

The Ephesians Series
Praying for the Person Who Has Everything (Part 1)
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For those of you who are visiting with us, I should mention that you find us having, about two or three months ago, started Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a wonderful study of this great book. This first chapter is rich with truth, and we find ourselves just at verse 15, after several months of study. But it's been a wonderful time, and we're glad you're joining with us as we continue our study together.

As we enter the flu season, perhaps you've read some of the articles that are proliferating these days, with growing concerns about a future world-wide epidemic of unprecedented proportions. Whether virus or a super-bug, many immunologists predict that such an epidemic is certain--that it will eventually come. Of course, it remains to be seen whether it will equal those that have already come. If you're familiar with history you know that the greatest such epidemic in the history of the world so far, occurred in medieval Europe. It was called the Black Death, not just in Europe, but really spread across the continent. One encyclopedia describes the event this way. It says, "from the years 1347 to 1351, just four short years, the Black Death, a massive and deadly pandemic swept through Asia, Europe, and Africa. It may have reduced the world's population from 450 million to 350 million. 100 million people died. China, where it originated lost about half of its population in those four years. About 65 million people died. Europe lost 25 million, about a third of its population. And Africa lost an eighth of its population, or 10 million people." The article goes on to say, "This makes the Black Death the largest death toll from any known non-viral epidemic." The saddest thing about the Black Death was that the epidemic was misdiagnosed and poorly treated

There are a number of articles that document the kinds of treatments that were used for people during those terrible pandemics. One article reads "Various concoctions of herbs were given and used for the medical treatment of different parts of the body and the varying symptoms of the disease. Medical treatment for head pains was with sweet-smelling herbs, such as rose, lavender, sage, and bay. Medical treatment for stomach pains and sickness was with wormwood, mint, and balm. Lung problems were given the medical treatment of licorice and comfrey. Vinegar was widely used as a cleansing agent, as it was believed that it would kill the disease. But blood-letting, or cutting open a vein nearest the infected part of the body was commonly thought to be

the best way to treat the illness. Horrific. With such a complete misdiagnosis and treatment of the disease, literally millions of additional victims died unnecessarily of the plague.

But as tragic, as I thought about it, as the consequences were for the wrong treatment of what most historians believe was the bubonic plague, it is equally tragic, perhaps even more tragic, that as Christians, we often misdiagnose and mistreat our spiritual infirmities, our spiritual problems. Most of the time when we think about our spiritual troubles with sin, we think about our slow spiritual growth, what do we assume the problem is? What do we diagnose the problem to be? Well, we might think perhaps it's a lack of spiritual resolve. It's a lack of spiritual will-power or determination. Or maybe we come to the conclusion that our struggles are because of a lack of spiritual resources. We simply don't have the resources around us to withstand sin, or to grow in our likeness to Jesus Christ. Another common diagnosis that we make is that the real problem, the reason I struggle with this particular sin, or this habit, or the lack of growth in my life, is because I simply don't have sufficient power. I have a lack of spiritual power. And if I had it, then I would see these changes occur in my life.

But the New Testament says none of those things is our greatest spiritual problem. Instead, Paul says that our greatest spiritual problem is a failure in our knowledge. Our greatest spiritual problem is that we don't truly understand God, and we don't truly understand what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In fact, this is the very thing that Paul prays for the Ephesians. Most of Paul's letters begin with prayers. Either thanksgiving, or petitions, or a combination of the two. In Ephesians, he doesn't get to the prayer until after this sort of outburst of praise that we've been studying together, that began in verse 3 of chapter 1 and ran all the way down through verse 14. But he does eventually get there, in verse 15. You follow along as I read his prayer for the Ephesians

“For this [very] reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which *exists* among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention *of you* in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. *These are* in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule

and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Now this is the second of six very long Greek sentences in Ephesians. The first one we studied together began in verse 3 and ran all the way down through verse 14.

