

The great need of the church: To know God better

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Turn to our Bible reading for this morning, which is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in chapter 1. And if you have one of our church Bibles, you'll find that on page 976.

And Paul Brennan, one of our assistant ministers, is going to be preaching again this morning. He was looking at the passage before this last week. So let's read together Ephesians chapter 1 at verse 15 to the end of the chapter.

For this reason, says Paul, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, 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 a spirit of wisdom, and a 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 towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. Amen, and may God bless to us this, his word.

Well, please do turn back to Ephesians, and we'll be looking at the second half of chapter one there together. So Ephesians chapter one, please do have that open.

Knowledge. Knowing things. It has never been easier to know stuff. A generation ago, you would need to take yourself off down to the library to find out something. Now you just have to speak into your phone, and you literally have a world of information at your fingertips. It's probably easier now than ever to know stuff about people. You can Google them. You can look up their Facebook profile. You can know lots of stuff about people without really knowing them. And it's possible to know lots of things about God, and yet not really know him. At the heart of our passage this morning is a prayer. And it's a prayer for knowledge. Knowledge of God. And it's not knowledge about God. It's knowledge of him, really knowing him.

[3 : 18] Paul's first readers, the Ephesians, and we need to know God better. And here, Paul sketches out for us what knowing God better involves and looks like. But why does Paul pray for knowledge of all things? Why does he pray for this? Remember that Paul is writing to his dear Ephesian Christian brothers and sisters to encourage them to stand firm in the midst of a hostile city? Just flick over the page to chapter 6, verse 12, where Paul sets out the reality of their situation. Chapter 6, verse 12. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Keep your fingers there for a second. This was the reality faced by the Christians in Ephesus. And Paul was in no doubt that they had a battle on their hands.

Just look what he goes on to say there in verse 13. Therefore, take up the armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand firm.

As one writer put it so well, in the closing verses of this letter, the smell of the battlefield lies heavily in the air. And through the smoke of war, we see Christians, fully clad in the armor of spiritual warfare, still standing.

Paul's chief purpose in the letter is to encourage his readers to stand firm, to keep standing. But how are they going to do that?

Well, it comes down to knowing certain things, knowing true things, knowing who you really are in Christ. Last week we said that the letter is really about identity formation, knowing who you are in Christ.

[5 : 39] Knowing that is going to enable you to stand firm. And knowing things about God is going to enable you to stand firm as well. And that's the subject of our passage this morning.

Knowing things about God. And here, Paul is addressing the church in Ephesus, and us now. And we're going to take this section in three parts.

But we're really going to focus on the second, which looks at the need to know God better. So firstly, the marks of the church, in verse 15. And then second, the great need of the church, which is to know God better.

And that's verses 16 to 21. And then the end, the last verse, we see the strength of the church. So first then, verse 15, the marks of the church.

And we see here that God's people have faith in Jesus, and love for each other. Paul states simply and clearly, his reason for giving thanks for this group of Christians in Ephesus.

[6 : 44] Look again at verse 15. For this reason, because I've heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love towards the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you.

Two key reasons why Paul gives thanks, and they are the two marks of any true church, any true Christians. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and love towards the saints.

These two things come together. You cannot have one without having the other. You cannot have true faith in Jesus Christ, and not love your brothers and sisters.

You cannot truly love your fellow Christian, without having faith in Jesus. That's not the mark of a true believer. Think about the first, faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul has already defined for us what faith in Jesus Christ is. Just look back to verse 13. In him, when he heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

[7 : 53] Faith is hearing the truth about what Christ has done, and believing in Jesus, what he has said about himself, about what the apostles say about him, about what he has done.

God's people have faith in Jesus Christ. That is foundational. Foundational, too, is how the believer in Jesus relates to other believers.

Those who have faith in Jesus, show love towards all the saints. All the saints. That's the mark of a true believer.

This isn't love towards those to whom you have a natural affinity, and naturally click with. This is love for all who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, I don't suppose many of us looking around, would choose to eternally bind ourselves to the person sat two rows in front, or to the person sat just to the left of us. But we are united in Christ.

