

# Gospel-Shaped Praying

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[ 0 : 00 ] Spirit of the living God, once again, we confess that we believe that you got a hold of the Apostle Paul. You enabled him to think these thoughts and to write these words.

And I pray in your mercy and grace now that you would help us enter in, as never before, the reality that is being described. And this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. We are currently making our way through one of the most life-transforming documents ever written.

We are slowly making our way through a first-century letter, written by a man named Paul, the Apostle Paul, to disciples living in the first-century city of Ephesus.

Ephesus was regularly voted the most livable city in the world. We come today to one of my most favorite parts of the letter.

[ 1 : 00 ] We come to one of my most favorite parts of all of Paul's letters. We come to the first of two prayers he prays for the disciples of Jesus living in the Roman Empire.

I love to hear Paul preach. But I especially love to hear Paul pray. I love to hear Paul preach. I mean, where would we be without his preaching? Where would we be without his preaching in the letter to the Romans, for instance? Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. That as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Where would we be without Paul's preaching in his letter to the Colossians? Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

[ 2 : 06 ] By him all things were made, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things have been created by him and for him.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to himself.

Where would we be without his preaching in the letter to the Philippians? Have this mind in you, which was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to take advantage of, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and humbling himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Therefore, God has highly exalted him, and lifted him, given him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Where would we be without that preaching? Where would we be without what Paul preaches in the letter to the Ephesians? Where would we be without that opening blessing?

[ 3 : 11 ] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, chosen, adopted, forgiven, clued in on the mystery of history, sealed by the Holy Spirit.

I love to hear Paul preach. But I especially love to hear Paul pray. Listen again.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe.

My goodness. Wait until we come to his other prayer in chapter 3. No one prays like Paul. No one prays as expansively as Paul, except, of course, the Lord Jesus himself, in the prayer that is

recorded for us in John 17.

[ 4 : 27 ] But no one else in all of Scripture, no king, no priest, no prophet, no psalmist, no one else in all of church history, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, prays like Paul.

No one prays with the emotional depth with which he prays. And no one prays with the extravagant expectations with which he prays.

I love to hear Paul pray. Now, what amazes me and challenges me is that this expansive praying emerges from crummy circumstances.

Crummy is an understatement. He's not on a retreat on the slopes of Mount Hermon. He's not on vacation in some exotic villa on the Italian seacoast.

He's in prison. Going on five years now, three years in Caesarea and two years in Rome, his emotionally deep, extravagantly expectant, intellectually rigorous praying emerges from a jail cell.

[ 5 : 46 ] Not that these are the only prayers Paul prayed in those crummy circumstances. I don't want to idealize Paul's spirituality. He must have also prayed for release from those crummy circumstances.

Right? I mean, he's human. He must have prayed for that. Before he ended up in Rome, in jail, he had written to the Roman church in anticipation of going to Jerusalem and probably being arrested. Join me in my struggle, he wrote, by praying to God for me that I may be rescued. He asked the same thing of the Corinthians. And Paul likely also asked God in prayer, why?

Why are you letting me go through these circumstances? He was, after all, taught to pray by the prayers of the Psalms. And if you know the prayer book well, you know that there are many so-called lament songs.

Oh Lord, you are the sovereign one. You are good and faithful. So why? Why am I here? And how long, oh Lord? So Paul surely felt free to pray in those biblical ways.

[ 6 : 56 ] It's just that by grace, he realized his true location in the world. Yes, in Rome, in jail, but also and primarily in Christ, in the heavenly places.

And in that true location in the world, he was gripped by the gospel. If I ever write a book on Paul, that will be its title. Gripped by the gospel.

And gripped by the gospel, Paul then prays gospel-shaped prayers. I love to hear Paul preach the gospel, but I especially love to hear him then pray the gospel.

Shaking me out of my limited perspective and stirring me to pray more boldly. I want you to know. That's the major burden of this first prayer in the letter to the Ephesians. Twice he uses the verb know. I want you to know. In the next prayer, which is in Ephesians 3, Paul is going to pray, I want you to be full.

[ 8 : 06 ] I want you to know God, Paul says. Not just know about God, but to know God firsthand, intimately, deeper than you know anyone else.

And I want you to know the benefits of knowing God, Paul says. I want you to know the hope of his calling, the riches of his glory in the saints, and the surpassing greatness of God's power being exercised toward those who believe in Jesus.

Notice how Paul addresses God from the prison cell. He calls God the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. As I pointed out a few weeks ago, this reflects a huge change in Paul's understanding of God.

All of his life, he had prayed using other titles and other names. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or the God of Israel. And he prayed that way because God had given great revelation through those patriarchs.

And as wonderful as that revelation was and is, that God gave and gives in the life of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it was nothing compared to the revelation given in Jesus Christ.

[ 9 : 23 ] In Jesus, God has now given a fuller self-revelation, and therefore, Paul has to change the name by which he addresses God. The God of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He now prays to the God we meet in Jesus. He now prays to the God that Jesus knows, that Jesus loves, that Jesus trusts. Father of glory, he also calls it.