The second lengthy sentence, the one I’ve just read for you, begins in verse 15 and runs through the end of this first chapter. The theme of this second long sentence, or even paragraph we could call it accurately, is how to pray for the spiritual growth of others. And this is a skill that all of us need to learn. Every Christian must learn how to pray for the spiritual growth and advancement of himself and of others. And here the apostle Paul models for us how it is we should do that. He even tells us what we should most pray for. So, his prayer in Ephesians 1 serves as a kind of model for our prayers, for those over whom we have responsibility, or for whom we have concern, and even a model for our prayers for ourselves as well. In these verses, we will learn together, Paul teaches us several realities about prayer. He teaches us, number one, the reasons for intercessory prayer. Number two, the pattern of intercessory prayer, and thirdly, the content of intercessory prayers.

Let’s look first at the reasons behind intercessory prayer. Look at verse 15. “For this reason, I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints.” In this verse, Paul tells us why he prayed for the Ephesians, what motivated him to pray for these people; and that in turn tells us what should motivate us to pray for others.

There are two reasons he gives here for intercessory prayer. The first is because of a genuine profession of faith in Christ, because of a genuine profession In verse 15 Paul says, I pray for you because I have heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you. Now remember, Paul had served these people and lived among them for almost three years. But as he writes this letter he’s been away from them for nearly six years, and he writes back to them, and as he writes to the church in Ephesus, and as he writes to the satellite churches all in the surrounding region, he says to them; over the last six years as I’ve been away, I have continued to hear about your faith. Specifically, he says, your faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now, we’ve heard that all of our lives. We live in 21st century Dallas, and we’re surrounded by a Christian culture, so that doesn’t shock us for him to address these people as having faith in the

Lord Jesus. But rewind in your minds back to this church in Ephesus. Just a few years before, all of the people that are now a part of that church did not have their faith in the Lord Jesus. Instead, their faith was in Diana of the Ephesians, the great goddess whose temple, one of the seven ancient wonders of the world, stood there in Ephesus. That's where their faith was, but now, their faith is in the Lord Jesus. Paul says to them, not only was it true of your initial act of faith at your salvation, but over the last six years I have continued to this day to hear that your faith rests in Jesus Christ alone.

By the way, Paul loves this title for Jesus, The Lord Jesus. The most frequent title he uses for Christ is the full title, The Lord Jesus Christ. Some fifty times in his letters. But he uses this shortened form, The Lord Jesus, about twenty times. And it's a wonderful balance this name provides: the Lord Jesus. Because Jesus was our Lord's human name--His incarnational name. It literally means Jehovah, or JHWH saves, rescues. It speaks of Jesus as a Savior. The Greek word for Lord on the other hand, "kurios," was used of anyone in authority. So, when we refer to Jesus as Lord, we're acknowledging His right to rule over us. It is saying, Jesus is my rightful master. So, when we refer to Jesus as the Lord Jesus, as Paul does here, we are acknowledging that the historical person called Jesus is to us both Savior and Lord. Paul prayed for these people because their faith was alone in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Notice he adds, in verse 15 that he had heard not only of their faith, but of their love for all the saints. You see, their love showed that their faith was genuine. Their faith was demonstrated to be genuine because it was accompanied by this love for all the saints, that is, for all Christians. Now why should this be shocking? Remember what Paul tells us about how we are by nature. In Titus 3:3 he says we, by nature, are "hateful and hating one another." You know that. Look around you. People have a veil of civility, but beneath them there is an innate hatred of other people, and self-advancement. But these people are different. They have moved from being hateful and hating, to having a love for all of God's people. That shows that their faith is in fact genuine, because only God can produce that kind of change. Love is, after all, the fruit that the Spirit produces when He's present. In John 13:35 Jesus said to His disciples on that night before His crucifixion, there in the upper room. He said, "by this will all men know that you are my disciples."

How? Because you love one another. In 1 John 4 the apostle John puts it this way. He says, 1 John 4:7,

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

Love then becomes the barometer of the reality of their faith in Jesus Christ. So, Paul says I am praying for these people because they have demonstrated both by their continuing faith in Christ and by their love for others, that they’re the real thing. They were genuine believers.

