

Why do we pray?

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, John. Good morning, everyone. Great to see you this morning. Well, we had, as you will know from the notices of the past few weeks, we had a prayer meeting this last Wednesday.

And as we always do, we delayed the start of growth groups so that as many people as possible could come to this very important meeting.

You know how many rocked up? Ten. Ten people out of a church of over a hundred regulars. We had ten people at what is probably the most important gathering of the term.

Now, I'm not here to police the congregation. I'm not going to force anyone to come to anything or to prayer meetings. But it was Charles Spurgeon who said this. He said, the spiritual condition of a church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings.

Now, if that's true, if that's true, then you'll excuse me if I express some concern over the spiritual condition of this church. The church which I will stand before Jesus one day and answer for how I've led.

[1 : 1 0] And so the question I ask is, why do we not take our prayer meetings more seriously as a church body? And I've been thinking about it, not just this week, but for a long time.

And to tell you the truth, I think the answer to that is that we don't tend to take prayer that seriously as individuals. While we would all agree prayer is good, I'm not sure we're convinced that it's that necessary.

Because in the back of our minds, I suspect there's a thought similar to this. If God's already decided what he's going to do, then how much difference really does prayer really make?

Is it worth missing Issy Dingo on a Wednesday to come out into the cold and pray for an hour? Because it's not really going to change anything, is it? God's already decided what he's going to do.

How is my attendance at a prayer meeting going to make much difference? I think that is the thought in the back of many of our minds. It's either that, which causes our lack of praying together, or it's that we actually think we don't need anything from God right now.

[2 : 1 9] I've got this, God. We've got this. You know, this term is under our belt. We're okay. We'll come out and pray when there's some serious needs. But for now, we've got this.

Don't worry. Thanks, God, for being around when we need you. And so those are the kind of thoughts, I think, which lead to an apathy, a laziness when it comes to prayer.

An apathy which I'm seeing in this congregation, which really concerns me. And that's why all of us this morning need to carefully, carefully consider Paul's prayer here in Ephesians 1.

It's written down for us as a model of prayer. But more than that, I think understanding this prayer will go a long way in helping us to undo some of our bad habits when it comes to prayer.

And I include myself in the number of people who have bad habits when it comes to prayer. And how we think about prayer and the place of prayer in our lives.

[3 : 15] Real, focused, concentrated prayer. Not just passing prayer when we need it. There's a lot of important things that this prayer in Ephesians 1 teaches us about prayer itself, which I want you to see this morning.

And the first of these lessons that we learn of prayer from this prayer is this. It's that God's sovereignty doesn't diminish the need to pray.

I'll say it again. God's sovereignty doesn't diminish the need to pray. So as I've said, one of the main reasons Christians struggle with the motivation to pray is because we think, well, God's already decided what he's going to do.

So our prayers can't possibly make much difference, right? But now I want you to look carefully at what Paul does here in Ephesians 1, 15 to 17.

Have a look. He says, for this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

[4 : 15] I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. Okay, so these are Christians who Paul's writing to who he's just explained, we saw last week, he's just explained these Christians were chosen by God for salvation before time began.

And even here, in this passage, he mentions their faith and love, which is proof of that election. And yet in the very same breath, he feels the need to pray for their spiritual growth.

But why? Why? If God has already decided to save them and he's already decided to bring them to perfection, to holiness one day, why does Paul need to pray for them?

Have you wondered that? I mean, in all his prayers, it's the same. Why does he pray for people who he's just explained God is going to save and he's going to see to completion?

And if they've already been given God's Holy Spirit, which we see in verse 13 they have, then why three verses later does Paul pray for God to give them the spirit? It's very strange, isn't it?

[5 : 23] Well, there's only one reason why he does this. There's only one reason why he prays for something he knows God is already going to give them. And that is because Paul believes that despite God's sovereign will, prayers are still needed for that will to be carried out.

And it's a very important concept we need to understand. Paul understood that God carries out his will through and only through answering the prayers of his people.

And that's why he was so fervent to pray for what he knew God would already do. Because he knew God was going to do that through his prayers. And that is one of the great mysteries of prayer, which unless we get it, unless we understand it, we won't pray like we should.

But we understand this mystery, this revelation that our prayer is no less necessary because God has already decided to do something. In fact, it is more necessary because he has decided to do what he has decided to do through answering your prayers.

Think about that. Let that settle in your mind. That is how God has decided to carry out his will in this world through the prayers of his people.

[6 : 44] See, a captain decides where a ship will go, right? The captain is sovereign over his ship and what his ship does and where his ship goes. But does that mean the helmsman, the guy who steers the ship, can just sit back and go, well, what's the point of steering the ship if the captain's already decided where it's going to go?

