaks of this. He says, “I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” And in Ephesians 1:4-6 we have what that calling envisages. We are to be holy and without blame and before Him in love. We have a position with Him as sons and we are accepted in the beloved - that is in Christ. Accepted is somewhat formal and cold, the better translation is “taken into favour in the beloved.” Taken into favour in the beloved - what a place! And all part of God’s calling.

2. That they may know the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints

Then we have the glory of His inheritance in the saints. Notice it is God’s inheritance, not the believers’ inheritance; this we have in Ephesians 1:14. This thought can be best understood by a reference to God’s former order when the Jewish nation was His chosen people. In Deuteronomy 4:20, Moses declares to the nation, “But the LORD hath taken you and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance as ye are”. So we learn that in that day Israel was Jehovah’s inheritance. He had prepared for them a land, the land of promise, Canaan, and although it had been occupied by many different tribes of people, nevertheless Jehovah Himself declares, in Leviticus 25:23, “...the land is mine...”. When God took possession of Canaan he did it through His people. Today His inheritance is “in the saints” (Ephesians 1:18); not that the saints themselves are the inheritance, but in a coming day of glory He will take possession of the earth. And how will he do it? He will do it by Christ who will be accompanied by His saints. Then we read that the earth will be filled with the Glory of God as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14). Paul prayed that these Ephesian Christians would comprehend these wonderful, marvellous truths. And surely it should be our privilege; indeed it is our privilege, to enter into them in a fuller way.

3. That they may know the exceeding greatness of His power exercised on their behalf

We read of the exceeding greatness of His power, a mighty power, and how was it revealed? By the resurrection of Christ. The greatness of that mighty power has been displayed in many ways. For instance, in Psalm 8, the psalmist asks the question: "When I consider thy heavens, the works of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained - what is man ...?" (Psalm 8:3). Then, in Job 38, God - addressing that man of old - asks, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundation of the earth? Declare if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures of it if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are its foundations cast? Or who laid its cornerstone?" (Job 38:4-6). And again, "Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it? ... Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion? Canst thou bring forth the Mazzaroth in its season? Or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons? Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? Canst thou set its dominion in the earth?" (Job 38:29-33).

Jehovah delivered Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm - ten plagues (Exodus 7:14-12:36) demonstrated His power and He divided the waters of the Red sea (Exodus 14:1-31) in order that His people might pass through on dry land, and then brought those same waters together to completely overwhelm the enemies of His people. But such exhibitions of power are not referred to here, rather it is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The death and burial of Christ outwardly might have been an evidence of weakness. Indeed, 2 Corinthians 13:4 says, "...he was crucified through weakness..." Contemplate that scene: outwardly Satan has triumphed; in the desert he might have been defeated but now, with the Lord in the tomb, his power, the power of death, has proved supreme. One can imagine Satan chortling with satisfaction and robbing his hands with glee, having at last overcome his most hated foe. So he thought. Paul, in seven words in his sermon at Antioch in Pisidia, announces the hollowness of his victory: "But God raised him from the dead" (Acts 13:30). Who is this One who has died, who is this man who was hated by all, was vilified and was ultimately crucified in Jerusalem, on Mount Calvary? It was none other than the Son of God, become man. The man who in death bore the penalty of His people's sin. But in that work He completely glorified God, He restored that which He took not away (Psalm 69:4) and God responded in a demonstration of the greatness of His power by raising Him from the dead. Not only that; He set Him at His own right hand in the heavens above, as recorded in Ephesians 1:21. He has been exalted far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named. And, says the Apostle, "this power is available to us-ward who believe" (Ephesians 1:19).

How little do we appreciate what is available to us and how little we avail ourselves of it. How often in our lives, in our spiritual experience, difficulties come our way. Adversaries, opposers, constantly temptations assail us. The power of Satan is constantly arraigned against us. Sometimes we are at our wits end to know what to do. To all such assaults against us our answer should be, "We know the exceeding greatness of His power." Not only in our daily living; in our service for Christ too, this power is available. What might we not be able to do, what exploits might we be able to accomplish, if only we had the faith to lay hold on the resources that are at our disposal? No doubt that this is an exercise of faith; sadly our faith is so often weak.

In Ephesians 1:22 we find that all things are put under His feet, not only is He set above principalities and powers, but everything, all things are brought into subjection to Him. Morally, of course, that is true now, but as Hebrews 2:8 records "But now we see not yet all things are put under him." This is man's day and the Lord does not yet assert His authority. But He will and it will be manifest in a coming day when all will be subject to him. Satan himself will have been removed from the scene and will be in the bottomless pit, no longer able to thwart the purposes of God. And our Lord Jesus will reign in righteousness and in equity.

Incomplete without His Church

Ephesians 1:22b-23 have a further thought and declare that Christ has been given to be head over all things to the Church. He is, of course, "the head of the church", as Ephesians 5:23 declares. This position of our Lord is again something that is very little realised and understood today. Ask anyone "Who is the head of the Church?" and you will get all sorts of answers: the Queen, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope, or perhaps some other, but there is only one true head of the Church and that is the one "who loved it and gave Himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25) - the Lord Jesus Christ. It must surely be a very wrong thing indeed to appropriate to oneself a title that is only true of our blessed Lord. But in our text He is not head of the Church as such, but he is head over all things to the Church.

What does that mean? I think we find the answer to it in Ephesians 1:23. The Church is His body, that is it is part of Himself, it is His fullness. What Ephesians 1:23 is saying, and we say it very reverently, is that Christ as man, in His position of headship over all things, is incomplete without His Church, His body. Adam was incomplete without Eve; (Genesis 2:18-25) she shared his place of dominion. In that millennial day to which we have already referred, all this will be manifest. Christ will be the supreme one, the one who is over all, and we, His saints, His Church, are part of Him and will be manifested with Him. These are the things Paul prayed that the Ephesians might know.

Shall we pray. Our gracious God and father, we thank Thee that Thou are the all wise God, whose thoughts are far above our thoughts, dost desire that we are children by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and His work upon the Cross should have an understanding and knowledge of all Thy ways and counsels. So Thou hast given us Thy Word, The Holy Scriptures and we now pray that with the help of the Holy Spirit, we may have a fuller understanding of all that they reveal. We ask it in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

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