Praying for growth in Christ

Text: Ephesians 1:15-19

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 5:6-21; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ephesians 1:15-23

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 441, 119:33-40, 344, 32, 287, 324, 523, ‘By Faith’, ‘Behold the Lamb’

Series: Ephesians (Sermon #6)

Occasion: Adult and child baptisms and Lord’s Supper

Theme: Having heard of the faith of the Ephesian believers, the Apostle Paul writes of his constant thankful intercessory prayers for them, petitioning God the Father that he would grant them continued growth in spiritual wisdom so that their knowledge of the hope, riches and power in Christ would deepen.

Proposition: Pray for growth in Christ for one another!

**Introduction**

Have you heard of the faith of Daniel and Rebekah? Well, if you hadn’t before this morning, you have now with their professions of faith and baptisms! There had likely been many professions of faith and baptisms in the church or churches to whom Paul wrote his letter to ‘the Ephesians’ since he had spent three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). He had had a very active teaching ministry there (Acts 20:20-21), living and serving amongst them, declaring to them the ‘whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27), ‘*teaching in public and going from house to house*’ (Acts 20:20).

He writes to many believers whom, whilst he did not know them personally, he had heard of their ‘*faith in the Lord Jesus*’ and their ‘*love towards all the saints*’ (ref. Eph 1:15). He was in constant prayer for these believers in Christ. He reveals the content of his prayers in verses 17-19. {The prayer of v15-19 is resumed in Eph 3:1 and then (after a long parenthesis) completed in Eph 3:14-19}.

Clearly, the Apostle Paul is **not** praying for their conversion, these ‘*saints who are in Ephesus*’ (1:1) were already believers – just as Daniel and Rebekah were already believers before they publicly professed faith and were baptised today! Even though He does not use the word ‘growth’, this is what Paul is praying for: an **increase** in the knowledge of Christ which they already have as believers. In unceasing thankful intercessory prayer he petitions the ‘*God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory*’ that He would give these believers ‘*a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of*’ Christ (v17) so that the ‘*eyes of their hearts*’: their ‘spiritual eyesight’ would be enlightened.

In Scripture, knowledge is not mere information, but essentially it is a relationship with God by faith which brings salvation and eternal life, generating love, hope obedience and joy (Ex 33:13; Jer 31:34; Dan 11:32; John 17:3; Gal 4:8; Phil 3:8-11; 2 Tim 1:12; Heb 8:8-12). We heard about this knowledge which comes from God in Jeremiah 31:34b: “*They shall all* ***know*** *me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more*." In his prayer, Paul asks the Lord that these believers would know: what is the hope to which he has called you (v18), what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints (v18), and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe (v19). We’ll look at each of these three elements in Paul’s prayer for growth in Christ under these headings:

1. Knowing hope
2. Knowing riches
3. Knowing power
4. **Knowing Hope**

Daniel and Rebekah have willingly and ‘hungrily’ received preaching and teaching in the Christian faith, but many people you and I speak to about Christ are uninterested and do not come to saving faith. Why is that? Because apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, human reasoning will not convince people of the truth of the gospel because our minds are damaged by sin (1 Cor 1:18ff; 3:18ff). “*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*” (1 Cor 1:18). Mere intellectual knowledge by itself ‘puffs up’ (1 Cor 8:1) without love for God and for others.

So how much of the gospel needs to be understood before true faith can be said to be present? On the day of Pentecost, as recorded in the book of Acts, Jews from many nations believed upon Christ and were baptised on the same day (Acts 2:41). However, as the early New Testament church grew and heresies (false teaching) arose, together with persecution, more extensive confessions and catechetical teaching were required as a pre-condition for baptism. The ‘catechumens’ (those who received instruction in preparation for baptism) were the subjects of the early New Testament church’s process for being admitted to membership. Catechumens would ‘hear the word’ over three years of teaching, before being baptised.

The church has long recognized the need both for instruction in the content of the Christian faith (doctrine) and a careful assessment of a person’s desire for a lifestyle consistent with God’s revealed will in Scripture. In verse 18 of our text, Paul prays “*that you may know the hope to which he has called you*”. As we grow in knowledge of God’s Word, we learn more about the ‘*reason for the hope that is in*’ us (1 Pet 3:15).

