

# Pray the Bible

## Session #4: Praying the Apostle Paul's Prayers with Kevin P. Halloran

Last session, we looked at the Old Testament book of Psalms, an incredible treasure trove of biblical prayers God has given us. In this session, we will look at a New Testament resource that can enrich our prayer lives that perhaps you've never considered before: the prayers of the Apostle Paul.

We'll first look at:

- 1) Who is the Apostle Paul, and why is he a useful example in prayer?
- 2) What his prayers are.
- 3) And then look at examples of how we can use them for prayer.

Before we dive in, let's pray.

Prayer: Father God, teach us to pray, and please fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope and be people of prayer.

### *Who Was the Apostle Paul?*

Here are five reasons why the Apostle Paul is uniquely positioned to help us in prayer.

#### **1. Paul was an Apostle.**

Being an apostle means Paul had apostolic authority. Using that authority and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote thirteen letters of the New Testament.

Being a New Testament apostle, Paul also writes in a way uniquely valuable to us because he also lived and ministered in the post-resurrection church age. That means that He understood more of God's plan of salvation than any Old Testament prophet or any of the Psalm writers. He could pray with greater specificity what God wants for us and the world now that the Messiah had come, died, risen from the dead, began building His church, and as we await His return.

#### **2. Paul was a sinner transformed by the gospel.**

Before he was an apostle, Paul was a persecutor of the church who thought he was doing God's work. Then the risen Jesus Christ revealed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus. And when Jesus appeared to him, everything changed. He was converted and called to be an apostle.

It's special to see a fellow human being like the Apostle Paul, a sinner transformed by the power of the gospel, sharing prayers for others and requesting prayer for himself. So, if we want our lives more transformed by the gospel, Paul is a helpful mentor for us.

### **3. Paul was a man of prayer.**

In Acts 9, after Paul's dramatic vision of the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, the Lord Jesus described Paul to a disciple named Ananias. Jesus didn't say *this was the former persecutor who was miraculously converted*, He said "[At a certain house,] look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying" (Acts 9:11). From the very start of his Christian journey, Paul was a man of prayer. And we see that evidently in his writing.

It's worth noting that in Paul's letters we see about *eight times* as many prayers as we see in the letters written by other apostles.

### **4. Paul was a pastor.**

Paul's pastoral heart comes out in his letters and addresses profoundly sensitive and personal situations. His prayers serve as a model for us in praying for those we minister to as well, people with their own needs, challenges, and temptations.

You may or may not have an official ministry position, but we all are able to shepherd others and point them to Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep. That goes for pastors, small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, parents, and other roles. So, Paul's prayers serve as a model for us.

### **5. Paul was a worshipper.**

Paul never lost sight of his conversion experience nor where he would be without the miraculous grace of God in his life. That led him to a huge view of God and a response of humility before God. (See 1 Timothy 1:12-17.)

Part of the reason Paul worshipped like he did was his understanding of the Old Testament from being a trained Pharisee. You see, a good Pharisee would have been awaiting the Messiah promised all the way back in Genesis 3. I can only imagine the awe and wonder Paul would have experienced in being commissioned by that same Messiah on the road to Damascus to take His gospel to the ends of the earth.

Paul was a worshipper and loved the Lord Jesus so much that He could say, "*To live is Christ, to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:21). As we pray with Paul, we will be led to worship.

***What are Paul's prayers? How can we identify them?***

You may be wondering, *I've read all of Paul's epistles and can't remember many—if any—of his prayers.* Let me clarify what I mean.

While we may not have "official" prayers recorded as words spoken by Paul directly to God, there are many passages that pull back the curtain on Paul's prayer life and what his priorities were in prayer.

There are a few main types of prayers coming from Paul:

1. **Wish Prayers.** In these prayers, Paul wishes that something would be true for his readers, and if he wishes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that makes Paul's words especially helpful as we think about praying for others. These prayers usually start with formula, "May God do \_\_\_\_\_" Romans 15:13 is an example: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."*
2. **Prayer Reports.** This is where Paul reports his prayers to those he prays for. Romans 1:8 is an example: *"I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world."*
3. **Requests for Prayer.** Ephesians 6:19–20 is an example of Paul requesting prayer for himself, Paul writes *"Pray also for me..."* and goes on to share requests.
4. **Benedictions.** A short word of blessing. You're probably used to hearing these at the end of church services. 2 Corinthians 13:14 is an example: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."*

It's one thing to talk about the usefulness of a tool and another thing entirely to see it in use, so turn to the book of Ephesians, where we will spend the rest of this session.