The Father, the Father, who is all-glorious, has manifested his glory in Jesus, this glory that lays down his life for the life of the world.

I want you to know this God, Paul prays. And I want you to know the benefits of knowing this God. Now, in order for us to so know, two things must take place.

And it's for these two things that Paul now prays. In order for us to know this God, God must open up to us, and that God must open us up to what God has opened up to us.

[10:30] I'll say that again. In order for us to know God, God must open up to us, and then God must open us up to what God has opened up.

In order to know God more intimately, we need a double work of grace. Now, this is the case in knowing anyone, in any relationship.

In order for me to know you, you must open up to me. I can make certain deductions about who you are by the way you act, and by what you say, and by how you spend your money.

I can make deductions about who you are. But I cannot know you, the real you, unless you choose to open yourself up to me. Right? And then, I'm not going to know you unless I choose to open up to what you've opened up.

I need to apprehend, I need to attend to what you have opened up. A double opening. In order for us to know God as God really is, God must open up God's self to us, and then God must open our eyes to apprehend what has been revealed.

[11:49] So, Paul prays, may the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation. He is not here praying that God give the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is given to us when we believe, as we saw in the verses just before the prayer, where Paul says, you were sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit when you believe. Rather, what Paul is praying for here is a particular work of the Holy Spirit.

He is asking that the Holy Spirit give the Ephesians and give us wisdom and revelation. Wisdom. This skill, this concrete know-how to live in the world in relationship with the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. And revelation. Now, the word that Paul uses is a very important word.

It is the word apocalypse. I pray that you may be given this work of the Spirit that you might be given an apocalypse. It is one of Paul's favorite words.

[12:54] It is certainly one of my favorite words. And this word apocalypse is wrongly used in our time to refer to awful cataclysmic events.

Now, newscasters would say things like an earthquake struck Christ's church with apocalyptic vengeance. And I want to scream out to the television wrong use of the word apocalyptic. In the first century, apocalyptic simply meant opening up. People wanted apocalyptic moments. It means opening a door.

It refers to pulling back of a curtain. It refers to the lifting up of a cover off of a box. And Paul is praying that the Holy Spirit will pull back the curtain, that he'll open the door, and that he'll lift the box off of God so that we might know who God is.

Yes, Lord, bring on the apocalypse. Am I making sense? Do it. Open up completely. Pull back the curtain because we want to know God as God really is.

[14:03] Jesus. And then Paul prays that the eyes of our heart might be enlightened to know what's been opened up. In the Bible, this word heart is the center of a person.

Yes, the heart refers to the seat of the emotion, to the place where we feel things, but it's also the seat of the intellect, the place where we think things. It's also the seat of volition. It's the place where we make decisions.

enlighten the eyes of their heart. Lord, get hold of the control center of their very being, Paul is praying, and help them know the great benefits of knowing you.

That's what he prays for. Now, everyone who believes the gospel has experienced this double work of grace. Do you believe that there is a creator?

Do you believe that somehow this creator spoke the universe into being? If you do believe that, you did not figure that out on your own. Do you believe that the creator came to earth in person, in and as Jesus of Nazareth?

[15:22] Do you believe that Jesus' death somehow accomplishes reconciliation between God and the world? had you and I been there in 33 AD standing beneath the cross where Jesus was dying, there is no way we would have concluded that was happening.

We would have concluded that here is yet another illustration of how good people get unjust treatment. We would have never on our own concluded that God was saving the world.

Do you believe that God then raised this Jesus from the dead? and do you believe that Jesus has now been exalted and seated on the throne of the universe? You believe that because God gave you an apocalypse and because God in his mercy then opened your eyes to apprehend this

apocalypse.

God in his mercy enlightened the control center of your being. Am I making sense and do I get an amen? This is why Paul then begins his prayer with thanksgiving.

I do not cease giving thanks having heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Disciples in Ephesus used to put their faith in other gods and goddesses, in other lords and ladies of their culture.

[16:46] They used to put their faith in Artemis, Diana. They used to put their faith in Caesar as Lord. They used to bank everything on Wall Street and Bay Street and Hong Kong Exchange but now they're banking it all on Jesus.

Paul does not cease giving thanks for this double work of grace that caused this massive shift in trust. Paul wants us to know God, the God who comes to us in Jesus and then he wants us to know all the benefits of knowing this God who comes to us in Jesus.

So he goes on. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know the hope of God's calling upon your life.

We cannot make it without hope. And Paul wants us to know and live the hope that comes from knowing the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. And what is that hope? Recapitulation. Putting the head back on. As we saw, Paul declares in that opening blessing, according to his good pleasure, God is going to make known to us the mystery of his will, that God is going to sum up everything in Christ.

[18:07] God is going to put the head back on the human race. The hope of the gospel is that God is going to restore all things in a new heaven and a new earth with a new humanity.

And the hope of the gospel is that before that day, God is using everything that happens in our life so that we become more like Jesus. The hope of the gospel is that what God has begun in us in Jesus Christ, he will complete in us when Christ comes again.

The hope of the gospel is that Jesus is coming. So Eugene Peterson can say, if the future is dominated by the coming again of Jesus, there's little room left on the screen for projecting our anxieties and fantasies.