We can summarise the great hope of the Christian in these few words: “*Jesus is coming back*”! At Lord’s Supper we “*proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*” (1 Cor 11:26). As we grow in faith in Christ, we grow in hope, becoming more certain of the future which God has promised, but which we have not yet experienced. The writer to the Hebrews defines faith in terms of firm hope: “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1). Christian hope has an objective quality of certainty. We don’t just hope that Christ might possibly come back to this earth, we know that this will most definitely happen.

When we hope in the second coming of Christ:

* We hope for end of suffering, decay, grief, death when these ‘*former things*’ of this age will ‘*pass away*’ (Rev 21:4).
* We hope for Christ’s perfect justice when all unfairness will be made right (Matt 25:31-46; John 5:27-29; Acts 24:25; Rom 2:5-11; Heb 9:27; 10:27; 2 Pet 3:7; Rev 20:11-15).
* We hope for our complete acquittal from the punishment for all our sins because of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf . We hope to hear words from our Master like these “*Not guilty, enter into the joy of your master*” (ref. Matt 25:21).
* We hope for enduring peace in a perfect new earth which will no longer groan (e.g. Isaiah 11:6).
* We hope for seeing the reality we currently only know by faith. “*For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face”* (1 Cor 13:12).
* We hope for the continuation of this eternal life in Christ when “*the dwelling place of God (will be) with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God*” (Rev 21:3).
* We hope ‘*for what we do not (yet) see, we wait for it with patience*’ (Rom 8:25).

We know this hope in our minds, informed by God’s Word and applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This sure knowledge affects the decisions we make in this life now, because our focus is upon the certain future we hope for. Knowing hope, we ‘*lay up treasures in heaven*’ (Matt 6:20), setting our minds on things that our above (Col 3:2). When we suffer loss in this life, we grieve, but not as others who have no hope (1 Thess 4:13).

As we pray for one another, perhaps with the aid of the ‘prayer calendar’ in our church bulletin, or the ‘photo directory’, remember to petition the God of our Lord Jesus Christ for those you give thanks for and remember in your prayers, that they ‘*may know what is the hope to which he has called them*’.

In His prayer, the Apostle Paul also prays that the Ephesians believers would know “*what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*”, which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Knowing Riches**

In last week’s sermon from Eph 1:11-14 we saw the central theme of the inheritance which God has purposed for His adopted children that both Jewish and Gentile believers have in Christ which is authenticated and guaranteed by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Here in verse 18 Paul writes of God the Father’s inheritance ‘*in the saints*’. This could mean the ‘inheritance’ that God Himself receives in the saints themselves ‘an inheritance of nations’ (cf. Ps 2:8; 82:8 also Jer 10:16; Ps 79:1). Knowing the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints then speaks of how valuable God’s people are to him e.g.: “*you are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you*” (Isa 43:4); “*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession*” (1 Pet 2:9); **“***The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*”(Rom 8:16-17).

More likely, in the context of Ephesians chapter 1, ‘the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints’ refers to the inheritance which God’s adopted children receive in Christ. We briefly looked at the content of this inheritance last week, let’s consider these riches in some more detail today.

Those who humbly follow Jesus Christ as His disciples, inherit eternal life (Mat 5:5; 19:29), receiving incorruptible bodies fit for dwelling forever in the New Heavens and New Earth (1 Cor 15:50). Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we will receive the kingdom of God when He comes again in glory to judge all people and declares *“to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”*. Later in this letter, Paul will call his readers to “*walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*” (Eph 5:2). He will also warn the unrepentant that “*everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God*” (Eph 5:5).

In Christ, God’s people receive an authentic, guaranteed inheritance which is confirmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling within the believer. Knowledge of the riches of God’s glorious inheritance, changes the value we place on the material wealth of this world. We understand the need to be on guard against all covetousness because “*life does not consist in the abundance of possessions*” (Luke 12:15). The 18th century Christian theologian and evangelist John Wesley once said that ‘*the last part of a man to be converted is his wallet*’. We know that the desire for money can be hugely damaging. As Paul warned Timothy, “*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs*” (1 Tim 6:10).