The prayers of Ephesians have so much to offer, and I can't pretend to give every insight from them. What follows is a sampler platter to encourage you to dig deeper into the prayers of the Apostle Paul and use them in your own prayer life.

## **Ephesians 1:15–23 – A Prayer for a Deeper Experience of the Gospel**

*"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and*

*what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might." (Ephesians 1:16–19)*

The context helps us understand how this prayer functions in Ephesians. Ephesians 1:3-14 is a glorious unpacking of so many benefits that we enjoy in Christ: every spiritual blessing, election from before the foundation of the world, adoption into God's family, forgiveness of sins, the seal of the Holy Spirit.

This prayer is simply to connect the Ephesians' head knowledge of those glorious truths with their heart knowledge, their everyday life experience.

In verses 17–18, it says Paul wants them to have a Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ and to have the eyes of their hearts enlightened to know three specific things in their everyday lives. (The three things are easy to recognize because the word "what" repeats three times.)

**1. Pray to know more of the Hope of Christ** - "What is the hope to which he has called you" (verse 18).

So many in our world today are without true hope. This is increasingly true due to political strife in our culture, the empty promises of our secular world, living through pandemics and war, but ultimately from not knowing the hope of Christ.

But we who are in Jesus Christ have been "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

Paul longs for the Ephesians to know more of that living hope. We need to know hope beyond our current circumstances. Hope a bad diagnosis, a pandemic, and a war can never take away. Hope is what causes us to persevere during hardship and suffering, and God wants to give it to us.

So pray along with Paul and me, "*Lord, help us know the hope to which You have called us.*"

**2. Pray to know more of the Love of Christ** - "What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (verse 18).

The meaning of the Greek of this phrase is somewhat ambiguous. It can either mean we are God's special inheritance, or He gives us an inheritance. Both are biblical ideas, and both point to the love of Christ.

I can ask God to know more of how we are His treasured people, His inheritance, who will receive an inheritance of our own in the new heavens and new earth.

That's one of the beauties of praying Scripture, even if we don't know precisely what it says, as long as we're not praying something unbiblical, we will offer useful prayers that God will hear. We have freedom.

This second petition is a petition to know more of our beloved status. In God's eyes, we are "more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37)—more than the greatest world leaders of all human history because God calls us His beloved children. You may know that intellectually, but do you know that deep down in your soul? That's what Paul is asking for, and we can ask to know it too.

*"Lord, help us know the riches of Your love for us in Christ."*

**3. Pray to know more of the Power of Christ** - "What is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might..." (verse 19).

I don't want you to miss how Paul describes this great power that is at work within us. Look at verse 20, "...*The same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...*" God our Father is the most powerful Being that ever has been or ever will be, and His unmatched power is *toward us who believe*.

This is resurrection power that is ALWAYS available for God's special people. This petition is that we would know that power; a power to help us be strong *in the Lord* and the strength of *His might*, as Ephesians 6 says. The power to help us stand firm in our identities in Christ, to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. Power to help us maintain unity and love within the church, power to love our spouses and children, power to work in a way that honors God.

Do you want to know that power when you are discouraged? When you are tempted? When facing intense spiritual opposition? We can pray to know the power of Christ at work in us, and we can be strengthened by that power.

Ephesians 1 gives us at least three petitions we can pray: Pray to know the **hope** of Christ, the **love** of Christ, and the **power** of Christ.

When might we want to use these petitions from Ephesians 1? Let me suggest a few situations to illustrate how practical it is.

- Daily – This is a prayer to wake up each morning with a deeper understanding of the riches of the gospel.
- When my faith is stale and I need a refresh. When I start thinking, "I learned all the truth of Ephesians 1:3-14 in Sunday school and don't really care much."
- When a loved one is drifting from Christ. Pray that the eyes of their heart would be enlightened to know more of the hope, love, and power of the gospel in their life.
- When I drop my three-year-old daughter off at Sunday school.
- You could pray this for your church community to be more and more characterized by the hope, love, and power of the gospel.