No, of course he doesn't because he knows that the captain has decided to take the ship where he wants it through the obedience of the helmsman and the crew. Doing their jobs.

Doing their jobs. The captain carries out his sovereign will through the jobs being done of his crew. Well, our jobs as Christians is to pray.

And God has decided to take his world and his church where he wants it to go, where he has decided for it to go through the obedience of his people, praying fervently.

Secondly, that's the first lesson we learn about prayer here in Paul's prayer. That God, in his sovereignty, has decided to carry out his will through your prayers.

[7 : 52] Secondly, we learn that we need prayer more than we think we do. Now, let's be honest with ourselves. We pray mostly when we feel the need to pray, don't we?

When we're sick or when we're going through troubles, we tend to pray much more than when everything's going well, let's be honest. Do you know when the church in America saw record numbers of people attending church services and especially attendance at prayer meetings?

It was in the weeks following September 11th, 2001. When people really felt the need for God's help, then they prayed. And then, of course, over time it dwindled again because prayer is mostly a response to felt needs.

The needs that are evident, the needs we feel, the needs that affect our comfort, the needs we notice. And that's why Paul here in this prayer wants his readers to realize that there are many needs we have which we don't actually feel we need, and yet we must pray for just as much, in fact, more than our felt needs.

We have needs that exist that we don't feel, that we often don't even know about. You have needs more than just your physical needs. You have needs more than just food and shelter and safety.

[9 : 14] You have spiritual needs, but you don't feel those needs. You might well feel the effects of those needs, but you might not link that with the need itself.

And Paul writes this prayer here to make a point of what our spiritual needs are that we don't often feel. Now, for sure, God will put trials in your life, felt needs, in order to drive you to prayer.

Why does God allow suffering in the lives of his people primarily, amongst other things, to get you praying? He gives you felt needs because he knows that you pray more when you feel needs.

But how much pain would we save ourselves if we realized our need to pray without him having to do that? Well, Paul's trying to save us some pain here by telling us what our spiritual needs that we should be praying for actually are.

He helps us to realize here that we have more needs than just the needs we feel, and so we should be praying more than we feel we need to. We should be praying more than we feel we need to.

[10 : 25] Because notice, in this prayer, Paul doesn't pray for any of the Ephesians' felt needs. He could, but he chooses not to. He doesn't pray for the sick. He doesn't pray for the trials and persecutions the Ephesians are going through.

He doesn't pray for their material or financial needs, even though they must have had a lot. No, he specifically prays for the needs that they and we tend not to pray for because we don't feel them.

So what are these needs that we have and yet we don't realize we have? Well, we see from verse 18, and there are three of them that I want you to see this morning. Paul prays that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Okay, so there are three major needs that every Christian has. Of course, we have more, but these are the three that Paul highlights. Firstly, to know the hope of God's call.

You see, a Christian, first and foremost, to live as a Christian, to live out the life God has called us to, we need to understand that we are called by him. We need to know our call and the hope of our calling.

[11 : 43] A Christian needs to know that they have a heavenly calling even while they live on earth. Now, as John already mentioned, we learned last week that God has elected who was going to believe in his son before time began.

And we're going to look at that more in our growth groups this week. But then, so he elected in eternity past who he's going to say, But then in the course of time, in the lifetime of each of his elect, through various circumstances and friends and preachers, there is a point that God calls that person that he has elected in eternity past to a living faith in time in Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

And in doing so, at that point, when God calls someone out of darkness into light, when he calls them to new birth through faith in Christ, he at that point calls them into a whole new life.

It's why it's called being born again. It's why it's called conversion. It implies a drastic change. And that's what true conversion is. When Jesus calls people to faith, he calls them to a life lived no longer for this world, but for the world to come.

An eternal life that Jesus opened up by dying on the cross for our sins. That life is now opened up for those who he's called, and he calls them to live that life now already, even while we finish this life on earth.

[13 : 19] It's as if we all start walking, we all start life walking in one big group down a long, wide road that leads to death.

That's how it ends. And that's typically how people consider life. They know, okay, well, we're on this earth for a while, so let's just make the most of it while we can before it all ends.

That's the worldly mindset, right? We live for this life. We live to get as much as we can here because we're all going to die. Everybody knows we're going to die, no matter what religion you are.

People aren't stupid. They know death is coming. And that's the road we all start walking out by default. All in a big group walking down this road that ends in death, and so we try to make the most of it.

But then Jesus comes along, and he selects particular people, takes them out of that group, puts them on a new road that never ends. A new road that continues into eternity.

[14 : 20] And because of that, because we've been taken out and placed on this new road, by the way, I'm not making this up, Jesus spoke about the wide and the narrow roads. You'll know that parable he gave.

So this is the way Jesus explains what he's done for Christians in taking them from the wide road that leads to destruction and putting them on a new road that leads to eternal life.

