

The Ephesians Series
Praying for the Person Who Has Every (Part 4)
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In God’s providence, as we continue our study of Ephesians 1, we come to a part of Paul’s prayer that’s very appropriate for this week, both for Thanksgiving, as well as the celebration of the Lord’s table together. So, I invite you to turn to Ephesians 1. This week, I read the story of Steven Marsh. You may never have heard of Steven Marsh. He’s obscure in terms of history. In fact, the details about his story are a bit sketchy. But apparently Steven lived more than 100 years ago and called New Jersey home. He was not a wealthy man, and so when his aunt died and her will was discovered, he was elated to find out that she had left him her entire estate.

The crucial part of her will read like this: “To my beloved Steven, I bequeath the family Bible along with the residue of my estate after my funeral expenses and just and lawful debts are paid.” Steven set out to settle the estate, hoping that at the end there would be some money on which he could live. Sadly, when all the bills had been paid and everything had settled, he discovered that there were only a couple of hundred dollars left. And after that small amount of money was used up, his only support for the rest of his life was a small pension. For more than thirty years, Steven Marsh lived in poverty. One day, he was cleaning out his attic as he prepared to move to his son’s home.

He planned to spend his old age there, and as he was going through the attic, he came across an old trunk, and in that trunk he found the family Bible that he had inherited from his aunt. When he opened it and began to leaf through its pages, to his shock he discovered that scattered throughout the pages of this old family Bible were a number of banknotes. When he had carefully searched and pulled them all together and counted them, he discovered that in that family Bible, his aunt had included \$5000, which, in that day, was a very large sum of money. Within his reach, inside that old Bible, were riches that he could have been enjoying for thirty years, instead of living in the poverty in which he suffered. As I thought about that story, I thought about us. Because the same is true for us. In our Bibles is an incredible amount of wealth that we don’t begin to fully appreciate.

That's why Paul prays what he does for the Ephesians in Ephesians 1. He prays for them and for us that the Holy Spirit would illumine our minds, would open our minds, would open the eyes of our heart, is how he puts it, so that we would begin to grasp the riches that are ours in Jesus Christ. Let me read to you again a portion of his prayer here. Ephesians 1:15. He writes,

“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, 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.”

The rest of the chapter is a reminder and a development of that idea of power, which we'll look at, Lord willing, next Sunday.

But in this prayer that Paul prays for the Ephesians, he provides for us a pattern, a pattern of how we ought to pray for spiritual growth, both our own as well as for that of others. We've seen in these verses that Paul teaches us several aspects of intercessory prayer. In verse 15 we learned the reasons behind intercessory prayer. In verse 16, the pattern of intercessory prayer. As we look at his prayer life, we learn what ours should look like. And we've begun, starting in verse 17 and flowing through the end of the chapter, to look at the content of intercessory prayers.

What exactly was it that Paul prayed? What was the heart of his prayer for these people he loved so much? It's what we should pray, both for ourselves as well as for others. The focus and content of Paul's prayer for us is that the Holy Spirit will illumine our minds to grow in our real spiritual knowledge. That, theologians call illumination. Notice it's put a couple of different ways. In verse 17 he says I want God to give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation. In verse 18 he says I want the eyes of your heart to be enlightened. Those mean the same thing. It's a prayer that God would enable us to truly grasp the reality of Scripture. To really get it, understand it in a way that is compelling, that changes our thinking, that changes our lives. That's what Paul prayed. And notice, he prays for this in two different ways.

He wants us to have illumination so that we grow first of all in our knowledge of God Himself. Look at the end of verse 17: "... in the knowledge of Him." We looked at that at great length.

Part of Paul's concern is that we would grow in our knowledge of God. Do you know God? You can. And Paul prayed that the Ephesians would truly come to know God. But he also prayed that we would increase in our knowledge of God's blessings toward us, God's rich spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ.

In verses 18 through the end of the chapter, Paul is asking God to grant us illumination so that we can better understand the spiritual blessings that God has given us in Jesus Christ. And as I pointed out last Sunday, listen carefully, your spiritual growth is directly tied to your growth in real spiritual knowledge, and perception of what you already have in Jesus Christ. You will only grow as you understand that more and more. Now, in Ephesians 1 Paul specifically prays that through the illuminating work of the Spirit, we will come to know three spiritual blessings, three spiritual blessings. Verse 18, the middle of the verse.

