

## Sermon – 09/03/2008 am

### Paul in Prayer

Study Text: Ephesians 1:15–16

‘Paul in Prayer’. We could also entitle this message ‘Paul in Prison’. Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison. *I am an ambassador in chains* he says (6:20). He had been in chains in Rome for over two years (Acts 28:30). Men in prison are often given to cursing, to violence and drugs rather than prayer. Some do turn to prayer seeking forgiveness for their sins and release from prison.

But see what Paul does while in prison. When thrown into the dungeon at Philippi he and Silas sang songs and prayed to God (Acts 16). We are not told what he was praying about – was he praying for the other prisoners and for the jailer? Judging from this letter he was probably praying for the new believers at Philippi and in other churches.

Paul writes to the church at Ephesus telling them that he was praying for them. His other letters from this same prison also begin with prayer for the saints – for believers in the church at Colossae and at Philippi. This letter to Ephesus begins with a great doxology, an extended word of praise to God, to *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Paul praises God for all the wonderful blessings he has given us who believe; the blessing of election, of adoption, of redemption in the blood of Christ, of revelation and the gift of the HS. As he sat in chains Paul was lifted up in his mind and in his heart to praise God for these great spiritual blessings that he and we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Cease Not In Prayer

We are onto the second or third page of the letter and still no complaint from Paul about his incarceration and no request for release. How long do you pray before you start to complain about things in your life? How long do you pray before you start asking God for things for yourself? There is a place in prayer for such requests but Paul, like the Psalmist, teaches us to come humbly and reverently before the Lord. He teaches us to remember who God is and all that he has done for us.

We pray to the God who created this world and sustains it from one day to the next. Each new day is a blessing from the Lord. Our every breath is from the Lord. One day there will be no new day. We will not wake up in this world. We will either be in the darkness of hell, or in the glory of God’s presence in heaven. If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ remember that heaven is your eternal home, and that Jesus has gone there to prepare a place for you.

Paul was facing the prospect of death as he languished in prison. Yet see what he wrote to the Philippians from this prison – *for me to live is Christ and to die is gain* (Philippians 1:21). He said *I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of me* (Philippians 3:12). *Lay hold of eternal life to which you were called* he writes elsewhere (I Timothy 6:12). Paul looked above and beyond his immediate circumstances. He looked to God; he looked to Jesus Christ whenever he knelt to pray – and was often on his knees in prayer.

Paul is only describing his prayer and not telling us his actual words. But he was aware of how Jesus taught his disciples to pray. ‘Our Father in heaven hallowed/holy be your name’. The first thing Jesus tells us to pray is that God’s name will be glorified. Paul prayed to *the Father of glory* (1:17). In the doxology he was repeatedly moved in his spirit to praise and glorify God. Our adoption as sons was to *the praise of the glory of his grace*, as was our redemption and inheritance in Christ (1:6, 14).

Paul’s prayers also included deliberate and clear mention of the name of God, *the God of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1:17). Jesus taught us to pray in his name. Jesus is the mediator, the one through whom we have access to Almighty God in prayer. Sometimes I hear people pray – ‘dear God...this, this and this...in your name amen’. What would Paul say about a prayer making no mention of the name of Jesus? He would be horrified! Anyone can pray a prayer like this no matter what god they believed in.

Paul was living in a pluralistic society just as we are. He was not ashamed of the name of Jesus Christ. He was in prison because he kept telling people that God raised his Son Jesus from the dead. When he prayed he spoke often and openly of Jesus Christ. He blessed the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3) and addressed his prayer to *the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory* (1:17).

What a great privilege we have to come before Almighty God. He is the sovereign God who created this universe. He is the God who dwells in unapproachable light. Yet he has adopted us as his children. We can call Almighty God ‘our Father’ – ‘our Father in heaven’. We have access to the throne of grace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Circle of Prayer**

Recognising the God to whom he is praying, and the grace of Jesus Christ in whose name he prays, Paul then makes his request. In fact his initial words are not by way of request but of thanksgiving. And it is not thanksgiving for any material benefit. He has not been healed or released from his Roman chains. His focus is not even upon himself but upon others.

Paul’s prayer is one of intercession, intercession that begins with thanksgiving for the faith of other men and women who believe in Jesus Christ. His prayer was fuelled by news of such believers which reached him. He had not even met these believers but only heard of their faith (1:15).

This letter to the Ephesians is regarded as a circular letter, a letter to be read not only in Ephesus where Paul had ministered for two years (Acts 19:10), but in neighbouring churches also. New churches may have been planted after Paul left. In any case there would have been converts in Ephesus since Paul left. This may explain why he had only heard of their faith.

It is always easier to pray for people when we have met them – or even better to have visited them. Mission agencies these days conduct ‘awareness tours’. News and photos do not always move people to pray, but meeting others and seeing their need first hand does. It is good when people share about their joys and tribulations – our prayers can then be more specific and more earnest. In some places people slip into church late and leave early to avoid meeting anyone. They think church is like a temple where they come to bring offerings and pray. This is not conducive to fellowship or intercessory prayer.

Paul prayed for those he had met, but also for those he had never met. Are you regularly praying for those you meet face to face each day, or each week? Do you pray for anyone who you have only heard is a fellow believer in Jesus Christ? Maybe you find it **easier** to pray for those you have not met because you are not on speaking terms to those you see regularly! Remember Jesus said to love your enemies and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (Matthew 5:44).

Paul was praying for others, not for himself. He was giving thanks for other believers. When it came to his own ministry, and his own difficulties, Paul asked others to pray for him (6:19). This is the circle of prayer that pleases God. *Far be it from me said Samuel that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you* (I Samuel 12:23).

## Content

Paul prayed not for himself but for others. He prayed a prayer of thanks for others before going on to make his petition for them. What was it that he was giving thanks for? Had they been healed from a sickness or saved from death? For sure such matters arose in Paul's prayers (Philippians 2:27). But in this instance, and many others, the content of his thanksgiving was for spiritual blessings. He gave thanks for their *faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for all the saints* (1:15).

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He said there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. Paul rejoiced whenever he heard of one sinner repenting and believing in Jesus. He gave thanks to the Lord for each new brother and sister in Christ.

This is not always the case in some churches. New believers are sometimes looked upon with suspicion. They are not welcomed into the inner circles of fellowship. They are kept at arms length until they conform. Paul gave thanks for the simple faith and love of these believers.

Faith must be seen; it must produce fruit in the life of a believer. Faith without works is dead. Paul not only heard of their faith, but also of their love for one another. Faith and love come in the one breath. The Ten Commandments can be reduced to two commandments according to Jesus, but not one. Love for God must be accompanied by love for one another. He who loves God must love his brother also (I John 4:21).

Paul had heard of their love for one another. They were meeting together and praying for one another. They were helping those who were in need. Love in action was evidence of their faith in Jesus Christ. If Paul heard of our church would he be able to pray in the same way, giving thanks for your faith and your love for all the saints?

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