- Pray it for persecuted brothers around the world to experience the gospel in deep ways as they suffer for the sake of Christ. (It's interesting to note that Paul wrote Ephesians from prison!)

There are limitless ways we can pray this prayer. I encourage you to add it to your prayer toolbox.

### **Ephesians 3:14-19 – A Prayer for Increasing Spiritual Maturity**

The first prayer in Ephesians relates more to our standing/position—to understand the unchangeable facts of who we are in Christ and who He is for us. This second prayer is about our health as believers. Our identity in Christ doesn't change, but the degree to which we mature and grow in the gospel does change; and is something to pursue in prayer.

This passage responds to what comes earlier in Ephesians. Paul is praying in response to what God has done in Jesus. And remember, Paul knew the Old Testament well, and he is speaking of God's unfolding plan in all of history to reconcile sinners to Himself and form the church, something that was once a mystery, but now has been made clear in Christ (see Ephesians 3:1–13). Here's how Paul prays in light of that:

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14–19)*

If you have trouble understanding exactly what Paul is getting at here, don't feel too bad. Even the apostle Peter said Paul is sometimes hard to understand! My encouragement to you is seek to understand Paul's prayers as best you can and mine whatever gold you can from them to enrich your prayers. We're going to do that right now with this prayer.

There is so much going on in this one prayer (that also extends to verse 21 with a glorious doxology), but John Stott summarized this passage's four key petitions better than I ever could:

"[Paul's] prayer is like a staircase by which he ascends higher and higher in his aspiration for them... [It] has four steps whose keywords are '**strength**' (that they might be strengthened by Christ's indwelling through the Spirit), secondly '**love**' (that they might be rooted and grounded in love), thirdly '**knowledge**' (that they might know Christ's love in all its dimensions,

although it is beyond knowledge), and fourthly 'fullness' (that they might be filled up to the very fullness of God)."

Strength, love, knowledge, and fullness. In the next few moments together, we will focus on two petitions: Love and Fullness.

### **1. Love – Pray to be Rooted and Grounded in Love.**

This is different than what we saw in the last prayer, what I described as a petition to know the love of Christ. This is *for our lives to reflect the love of Christ*, and have our lives grounded on the sure foundation of love. Love for God and one another are, after all, the first and second great commandments.

For us to stand firm in Christ in a world that opposes Him, we need to be firmly rooted in love for God. For us to stand united as a church during divisive times, we need to be grounded in love for one another.

One of the glorious implications of being rooted and grounded in love is that in turn we will better comprehend the greatness and glory of the love of Christ. It's the opposite of a vicious cycle, known as a virtuous cycle, the more we are rooted in love for God and others, the more we will know the love of Christ, and the more we know the love of Christ, the more it will overflow from our hearts back to God and others.

We pray to be "rooted and grounded in love" so we start that cycle that has compounding value. It's a petition that when answered, should continually help us receive more and more answers to that prayer. And when we grow in love for God and others, so much spiritual good is accomplished.

*Lord, root and ground us in love.*

### **2. Fullness – Pray to Be Filled with All the Fullness of God.**

A natural question arises, what does it mean to be "filled with all the fullness of God"? It doesn't mean that finite you can contain an infinite God, but it does mean that our lives can be more and more filled with God and all He has to offer us. Remember, as Ephesians 1:3 says, we have "every spiritual blessing in Christ"—to be filled with the fullness of God is to grasp God and those spiritual blessings in an experiential way. We are asking for all of God we can possibly experience. A gloriously bold prayer!

I like to use the following illustration to help us see what this petition means. Say, when you're a new Christian, your experience of God is like the amount of water in a Dixie Cup. That certainly isn't all the water there is, but you have something. Then, as you grow over time, you can hold the volume of a one-gallon jug of water. Then later on you can compare your experience of God to an Olympic-sized swimming pool. This petition is asking for fullness of God that

would require all the water in the Atlantic Ocean, eventually all of the water in the world. It's asking to experience all of God and the spiritual blessings He bestows in every way we can.

