

# Praying with Perspective

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[ 0 : 00 ] We thank you, gracious Father, very much indeed for the wonderful freedom we have this morning to gather round your word. And we pray for the help of your spirit that we might make the very best of this time that we have in front of us.

That you'd focus our eyes on your magnificent Son and help us to trust in him. This we ask in his name. Amen. Amen. My brother went to the wrong wedding reception. Right wedding, Neil and Jenny, wrong reception. It wasn't a wedding where he knew many people. So after the service went through, he followed on to the hotel where the reception was due to be. There was no one on the reception desk to direct anyone where to go. So he looked around. Down the corridor, he spotted somebody he thought he knew. He thought it was the bride's father. This chap was talking on the phone, so he couldn't be asked for directions, but he thought, well, I'll head off down that way, and maybe that'll be the right way. He came to a room with lots of dressed up people.

[ 1 : 08 ] Is this the wedding, he said. Yes, they said. So in he went. He went to the bar, bought himself a drink, sat down to enjoy. He exchanged pleasantries with the people at the next table.

Lovely service, wasn't it? And what a lovely day. He didn't see people he recognised, but he hardly knew anyone at the wedding, so that wasn't a surprise to him. Bits and pieces of finger food came round.

He enjoyed those enormously. There were children playing around, and he enjoyed watching them. He noticed a girl wearing a dress very like the dress he'd seen the bride wearing earlier.

It wasn't the bride, but being a lateral thinking sort of chap, he reckoned that it must be a bridesmaid that he hadn't noticed, who'd been wearing something matching.

She gave him a slightly quizzical look as she walked past, but said nothing, so he carried on. Forty minutes in, and two bottles of beer later, it was announced that the bride and groom would be cutting the cake.

[ 2 : 06 ] Two people stood up. One, the bridesmaid he'd seen a little earlier on. The other, with his back to him, a bloke that he thought looked very like his friend Neil, but his hair seemed rather shorter than he thought Neil's had been earlier on.

It was only when the groom turned round to face him that my brother at last said to himself, Hang on. There must be a mistake here.

Those hang on, there must be a mistake here moments are common enough in life, are they not? And they're common enough in the spiritual experience of Christians.

Hang on, there must be some mistake here. It's a thing that real Christians often say to themselves. It may take a good while for such doubts to arise, but sooner or later, you'll ask yourself, Is this right?

Is this really how it's meant to be? Or have I got it wrong? Sometimes the question crops up because something really bad happens in life. Life is out of control.

[ 3 : 17 ] Help seems far away. Can this be the real Christian life? There must be some mistake. Do you think people in Japan are saying that today? Sometimes the question crops up because a more attractive version of Christianity walks through the door, offers you a new level of spiritual experience on a plate, and suddenly the real faith that you thought you had doesn't seem quite surreal anymore.

Perhaps I've missed something, you say to yourself. More often than that, I think, the question just hovers vaguely in the background. Oh yes, there are those glimpses of brilliance in the Christian life, aren't there?

When knowledge of God seems thrilling, and the glory to come seems preciously real, and the company of Christians is a little foretasted of heaven, and sin is fought and conquered, those moments when faith is strong, and hope is joyful, and love flows unfettered, but so much of the time, it is not like that.

Too often we worry, God seems distant, Christians disappoint, weakness and sin are all too close at hand, and faith falters, and hope fades, and love is tarnished, and the question nags in the background.

Has there been some mistake here? Is this really it? Isn't there more to following Jesus than this? Can I be a real Christian?

[ 4 : 56 ] Well, let me say, if you recognise any of that, then this is just a part of the Bible for you this morning. We're in Ephesians chapter 1. We'll be looking mainly at the prayer from verse 15 onwards.

The title of this talk is Praying with Perspective, but this isn't first of all a sermon about prayer, though there will be things to learn about that. It's first of all a sermon about perspective, because this prayer is here in this letter, mainly I think to give perspective.

Let me explain. I wonder if you've noticed how the Apostle Paul so often starts his letters by telling people what he's praying for them. Have you noticed that? The standard Paul letter goes like this. Hello, it's me, Paul, and I'm writing to you over there grace and peace, and by the way, this is what I'm praying for you, and this is what I'm thankful for you in front of God.

So many of his letters start exactly like that. Why does he do that, do you think? Well, it may be to encourage people. About six months after I became a Christian, I met a chap who I'd first met when he spoke at the first evangelistic meeting I'd ever been along to.

