

Anchored in God's Loving Purposes. Part Three. Growing in Christ Ephesians 1.15-23

September 13, 2026

Does it ever feel like your prayers don't really have much to show for them? I mean, what do we have that we can point to and say, "Look there, there's the pile of all the things I asked for, and God gave me just what I was asking for."

Think of some of the seemingly unconditional invitations held before us. Jesus says to us:

In Matthew 21.22

If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

And in John 16.23

Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

We hear those invitations, so we pray, and then we look at the answers to our prayers, and we don't really see much fruit.



Do you ever wonder why, when we are invited to ask our King for so much, and we take him at his word and ask, why we seem to have so little to show for it? Why so little of what we ask for we receive?

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This morning we look at a passage on prayer that I think has the potential to transform our prayer life, and to lead to far more of a sense of those things we pray for being answered. It's a secret that I know a number of you have already discovered.

We find it in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 15 through 23. Turn there with me and let's look at what Paul says in this section on prayer. He writes:

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.

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.

I pray 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.

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, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

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Wow! What a promise! That the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to us! So how do we access that power in our prayers?

Let's go back up to verses 15 through 19, where we'll be focusing for the rest of the message, and let's take a closer look at what Paul prays and see how that might inform our own prayers.

Ephesians 1.15-16

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.

Paul begins by saying, "for this reason," making a clear connection with what comes before. Paul says: everything I've just shared about God's redemptive plan creates the context for everything I'm about to share about how I am praying for you.

If you were away last week, I really want to encourage you to go back and listen to that message on chapter 1, verses 3-14. It really lays the foundation for the rest of our conversation this fall.

For those of you who were here, you'll remember that we summed up this one momentous cascading sentence in five words: *God chose us in love*. Then he goes on to describe his cosmic redemptive project of bringing all things under the loving rule of Jesus the King.

In light of that, Paul says, ***ever since I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people***: ever since I learned that you had given your allegiance to Jesus as King above all else, and that you are living a life of love that reflects your devotion to him and is worthy of it.

I think it's interesting to notice that this same two part framework of the faith – loved by God, and living a life of love – shapes the way Paul wrote his letter, and provides the frame of reference as he looks into the lives of those for whom he prays, *and* shapes the way he prays for them.

Now Paul turns to the content of his prayers.

Before we go on, if someone told you they were praying for you, what would you want them to be praying? Let's look at the three things Paul prays and see what we might learn from those.

1. Here's his first prayer:

Ephesians 1.17

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.

The ***Spirit of wisdom and revelation***. We're left with an interesting translation question here. Is Paul saying he's asking God to give them a wise and understanding spirit, sort of a wise outlook? Or is he praying that God by his Spirit would impart to them his wisdom and understanding?

You could translate this phrase either way, but every time the idea of revelation is mentioned in the New Testament, the Spirit of God is always involved. Plus, I think here Paul is echoing the same triune affirmation of faith that he just made in the previous section.

There, in a wonderful divine conspiracy, the Father chooses his own, the Son redeems them, making them his own, and then the Spirit marks them as his own, and brings them to life spiritually. And here, in a further conspiracy, the Father answers prayer through the Son,

granting the wisdom and revelation that come through his Spirit. The Divine community conspires to answer our prayers – that's amazing the think about.

When used biblically, **wisdom** means seeing into the true nature of things, seeing everything as it really is, with God at the center of it all.

Revelation means truth that only God can make known to us. And because God is invisible and inaudible, the only way we can know anything about those spiritual realities is if God chooses to make it known by His Spirit.

So when the Spirit gives *revelation* we are given the gift of truth about God, and when the Spirit gives *wisdom* we are given the gift of being able to understand it.

That revelation includes Scripture, of course, which the Spirit inspired and preserved for us, and it includes insight into God that the Spirit makes known to us directly.

What specifically does Paul want them to see and understand?

