

Pray to know God more

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[0 : 0 0] Friends, in this season we're exploring Christianity itself, what exploring Christianity and what seeking to grow in faith in Christ might look like for us in 2024, both as a church but also individually.

And last week, Steve shared from the life of Jonathan Edwards and of others from the book of Hebrews who lived imperfect but outstanding lives, pursuing knowing God with their whole minds and hearts, and how that was of an incredible benefit to their faith but also to the city around them.

Our next step is in a book called Ephesians, in chapter 1. And in this, we find an encouragement from one Christian to others to pursue knowing God.

And this comes in the form of a prayer. It's a prayer that asks God to provide knowledge of God. That's right, for God to provide knowledge of God.

Of Him in people, provide knowledge of Him as people seek Him. This prayer shows us how Jesus meets the needs of every person.

[1 : 2 0] How knowing Him more and more meets the needs of every believer. And how praying in this manner, in Ephesians 1, actually fuels Christian faith and love for one another and love for their city.

That's an eternal benefit to Christians and their community and everyone around them. So here's a question for you. Do you seek to grow in your faith?

Do you struggle to find a reason to do so? Or have you never put your faith in Jesus? This passage is relevant to you today, as it was relevant to the Christians who lived in a city called Ephesus, over a millennia ago.

A man called Paul wrote this letter to people in this city, and he knew them very well. He wrote from prison to this place where he'd been two and a half years before.

He had helped grow their church. He preached publicly for more than two years in that city. And he knew it really well.

[2 : 3 6] It was a multicultural place. It was a center of the popular religion of the day. There were temples and shrines, especially to the goddess Artemis of the time.

It was a place of international trade and thought. It was like the religious, commercial, and intellectual crossroads on your way in and around the Roman Empire.

Imagine main roads all converging, cluttered shop fronts, standstill traffic, people and signs in languages from all over the world.

Kind of sounds like Chatswood to me. With our shopping centers like shrines to consumerism and materialism, which are the popular religions of our day.

And the terrible traffic, and the wonderful cultural diversity, and the crossroads of all the train lines of Sydney, it seems. But while our cities are similar in some ways, they're very dissimilar in others.

[3 : 37] For Christians and Ephesians felt the pain of persecution really fiercely, in a way that we cannot imagine as Christians here in Chatswood. I encourage you to go read the end of Acts 18 and Acts 19, to get a picture of what life was like in this city for Christians following Jesus.

But even though our experience as Christians can't be the same city to city, we do face really similar problems. So Paul asks God for, in prayer, what he knows all Christians need, especially in Ephesus, but also here in Chatswood.

He prays for a knowledge of God that can help us process and cope, and even thrive in our life following Jesus in our city. So, open up to Ephesians 1 with me.

We're going to be in verse 16 and 17 first, so open up with me. Firstly, we see there in verse 16 and 17 that Paul remembers the Ephesians in his prayers, and he keeps asking that they might know him better.

Paul gets specific in praying for Christians to know God in three specific ways. So have a look there in verse 18, I'm going to read.

[5 : 03] He prays that Christians may know the hope to which God has called them, the riches of his glorious inheritance as his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Three areas of knowledge, hope, inheritance and power. First, to the hope that God has called us into. Christians embraced a hope in Jesus Christ when they first believe in him.

They've actually just set a creed declaring what it is that we first believed, and that we still believe. Christians embraced a hope in all the benefits of the good news.

That God himself, by grace, has called them into forgiveness, true freedom, purity, safety, certainty, holiness, joy beyond measure, and a changed heart.

There are so many benefits that God gives every Christian at the very moment when they follow Jesus. Increasingly knowing a sure hope in our spiritual reality helps us turn to our relationship with God to face our present reality.

[6 : 32] What happened when we first followed Jesus in the past is still our sure hope in the present. And if you need a reminder at any time of all that you have been called to, what is your hope in Jesus, there is a board right there on the other side of that wall that can show you everything available in Jesus, or if you follow him, that you have in Jesus.

And from the moment when we came to faith, we can look forward to a glorious future with God beyond this life.

In verse 18, Paul describes us as a holy people that share in a glorious inheritance together. We're all written in the will. Colossians 1.12, in another of Paul's letters to a different city, uses similar language, saying that it's God who qualifies us to share in the inheritance of his holy people.

And while eternity with God is far beyond our imagining, Scripture is bejeweled like a crown with promises and pictures of a relationship with God that will last forever through what Jesus has done for us.