[ 6 : 09 ] I hadn't met him since then. He'd given me at that time a little book to read, which I hadn't read. He said to me, I didn't know you'd become a Christian. I've been praying for you.

It was a massive encouragement to me to hear that this person had been praying for me since that day. He'd only met me on that occasion. To know that your apostle, the great missionary to the Gentile world, has heard about your faith, verse 15, and your love towards all the saints, and has been thanking God regularly for that, would be tremendously encouraging, don't you think?

But there is more to it than that. Paul's prayers communicate what is really important. So often the things he mentions in his prayers are the very issue that lie at the heart of his letters.

The prayers set the agenda. They give perspective on the whole thing. And we're going to spend the rest of our time looking at this prayer and asking, what perspective does this prayer provide? What difference would it have made for his Ephesian readers to read this prayer? What difference does it make to us to chew over the contents of this prayer this morning?

[ 7 : 31 ] Now notice verse 17. And notice that this is basically a prayer that these believers would know God better. Verse 17, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.

And I think this basically means I'm praying that the Spirit of God would be at work in you so that you would know God better. Now of course, knowing God is a vague idea, isn't it?

For the letters G-O-D mean different things to different people. But Paul doesn't leave it vague. And the rest of this prayer unpacks for his readers what knowing God better might look like.

And that's a great help for us because it tells us that knowing God has a shape to it. It's not entirely subjective how I feel towards God.

It doesn't depend on how I happen to feel today primarily. You can know if you're growing to know God better by having a look at the things that Paul mentions here and asking yourself well, am I growing in knowing these things?

[ 8 : 45 ] But let me say also that Paul's readers needed to be confident about what knowing God better meant. You see, this letter was probably written to the churches not just in the city of Ephesus but in the region around about.

And Ephesus and its surroundings you couldn't help be aware if you were there that as a Christian you were playing out the Christian life on the home turf of one of the biggest outfits in the spiritual league in the ancient world.

You were playing on the territory of Team Artemis. Let me explain. My son has an interest in football statistics.

A couple of weeks ago in an idle moment we were going through would you believe it Scottish league winners through the last century. And it does not take a magician to guess what names dominated those lists.

If you follow football in Scotland you are just inevitably aware all the time of those big boys from Glasgow who so often end up on the top of the pile. And if in contrast you yourself follow a team of small boys I hesitate at this point to mention any specifics lest I get off on the wrong foot with anyone.

[10:08] You cannot help I imagine feeling powerless and insignificant in comparison even though you won't admit to it. Let me say it was much like that being a Christian in Ephesus but more so for Ephesus was home to the goddess Artemis whose temple one of the wonders of the ancient world and whose cult dominated the city and the region both spiritually and economically.

You can see this if you read about Ephesus in Acts chapter 19 you can see it in this letter in the massive emphasis on this letter on spiritual powers. You don't have to look further than verse 21. Look at verse 21 would you? Where Paul says that Christ has been seated far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named.

Well in Ephesus one rule and one power and one authority and one big name was always there in the background of your mind.

As a Christian in Ephesus you knew you belonged to a team that in comparison looked very small utterly unimportant and completely powerless.

[11:29] Now friends we might easily feel just like that as we think about being followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in this present age.

Our circumstances are quite different from theirs. There's no massive temple of Artemis sitting just down the road but our experience is very similar. When you look at how church is going in Glasgow in Scotland in the UK do you feel big and strong or small and insignificant?

Now what this prayer does is it takes the reader's eyes off how things look and puts them on to the way things really are.

This prayer moves us from how things look to the naked eye to how things really are. Paul prays that knowing God would help them grasp more firmly three invisible realities.

Things that are real but are not visible. Verse 18 I pray that you would have the eyes of your hearts enlightened he says.

[12:50] You won't apprehend these things by having your glasses fixed getting a new set of contacts spec savers will be no use whatever to the Ephesian Christians. God needs to open the inward eyes wider and shine more light into the understanding.

Well we're going to spend the rest of our time this morning looking at these three invisible realities. First first invisible reality Paul wants them to understand how certain God's future is.

Verse 18 Having the eyes of your heart enlightened that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

The key word here is hope. Hope is one of the defining marks of a Christian. In verse 12 Christians have been referred to as those who hope in Christ.

Now let me tell you what hope isn't. Hope is not wistful longing. You may have come to here this morning saying I hope the preacher is under half an hour today and you may have hoped that without any great conviction based on past track record.