Paul prays the Spirit would reveal the truth, and then help them understand it, first and foremost, *about God himself* . . .

so that you may know him better.

If we're not careful we can miss what this actually says. The Greek says "will give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation *in the knowledge of him*," and many translations follow that language.

The NIV has gotten this translation just right when it says: "so that you may know him better." This is a relational word, not a notion from the discipline of systematic theology.

Evangelicals love to know things about God. We love to compile and systematize everything that the Bible says about God's omnipotence or his sovereignty or his grace or his covenants with us.

We can be mistaken and think that knowing about God and knowing God are the same thing. But they're not.

Paul isn't praying that they would add to their stack of God facts. He prays that the Spirit will help them know the heart of God better. He doesn't want them to be able to draw an accurate map, he wants them to visit the place and get to know the terrain.

Even though it sounds clunky to us, this is the language of intimate personal connection. Knowing God more deeply. Having a closer personal relationship with him. Getting to know him better and better. Knowing God intimately.

So what does that mean? Knowing God can sound so ethereal. What does it mean to have a close relationship with God?

Well, in about a month, a dear friend of mine named Richard White is coming here to preach. (And you are in for a treat when he does!)

Richard and I met and became friends over forty years ago, when we were both in seminary. and we've been in a pastors' covenant group together ever since. We've also been in a denominational pastor's group that has met annually for about a dozen years.

What does it mean for Richard to be a close personal friend? Well, we've spent lots of time together. We meet up at least twice a year, totaling almost a week that we spend together every year. During those gathering we've studied Scripture and prayed together, and we've planned activities together, and we've played together.

What does it mean for Richard to be a close personal friend? Well, we've hung out around a campfire and shared stories in South Carolina, and we've eaten yak burgers and hiked on mountain slopes in Colorado, and we've squeezed together under a skinny pine tree during a torrential rain storm in North Carolina, and we've taught side by side in Nepal. and we've kayaked among bioluminescent jelly fish in Florida. He took me to the hospital when I broke my collar bone, and he and his wife helped nurse me back to health.

What does it mean for Richard to be a close personal friend? Well, when I was asked to speak at his retirement this past summer, as a result of all that time together, and finding ourselves in so many places side by side, I didn't exactly struggle to think of things to say. I mean, we've done *life* together. I know the way he thinks. I know what makes him laugh. I'd recognize his gentle southern voice anywhere. I know the way his heart ticks. I know what he's really good at. I know what makes him upset. I know the longings of his heart.

The same goes in our relationship with God. Knowing God more closely is what comes of going through life with him – spending intentional time together, going through joys with him, going through times of uncertainty, going through times of pain and loss, and all the while coming to know the way he thinks, what brings him joy, what makes him angry, what his voice sounds like, and what is most on his heart.

According to Paul, knowing God is the most important thing of all. So that's the most important thing we can pray for.

In her classic book *The Living Mountain*, Nan Shepherd said something about knowing the mountains that is even more true of knowing God. She wrote:

Knowing another is endless. The thing to be known grows with the knowing.

One of the most consistent threads that runs all through Christian devotional literature for the past two thousand years is this idea of our moving into ever more intimate relationship with God not only in this life, but also in the life to come.



In the middle 1200s an English Bishop named Richard of Chichester became ill from traveling to another village to preach. On his deathbed, surrounded by other pastors, he prayed a prayer that since has become familiar.

His prayer reflects his passionate desire to let the center of his faith not be what God has done for him, or what he has done for God, but deeper than that – God himself:

*O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,
May I know You more clearly,
Love You more dearly,
Follow You more nearly.*

That's the thing for which Paul prays here. That we would grow closer and closer and ever closer to God.

Think for a moment about the words you use in your conversations with God throughout the day. Which do you say most often?

Please? Expressing your needs? Making requests?
Thank you? Expressing gratitude for what God has done for you?
What about, "I love you"?