By the way, let me just stop here and remind you that the apostle Paul urges us in 2 Corinthians 13:5 to examine ourselves whether we’re in the faith. This should be something that we do. We regularly examine our hearts to see if we’re in the faith. And how do we do that? Well here is a barometer. Here is an indication of the genuineness of our faith. This is a test. Are both of these things present in our lives? One is a test of belief and the other is a test of practice. Can you say this morning that your faith is totally and completely in Jesus as Savior and Lord, and in Him alone? And can you say that there is within your heart this morning a genuine love for God’s people? If both of those things are true, then it confirms to you that you’re in Christ. If one of them is missing, then you’re not. You’re not a Christian, no matter what your profession may be.

When people around us profess the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord, and when they evidence the reality of that claim by a love for others, then we should pray this prayer for them just as Paul did for the Ephesians. He says, listen, I pray for you because I see you’re genuine. You’ve put your faith in Christ alone, and the love that you show for all Christians evidences the reality of that faith.

There’s a second reason behind intercessory prayer. Not only because of a genuine profession, but also because of shared spiritual blessings, shared spiritual blessings. Notice how Paul begins verse 15. “For this reason,” that expression points back to the entire paragraph before it, the paragraph we’ve studied, about all those spiritual blessings that are ours. Paul is saying, in light of what I’ve just told you is yours in Christ, for that reason, I pray for you.

Peter O’Brien in his commentary writes: “this is a petition that those who have been so richly blessed by God may learn about hope and glory and power more deeply. Clearly the apostle wants his readers to appropriate more fully every spiritual blessing that has graciously been given them in Christ.” Paul says here are the blessings that are yours, and we’ve studied it over many weeks together. And then immediately he says, because of all of those blessings that are

yours, for this reason I pray for you, because of the shared spiritual blessings we enjoy together. Do you pray for others because they are in the same family of God as you? Because they make a genuine profession of faith in Christ accompanied by love, and because they have been given these incredible resources you have been given, but of which they have not yet begun to take full advantage?

Do you pray for others in that way? In fact, let me ask you more generally. In light of this text, do you pray for the spiritual growth and advancement of other people? This week, have you prayed for the spiritual growth and advancement of others? ... of your spouse? ... of your roommate? ... of your children? ... of your parents? ... of your extended family and friends? ... for the people in this church? Do you pray for the spiritual growth of anyone? In fact, do you even pray for your own spiritual growth? Paul was driven to pray for the Ephesians because of their genuine profession of faith, and because of their shared spiritual blessings, because he wanted them to enjoy them even more. Those are the reasons for intercessory prayer.

Secondly, I'd like for us to study together the pattern of intercessory prayer, the pattern. Look at verse 16. I "do not cease giving thanks for you while making mention of you in my prayers" Prayer had a huge priority in the life of the apostle Paul. I have here in my notes a list of references which we don't have the time for me to take you through, where over and over again, Paul talks about his prayers for the people to whom he writes. In almost every letter, he references the reality that he prays for them.

So, we can learn much about the model or pattern of true intercessory prayer just by listening to Paul share his prayers, by paying attention to Paul. As we watch him, as we listen to him, as we learn from him in this prayer, we discover several qualities that are always present in intercessory prayer. As he lays out the pattern of his own prayer, we see these qualities in stark contrast to our own.

What is intercessory prayer like? Let me give you these qualities that Paul set in the pattern of his own prayer life. Intercessory prayer is, first of all, individual.. This is the pattern. It's individual. Notice verse 15. Go back to the very beginning of verse 15, and you catch the subject I. I pray. You see, while there is a place for corporate prayer, praying together with other Christians, the lives of all the great saints have always been dominated by private, individual prayer to God, and Paul is no exception. He says, I pray. Listen, prayer is not something for the great saints. It's not something for those who know God better than you.

Prayer is for every Christian. It is like your air hose to heaven. Without prayer, your spiritual life cannot survive. If you claim Christ, then you must pray. Jesus assumes that we will pray. You remember, as He begins the Sermon on the Mount, He gets to chapter 6 and He's talking about spiritual exercises and He says to His disciples, 'when you pray'. He assumes that that will be a reality. And just a few verses later, He commands it. In Matthew 6:9, He says to His disciples, "Pray then in this way." Pray is an imperative. It's a command. Pray, Jesus said. And that's true for each of us. Prayer is individual. It is our lifeline to heaven.