“... what is the hope of His calling.” [That's the first spiritual blessing. The second spiritual blessing is the end of verse 18] “what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints” [And the third spiritual blessing is the beginning of verse 19.] “... what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.”

If Paul prayed these for this group of people whom he ministered to for three years, and now six years later he writes them this letter, and he's still praying this for them, then how much more do we need to pray this for ourselves and for those that we know and love.

Last week we studied the first one: “the hope of His calling.” What does that mean? Well, it's the hope into which God brought us by His effectual call of us. When you were saved, when you came to Christ, the reason you came is because God was in the gospel in a sense, calling you, drawing you to Himself. And when he did that, He gave us hope, the hope that was held out to us in the gospel. And remember, the Greek word for hope is different than the English word. It's not desire plus a high degree of uncertainty, which is how we use the word hope. It's, instead, desire plus certainty. That's real biblical hope. I desire it, and I know it's going to come to me. That's what Paul means. And what is our hope?

Our hope is rescue from the penalty and the power and the presence of sin. Our hope is comprehensive personal righteousness, real likeness to Jesus Christ: a redeemed body that doesn't decay and doesn't lead me into sin, eternal life, Christ returning for me, getting to share in God's glory. Those are all part of my hope. And when God called us, He made those

amazing promises to us. But here's the problem. We will not enjoy all of those promises in this life. And so, we need hope. We need to live in hope. Desire for those things, and the certainty that we will receive them, that's the hope of our calling. And Paul says my prayer is that the Spirit will grant you illumination to fully grasp the reality of the hope of your calling.

Today we come to the second spiritual blessing that Paul prays we will come to truly grasp through the work of the Spirit in illumination. Notice verse 18, the end of the verse: "what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints." Now, at first glance that's an awkward phrase, and not the way we would put it in English, so it can be a bit off-putting. It can be a bit difficult, but it is incredibly rich. Stay with me for a few minutes this morning, and I think by the time I'm done, this phrase will become one of your favorite phrases in all the Bible.

We have to start by asking whose inheritance are we talking about here. Because Paul simply says, "His inheritance." You'll notice our translators capitalized it, meaning they thought it was a reference to God. And most people believe that's true. God's inheritance. But there are two possible meanings of that phrase, and commentators are somewhat evenly divided over which Paul means and intends here.

The first possibility, he could mean our inheritance. In other words, the inheritance that God has promised to every Christian and that we will someday receive. This idea is here in the context of Ephesians 1. Notice in verse 11, we looked at this in detail, we have obtained an inheritance. God has written us in His will. We have an inheritance from God. What is it? It's incredible. It's everything in the universe. It's everything that belongs to Jesus Christ. Paul says we are co-heirs, joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Everything that belongs to Christ will ultimately belong to us as well.

But specifically, the New Testament tells us that that inheritance includes spiritual salvation, that is, spiritual rescue from the wrath of God that's due against our sins. It includes living forever under the perfect rule of Jesus Christ in a perfect world. And it includes, and this is the shocking part, our inheritance includes God Himself. We get God. What an inheritance. We have that. It will soon be ours.

But in this life we live like the minor children of a wealthy father, who don't begin to enjoy all the riches their father has. We haven't begun to experience the spiritual richness that awaits us in heaven, but someday it will be ours. Until then, it's crucial that we understand that the inheritance that has been promised to us will someday be ours. If we can truly comprehend what

awaits us, it would radically change how we view our circumstances here, and how we view what's important here. Wouldn't it? If we really understood what awaits us in God's presence. So, in verse 18 when Paul says His inheritance, that's what he could mean. He could mean the inheritance that comes from God to every Christian.

But there's a second possibility. And it's the one that I'm convinced Paul means. Look again at the wording. "His inheritance." Now remember that before his conversion Paul was a Pharisee and a rabbi. He was extremely knowledgeable in the Old Testament. Some Pharisees had been able to memorize a huge portion of the Old Testament. He would have been incredibly familiar with the Old Testament. So, when you look at this phrase, "His inheritance," it makes sense to think that that would be informed by and shaped by how the Old Testament uses this expression.

