

TEACH US TO PRAY: PAUL

SHERARD EDINGTON

Ephesians 1:15-23

This sermon is the third in a series that I'm calling Teach Us To Pray. Each Sunday this Fall, I invite you to join with me as we explore a different prayer that we find within the pages of our Bible. As we encounter each prayer, my question to you is this, "What can we learn about the act of praying from this particular prayer?"

The first two prayers in this series were individual prayers. They were spoken by persons praying for themselves. Hannah poured out her heart in a prayer for a child. She desired a child more than anything, and one day, while at Shiloh, she slipped away from her family's celebration and headed to the temple to plead her case to the Lord.

Our second prayer was by the grizzled prophet Elijah. While Hannah prayed for life, Elijah prayed for death. Elijah had been a zealous prophet for God but now he found himself a fugitive with a bounty on his head fleeing away from his home. He traveled as far as he could into the Judean wilderness and when he could go further he laid down under a tree and prayed that God would take his life.

These are prayers by two people with specific requests for themselves—one for a child and one for death.

The prayer we read today is different. It is a general prayer. It is offered by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus. This is not a prayer for himself, or for any one person. It is a prayer for the community of believers in Ephesus. And Paul's prayer is uncomplicated. He simply wants the people to know God. That is the prayer.

In our Bible study this week, one of you commented that this prayer lacked conflict. And that is correct. The letter to the Ephesians is known as a general letter. Its purpose is not to address a specific situation or need or conflict. The people Paul is writing don't have questions for him or a dispute that needs settling. Rather, the letter to Ephesus is a letter of love written to the saints in that church, the saints adopted by Christ.

In today's reading, Paul writes that he is well aware of the people's faith in Jesus Christ, and he has learned of their love towards all the saints. For these reasons, he gives thanks for them as he remembers them in his prayers. And then Paul offers his own prayer—which we read today.

Paul begins, *I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him.* That is the heart of this prayer—Paul's desire that God fill the congregation at Ephesus with wisdom and revelation.

Wisdom, in this case, doesn't mean that Paul necessarily wants the people to be smart or able to dispense sage advice. That is not the wisdom he has in mind. Instead, this wisdom is the capacity to know and understand God. To possess wisdom should be our prayer for anyone—that they know God. Not in a superficial way—more than just knowing God well enough to pick God out in a lineup—but to understand fully who God is, to know God in their hearts, to have wisdom about God.

I am reminded of a story about an angel who appears to a man and offers to grant him either infinite wisdom or unlimited wealth. The man says that he would like the wisdom. As you wish, says the angel, and with a flash of lightning the man is transformed. But he just sits there staring at the table. The angel asks if there is anything wrong. The man replies, I should have taken the money.

Paul prays that the people of the church have more than just wisdom. Paul pairs wisdom with revelation asking that the people have *a spirit of wisdom and revelation*. Revelation, of course, means something that is revealed, specifically, from God. Wisdom about God is not something that we attain ourselves. Wisdom of God comes only from God. It is divine. Paul's prayer is that the people in the church at Ephesus will be filled with the wisdom of God by God.

And when they are blessed with this wisdom, they may see the *hope* which God offers. Paul prays that they will see this hope with the *eyes of their hearts*. Again, not a superficial hope, but a hope embedded in their souls. When we know God, then we see and understand God's love and intentions for us. That brings hope.

And finally, this hope is a treasure—a treasure which Paul says is an inheritance from the saints.

Today, when we hear the word saints, we tend to think of the saints of the Catholic church—individuals who have been canonized. Those saints are a select few. As Protestants, however, we take a looser view of sainthood and define saints as Paul does—as the faithful of the church in the present time and in the times before. The saints are all around us. The hope of God is passed down from the many saints who have gone before. Saints are the fabric of our faith. They make us who we are.

If this is a sermon series called Teach Us To Pray, what can we learn from Paul's prayer? I believe the biggest takeaway here is that we, as people of faith, must pray for others. Yes, we can pray for ourselves, but we should also pray for

those around us. We can pray for their happiness; we can pray for their health; we can pray for their well-being. We can pray for those facing surgery as well as those who have lost a loved one. But, ultimately, we should pray that each person come to know God in the foundation of their souls. We pray that God fills each person with wisdom and revelation. For that is what we seek in our lives. This should be the root of all prayers—to know God.

We too often forget that God's power is great—greater than we can comprehend. God's power raised Christ from the dead. God's power put the stars in their courses. God's power exceeds that of any earthly authority. God's power changes lives. When we pray for people (as well as for ourselves) to have wisdom, we can do so confident that God has the power to grant that wisdom.

On this Sunday of All Saints, let us remember the saints of the faith—the people of wisdom who are among us and those who have gone before. May our prayers bind us together with the sweet revelation wisdom of our Lord. May we be the body of Christ.