The second quality of intercessory prayer, not only is it individual, but it's persistent. As you look at the pattern of Paul's prayer, you see this persistence. Look at verse 16. I "do not cease" giving thanks and making mention of you in my prayers. Now that doesn't mean that Paul literally never stops praying. It doesn't mean that every waking moment, his mind is occupied in talking to God. This is an expression that was common in the first century. Even ancient pagan letters began with a similar claim. What Paul means when he says 'I don't cease praying for you' is that whenever he prayed, and that was often as we'll see in a moment, he faithfully remembered to pray for the Ephesians. He was persistent in praying for them. By the way, he urges this same persistence from us. Just a couple of chapters over, in Ephesians 6 he says to the Ephesians, in verse 18 of Ephesians 6, "with all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit."

I want prayer to be something persistent in your life. This is true throughout Paul's writings, by the way. Let me just give you a couple of examples. In Romans 12:12, as Paul lays out in the practical application of the gospel that he's just taught, this sort of staccato list of commands, in Romans 12:12 he says this: I want you to be devoted to prayer. In Colossians 4:2 he says the same thing. He says:

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of* thanksgiving, praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have been imprisoned.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, again in the end of his letter to the Thessalonians he has this list of commands, and he says, and this is the most famous of them probably, in 5:17: "Pray without ceasing"

Again, Paul does not mean that you ought to pray every waking moment of your life. That's an impossibility. He's saying that you're to be persistent in prayer. It is to be a persistent reality in your life. Don't ever stop praying. If you're going to truly intercede for someone, you don't pray for something once and move on, Paul says, I don't cease to pray for you there in Ephesus. If it's important, and if the person is an ongoing concern in your heart and life, then you keep bringing that issue back to God. Paul says every time I pray, I pray for you Ephesians. True intercessory prayer is persistent.

A third quality in Paul's pattern of prayer that we can see here is that it was balanced. It was balanced. Notice verse 16: "Giving thanks for you while making mention of you in our prayers." Paul summarizes his prayer life in two great balancing components: giving thanks to God, and making requests of God. By the way, these were both standard conventions of first century letter-writing.

One of my favorite places in the world is the British Museum. If you've never had the chance to go there, I encourage you to make time when you're in London. In the British Museum, there is a papyrus letter that was written in Egypt by a sister to her brother. The letter is dated with the date that would be equivalent to, in our calendar to July 24, 172 BC. So, 200 years before Paul. The letter begins like this. "I continue praying to the gods for your welfare. I am well myself and so is the child, and all in the house. ['Continually making mention of you', that is, in prayer, same expression as Paul uses.] When I got your letter, immediately I thanked the gods for your welfare." So, 200 years before Paul, this is how ancient letters were composed. But Paul takes that conventional prayer that would have been for their welfare, and he turns it, in every case, into a rich prayer. And in Ephesians, he turns it into a rich prayer for their spiritual enlightenment. As Robinson, one commentator, puts it, "what to others might have been a mere formula of correspondence, becomes to Paul a vehicle of the highest thought."

So, he has this balance in his prayers. He begins with giving thanks. On one side of his prayers is giving thanks. This word by the way is only used two times in the New Testament of giving thanks to people. The other thirty-six times it's used of giving thanks to God. We're approaching the Thanksgiving season, when we will set aside time for thanksgiving. But what exactly does that mean? What does it mean to give thanks to God? Harold Hoehner, in his excellent commentary on Ephesians, puts it like this "It signifies always the outward expression in word or deed of the interior sentiment of gratitude for a favor received." In other words, thanksgiving is a response in word or deed that comes from the heart. There's gratitude in the heart, and therefore the gratitude in the heart spills over either in words or in deeds in an outward

way, where they can be demonstrated, for the favors you have received from God. Giving thanks to God in this way was of huge importance to the apostle. He brings us back to this over and over again. In Ephesians 5, in fact, here in this same letter, in verse 20, after he says “be filled with the Spirit” he says one of the immediate effects of being filled with the Spirit, Ephesians 5:20, is that you will always give thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to God, even the Father.

You want to know if you’re controlled by the Spirit of God, if you’re dominated by the Spirit of God? Do you have a truly grateful heart that just keeps giving God thanks for all of the incredible blessings that He’s poured out upon you? In Philippians 4:6 Paul says, “be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God”.