So we find hope in the past, and we look forward to the future riches in Jesus. And for right now, Paul prays that we would know the incomparably great power that is literally toward us, for us, toward all who believe.

[8 : 21] And that power is that Jesus is ruling right now over all the happenings, all the kings of this world, all the powers that we face in our city, in our nation, in our world.

Nothing is beyond the reign and authority of Jesus Christ. So we hope in our past redeemed by Christ, in a future promised in Christ, and we can rest in his power now over our present as he rules unseen over the chaos of this world.

Why does Paul ask God to grow a Christian's knowledge, though, of their hope and inheritance and in Jesus' power for now?

Why does knowing God more in these three ways actually matter? It's because this is the knowledge Christians need to process, cope, and thrive in life, in our city.

And what are we trying to process and cope with? Well, studies and books and arts, they all come to similar conclusions. All people are lonely or hopeless, afraid of illness and death, anxious about finances and housing, frustrated that all of our relationships are just bent to break down.

[9 : 46] We might be isolated from the world, a part of interracial conflict, or scarred by trauma.

Every story, every song, every film, they all play on how we all long for such problems to be solved, and they all look for answers.

And for a poetic summary that I think is quite beautiful, we're going to explore, just for a little bit, the chorus of a song by the band Coldplay. I was obsessed with Coldplay when I was in high school.

That was a very long time ago. But I find this song called Death and All of His Friends really helpful for us. So if you'll permit me, listen to the words and the longing of this chorus.

I don't want to battle from beginning to end. I don't want to cycle and recycle revenge. I don't want to follow Death and all of His friends.

[10 : 53] Do you hear the three problems they're bringing up there? Death and all of His friends. Well, it's Death and His friends' evil and disunity. This seems a good summary of humanity's struggle to process, cope and thrive in life.

But Coldplay's solution is Viva La Vida, another one of their famous songs. The title of the album that these songs come from is called, and it's two options, Viva La Vida or Death and All of His Friends.

That's their choices. And Viva La Vida seems like their solution. Viva La Vida translates roughly as, live life while it is long.

It's based on a painting by Frida Kahlo. Viva La Vida means there's so much potential in life. Keep at it. Enjoy it. Make the most of it while you have it.

And even though, Frida Kahlo herself said at the end of her life, I hope the exit is joyful, and I hope never to return. The world, and Coldplay, and Frida Kahlo, and our city, have no reasonable solution to death and all of his friends.

[12 : 16] Death, evil, and conflict between people. Humanity need a hope better than Frida's, better than Chris Martin from Coldplay's. We need a future beyond ourselves for this life and beyond, and a power over death, evil, and disunity to trust in.

And the good news is that all people have that alternative. Instead of death and all of his friends, we don't have, make the best of it while we live, viva la vida, we have Jesus.

For Jesus came from an eternal life past that was without even a moment of hopelessness, no disunity, no lack of love or fear of the future, and he gave that life up.

He came as our lifeline into our lifetime to his own creation and joined with us in living a life headed toward hopelessness and disinheritance and death and a broken relationship with God.

Also, he could hand to us for free a sure hope after paying for our sin in our place on the cross. And also, we would not have to face another day of our lives without looking forward to a future of safety and of eternal life and of justice and a perfect relationship with our Creator.

[13 : 42] Jesus exchanged his glorious future for a horrifying judgment and end that was ours. He embraced death so you could look forward to your glorious inheritance in God's Son.

Jesus proved that he has the power to rule life right now. So let's look back at Ephesians 1 because Paul can't stop talking about how Jesus has actually killed death and all of his friends.

He has the power over it right now. Jesus first conquered death itself when he rose again. That power, have a look there at verse 19, that power is a mighty strength exerted when God raised Christ from the dead.

The power that proved stronger than death at Jesus' resurrection is the power that will raise his followers. And at the same, at that same power, raised Jesus to the throne of heaven where Jesus rules in verse 21.

Above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name, now and to come. There is no evil done in the world that Jesus' power does not rule over.

[15 : 06] No matter if we see him ruling over it or not, we can trust our king through anything. And Jesus is also the only ruler who can unify all people together.

He unifies the people, his people as the church. Have a look there in verse 22. The church which is his body, the fullness of him.

Jesus himself is active in the world right now, dealing with death and all of his friends through people who follow him. as his power displayed and impacting the world.

As if he is here for he is in and through his church. Coldplay song goes, I don't want to follow death and all of his friends.