[14:02] You wish it were true but you fear it won't be. Hope in the Bible is not that sort of hope. Hope means something which is absolutely certain you just can't see it yet.

Certain because God has promised it and he's supremely powerful and he always keeps his promises. God has made promises for the Christian of what things will be like in the end and Paul prays that they will grasp that more firmly.

How will it help to have a firmer grip on how things will be in the end for you? Well take a look at what God has promised. Look for example at verse 4.

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him. One day everybody who trusts in Jesus Christ will be holy and blameless in their experience in front of God.

Well look at verse 10. One day everyone who trusts in Christ will be fitted into God's great plan when Jesus is placed at the head of a reordered universe.

[ 15 : 26 ] Do you think it might help to have a firmer grip on those things today? You don't have to be a Christian do you to know the terrible sense of failure and frustration that so often crops up in life?

Haven't you found yourself for example hurting the ones you love? Treating them as you know you oughtn't? Kicking yourself for what you've done or failed to do in relation to other people?

Haven't you ever felt that? Of course you have. Haven't you ever asked yourself in a moment of despair what possessed me to say that or do what I did?

Well don't you know that if you're a person who follows the Lord Jesus Christ one day all of that kind of thing will be gone forever. Just imagine.

You'll never do anything like that ever again. You won't even want to. You won't think of it because he will make you perfect in the end. think how wonderful that will be.

[ 16 : 34 ] Breathtaking thing to imagine. If you were able to grasp that more firmly what do you think it might do for you? Well it might make a change to the way you react when you find your sinful self is still alive and kicking.

What do you do when you find yourself falling into sin? Are you utterly cast down by your shortcomings? Riddled with guilt and doubt?

Or are you grateful that it won't always be like that? Hope will help you to do the latter. Help you to keep at it and not give up when you have failed and not despair when you have found it difficult.

Because you're certain that one day even though not yet the work will be completed by God himself. Don't you think that hope will be a good thing to have? To pray for other people to have?

What do you do with sickness and ageing? I've just passed the great 5-0 landmark. Let me say I still feel 25 inside but boy is it not like 25 physically and anybody who's that age will know exactly what it's like and it can only get worse from this point onwards.

[ 17 : 52 ] What do you do when you find age and gravity taking over? Are you cast down that your body's not what it once was and your mind isn't what it once was?

Or are you expectantly looking forward to the day when you'll have everything made new because of the magnificent work of the Lord Jesus? Hope will help you to do the latter.

Don't you think that would be a good thing to have and to pray for others to have? Or what if your walk with God is not as close as you'd like it to be?

Does that depress you? Or are you eagerly pressing forward to the day when it will be everything you could imagine? It could possibly be and much more. When you see him face to face as you were always made for, hope will help you to do the latter.

Let's be absolutely clear about this, brothers and sisters. life in this world will always disappoint you, always, at every point, in the end. Have you got anything solid to hope in this morning?

[ 19 : 03 ] Something real, something that will cope with sin and sickness and ageing and even death? Are you always bogged down with the fact that things are not the way you'd like them to be?

Or are you always looking forward expectantly to the day when they will be the way you want them to be? Paul wants their hope to be clearer.

Be good for them, wouldn't it? Be good for us too. He wants them to know how certain God's promised future is. Second, he wants them to realise how wonderful God's church is.

Verse 18 again, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may know what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

Now, in the Old Testament, this idea of an inheritance is an idea which is used to describe that the people of God belong to him as his possession forever.

[ 20 : 10 ] They are his inheritance. Something he's made that's precious for him. Paul is saying here, I want you to know what a marvellous thing God will possess for himself in the end in his people.

Now, friends, look around you just for a moment. Just look at the person next to you and the person beyond them and the person on the other side of the room. It doesn't look that good, does it?

I mean, it's a nice new building, the setting's terrific, isn't it? But the people, well, the people are just ordinary people, aren't we? Read the papers. The people of God are not well thought of in this age, are they?

It doesn't appear to anyone that church is the place to be. On your way to church today, what were average Glasgow man and woman doing? Getting out of bed, maybe?

Coffee? Reading the paper? Shopping? Or that thing most precious to Glasgow man, washing his car. Does he think that church is the place to be this morning?

[ 21 : 16 ] The place where the action is? Not for a second. To the outward eye, church will never look great in this age. But the outward appearance is not the reality.