So, the way to understand Paul's use of it is to look at how the Old Testament uses it. It's used twenty-seven times in the Old Testament, that little phrase "His inheritance." And in twenty-five of those twenty-seven times, the pronoun "his" describes the person who is getting the inheritance, not giving it. In fact, of those twenty-seven times in the Old Testament, eight times the pronoun "his" clearly refers to God as it does here. In every one of those times, it always refers to what God Himself inherits, what God receives, what God personally inherits. So, understand that in Ephesians 1, that's what Paul is saying. Let me give you a reference that makes that clear. Deuteronomy 32:9 says, "the Lord's portion [His portion of the inheritance] is His people. Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance."

That's one usage of it. So, in Ephesians 1, "His inheritance" isn't talking about what we inherit from God or what God gives us, but it refers to God's inheritance, what God receives, what God personally inherits. You say, well, what is God's inheritance? Look at verse 18 again. His inheritance in the saints. Listen, throughout the Scripture, everywhere you go, God's inheritance is always His redeemed people. Now, we don't think of ourselves like that, but that's how God describes us. We are His special possession. We are His inheritance. Let me show you this idea in a number of passages. Turn back to Exodus 19. Here at the foot of Mount Sinai as the people gather, and God is there on the mountain, they enter into a covenant together, and God tells Moses to relay this to the people. Exodus 19:5:

"... if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. [Moses,] These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."

You are going to be My special possession. You're going to be Mine. In Deuteronomy 7, forty years later, after that faithless generation had died in the wilderness, in Deuteronomy 7, Moses says to that new generation, those that were 20 and younger when they first left Egypt. He says to them in Deuteronomy 7:6

“you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” [And then he explains how this happened. Verse 7.] “The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, you were the fewest of peoples,”

But He set His love upon you, He chose you because the Lord loved you. He loved you because He loved you. In other words, that's a Hebrew way of saying it has nothing to do with you at all. He simply chose to love you. We are His inheritance. And this is throughout the Old Testament, by the way. I'm not going to have time to take you through all the references, but track to the last book of the Old Testament. In Malachi's prophecy, he predicts judgment for those people that were living in disobedience to God, but then he remembers at the end to speak a word of encouragement to those who remain faithful to God.

And in Malachi 3:16 it says,

Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who esteem His name. [We don't know for sure what this book is. Some conjecture that it's the Lamb's Book of Life that's described in the New Testament. But verse 17 says,] They will be Mine, says the Lord of hosts, on the day that I prepare My own possession. [They're the ones I get. They're My inheritance. They're My possession.] And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.

But this isn't just an Old Testament idea. When you come to the New Testament, the same thing is here. In Titus 2 Paul writes to his young son in the faith, left there on the island of Crete. Titus 2:14, he says, “Christ ... gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and [here's part of the reason He gave Himself up for us] to purify for Himself a people for His own possession....”

Peter makes the same point in 1 Peter 2. And in fact, in 1 Peter 2:9 and 10, he takes what we read in Exodus 19, that covenant that God formed with Israel at Sinai, and he relates it to us as the church. 1 Peter 2:9 “But you [the church] are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION [YOU ARE] A PEOPLE FOR *God’s* OWN POSSESSION so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

There are so many passages in the Old Testament that speak of His inheritance or My inheritance, God speaking. Or somebody speaking to God saying Your inheritance. And it’s always a reference to God’s people. We, as God’s people, belong to God as His own possession. F.F. Bruce writes this. “Paul here prays that his readers will appreciate the value which God places on them. In order that their lives may be in keeping with the high calling and that they may accept in grateful humility the grace and glory thus lavished on them.” And then, listen to what he says: “that God should set such a high value on a community of sinners rescued from perdition and still bearing too many traces of their former state [isn’t that us?] might well seem incredible were it not made clear that it’s because He sees them in Christ.”

So, what is Paul praying back in Ephesians 1? Listen carefully. This is incredible. What Paul is really praying is that the Spirit would illumine our minds to understand that we are God’s treasure. He wants us to understand the place that we hold in the heart of God. We are not just God’s possession, we’re His treasured possession, his treasure. Look again at Ephesians 1:18. “... the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.” The word riches refers to wealth or abundance. The riches of His glory is a reference to the degree of wealth. We’re talking about extreme wealth, super wealth. That’s what God’s people are to Him. We are God’s most extremely valuable possession.