Jesus defeated death and all of his friends. So follow Jesus. If you follow Jesus you have hope, you have an inheritance, you have God's power in Jesus for you right now, but you will still feel the effects, all the problems of death and all of his friends.

[16 : 25] We're all a part of this city and if our eyes are open we're all a part of the world whether it's on our screens or right in front of us and it's hard. We are so prone to forget the spiritual reality put on this page in Ephesians 1.

So prone to forget how Jesus gives us life, even life to thrive in our city whether life is hard in Ephesus or whether life is hard in Chatswood. Paul's solution for all believers is to pursue knowing what we already have in him and not forgetting this knowledge day by day.

or else one of three things are going to happen. We either turn to the world, turn to ourself or our fears to process and cope and try and thrive in our city.

If we forget Jesus we might turn to the world for answers drifting from all Jesus offers us into a viva la vida lifestyle where our life might not look too different to people down at the mall who don't have any knowledge of Jesus at all.

A life that ends up in a dead faith. Or we turn to ourselves looking at Jesus and all he has accomplished as not quite enough yet to save us from our sins and so work vigorously and religiously to save ourselves somehow in our way in our works.

[18 : 00] Or we forget and follow the fears of our city of our time the fears that are on display on our screens. Those fears can shape our worry and our worry can be so strong that instead of looking at what Jesus has accomplished is enough we actually fear into seeking more and more spiritual experiences in place of that completed works of Jesus Christ.

Following Jesus means looking to him day by day as if he has gone before us and we are following literally following him step by step into a life of thriving in him.

But not seeking to know him more leads us to doubt. We must respond to our proneness to forget. Proneness to forgetting the hope and the future and the power of Jesus Christ by seeking to know God more and regularly remembering all his benefits to us past and future and in our present.

So what is your next step in getting to know God through the completed wonderful glorious works of Jesus Christ? If you don't follow Jesus yet and like Coldplay you are looking for an alternative.

Your next step is to explore Christianity. God is known and knowable and wants you to know him through Jesus Christ. We would love to help you explore knowing Jesus through history, through his teachings and all he has done for you today.

[19 : 56] So come speak to me or speak to someone you know here about what your next step might be exploring Christianity. And if you do follow Jesus your next step is always going to be pursuing deeper and deeper knowledge of God through Jesus in the Bible day by day.

I invite you to take a step that you may not have taken this year toward opening your Bible in a more purposeful way. Jess has already mentioned an explore book.

It's a resource that guides you through little letters or books like Ephesians. Day by day helps you understand it, helps you pray about it, helps you apply it to your life, helps you know God more.

I encourage you to get one of those when they come in. Or go have a look at our resource table today. And do this together with others. We have community groups starting up again soon in our church and that's where we every week ask questions of the Bible and of faith together openly.

Christians flourish in God's word in community and I encourage you to consider joining a group to grow in your knowledge in God this year. But you might be sitting here and not want to take a next step.

[21 : 21] Some of us find the idea of knowing God in the pages of books, knowing God more with others openly, intimidating or makes us feel afraid or it's just too hard.

It's just a pressure on our shoulders that leads us to give up. That's been me in the past, especially when I was younger, but in and out of season.

And if that's you, Ephesians has one more encouragement for you. Have a look at Ephesians 1.17. And just look at these verses and look, where does our knowledge of God come from?

Does it come from our hard work? Does it come from our intellect? Does it come from how well we know English? No. Our knowledge of God comes from God himself.

Paul here asks God that he may give you, as it says, the spirit of wisdom and revelation.

[22 : 31] There is a spirit of God that gives knowledge of him to us day by day. A Holy Spirit that works through the words of scripture, in books, and through people to help us grow in our faith in God.

And as verse 18 says, if you look there, it's only as God himself enlightens the eyes of your heart that knowledge comes into you in a life-giving way.

Jesus himself, who called himself the light of the world, like a light in a pitch-black room, through the Holy Spirit, does the knowledge-giving that we seek.

The pressure that you might feel to grow in your knowledge of God is actually on God as we take our next step to know him more.

It's a partnership, the pressure is on him. Paul has told us he's praying for us, for the Ephesians, for knowledge of God, that we find in what Jesus has already done, in what he's going to do, and what he's doing in and through us now.

[23 : 48] And his prayer shows us how to take that next step, and that God will work to give us that knowledge as we take it. And Paul shares this prayer with us, as an example of what to pray for, to shape the culture of God's church, of people who follow Jesus together, to be a people who are thankful, who expect big things of God, and who are prayerful observers of fellow Christians around us as he grows us in Christ.

