

Ephesians 1:15–23

Praying for you

The story of God changes us

I imagine by now you'll have heard that last Saturday an assassination attempt was made on the former president of the United States – Donald Trump.

Instantly world leaders began sending out their 'thoughts and prayers' for Donald on social media. And this got me thinking about 'thoughts and prayers'. It's a phrase we hear all the time, but LOTS of people are tired of 'thoughts and prayers'.

Hear me out. 'Thoughts and prayers' seem like fluffy words that allow people to appear kind but keep the pain and suffering of this world at bay without doing anything about it. Because too often people say it, but don't do anything with it.

In our passage today the apostle Paul sends his thoughts and prayers.

Look at v.15:

"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." (Ephesians 1:15–16)

I must confess when I started reading this passage to prepare for today it all sounded like fluff. Nice words about God and Jesus without substance and I really wondered what I was going to say today.

Thankfully after a bit of thought and prayer (pun intended) I've realised how much this passage has to show us about our life together in Christ.

When we let the story of God change and define who we are, the Holy Spirit empowers us to put our thoughts and prayers into action as we live for Christ and make a real impact for God.

Thoughts

Before we unpack this passage, some context is helpful.

Acts 19 tells us about Paul's first visit to Ephesus which was a mighty city in what is now Turkey.

Back then it was a strategic Roman port city with over 250,000 people, one of the largest in the world. It had a theatre, stadium, public baths, and temples to all sorts of gods. It also had a strong Jewish community with their own synagogue.

Paul travels to this town in about 52 AD and there he finds some disciples. When he asks them whether they received the Holy Spirit when they believed, they tell him they didn't know there was a Holy Spirit, and they'd only received John's baptism. Paul then explains how John's baptism was about repentance, and he told them to believe in Jesus, to whom John's ministry was pointing.

Acts 19:5-7 tells us:

*"On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all."
(Acts 19:5-7)*

Paul stays in the city preaching to Jews in the Synagogue, but then gets kicked out, and goes to a public lecture hall. There Greeks and Jews become followers of Jesus and as the movement grows, people are miraculously healed and evil spirits are cast out.

This generates opposition and even riots but still the church grows. It becomes this beautiful multi-cultural community of people who simply call themselves: 'the Way'. Paul spends two years in Ephesus teaching them about Jesus and helping them know the fullness of life in Christ.

Fast forward eight years and Paul is in jail in Rome because of his faith. He's heard from his mate Tychicus how the church in Ephesus is going and so he sends this letter we have in our hot little hands.

It's a letter of encouragement and some early manuscripts don't specifically address it to the saints in Ephesus so there's lots of evidence that it was a letter intended for other Christians in other places as well. Even us living on the other side of the world 2000 years later.

Last week Mark talked about the blessings and gifts imparted to the Ephesians when they put their trust in Jesus.

Now Paul wants some things to be at the centre of their thoughts as he prays for them:

-He wants them to understand that knowing God is the most important thing in all the world.

v.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.” (Ephesians 1:17)

Notice how Trinitarian this is. God the glorious Father is addressed, Jesus Christ is called ‘Lord’, and he’s asking that we might receive the Holy Spirit of wisdom. Paul wants us to know ‘Him’ better, and you might ask “Who, the Father, Son, or the Holy Spirit?” and the answer is “Yes!”

The kindest thing Paul could want for us, is that we might know God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That we might fall deeper in love with him.

Now this is important for us as a church family because our mission at Dalby Anglican is to know Christ and to make him known. What this passage tells us is that knowing Christ is not static. It’s not like I can read about Jesus, take a test, know everything about Jesus, and then get on with my life.

No! You can know about someone by hearing about them, but you can only know them by relating to them. We learn about God by reading the Bible and discussing His works and personality at church and in small groups, but we can only get to know him by spending time with him in prayer.

More about that in a moment.

–Another thing Paul wants for us is hope and power, v.18:

“I pray also 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 the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Ephesians 1:18–19)

Hope and power are two things we receive when we believe the gospel.

The word for hope here isn't an uncertain aspiration, instead it's concrete joyful expectation of a future event. It's not so much a "Well I hope the weather warms up soon..." instead it's: "I'm looking forward to winter turning into spring."

The word for power also needs unpacking as it's the word '*dunameos*' from where we get our word dynamite.

But the power Paul is talking about is greater than dynamite.

Did you know that there's about a million volts of power in a single lightning-bolt? That's enough to power the whole of Dalby for a day! Well Paul is saying, the God who made the lightning bolt, our sun, and the vast universe we live in pulsating with energy, lives inside us.