In the end, the people of the Lord Jesus Christ will be a rich inheritance for him to possess for himself. Look at verse 22.

God put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church. The Lord Jesus Christ has a special relationship with his people.

They're particularly his concern. And look on to chapter 2 and verse 6 and 7. God raised us up with him, with Christ, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus so that in the coming ages, God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Now, what on earth does that mean? Well, I think it means simply this. God has a plan for all the ages to come to use the people that he has made to demonstrate to the whole universe the brilliance of his grace so that everyone will see.

[ 22 : 39 ] Let me illustrate. A few years ago we went on a family camping holiday to Germany, to the Rhineland, and one day we visited Rudesheim. Now, has anybody here been to Rudesheim?

Yeah, no, no. Let me say there's not much to recommend it, I have to say. It's enormously touristy and not much fun apart from one thing, the Museum of Mechanical Musical Machines, which let me say, if you're a slightly nerdy person, is paradise.

You would not believe how many different mechanical musical machines there are in the world. It's worth going to Germany just for that place. Now, at the end of the tour, which I have to say I absolutely loved, there was the inevitable gift shop.

I hate gift shops, don't you? I hate the way the tour always ends there. In the middle of this gift shop was a great big glass display case beautifully lit, containing musical boxes.

Now, frankly, I'm not interested in musical boxes either. I like ornaments about as much as I like gift shops. But our guys strolled over lazily to the gift shop and unlocked the door and from the top shelf pulled out a small box.

[ 23 : 59 ] Pretty little box, glittery, couple of inches across. Again, I don't like that kind thing much, but he opened it up and out popped an exquisitely beautiful little bird, couple of centimetres long, perfectly crafted, moving wings, moving head, moving beak.

But the most brilliant thing about this musical box, which it was, was that simply by winding a clockwork mechanism which pushed air through small tubes inside, this box produced birdsong to my ear indistinguishable from the real thing.

It was breathtakingly brilliant. I wanted one immediately. It was about a million miles outside my price range. Now, let me say, I do not get excited by glittery things, but I wanted one immediately. the guide, who was German, stood back and held it up and he said, only the Swiss can do this.

Now, let me say, I had not given much thought to the Swiss as a nation before that moment. They don't play rugby there, everything is expensive, I understand, but that display case has changed my mind about the Swiss forever.

[ 25 : 22 ] For if only they can do that, there is something very special indeed about them. Now, that is a trivial example, but it is just like that with God and his church.

That is the sort of thing that's being said here. In every age to come beyond this one, the brilliant kindness evident in the creation of the church of God will bring gasps of admiration from all onlookers.

the people of God look very unimportant now, but in the end, there will be nothing else worth belonging to and everyone will know it.

How does it help to know that? Well, let me say first, it gives courage. church in Ephesus did not seem impressive, no doubt, especially with Artemis looming in the background.

And church here does not seem that impressive, does it? Second, it keeps in mind the importance of how we relate to one another as believers.

[ 26 : 38 ] What do we do when other believers upset us? Avoid them? Hope we won't have to talk to them again? Hope it will go away or keep working at the relationship. Well, if we understand how special is the people that God is making, that will strengthen us to keep doing the right thing.

One does meet Christians from time to time all bitter and twisted about the sinfulness of other Christians, harbouring grudges, talking behind backs, behaving decently in public, but inwardly

despising.

How presumptuous would it be though? Subtly to tear down what God is building up. How out of step with God the Father that would be.

How absurd not to be throwing all your weight right in behind what God is doing. God is making for himself something indescribably brilliant out of you and the Christians you know and all those you don't.

and we ought to be giving ourselves to that work. It's not immediately obvious that it's a good thing to give yourself to. No wonder Paul prays that the Ephesians would grasp it better.

[ 27 : 54 ] Paul wants them to know how wonderful God's church is. Third and finally, Paul wants them to know how overwhelmingly powerful God's power is.

having the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may know verse 19 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's named not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Brothers and sisters, do you feel deficient in power as a Christian this morning? I imagine that you do. In fact, I'm sure you do because if you didn't there wouldn't be such a market for things that promise more spiritual power.

But, verse 19, if you're a believer in Christ, resurrection power is at work in you even today. What's it like to have that all at work at you?

[ 29 : 07 ] How powerful is it, Paul? Well, says Paul, it's like the power that raised Jesus from the dead. It's that sort of power. It's like the power that translated him from the grave to the position of highest authority in the universe.