Whenever you’re praying, thanksgiving is a part of that, Paul says. In Colossians 3, the next letter, in verse 15, the parallel passage to the “be filled with the Spirit” of Ephesians 5. He says in Colossians 3:15:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, [and then when you sing, he says, you will sing] ... with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

This was absolutely crucial to Paul. He closes, in that list of commands I Thessalonians 5, after he says “pray without ceasing;” he says, “in everything give thanks for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

You know, so many Christians run around looking for God’s will. What’s God’s will for me? Well, here it is, God’s will for you: part of God’s will, clearly revealed in His Word, is that you would give thanks to God in everything. This is absolutely crucial.

Now, back in Ephesians 1, what is it Paul is giving thanks for? In the context here, and in many other of his letters, next to his thanks for Christ and the cross and what was accomplished for him there, he was most thankful for people, for people. Let me urge you, this Thanksgiving, to make sure that you spend time thanking God for the people that He’s brought into your life. The people that He’s used to influence you, to shape you, to mold you, maybe a parent or a teacher or

a friend or a family member, spouse. People are one of God's greatest gifts to us. And Paul understood that. Read his letters, and see how often he was saying I thank God for you. He wasn't wasting words. He wasn't flattering them. That was the genuine expression of his heart. I thank God for you. He was giving thanks.

The second element or component of Paul's prayer life, that kept it balanced, was not only did he give thanks, but, it's translated here as, "I make mention of you." That's equivalent to I offer a request about you. In a word, the kind of prayer Paul is talking about here is for the needs of others. It's called intercession, because it's interceding before God on behalf of someone else. And to Paul, this kind of prayer is absolutely crucial. Just a moment ago, I read from Colossians 4 where Paul pleads for intercessory prayer for him and his ministry. He says, listen, pray for me, that my ministry will be successful. But he also saw it as crucial, this intercessory prayer, as crucial for the spiritual growth of others, as we can see from Ephesians 1:15. Have you ever thought about that? That the spiritual growth of others is tied to our prayers on their behalf. So, Paul's prayers were balanced between thanksgiving and petition.

A fourth quality of true intercessory prayer is that it's unselfish. Verse 16 he says "[I give] "thanks" [and I make] "mention *of you*." I give "thanks for you." Listen, it's okay to pray for ourselves. But I want you to think for a moment about what percentage of your time and prayer this past week was spent praying for yourself, and your needs and your problems, and your circumstances. And what percentage of your prayer was for others? Prayer should often be for others. Our Lord taught us that, didn't He, in the Lord's prayer. The Lord's prayer itself encapsulates our brothers and sisters in Christ with us. He taught us to pray like this:

"Our Father who is in Heaven, hallowed be Your name." [And then when He gets to the specific requests, He says] "give us this day our daily bread ... Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Don't lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [True intercessory prayer is always about others. It's unselfish.]

A final quality of Paul's prayers is that they were regular. As we look at his pattern, we see that his prayers were regular. Look at the end of verse 16. He says I'm always giving thanks and making mention of you in my prayers. Notice plural, in my prayers. Paul says, I regularly pray. In the Old Testament, and in the Jewish tradition there were normally three times a day that were customary to pray. There was time set aside in the morning, at noon, and in the late afternoon to evening. Often the morning and afternoon prayers were connected to the offering of the sacrifice

at the temple. If you lived in Jerusalem, you went to the temple for the morning sacrifice, for the afternoon sacrifice, and it was a time of prayer. You remember in the early chapters of Acts, Peter is making his way to the temple when he encounters the lame man, and he's going there at the hour of sacrifice to offer prayer to God. The point is this: Paul's prayers were a regular part of his day. Always, at least three times a day, and probably much more than that for Paul.

Now, we've talked about this before. I would encourage you to make your prayer life regular. Don't wait to be led into prayer. Make it a part of your schedule. Maybe it's morning and noon and evening, or maybe it's like we talked about before where it's when you first get up in the morning, when you begin your work, whatever that is, at noon, and then again at bedtime. Whatever the schedule, make a schedule. Make a routine. Make a commitment to yourself that prayer is going to be a regular part of your life. So there's the model or pattern for intercessory prayer. As we look at Paul's, we see that it's individual, it's persistent, it's balanced, it's unselfish, and it's regular. Is your prayer life like that? Should be. Paul's prayer life is intended to serve as a model for our own.