I delight in you. You are a joy to me. I am so glad you are with me. You are so good to me. You are life to me. I love you. Just simple hidden ways of lifting words of love to the God who knows and loves me, who is with me and for me.

As AW Tozer put it:

God's gifts are many; His best gift is one. It is the gift of Himself.

Because that's true, this is what the poet Thomas Traherne is moved to pray:

O give yourself to me,
for without you no gift at all can satisfy.
And because you yourself are the gift,
O give me what you are,
That I may give you what I am
And be a partaker of [your love].

So Paul's first prayer is that we would know God better, more intimately, ever growing closer to him. It's the most important prayer someone can pray for us, and it's the most important prayer we can pray for others.

2. The next verse brings us to Paul's next request:

Ephesians 1.18-19

I pray 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.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened

Or better reflecting what's going on in the Greek, as the ESV puts it, "having the eyes of your heart enlightened."

This parallels the previous verse: If God gives you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that means that the eyes of your heart will be enlightened. It's like that familiar chorus from the eighties:

Open the eyes of our heart, Lord. We want to see you.

And what is it that Paul wants God to open our eyes to?

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened
in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you

Now, this word *hope*, like the New Testament word *mystery*, means just about the opposite of what it means when we use the word today.

For us, a *mystery* is a difficult-to-solve puzzle that baffles us, but the way the New Testament uses the word, a mystery is something God is spelling out and making clear.

In the same way, when we hear the word *hope*, it's usually not much more than a wish. "I sure hope it doesn't rain tonight during the picnic and worship time."

But for Paul and the other New Testament writers, hope isn't a wishful thinking. It is a *certainty*. The word means a confident expectation, a sure thing.

Whatever God has promised about the future is as good as done already, because the same trustworthy God who made the promise will see it through to reality. God's plan is so sure that we can think of it as already having become a reality.

And what is that hope to which God has called us, that Paul is praying for us to see more clearly? It is everything Paul just got done summing up in verses 3 through 14 – all of our spiritual blessings in Christ.

All that God has for us – choosing us, dying for us, raising us to life, making us his own, setting us free, forming us together into a new eternal community, and bringing all things together under Christ's rule – that is our hope.

And Paul prays that those he writes to would be able to see that hope, and all that it means for us, more clearly.

Then Paul prays that they would be able to see more clearly

the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,

It doesn't take long looking at this to realize Paul here is restating the line before. Clearly their "glorious inheritance" parallels "the hope" they have, and God's "calling" on their lives parallels their being his "holy people, people set apart for his purposes"

So in these two phrases Paul is really praying just one thing: that they would know "the hope to which he has called you – that is, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people."

I think – and this is important – I think that when Paul prays for them to be enlightened to see their hope and their inheritance more clearly, I think he means that he prays they will be able to see *from within* their hope and their inheritance.

God's loving purposes are so *sure* that they should become the house we live in and the windows we look through out onto life. We understand who we are and why we're here and what we're about *through them*.

Paul is praying not just that we see our hope more clearly, but that we stand *within* it more consistently. ***That we would live from within the promises and purposes of God.***

Or to say it another way – and this is where the title of this series came from – that we would be anchored in the loving purposes of God. That means:

Among people whose love for me is fickle, knowing I was chosen sets me free not to be desperate for their love.

When I face a life circumstance that threatens my wellbeing, knowing I have been raised to new life gives me deep peace, and that I can be confident that even now God is working for my good.

Knowing God is creating a single unified new humanity, built upon Jesus' work of securing my redemption, I can move toward someone who has hurt me and extend forgiveness with freedom.

Crashing into a wall in the dark, I can tighten my grip on the one who holds mine, the one for whom all darkness is as light, and find hope.

Confident that God is gathering all things together under the feet of Christ the King means I don't have to be anxious about the political and economic fluctuations that threaten my peace day by day.

By praying that we would be enlightened to our hope, he is praying that we would stand in the light of our hope.