And because we've been placed on that new road, the way we live our life on earth should be completely different to someone who is just living for this life. That's why we're called peculiar people.

That's why we're called to live as travelers, passing through this life towards our real home in eternity. And that is a very different way of living than people who have settled their home in this world.

That is what our call is. That is what God has called us to if we're Christians. In other words, we're called to be citizens of heaven, not citizens of earth.

[15 : 24] That's why I've entitled this whole series in Ephesians, Citizens of Heaven, because that's what this book, Ephesians, teaches us to do. How to live as citizens of heaven, not as citizens of earth.

And yet we don't live as citizens of heaven automatically because we've been brought up for years and years and years to be citizens of earth. And our culture teaches us to be citizens of earth.

As we listen to the radio, as we read books, as we watch TV, the culture is teaching us how to make the most of this life, to live for this world, to live on the broad road as citizens of earth.

Ephesians teaches us how to live as citizens of heaven. But how much time do we spend reading Ephesians and the Bible to learn to be citizens of heaven versus listening to the radio and watching TV and reading books that teach us how to be citizens of earth?

How much time, if you had to compare the two? What has more attention? What do you give more attention to? Living as a citizen of earth or living as a citizen of heaven?

[16 : 30] It's automatic. We're wired to live as citizens of earth, not citizens of heaven. And that's why Paul prays here that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened so that we really know our calling.

You know, it's actually quite an insult, this prayer. It seems very nice. But he's saying to these Ephesians, despite all your faith and your love and God's election of you, you're still dull.

You still don't have light. Your eyes are still closed as to what your calling really is. And now I'm going to teach you how to start living out that calling, Ephesians, and us as well.

He wouldn't need to pray that if we automatically lived as citizens of heaven. But we don't. And so that's a great need for us. We need to be praying for that for ourselves.

Just more than anything else, first and foremost, to realize the calling that we have and then to start living that out in our daily lives. The second great need Paul prays for Christians here, not just that we know the hope of our calling, but also he goes on to pray that we know the riches of God's inheritance.

[17 : 44] The riches of God's inheritance. In other words, we need to understand how rich we really are as Christians. Because for a Christian, our wealth is not found in our bank balance or in how much property we own.

A Christian's real wealth is found in what they are going to inherit in the life to come. That is where their wealth resides now. Jesus said, do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven.

Realize that if you're a Christian and you've changed from the broad road to the narrow road, your wealth is no longer here, it is there. Do you know though, as a matter of fact, I'm actually a millionaire.

Did you know that? Your pastor is a millionaire? According to a number of SMSs I've received. Here's one I got just last week. Let me read it to you.

This is fantastic. Okay. Smiley face, you've been rewarded in Omo, full stop, with 350,000 rand to claim your money, call Mrs. Linda or Mr. Ben on this number.

[18 : 53] That's fantastic, isn't it? How people are just willing to give you free money? And if I added up all these amounts that I've apparently been awarded, I'm a millionaire. Except that I know these are all false promises, aren't they?

They're scams. Well, I want to tell you this morning, the Christian hope of resurrection and new life and restored creation is no false hope.

It is no scam. Because it was proved and secured by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead in history. There is a new world coming for God's people with every joy imaginable in the presence of the Father, enjoying Him and His gifts without limit for eternity.

All the things we chase after in vain in this life, we will be given to the full in the new creation. That is the inheritance waiting for God's children. And yet, we too often treat that promise like one of these SMSs, don't we?

Not really taking it seriously, just reading it and then carrying on as if nothing's really changed. We don't treat our inheritance as the inheritance it is.

[20 : 10] Because imagine how different your reaction would be if you received not a dodgy SMS, but a telephone call from a bona fide lawyer informing you that you've just inherited your long-lost uncle's 5.2 billion rand.

Now imagine, and then he gives you evidence, he shows you the documentation, the will. Now, would that perhaps change your life? I think so. That would be quite a life-changing thing.

Quite a life-changing phone call to receive. Because you, imagine it, 5.2 billion rand, you've just been told that you're inheriting. You would not have to worry about money for a day in your life ever again.

You would never need to worry about financial security. Imagine that. even if you haven't actually received that money in your bank account yet, but you've just been given a guarantee by the lawyer in that phone call, just that knowledge is enough to change your life from that moment you put the phone down, right?

Well, God has given us a phone call in the gospel telling us and proving to us the inheritance that we've received, which is far greater than 5.2 billion rand.

[21 : 27] We can't put a price to it. In the gospel and through the Holy Spirit in us, God has given us the guarantee of our inheritance. In fact, Paul says that in the very last passage at the end.

He says, the Holy Spirit is the down payment, the seal, the guarantee of your inheritance as a Christian. and so even though we need to wait before we see it, realizing the wealth of that inheritance should already change the way we live today.