[9 : 00] That is the reality. And so we're to love each other. That is the mark of a true believer. The mark of a true church. So let's give thanks for the many times that is true in our church.

Give thanks for that, but it also presents a challenge. You need to ask yourself, is this true of me? Do I pray for other Christians?

Do I seek to spend time with others, to share burdens, to extend hospitality, even when it's not convenient? Do you love your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

Sinclair Ferguson on this verse says this, authentic Christians always, always transform both the Godward and the manward dimensions of life.

Otherwise, professions of faith are hollow. Authentic Christianity always transforms the Godward and the manward dimensions of life.

[10 : 07] Paul gives thanks for his readers. They're living this out. He gives thanks for what they already are in Christ. But Paul then gets specific with what he prays for them.

They're not yet the finished article. And there is a battle to face. They need to be equipped for that battle. And so we see in the main body of this section, verses 16 to 21, our second point, the need of the church.

The great need of the church. God's people need to know God better. God's people need to know God. Paul sets out his big prayer for the church there in verse 17.

He basically prays that they would know God better. Have a look. Remembering you in my prayers, he says, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and a revelation in the knowledge of him.

He prays that they would know God better. He isn't praying for some mystical event whereby they get some special knowledge. that's not what he's asking.

[11:19] Rather, he wants them to see clearly what is already true, what has already been revealed about God. And knowledge of God always comes from God's revelation of himself through his word.

He prays that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened, that they would see God for who he really is. This was, Paul perceived, the great need of his readers.

More than anything else, this is what he prayed for, that they would know God better. As a minority interest in a big city, more than anything else, they needed to see clearly the invisible realities about their Lord and King.

Now, an outside observer looking in on their situation there in Ephesus, he might point to other greater priorities, other needs, simply than knowing God better.

They might suggest improving their public relations, trying to get a foothold with the governing authorities. They might suggest implementing the latest growth strategies from the super apostles.

[12:39] None of these are to be found in Paul's thinking. No, he views their greatest need as knowing God. I wonder if that features anywhere at all on our prayer lists.

for ourselves and for others. Knowing God, this is always the Christian's greatest need. But Paul doesn't leave it vague.

He doesn't leave it as a vague idea to know God better. He gets specific. He mentions three things in particular that he wants them to know. And you can perhaps ask yourself, am I growing in knowing these particular things about God?

God's future for his people is a certain future.

Second, God's people are his treasured possession. And third, God's people have God's mighty power at work in them.

[13:43] So let's look at the first of these. Paul wants them and us to know this, that God's future for his people is a certain future. Look down at me again at verse 18.

that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. The hope to which God has called every Christian is the hope of our future inheritance.

The great hope that lies beyond death to an eternity with our father. New life in the new creation. This is a hope that is solid and concrete.

It is a certain hope. It's quite different from the way you and I might use the term hope. When I speak of the hope of having three days of consecutive sunshine in Glasgow, that is far from concrete and certain.

In fact, it's foolish optimism, particularly in a day like today. Hope, in the sense that Paul means it, is the assurance of the reality of what we have not yet fully experienced.

[14:58] It is the assurance of the reality of what we have not yet fully experienced. It is an absolute certainty. We're just not able to see it yet.

Paul prays that his readers would know that God's future for his people is a certain future. Now, why would he pray that? It's clearly a good thing to pray for, but why?

And why in this particular letter? As we touched on last week, Paul wants his readers to see who they really are in Christ so that they are able to live out what he sets out in the second half of his letter.

He wants them to stand firm. He wants them to stand firm against the forces out there and unite together as a church. Having certainty about the future will enable them to live that out, will enable them to stand firm and pull together.

It's true, isn't it, how you think about the future affects how you live now. If you're planning to buy a house in the next three to five years, well, you start saving now, don't you?

[16:11] You carefully budget and plan, and that really affects how you live now. Knowing that their ultimate future was a certain future, a future that could not be altered, that would give them strength and courage to stand firm in the face of the present battle, in the face of the huge religious cult of Artemis that was everywhere around them.