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So Paul has prayed that we would know God better.

He has prayed that we would see our hope more clearly, be anchored in his loving purposes for us, and live from within that frame of reference of knowing who God is and what God is doing.

3. Now he comes to the third petition

That we would know ***his incomparably great power for us who believe.***

God is up to something extraordinary. Not just around us. But *in us and through us.*

But we can't bring any of this about through our own effort. For God's design on our lives to find their fulfillment, we have to experience *his* power, equipping us to walk in a manner worthy of God's call on our lives, and living a life of love.

Note that Paul doesn't pray for us to become powerful. Instead, he prays for God's great power in us to be recognized and set loose and cooperated with, allowed to have its way.

in the New Testament, whenever power is discussed in the life of a believer, things are always framed in terms of God's power being made evident in our weakness and limitations.

For the Christian, power is never for the sake of controlling others, but always for the sake of experiencing transformation ourselves.

Think for example of:

Philippians 2.13

God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him

II Corinthians 12.9

The Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

II Corinthians 3.18 NCB

As we gaze upon the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, all of us are being transformed into that same image from glory to glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

As we abide in Christ, we have access to his life-giving power, both to transform us more and more into the likeness of Jesus *and* to make us more and more fit conduits of the love of God for others.

So in this prayer, Paul prays that we would:

A Summary of Paul's Prayer

Know God himself more intimately.

See more clearly, and then stand more confidently within, the hope to which He has called us.

Experience more fully His transforming power at work in us.

* * *

So let me bring this back to the question with which I began.

Why is it that our prayers can seem so often to go unanswered?

In the 1700s a man named Jean Grou wrote a thought-provoking little book called *How to Pray*.

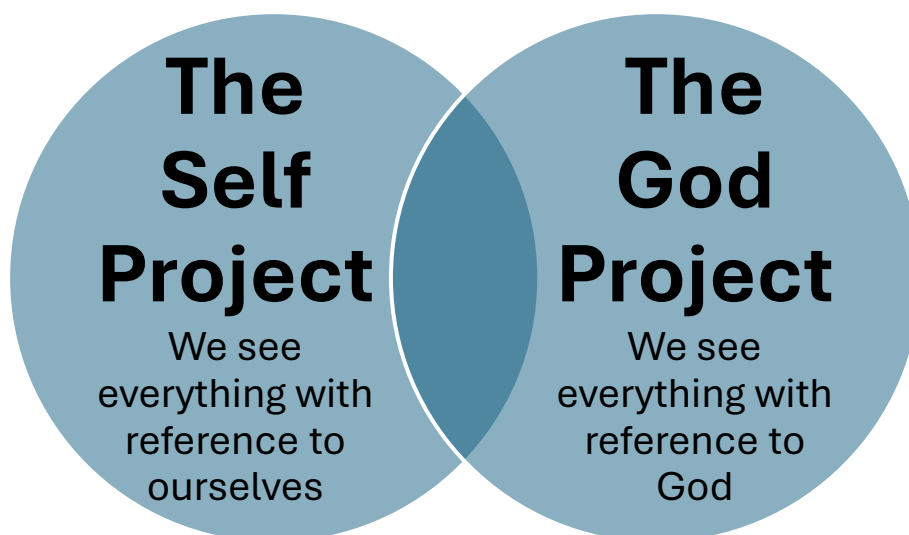
What he suggests is that the reason our prayers are often ineffectual is because we are often asking for things that don't ultimately line up with the loving purposes of God. He writes:

We behave as if our own interests, caprices, and passions were all we had to consider in making our requests, and God must fall in with all our desires, however unreasonable they may be. 74

It is the glory of God and his holy will that must be our first considerations. Where these two motives agree in inspiring our prayers they are truly offered in the name of Jesus Christ, and never can we call upon that adorable name in vain. 76

Let us imagine a Christian who in his prayers places God's glory and his own spiritual progress before everything else. . . . If we approach God with this motive, which is his own in all that he does, we shall never have reason to complain that he does not listen to us. 77, 75

All of us, until God gently teaches us otherwise, begin in our prayers by seeing everything with reference to ourselves.