Isn't that good? If the future is dominated by the coming of Jesus, there's little room for us to project our fears and fantasies onto the screen of our minds.

And then he says, it takes all the clutter out of our lives. God, open our eyes to see Jesus coming. Help us to live with gospel hope.

[19:20] Paul goes on, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know the riches of the glory of God's inheritance in the saints.

In Christ, God has claimed us for himself. We are his inheritance. Imagine that. God creates everything. God creates and sustains the universe.

He has at his disposal suns and stars and galaxies and planets. And yet for his prized possession, he chooses us. He chooses a people to redeem and make us his own.

And what Paul wants us to know is that God is investing everything he is in his inheritance. The God of glory is investing all of his glory in his inheritance so that it shines with his glory.

The riches of his glory. The idea in this phrase, riches of his glory, is that it's inexhaustible. The living God is rich beyond our imagining and he's investing it all in his people.

[20:30] He always gives his people everything we need to be his people. It's what Paul experienced in prison. He was given all he needed to be the kind of person he needed to be towards other prisoners and his jailers.

It's what's promised to us. We will always have all we need to be the kind of person that blesses other people in Jesus Christ. The father of glory is making sure his prized possession becomes all he desires us to be.

Oh God, Paul says, open their eyes and help them see how much they mean to you. And he goes on. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know the surpassing greatness of God's power towards us who believe.

Power toward means to our advantage. Paul wants us to know the kind of power and the extent of power God is exercising toward us.

And if you look in the passage here, you see that Paul keeps up all kinds of power words to convey this surpassing power. It's in accordance with the working of the strength of his might.

[ 21 : 48 ] Each of those terms can be translated power. So you could paraphrase this part of the prayer. I pray that they may know the surpassing greatness of your power, which is according to the power of the power of your power.

He says it so we don't miss it. Lots of power. Paul wants us to know the power that exceeds all bounds, the power that exercises enormous power in the world, and that it's all being exercised towards us.

Nobody prays like Paul. Power. It's the word dunamis, which comes into the English language in words like dynamism.

And it refers to the capacity to do whatever needs to be done. Working. It's the word energia, which comes into the English language in words like energy. And it refers to the ability to do whatever needs to be done.

It's active energy and not potential energy. Strength. It's the word kratos, which comes into English words that end with the word crossy, theocracy, ruled by God, democracy, ruled by people, autocracy, ruled by self.

[ 23 : 02 ] And it refers to the authority to exercise power, the right to work, and might. That word refers to inherent strength. It refers to the inherent ability to overcome resistance.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened to know the power, working strength, might toward us who believe, overcoming obstacles, overcoming resistance, so that we can be all that Jesus wants us to be.

Oh God, open our eyes to see how much power is at work towards your people. To help us begin to comprehend this power, Paul then goes on to show how it works.

It is the power, he says, that God exerts in Christ. It's the power that raised Christ from the dead. It's the power that seats him on the throne above every and all other powers in the universe.

It's the power that puts everything in subjection to Christ. And it's the power that gives Christ as head of the church. Do you see all the resistance God overcomes in this?

[ 24 : 19 ] His power overcomes the resistance of death. His power overcomes the resistance of cosmic forces, no God or goddess, no spirit or demon can ever take Jesus Christ off the throne.

And it is the power that overcomes human resistance to the lordship of Jesus. You see, there's a certain amount of power that takes to raise the dead, but another kind of power that needs to overcome human resistance to Jesus Christ.

That any one of us today would want to surrender totally to Jesus Christ as lord is a sign of God's mighty power in our hearts. And living in the victory of that power, then, is what the rest of his letter is about.

It's the power we need to stand in conflict with the evil one. It's the power we need to stand against those powers that still want to resist Christ. It's the power we need to be human in Jesus.

Ephesians 4.1, right in the middle of the letter, I therefore, prisoner of the Lord, exhort you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

[ 25 : 33 ] And what is that? With all humility and gentleness. It takes great power to live in humility and gentleness. And with patience and endurance.

It takes great power to be patient. It takes great power to endure especially crummy circumstances. Oh, God, I pray that you would open up the control center of their lives to know how much power is available to them in Jesus Christ.

I love to hear Paul preach. But I especially love to hear him pray. I love to hear Paul preach the gospel. But I especially love to hear him pray the gospel.

Because Paul is an apostle, a sent one, an apostle of Jesus Christ, we know that all Paul preaches is pleasing to the living God. And because Paul is an apostle, a sent one, apostle of Jesus Christ, we know that all that Paul prays pleases the living God.

God delights in these gospel shaped prayers. We can pray such prayers knowing that they are heard and answered. Because they've come to us from an apostle.

[ 26 : 49 ] Oh, living God. God of our Lord Jesus Christ, we want to know you. Grant us a spirit of revelation. Grant us this apocalypse. And then open the control center of our lives to see what you reveal to us.

And in knowing you, we want to know and live the hope of your calling. We want to know and live the riches of your glory towards your inheritance. And we want to know and live the greatness of the power, of the power, of the power, of your power.

In Jesus' name, amen.