Knowing their future was certain could help them stand firm, to stand their ground. Do you have the future as revealed in the Bible clear in your mind?

You and I need to know that the future is in God's hands. Jesus Christ is returning one day and he will judge and those who are his will be secure.

God is, thinking back to verse 10 we looked at last week, he's going to bring everything together in Christ. That is where history is going. Are you living now as if that is true?

Think about how you respond to setbacks in life? Do you throw the toys out of the pram? Or do you think how things are now isn't how things will be in the end?

[17 : 38] In the end, we have a certain future with God. That is the Christian hope. That is unshakable. That is not going to change.

This hope brings a radical change perspective to basically everything. Every aspect of life changes when we see this to be true. It changes everything.

God shows you in his words what is going to endure, what will last, and so he shows us what to invest in now. The church, each other, the gospel, evangelism.

These are the things to invest in. Has knowing God's certain future for his people transformed your priorities and commitments? It ought to.

And if you already prioritize those things, then press on with it. Keep going. It is worth it in the end, even if it doesn't look like much now.

[18 : 46] even though others may scoff at your priorities, your future is certain.

Invest now in what will last. Take courage because the future is a certain future. Let's look on to Paul's second prayer request.

Paul wants them to know that God's people are his treasure possession. Just look down with me there. At verse 18.

What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints? It is the saints who are the glorious inheritance and they belong to God.

You, Ephesian Christians, are described as rich, says Paul. as God's glorious inheritance. In other words, you are his treasure possession.

[19 : 51] If you're a Christian, that is true of you this morning. You are God's treasure possession. This is stunning. His readers are mostly Gentile Christians and Paul, later in the letter, describes what they once were.

They once were dead in sin. They once were separated from Christ. They once were without hope and without God in the world. That is true of us this morning if we're a Christian.

That was what we used to be. But what a transformation now that we are in Christ. You are God's treasured possession.

And Paul prays that they would realize just how valuable they are in God's sight. there in Ephesus and here in Glasgow a small band of Christians, a minority in a city full of idol worship, an ordinary looking bunch of people.

Here is your true value. Those guys who went along to the temple of Artemis couldn't see it. I don't suppose the Christians in Ephesus saw it either.

[21 : 11] You can't see your true value as you look around church this morning. Glorious inheritance is probably not the first thing that springs to mind as we glance around. But God knows your true value.

Think on that, Ephesian Christian. Think on that, Glasgow Christian. You are God's treasure possession. Seeing the church and seeing each other in this way helps us see that the church is something worth battling for, something worth committing to.

Have you seen the true value of the church? Have you committed to it? It's not being committed in a vague sense of being committed to the church out there, but committed to this particular group of people here this morning.

If you haven't committed, if you haven't seen the true value of the church, why not come along this afternoon to hear a bit more about what church membership is all about?

God's people are a treasure possession. So let us see the true value of the church. In God's eyes, it is a treasure possession. And Paul prays that they would know that.

[22 : 31] Let's look on then to the third particular request that Paul makes. Paul prays that they would know that God's people have God's mighty power at work in them.

Have a look down at verse 19. Paul prays that they might know what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe. Paul wants them to know that God's people have God's power at work in them.

And that is a power that is immeasurable. It cannot be measured. Now we love to measure and quantify things.

We are able to measure powerful things. For example, think about the earthquake and the tsunami in Japan three years ago. That released 600 million times the energy of the Hiroshima bomb.

Huge power. So powerful was that earthquake that it managed to shift the earth's rotation and shorten the day by 1.8 milliseconds.

[23 : 38] That is a huge amount of energy. And yet, it pales in comparison to the God who made the earth, who created night and day.

The power to create that is inconceivable. His power is immeasurable. powerful. And it is, says Paul, at work in you. Two aspects in particular, two examples of that power are mentioned here in verses 20 and 21.

It is the resurrection power over death, and it is the power that has exalted Christ to the right hand of God. He is the supreme power over all powers.

death. The power at work in you is the resurrection power over death. Man's great enemy has remained unchallenged.

Death itself. We are all dying. We all face death. It is the great leveler.