How often do you pray, like Paul prays here, for other Christians? If Ephesians 1 is an example for us to follow, then we should pray for other Christians, as it says in verse 15, when we hear of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for God's people.

Beyond just our relationship with God, our relationship, we should consider the work he is doing in the lives of the Christians around us, and look for signs of faith and love in them, and respond, like Paul, with this unstopping, ongoing thankfulness, not waiting for something to go wrong in a believer's life, to pray, but never stopping in thankful prayer, asking God to grow faith and acts of love in people who we are thankful for as we see God working in them.

When you have conversations with other Christians, you should ask how they're going, how are you going, and really want to know.

That's good friendship, it's good Christian friendship. And you should ask what's really going on in this spiritual life. How are you going, and how are you growing?

[25 : 52] And Ephesians 1 demands that that second question, how are you growing, is motivated by an ongoing, unstoppable thankfulness for that person in your life, and in your city, and a desire that God would be spiritually imparting knowledge to them through his spiritual wisdom and revelation, that they would be growing day by day in Jesus.

So is your heart moved toward other believers in this way? Are your conversations in our Christian community filled with questions about growing in faith, answers of how God has given us a hope and a future and a rest in the power of Jesus?

We want one another to thrive in life. But, if you ask, how are you growing, and a fellow believer doesn't know how to answer that question, maybe they are not growing in their faith.

And this is not to ask to seek to shame them, this is to ask to seek to help them grow, if we can, and also to pray for them.

If you're not pursuing God, or you discover someone else is not pursuing God, then it demands action. So, are you willing to come alongside someone and help them grow in their faith?

[27 : 20] To ask them questions of how they're relying on God to process and cope and even thrive in life? Do you see signs that they're running to the world?

That they're relying on themselves? Or that they're motivated by their fears? Are you willing to commit, even long term, to helping them grow in their knowledge of God?

This is the kind of community culture of faith and love that I think was on display in believers in Ephesus. And that's why Paul's thankful in verse 15.

I think he'd seen it. I think he'd tasted it. And I think he'd heard of it, even years after leaving. And he prays like this all the more, so that the things he's thankful for, their faith in Jesus and their love for each other in their city, would just grow and grow and grow.

Because he hears that they're thriving in life. And he wants us to thrive in it too. He doesn't want them to get distracted away from what we really need. And this is the kind of community that St. Paul's in Chatswood should seek to be.

[28 : 33] One where we pursue openly knowing Jesus more, knowing God more in him as we live together.

So the best answer of how to process life, how to cope with life, how to thrive in life, is only found in the hope and the glorious future and the power that we find only in following Jesus Christ.

For only in Jesus Christ can we know the hope that is an unshakable foundation. Only in Jesus Christ can we know a future that is an unshakable force working unseen, an unshakable promise worthy of carrying through life.

And only in Jesus Christ can we know a power that is an unshakable force, working unseen in our world right now that drives away despair and the power of death and all of his friends.

For Jesus conquered death. He reigns over all things and he himself is our head. He is the one who we follow. We are his body and his church.

[29 : 43] He alone can unite people who would otherwise hate each other. He alone can unite people from any background, any culture, any gender, any age group, any language.

And those who have turned to follow Jesus need to know deeper and deeper, no matter their age, day by day, no matter where they started. All Jesus has been, all he will ever be, and all he is right now for Christians across our whole world, in our city, in this room, as we continue to grow as his people.

So that in our growing there would be such an impact in one another and on our city that people who look from other cities around can see Jesus on display like he saw it in Ephesus.

May such a prayer shape us, change us, inspire us, and be prayed daily in our community as we live lives following Jesus in Chatswood.

I'm going to pray this prayer over us. And whether this is your last Sunday with us or your first, whether you know Jesus yet or not, let us pray in line with Ephesians 1 and ask that God would know, help us to know him more.

[31 : 14] Let's pray. Glorious Father, we praise you that in Jesus Christ there is an alternative to following death and all of his friends. Please help us to follow him and truly live.

Please grant us wisdom and revelation to know you, our Lord, your son Jesus, deeper and deeper, day by day.

Would you enlighten our hearts so that we do not turn to the dark and that by his light we might know you more. Please give us a knowledge of the hope we have in all we are called to in him, a knowledge of the riches of our glorious inheritance in him, a knowledge of Jesus' power that is right now ruling over death, evil and injustice, powerfully binding us together as his church.

Please help us to know you more and more, oh God, in Jesus, who is our Lord and our all in all. Amen.