In the scriptures we see God creating the universe, toppling Empires, calming the oceans, but the pinnacle of God's power is found in v.19:

"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms," (Ephesians 1:19–20)

The moment you put your trust in Jesus, the Father sends his Holy Spirit to live inside of you, giving you his resurrection power. That's a lot of power!

Something else Paul wants to be front and centre of our mind is the supremacy of Christ.

He writes:

“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.” (Ephesians 1:22–23)

By raising Christ from the dead and exalting him in glory God placed everything under his feet.

It's interesting that Ephesus was at the foot of a hill. Even though it had enormous temples and grand buildings they were still dwarfed by God's creation.

Here Paul is reminding us that Jesus is preeminent. By becoming one of us, dying in our place, and rising to eternal life in heaven, God placed all things under Jesus' feet.

Some read v.23 to mean that the church as the body of Christ in some way completes Christ, which is an amazing thought. But I think the best way read this is to understand that fullness describes how Jesus fills the church with all gifts and blessings. Before knowing Christ, the Ephesians knew some of God's blessings, but after knowing Christ they received his fullness.

God isn't hiding anything or withholding anything from you. There are sects, cults, and movements that will tell you Jesus is fine, but you need something more to live a full and happy life. And yet Jesus says in John 10:10:

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”
(John 10:10)

True power, peace, joy, faith, hope, and love are found only in Jesus, and when we set him as Lord of everything, especially our thoughts, fullness of life follows in his stead.

Prayers

And with all this in mind we can begin to apply this passage to our prayer lives.

I must say reading this prayer makes me want to lift my prayer-game.

First, Paul's prayer is full of gratitude. He thanks God for the Ephesians, he's thankful for their faith, for the hope and power of the Holy Spirit afforded to them, and for the fullness found in Christ!

This joyful gratitude should mark our prayers. So often my prayers are gimme prayers: God gimme strength, gimme patience, gimme a car park. These prayers are ok, but they will never satisfy our souls and deepen our relationship with God.

We need to spend time praising God for all he's done, doing, and going to do. When we hear of what God's doing in Asia through our link missionaries Bruce and Libby, we give thanks. When we hear about the wonderful work Jinah is doing with our youth, we give thanks. When we hear that other churches in town are growing and reaching out to people, we give God thanks.

If we never give thanks, we can end up grumpy, entitled, and unfulfilled. Praise and thanksgiving should open and flow through our prayers.

The second thing this prayer can teach us about our prayers is that we need to pray not just for good things for others, but for their salvation; missional prayers.

I recently noticed this about my prayers for my sons. Often I was just praying that they'd be healthy, smart, and strong. Again, this is fine but if I'm not praying that my kids would know Jesus, I'm not really praying for their ultimate good.

Remember Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts might be enlightened so we may know the hope and power found in Jesus by the Holy Spirit. He's not just praying that we'd have a nice day or be rich and successful. While those things are good things, if they're our ultimate things, they become idols that crush us.

God can do far more than we often care to ask or imagine. Let's not just give God our spiritual shopping lists, let's catch God's vision for our world in our prayers. So let's pray that our loved ones who have fallen away from church might come back. Let's pray that our church might reach Dalby with the Gospel. Let's pray that the church in Australia might stop shrinking and start growing again.

It's okay to pray small prayers but let's pray big prayers too. Let's pray missional prayers. Today's a great day to take stock and ask yourself how is my prayer life going? How can I deepen my prayer life today?

The final thing I want to point out today about prayer is that relies on the fullness of God. It's been said that: "God never gives you more than you can handle" but that's nonsense. God often gives us more than we can handle because he didn't make us to do life alone.

All through this prayer we see the sufficiency of God and how Christian prayer is inspired by the Holy Spirit and believes in the fullness of Christ.

God's vision for us as a church is too ambitious, too grand, too wonderful for us to ever achieve it without his help. If we're going to be a fruitful community, working together on mission, we need to be a praying community at our core.

Prayer isn't just for spiritual giants like Paul, it's for everyone. This is why he shares his prayers and acts on his prayers. In the coming weeks we'll see that prayer doesn't mean that we don't have to do anything. Instead, when we get our thinking about God straight, we'll fall to our knees in prayer, and this will drive us to action.

When we really do this and cultivate a life of Christian prayer, we'll be in a position to challenge people's scepticism about 'thoughts and prayers'.

Prayer is our life blood. Prayer is the engine room of our church. It's the way to make a real difference and live the peace, hope, and joy found in Christ.

So let's pray to God now.