Now, some may be tempted in reading this verse to go overboard pursuing an experiential version of the Christian faith that is disconnected from the Word of God and living by faith, not by sight. We shouldn't do that. But we still need to realize that God wants to fill us with more and more of His fullness. He is the One who gave us this prayer.

As Stott said, there is progression in the petitions of this prayer, it is a staircase, and this one is the highest step on the staircase. After Paul prays for the Ephesians to be strengthened by the Spirit to be rooted and grounded in love, he prays for them to grow in knowledge of the multiple dimensions of Christ's love for us, and then prays for that knowledge to result in "being filled with all the fullness of God." That is why one biblical scholar (Dr. Tom Schreiner) can say, "Being full of God is the goal of the Christian life."

I'm almost at a loss for words to describe the value of this petition. As I realize that Paul asked God that "according to the riches of His glory" (verse 16) He might grant these petitions to us...my heart is simply hungry for more of God. I want God to empty me of anything that would prevent more of His fullness in my life, a fullness that would touch every thought and every aspect of my life.

*Lord, fill us with all Your fullness that we can possibly hold. And increase our desire for more of You.*

How might we use this prayer?

- Daily – We can pray it for more excitement about God. Stott said: "Climbers of this staircase become short of breath, even a little giddy."
- We can pray to be rooted and grounded in love as we think about the divided world we live in. We show that we are Christ's followers by our love.
- We can pray this prayer when we are content in the Christian life and the knowledge of God. This prayer will remind us of how much we need to grow and how much we need God's help.
- We can ask for more of the fullness of God in our lives, our families, our marriages, our churches.
- We can and should pray this in so many situations.

### **Ephesians 6:19–20 – A Prayer for Gospel Proclamation**

This last passage we'll look at closes the famous armor of God passage which closes the book of Ephesians. Paul encourages believers to continue in prayer in Ephesians 6:18 before requesting prayer for his proclamation of the gospel in Ephesians 6:19–20.



These two verses give us insight into two ways we can pray for the advance of the gospel, not only for pastors and missionaries, but also for every Christian as a gospel proclaimer in their church and neighborhood.

*“[Pray] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”* (Ephesians 6:19–20)

**The first thing Paul asks for is clarity**, “That words may be given me” (verse 19). Paul knew he needed people to pray for him to share the gospel with clarity.

This should also be encouraging for all of us because Paul—the guy who wrote Romans and Ephesians, two of the clearest expositions of the gospel ever written—realized he needed the help of almighty God for his message to come across clearly and faithfully.

The truth is the gospel is a message that demands a response. But, if we share the gospel without clarity, no one will believe us because no one will understand us! So, pray for clarity.

The second thing Paul asks for here is **boldness in proclaiming the gospel**. Paul mentions boldness twice, once in verse 19 and another time in verse 20. Another way of saying boldness is to speak “fearlessly” (as the NIV translates this verse). Why would we need to pray for boldness?

Often, it is because there *is* fear to overcome. Have you ever feared sharing the gospel with others? I know what it’s like too, especially if I feel like I’ll be rejected. The gospel can be, after all, offensive and can bring opposition as Paul knew well.

But how encouraging is it that Paul—the guy who wrote thirteen books in the New Testament, the greatest missionary the world has ever seen, the one who saw the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus—asked people to pray that he would be bold and not fearful when sharing the gospel?

Do you feel a little better if you’ve ever feared evangelism? I hope you’re encouraged, but not in a way that uses fear as an excuse to not share the gospel.

We need both clarity and boldness in testifying to Jesus. If we only had clarity and *no boldness*, we wouldn’t open our mouths. If we only had boldness and *no clarity*, our zeal might be unorganized babbling that would confuse our listeners.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, pray for ***boldness*** and ***clarity*** when presenting the gospel to family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. God is ready to answer this prayer to advance His kingdom... if we would only ask.

How might we use this for prayer?

- We might pray it while driving to church on Sundays. I pray for the preacher that day to speak the gospel with clarity and boldness.
- I pray for my wife each week as she shares the gospel in the evangelistic club she runs for young girls.
- You can pray it before getting coffee with an unbelieving friend or another time you want to testify to Jesus.

We've looked three powerful passages from Ephesians—there are many more useful prayers from the apostle Paul that we can adapt for our prayer lives. See you next time when we will look at overcoming five common obstacles to prayer.

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