So, we've seen the reasons for intercessory prayer. We've seen the model or pattern of intercessory prayer. Now we come to the heart of Paul's prayer, and the key to effective intercessory prayer. It's the content of intercessory prayer. The remaining verses of chapter 1 spell out for us the content of Paul's prayer, and in the time that we have remaining today I want us just to begin to look at it together. Look at verse 17: "[I] do not cease ... making mention of *you* in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him."

Notice first, how Paul refers to God here. That's important because the name Paul uses for God usually connects to what he's going to pray for, there's some correlation. So why does he use these two titles for God here in Ephesians 1:17? Look at the title: "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ." That title points back to verse 3. Notice it's the same basic title he used there. Paul is saying this. Listen, the one to whom I'm praying to help you grasp your spiritual blessings is the same one who gave us all these spiritual blessings. So, it's important for Him that we understand and appreciate them.

The second title is an unusual one: "the Father of glory." God is called the Lord of glory, the King of glory, but this is an unusual expression, here. And it's a title that points to God as the source of all glory, and it's probably best to take it here as the focus on His power. Many commentators take this approach. It's speaking of His omnipotence. His glory in the sense of

nothing can stand in His way. However difficult the request may be, this God is powerful enough to answer it.

So, now that we understand why he appeals to God like this, let's look at the request itself. Look at verse 17. I pray "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation."

Stop there. The heart of Paul's request is that God would give us a spirit. What does that mean? What kind of spirit? Well, there are only three possibilities. He could be praying that we would receive a human spirit. Secondly, he could be praying that we would receive the Holy Spirit, but of course as Christians, we already have both of those. We already have a human spirit: we already have the Holy Spirit, so it's best to see the third option. He's praying that we would have a spirit in the sense of a disposition, is the best way to understand it. The word 'spirit', by the way, is used like this in other places. In Romans 8:15 it's described as the spirit of slavery or the spirit of adoption. In Galatians 6:1 we read of the spirit of gentleness, or the disposition of gentleness. So, by spirit here, Paul means a capacity or a disposition, a mindset. But of course, as we look at whatever this spirit is, this disposition we're to have, the source of it would of course be the Holy Spirit because He's the one who personally applies redemption to us. So, Paul is praying that we will have, by the work of the Spirit in us, a disposition of wisdom and of revelation. Wisdom, we learned back in verse 8, refers to the knowledge of eternal questions. It refers to the knowledge which sees things as they really are, which knows things as they really are. Paul is saying, listen, I want you to have wisdom in this sense. I want you to really know what God has done for you in Christ. And then he says, "revelation." Revelation is a word that means literally to unveil or to disclose something that's hidden. The Holy Spirit has already revealed the truth through His Word. Look back in Ephesians 3:3.

Paul says, "by revelation" [there's our word] "there was made known to me the mystery, [that] ... "I wrote" [to you about, verse 5. This mystery was] "... in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed [there's the verb form of the word revelation] to His holy apostles and prophets [by] the Spirit."

Listen, the Spirit of God has already disclosed or revealed His truth through the apostles and prophets. It's recorded for us in the word of God. What we need now is to understand it better. We need to grasp its full significance and live in light of it.

Listen carefully. If we had to reduce what Paul is praying for the Ephesians here to a single word, that single word would be “illumination,” Illumination. Robert Raymond, in his systematic theology defines illumination in this way. He said “it is the Holy Spirit’s enabling of Christians to understand and to apply the Scriptures they have studied.” It’s insight into the meaning of Scripture.

This is exactly what the psalmist prays for. You remember in Psalm 119:18. What does the psalmist say? “Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things [in] your law.” He didn’t mean open my physical eyes. He meant, God, help me to see, give me insight into what Your Word teaches. So, we must pray for illumination as Paul did. We must pray that the Spirit would help us understand the Scripture. But our responsibility doesn’t end with prayer.