It's that kind of power. Really? Well, yes, he says. Why is it then that we seem so powerless? Answer?

Answer? Because it takes all the resurrection power of God just to keep you standing in the Christian life in this present age.

Flip on to chapter 6. Chapter 6, verse 10. You'll probably know this image. This is Paul encouraging the believers to put on the full armour of God.

Finally, verse 10, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might and put on all the armour that he supplies. And look on to verse 13.

[ 30 : 10 ] Therefore, take up the whole armour of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all to stand firm.

What is it like when Christian believers put on all the sorts of armour that God wears when he goes out to fight? Answer?

Well, they can stay on their feet in the battle. If you're still on your feet as a believer, if you're still on your feet as a church, trusting firmly in Jesus, there isn't a bigger miracle in the created order.

It takes God's resurrection power to give you faith in Christ and to keep you in faith in Christ.

believing in him and living for him together. So often we feel there's something wrong with the situation as it is at present.

Don't we? Something wrong with our apparent lack of power. Something defective about ourselves as Christians. Something defective about God and his gospel or his reliability.

[ 31 : 18 ] That's why we're always such suckers for anything which offers more power and that's why we're so often disappointed. Let me pull this together.

There must be some mistake we find ourselves saying often. Something can't be right. Really? Really? chapter 1 starts with a great celebration of God's unstoppable plan for his son.

The plan culminates in verse 10. A plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. An unstoppable plan forged before the beginning of time to put the Lord Jesus as the visible head of a totally reordered universe.

That's why when Paul gets to verse 15, he says, for this reason, because of God's unstoppable plan for his son, I'll pray confidently these things for you.

[ 32 : 32 ] But how does the Lord Jesus Christ look now to the outward eye? Well, the answer to that is, he looks nothing special at all, does he?

Can you see the supreme authority of the Son of God today? You can't. Can you see his world dominion? You can't. Can you see how amazing it will be whenever everything is ordered under his loving care?

You just can't, not with your eyes. Jesus doesn't look anything now. He doesn't look powerful, he doesn't look glorious, he isn't even visibly present.

But let me ask you, do you think that just because you can't see anything much, God has somehow taken his eye off the ball, forgotten his plan for his son?

Do you think that's possible? Of course it's not possible. Just because we can't see God's plan for Jesus and his greatness and his glory doesn't mean for a second that God's forgotten or that the plan's fallen over somewhere.

[ 33 : 52 ] Let me say, if you're just looking at the Christian message this morning, if you're here and you're not here, the Christian, the message of the Christian gospel is not first of all a message about what God can do for you in this age here and now.

It is first of all a message about what God will do through his son in the age to come. Don't let present appearances put you off looking properly at Jesus, for he is where the action is and one day that will be obvious for everyone.

Let me ask you if you're a believer, do you think it's possible that God has taken his eye off you? A person who trusts his amazing son?

Well, of course not. It is not a mistake that your experience in this world is as it is now.

It is not a mistake. You think it is, don't you? You think it is and you'll probably think it is tomorrow morning but it is not a mistake. Sure, your experience doesn't feel great now and church doesn't look that good now and nothing feels very powerful now about your Christian life.

[ 35 : 12 ] Surely there must be some mistake you say. There is no mistake. It's just that God's powerful activity is not visibly clear yet.

It will be in the end. It will be just as clear with you who have faith in Christ as it will be with the Lord Jesus himself.

You can't see him yet but one day everyone will. Three invisible realities. How certain God's future is.

How wonderful God's church is. and how overwhelming his power is. Invisible realities but real all the same.

Great things to be more confident in. Great things to pray for one another. Let's pray shall we? Why don't we have just a few minutes in the quiet to reflect on the things that we've thought about this morning and maybe respond in our own minds and hearts to God and what he has said to us.

[ 36 : 41 ] it's on the feet.

God's plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. We thank you, Heavenly Father, for your magnificent plan to put your Son as the head of everything, rescued, straightened out, reordered, remade.

We thank you for his magnificence. We thank you that you cannot possibly let your plan for him fall over. And we thank you for the confidence that this gives for those of us who trust in Christ that just as his power will one day be made clear for all to see, so our present weaknesses do not disqualify us from sharing in all the good things that you have brought.

We thank you that the life we live now is not an accident. And we pray very much that you would help us day by day to grasp these invisible realities more firmly.

[ 38 : 27 ] For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.