[24 : 48] It is the great certainty. Now, a number of folk here, I'm sure, will own something made by Apple, an iPod, an iPhone, or something.

And the great driving force behind those devices was Steve Jobs. He died a few years ago from pancreatic cancer. And not long after he was diagnosed, he gave an address to a bunch of graduating students.

And he said this, no one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share.

No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.

Now Steve Jobs says what a lot of people think. And he's right up to a point. No one wants to die.

But he goes on to say that death is life's best invention.

[25 : 55] And he's wrong. You know, and everyone you know knows, that death is wrong. Death is not how it's meant to be.

God has set eternity in the hearts of men. Death is the great enemy. But know this, says Paul, God's power that is in every believer is the power that has raised Christ from the dead.

In Christ's resurrection, death has been defeated. The fear of death has been conquered. Death has been defeated for the Christian.

The doorway into eternal life. to be with our Lord. Do you know this, Christian? Do you really know this? That beyond death, we have life everlasting with our Father in heaven?

God's love. That is a great assurance. That is a great truth. Not only is the power at work in you the power over death, it is the power that has exalted Christ to the power over all powers.

[27 : 10] Look again at the second half of verse 20. power. That power seated Jesus at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

Jesus is right now seated in heaven, and he is above every other power in the cosmos. For the Ephesian Christians, this was hugely significant.

They lived face to face with people who worshipped a false God. They were aware of a real spiritual battle going on around them. They needed to know this.

They needed to know that Christ was already supreme over all other powers. And you and I need to know this too. When you face your own battles against dark spiritual forces, when you face difficult circumstances, perhaps as you try to witness to friends and family, when you find yourself battling the same old sin again and again, you need to know that Christ is in charge.

He reigns above every single power in the entire universe. And you need to know that the war has been decisively won.

[28 : 31] Death has been defeated. Satan has been defeated. But we still face battles along the way. as we wait for our king to return. And Paul is writing to encourage them, in light of that, to stand firm now.

That power that has raised Christ to that position is at work in you, enabling you to stand firm. So know this, says Paul, God's people have the power that rose Christ from the dead dead, and that has seated him above every other power.

That is at work in you. And it's a power that does something very unimpressive looking. It will enable you to stand firm. That is the sign that God is at work in you.

Nothing flashy, nothing spectacular looking, just standing firm, making it to the finish line, on two feet.

That is a sign God is at work in you. So we've seen the marks of the church. We've seen the great need for the church, which is to know God better.

[29 : 52] And then finally, as we finish, the strength of the church. God's people are in Christ, the supreme Lord over everything. So as we close, let's notice the great truth about the church there in verse 22.

Jesus is the supreme Lord over all things, and he has been given to the church. In the words of one preacher, Jesus reigns over all things, subdues all his enemies, withstands all sinister evil forces in the universe, in order to safeguard and bless his chosen people.

all that he does for his church. This is a wonderfully reassuring truth for all Christians everywhere and in every time.

You, if you are in Christ, have the ultimate security. You can enjoy real confidence as you live out your Christian life in a city much like Ephesus that largely rejects the invisible reality that Christ reigns.

Christ. So knowing these things that Christ is at work to safeguard you, that brings great confidence. Our strength as a church rests in Jesus, the supreme Lord over all things.

[31 : 17] Paul wants you to know this morning. He wants you to know God. He wants you to know God's future for his people is a certain future.

To know that God's people are his treasure possession. To know that God's people have his mighty power at work in them. Paul wants you to see things as they really are.

To see the reality of your future because that determines how you live now. To see yourself the way God sees you as a treasure possession because that helps you see the true value of the church.

It's something worth battling for. And to see that God's power is at work in you because that brings with it a conquering of the fear of death and a confidence that Christ is the power over every other single power in the world.

Know these invisible realities. They will enable you to stand firm to make it to the finish line. So let's pray for ourselves and each other that we might truly know God better so that we keep standing.

[32 : 38] let me pray. Amen. Father we ask that you might help us to know you better.

To know the certainty of our future. to know our true value. To know your power is at work in us. Encourage us with these things Lord we ask it for your glory. Amen.