If we grasp what we're getting, what the inheritance is, no longer will we need to worry about riches on this earth because we know the far greater riches to come.

But we don't think like that. We don't naturally realize how rich we are in Christ. Christ. And that's why Paul has to pray here for Christians to grasp the riches that they actually have.

And so that's another vital need for Christians. If we're going to live the lives that God has called us to live on earth, we need to know the riches of God's inheritance that He's given us and live in light of that.

[22 : 36] But then there's a third need we have as Christians that we see here. And that is to know the greatness of God's power. In verse 19, Paul also prays this, that we know His incomparably great power for us who believe, that power is the same as the mighty strength He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms.

His incomparably great power for us who believe. God has made His power available for His people. His power, God's power is available for us, this says.

What power is available for us? Well, we're told the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, the same power that physically raised Jesus from death to life is the power that's available for God's people today.

You know, for all our medical science and our technology developed over the centuries, humans are still as powerless against death as we ever were. We haven't advanced there in that field at all over thousands of years.

We can land a man on the moon, we can design microchips that perform millions of calculations per second, we can travel faster than the speed of sound, we can instantly talk to someone on the opposite side of the planet, but what we've never been able to do is bring someone back from the dead.

[24 : 04] that is beyond the power of humans. But it's not beyond the power of God, he's done it. In history, Lazarus, a little girl, and Jesus himself were all raised from the dead by God's power, and it's that same power that God makes available to you and me to give us new spiritual life and to help us to live out our calling day to day.

Think about that. The same power that raised Jesus and others physically from the dead is the same power that is available to you to raise you from this earth and from living as a citizen of the world to raise you into a new life as living as a citizen of heaven.

That power is available to you today. Power beyond what we or any human religion could give. power to put off sin and to live holy lives.

Power to change others with the gospel. Power to achieve for God in this world what we could never achieve by our human efforts. Power to achieve in Plumstead and Southfield and our community what we could never achieve by ourselves.

God has made that power available to us and yet we hardly ever tap into it because we don't even realize we have it most of the time.

[25 : 33] If we did if we realized the power the real life changing world changing power that was available to us to do things in this world there would be more people at our prayer meetings.

If we really believed what we could achieve in God's power our prayer meetings would be the most well attended meetings in this church that would be exciting we would be counting the days till our prayer meetings if we believed that we had available to us that same power through prayer but we don't.

And so that's why Paul prays here not for Christians to receive power from God but to know the power that God has already made available to them through prayer and through His Holy Spirit who lives in us.

Paul prays fervently that the Ephesians good as they are loving as they are faithful as they are will just realize the power that God has made available to them so that they can tap into that and start changing the world.

If only we would realize that too. And so do you see a Christian's greatest needs are not material needs. They're not the needs we feel. Our greatest need is not for God to bless us with health and safety and other blessings but rather to realize the blessings that God has already given us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[26 : 59] That is our greatest need to have the eyes of our heart opened enlightened to see what God has given us. The hope of His calling the riches of His inheritance and the power that He has made available to His people.

And Paul prays for those things and then he writes that prayer down because he wants us to be praying for those things too. And he wants us to realize that prayer is much more necessary and important in our lives than we think it is.

And most of all he wants us to realize that we will never be able to live the lives that God has called us to live unless we are people of prayer first. We will never be the church here in Plumstead that we are called to be unless we are a house of prayer.

unless we together are tapping in to the power that God has made available for us by gathering together and praying. And so, in closing, if you call yourself a Christian this morning, will you make a discipline of prayer in your life with other Christians on a regular basis because that's our job as God's people?

Will you organize to get together with at least one other Christian every week just to pray? And to pray not just for your felt needs but for the real spiritual needs of yourself and others that we've learned about here.

[28 : 29] Use this prayer as a model for what you're going to be praying for. And will you pray for the needs of your church for God's power to work in us to achieve great things for Him?

And will you pray that we would start living as the citizens of heaven that God has called us to be? Will you pray? Will you pray?

Not just to tick a box each day but will you make time in your schedule block out time put aside other things to pray serious focused life changing soul saving world changing prayers will you be involved in that work that God has called His people to?

Because as Oswald Chambers rightly says prayer does not fit us for the greater work prayer is the greater work let's pray Lord you have given us such a privilege not just to have access to you through prayer but to be involved in the work you are doing in this world through our prayers Lord forgive us forgive us forgive us for the laziness we have had towards prayer forgive us for our nonchalant attitudes thinking that prayer is not important Lord you have given us a job to do and that is to pray and help us to do our job Lord even now will you work through your power to change each of us to change our desires to focus our lives on this work this great work that you have given us and through us through this church would you transform lives would you transform the society and would your name be glorified in Jesus name we pray

Amen