Knowing the riches of our glorious inheritance helps us to be generous with our material wealth, giving willingly, cheerfully and sacrificially for the needs of others and for the work of the gospel through the church (2 Cor 9:6-8). We know that God ‘loves a cheerful giver’(2 Cor 9:7). A cheerful giver is a person who knows how very wealthy they are in Christ because of their abundant inheritance in Him. A growing knowledge of the vast spiritual wealth which we possess in Christ leads to greater confidence, assurance and stability in our Lord as we continue to live the ‘pilgrim’ life on this earth which is not really our home.

As we pray for one another, perhaps with the aid of the ‘prayer calendar’ in our church bulletin, or the ‘photo directory’, remember to petition the God of our Lord Jesus Christ for those you give thanks for and remember in your prayers, that they ‘*may know what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*”. In His prayer, the Apostle Paul also prays that the Ephesians believers would know “*what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe*”, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Knowing Power**

What is the greatest demonstration of God’s power? His creation of all things out of nothing (Heb 11:2)? Christ’s upholding the universe by the word of his power (Heb 1:3)? His promised restoration of all things in Christ (Rev 21:5)? In the context of Paul’s prayer, the ‘*immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe*’ is seen foremost in the resurrection of Christ (v20) and His glorious elevation ‘far above all rule and authority’. We know that “*God has highly exalted (His beloved Son Jesus Christ) and bestowed on him the name that is above every name*” (Phil 2:9).

This immeasurably great power comes toward us who believe. Paul prays that God would enlighten the hearts of his readers so that they would know this power. The same power of God that raised and exalted Christ is now at work in His people. Today we have seen the greatness of God’s power in bringing Daniel and Rebekah to saving faith in Christ.

We see the power of God as, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we ‘put off ‘the old self and ‘put on’ the new self. Paul will write about this process of sanctification some details in chapters 4-6. Knowing the power of God at work in our lives enables us more and more to love the One who first loved us and to love others whom we would not otherwise have cared much about, apart from Christ

Daniel and Rebekah, I pray that you may grow in your love for each one of your brothers and sisters here in Christ. Congregation, I pray that each one of us my grow in our love for Daniel, Rebekah and their son Thomas as we know more and more the immeasurable greatness of God’s power towards us who believe.

Knowing the power of God at work in our lives enables us more and more to forgive one another; to let go of past hurts and injustices. Knowing the power of God at work in our lives enables us more and more to suffer the challenges, difficulties, disappointments and losses of this life in hope. Today, the sacrament of Lord’s Supper enables us to see, touch, taste and smell the reality of the greatness of God’s power in Christ.

* We recall that the man whose death we remember today was born of a woman.
* We remember that God became incarnate in human flesh.
* We remember that Jesus is the long-awaited ‘Immanuel’ (God with us).
* We remember that Jesus laid down his life, that he might take it up again (John 10:17)
* We remember the power of God in judgment against His own beloved Son who, for our sake He made to be sin who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21).
* We remember that He who once was dead is now alive!
* We remember that Christ is now seated at the right hand of God and intercedes for us when we pray.
* We remember that we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15)

The Ephesian believers to whom Paul first wrote, had come to saving faith in Christ as have Daniel and Rebekah, how about you? Have the ‘*eyes of your heart been enlightened*’? Do you the certain hope of life in Christ? Are you spiritually wealthy with riches of a glorious inheritance in Christ? Have you experienced the immeasurable greatness of God’s power in Christ in making you alive together with Christ? (Eph 2:5) In summary, do you know the Lord?

If you hate your sin, turn away from it and love the Lord Jesus who laid down His life for undeserving rebels like you and me, then you know the Lord! “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9). Praise God for the faith of Daniel and Rebekah and for all who believe.

As we pray for one another, perhaps with the aid of the ‘prayer calendar’ in our church bulletin, or the ‘photo directory’, remember to petition the God of our Lord Jesus Christ for those you give thanks for and remember in your prayers, that they may know:

1. what is the hope to which he has called them.
2. what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.
3. what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe.

AMEN.