Often in the Old Testament, even in several of those passages I read you, the Hebrew word that’s translated “possession” means “a valuable possession,” a treasure, a treasured possession. Think for a moment about yourself. What possession in this life, what thing that you own is your most valuable possession. With the Southern California wildfires’, I watched as they interviewed a man who had ten minutes to gather up what he could, and then he had to simply walk away knowing that he would lose the rest. As I watched that interview, I thought what a clarifying moment. What a clarifying ten minutes that was for that man. If you were given ten minutes to gather up everything you could, and you fully expected to lose everything else that you possess, what would you take?

You'd probably start with the kids. Then there would be old pictures and things that you couldn't replace, that money can't buy. Those are truly your treasures. Here's the amazing reality. If you're a Christian, then God thinks of you like that. If I can say it respectfully, if God had ten minutes to gather up His belongings, He would take you. He considers you to be one of His most valuable possessions.

Just so we can get this in our minds, because it is so foreign to how we think of God, let me look at it from a slightly different angle. To put it a different way, we could say God delights in us. God takes joy in us. God has pleasure in us. Now, we would never in a million years think of ourselves that way if God hadn't told us that's how He thinks, but He does tell us that's how He thinks. And it began for you, Christian, the day you came to faith in Jesus Christ. He set His love on you in eternity past, but He began to delight in you and take pleasure in you the day you came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Turn to Luke 15. I love these three parables Jesus tells in Luke 15. He tells a parable about a lost sheep, about a lost coin, and about two lost sons, one who left and one who stayed at home. Both lost, both in need of grace, one who realizes it and the other who doesn't. But what I want you to see is the focus in these three parables is the one who finds the lost item. And it pictures God in each case. Notice how the lesson ends in each case. At the end of the lost sheep, notice verse 6.

“... when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, and he ... [says,] ... ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who ... [don't think they] need ... repentance.]”

Who's doing the celebrating? Who's doing the rejoicing? It's God. And this becomes clearer as we move through this chapter. Look after the lost coin is found. Verse 9,

“When she ... found ... [the lost coin] she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’ In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God [, in other words God Himself,] over one sinner who repents.”

But then it becomes really clear when you get to the prodigal son. Notice how the father responds. Now keep in mind the father here represents God. The son has created the ultimate act of hostility toward the father. The ultimate act of shame he's heaped on his father, by saying, in that culture, I want my inheritance before you die. That was like a slap in the face. It's was, "you're worthless. I wish you were dead. All I want is the money." He leaves, he squanders everything he has. That's a picture of us. That's a picture of how we treated God.

And then, by an act of grace, the son gets to the very bottom. He comes to himself. He realizes how he's mistreated the father. He realizes the grace of his father, and he decides to go home. That's us when we've repented and returned to Christ. When we came to the Father, asking for forgiveness. And notice how the Father responds. Verse 20, "He got up and came to his father [the son does]. But while he was a long way off his father saw him, felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him."

Now I don't have time to develop all of this. John MacArthur is coming out with a new book you have to get, on this parable, which is really a life-changing story. But you just need to know this. In the context of the first century Jewish home, this boy had shamed his father in the worst possible way. And the father is now shamefully acting himself. Because, instead of treating this boy like that culture demanded that he be treated, which is held at arm's length, made to earn his father's love and respect again, he runs to meet him and embrace him and kiss him.

... the son said ... 'Father, I've sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son' ... the father said to his slaves, "Quickly bring the best robe ... put it on him, ... put a ring on his hand ... sandals on his feet; bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; [Who's celebrating? God.] "for this son of mine was dead and ... [he's] come to life again; he was lost and has been found. And they began to celebrate.

Verse 32. He explains to the older son, "we had to celebrate and rejoice for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, he was lost and he's been found."

Listen to me, on the day you came to faith in Jesus Christ, there was a celebration in heaven. And it wasn't just the angels, it was God Himself. He rejoices over you. He finds joy and delight in you, and that continues throughout your Christian life and experience here.