When my focus is on the David project, I see everything in connection with me. How am I impacted? How are my needs being met, my desires satisfied?

But God's project is quite different. He invites us to shift the center of our perspective, and to see everything with reference to Jesus the King. How are his loving purposes in this world being served?

The two projects will lead us to make two very different sorts of requests.



And, as this diagram reflects, there isn't much overlap between what is best with reference to myself and what is best with reference to God.

How will I pray for me, or for you, if I'm thinking in terms of my own project? I'll ask for what would please me, serve me, improve my circumstances, ease my discomfort, meet my needs, go my way. Those are the things I will pray for me. And I will pray similar things for you.

But God isn't a genie, and those aren't the kinds of prayers he offers to answer. Some of those prayers are directly contradictory to his loving designs. God answers the prayers that are consistent with his good and loving purposes: His presence in our circumstances, his kingdom in this world, his reputation in others' eyes, his likeness formed in us.

Imagine your car was stuck in the mud, and you got out and began to push from the side, against the car door, and then you asked God for help, and he came over and began to push the car from behind.

There would be two things to notice about that situation. First, you aren't pushing in the same direction. It could almost look like you were pushing against each other. So that could lead you to say, "I don't understand. I asked for God's help, but he didn't help me."

And second, God had a clearer view of what would be beneficial than you did. And God is always about doing the thing that ultimately benefits you the most, even if it is not in line with, or even contrary to, what you are asking him to do.

So how do I pray if I pray with reference to God, and in line with his loving purposes?

Meet me in this difficulty, Lord. Use it to draw me closer to you, to teach me, lead me, form your likeness in me, form humility in me, to help me to trust you more, help me to reflect you more, help me to live out your love more faithfully.

Those are the prayers that, when we pray them, God *delights* to answer! And when we pray this way, we will see answers in abundance every direction we look.

in John 16.23

Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask *in my name*.

* * *

This week I got away for my annual prayer retreat, during which it was my great joy to pray by name for every person who is part of the Covenant family – children, young people, and men and women.

And for each of one you, I prayed, among other things, these three prayers of Paul.

And it was really moving.

I got me thinking: what if this is what we always prayed for each other?

Certainly we can pray for healing, or reconciliation, or a new job, or a new boss.

But what if these were the things we formed the habit of praying for each other most often?

In illness, in a work struggle, in a relational difficulty, in a season of uncertainty, in the face of things in this world feeling out of control. May you

Know him more intimately

Know more his hope, and all that he has for you
And know more his power at work in and through you

And what if when people asked us how we could pray for them, this is how we answered,
with these three things

That in this struggle or life circumstance we would draw closer to God
That we would be anchored more firmly in his loving purposes
That we would experience his power at work in and through me

What if in our small groups, or around our tables as a family, or during our pastoral prayer in
worship, these were the main things we prayed for each other?

We're going to close our service this morning by giving you a chance to practice this. In just
a moment I'll ask you to turn to one or two other people in your row. Please just tell each
other your names and then pray for each other using Paul's prayer. If you're more
comfortable praying silently, no problem. If you're okay praying out loud, great.

Just a simple prayer. It might sound something like this:

Lord, thanks for Jim. Help him know you more intimately. Help him to see more
clearly the hope to which you've called him, and to live from within that hope. And
help him to experience your transforming power at work in him. I ask this in the
name of Jesus the King.

Turn now, share your names, and then briefly pray these three prayers for each other, would
you?

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Paul's Prayer in Ephesians 1.15-19

To know God himself more intimately.
To see more clearly – and to live more from within – his loving purposes.
To experience more fully His transforming power at work in and through us.