We must also study and meditate on the Scripture. Turn to Psalm 119 for a moment. There’s a section here that really deals with this issue. Psalm 119:97. Many of you spent time in the last several weeks, as I encouraged you to, going through this great Psalm. This is a powerful section. Verse 97. He says,

O how I love Your law. It is my meditation all the day. [I think deeply about it. I meditate on it.] Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Your precepts. [Now look at verse 99.] He says, I have more insight than all my teachers.

The word insight here refers to the ability to use what you know, the knowledge that you’ve accumulated. He says, I have more true insight into the reality of things than all my teachers. Did the Psalmist read more than his teachers? Did he have more experience than his teachers? No. So how did he get more insight? Look at the second half of the verse. He explains. For, (because) Your ... [statutes] are my meditation. Now, how does meditating on Scripture bring that kind of insight? The answer is illumination. The Holy Spirit’s illumination. That’s the key. As we meditate, and as we pray, the Spirit does what we cannot do. He gives us illumination.

So, what is illumination? I’ve given you a basic definition, but let me take you a little further. J.I. Packer gives what I think is the best explanation of illumination. Listen carefully. This is a little longer quote than I normally read, but I want you to stay with me because this is what Paul

is praying. This is what you need for your spiritual growth. This is what I need. Listen to what he writes:

Illumination is not a giving of new revelation, but a work within us that enables us to grasp and to love the revelation that is there before us in the biblical text as heard and read and as explained by teachers and writers. [He says] Sin in our mental and moral system clouds our minds and wills so that we miss and resist the force of Scripture. God seems to us remote to the point of unreality. [Can you ever connect with that? God seems at times remote to the point of unreality. He goes on to say,] And in the face of God's truth, we are dull and apathetic. [Have you ever felt that way as you turned to the pages of Scripture. It just seems like it's dead. There's nothing there for you. We are dull and apathetic. He goes on to say,] the Spirit, however, opens and unveils our minds and tunes our hearts so that we understand. As by inspiration He provided Scripture truth for us, so now by illumination, He interprets it to us. [Listen carefully. Here's the key.] Illumination is thus the applying of God's revealed truth to our hearts so that we grasp as reality for ourselves what the sacred text sets forth.

Did you notice those key expressions? The Spirit in illumination helps us to grasp, to love, to see, to grasp as reality for ourselves what the sacred text teaches. That's what illumination is, but let me give you a picture, because sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, as they say. What does it look like? What is illumination like?

Think with me for a moment of a beautiful stained glass window in one of the magnificent cathedrals of Europe. Some of you have had the opportunity to travel there and see them in person. All of us have had the opportunity to see them via pictures and television. If you were to see that magnificent stained glass window on a dark night, you would essentially understand what's going on in that picture. You would interpret it accurately. You would be able to make out the images. You would be able to understand it. But it would make no impact on you personally. It's flat. It's lifeless. It's dead to you. You simply, basically, understand what's happening, but it affects you not at all.

But if you were to walk into that same cathedral the next morning, and you were to look at that same window as the full blazing light of the morning sun streams through it, then it would literally come to life. The colors would pop off the glass in their vividness. The images would almost seem lifelike, and realistic. It's the same image. It's the same meaning, but now it's

alive. It becomes real and beautiful and attractive to you. That's what the Spirit does in illumination. He turns on the light behind the sacred page, and God's Word suddenly becomes real and beautiful and attractive and desirable. We understand it. We see that it's real, and it matters.

That's what Paul prayed for the Ephesians, and it's what he wants us to pray for as well. That God would take, by His Spirit, and turn on the light so that the word of God becomes to us a reality and beautiful and attractive, and it grips our souls and it changes our thinking and it affects our lives. We don't have the power within ourselves to make that happen. We have to read, we have to study, we have to meditate, and we pray for God to do that through His Spirit in us.

Next week, we'll look together at more of how we need this illumination, and specifically what we need it for, but as we end today, we end with this basic prayer.

Lord, open the eyes of my heart that I may behold wonderful things from Your law.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for Your truth. We are ignorant and in need of a teacher. Father, Your Word to us is often unrealistic and dead, but it's not because of Your Word. You've told us Your Word is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. It's because of our own cold lifeless dull hearts.

Father, I pray that by Your Spirit you would illumine our understanding, Turn on the light, grip our souls with the truth. Change our thinking, and change how we live to the glory of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.