So many references drive this home. Just turn to one, Zephaniah. I love this. Toward the end of the Old Testament, the prophet Zephaniah, some of you didn't know there was a Zephaniah in the Bible, it's near the end. Zephaniah 3. Zephaniah describes the millennial blessings that are coming on God's people. During the reign of Christ on the earth, during the millennium, these are the blessings that will be ours. And listen to how he describes it. Zephaniah 3:17, "The Lord your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy. He will be quiet in His love. He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy." Have you ever thought of God like that? It's how God describes Himself. There's coming a day when we're in His presence that He will rejoice over us with shouts of joy.

The same thing is true in the New Testament. You come to John 13:1, the night of the last supper, and it describes Jesus in His overwhelming love for His own. John 13:1 says, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, [listen to this] He loved them to the end."

Now in the English text that sounds like it means He loved them until He died. That's not what it means. It literally says this in the original text, He loved them to the telos, to the extent, to the uttermost, to the outer boundaries. He loved them to the maximum. That's God's affection, His delight in and love for us. Or as Paul puts it in Romans 8:38 and 39, he says,

"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus."

Do you really believe that? Do you really believe that if you're a Christian, you are God's very special possession? You're His treasure? That's what the Bible teaches. I want you to turn to one more passage that's just stunning. It's really a shocking passage. Turn to Isaiah 62. Isaiah describes what will happen under the final restoration when God redeems His people Israel, and how He will respond to them. And of course, they will join us at that point. We will all be God's redeemed together, and so this is an accurate description of how God will respond to us as well. Notice how He responds. Isaiah 62:4.

It will no longer be said to you, "Forsaken"; [in other words you'll no longer be called the one God forsook] Nor to your land will it any longer be said,

“Desolate”; But you will be called, “My delight is in her, and your land
“Married”; For the LORD delights in you, And *to Him* your land will be married,
For *as* a young man marries a virgin, So your sons will marry you; [but watch the
end of verse 5. This is amazing] ... [But] *as* the bridegroom rejoices over the
bride, So your God will rejoice over you.

Folks, if you could ever come to grips with that, it would take your breath away. I still remember my wedding day, like it was yesterday. It's been 21 years, but I remember the day. I remember the eager anticipation. Sheila and I broke all the traditions and spent a lot of time before the ceremony with our family and friends, and I remember the joy and the excitement. I remember how overwhelmed I was as I stood there at the front of the chapel, and I watched Sheila appear in the back door and sort of float down the aisle toward me. I remember standing there during the ceremony, our holding hands together, and I was just a poor seminary student with barely two nickels to rub together. And I remember standing there thinking, I am a rich man. I delighted in her, and I still do.

But here is the thing that staggers me. Here is the thing that puts me in awe of God. It staggers me to think that God rejoices over me in the same way. That's what Isaiah is saying. There is some reality in God's view of us that can best be illustrated by the response of a groom to his bride on the wedding day. Paul is praying that the Spirit of God would illumine our minds to fully understand that, to be gripped by that, that God regards us as His greatest treasure. Why? Because if you'll ever get a grip on that, it will change how you live, and it will change how you love. You will love God in return, and you will love others as you understand and grasp His love for you.

There's one question in all this that boggles my mind, and that is how can God come to think of us, who by His own description are blind and wretched and naked and beggars. How can He come to think of us as His most valuable possession? There's only one explanation, and that's because we are in Christ. When He sees us, He sees Jesus Christ. F. F. Bruce writes “God's estimate of the people of Christ is inevitably consistent of His estimate of Christ.” You and I need to pray that we will have a spiritual understanding of the riches of God's inheritance, that we are the riches of the glory of God's inheritance, that we are God's most valuable possession. We need to comprehend the place that we have in the heart of God. If you want to understand that, then think about the cross, because nowhere did God more clearly prove and demonstrate His love for us than at the cross when He poured out His wrath against our sins on His Own Son.

Our Father, we thank You for Christ. We thank You for His death for us.

Father, don't let us ever get over the cross. Don't let us ever think that as we mature in faith in Christ that we get beyond the cross. Lord, help us to live every day with an awareness that we live and breathe and have our being only because of what Jesus accomplished there. And that's true every moment and will be, not only in this life but in eternity to come. He earned the grace that You show us now, and the grace that You will show us throughout eternity by His willing and voluntary sacrifice of Himself. Father, make us cross-centered Christians. Make us Christ-centered Christians. As a church, Lord, don't let us ever forget the sacrifice He offered there for sins, to make us Your special treasure.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.