



HG217: Our Hope Is Found In: **Prayer**

Ephesians 4:14-21

Home Group Study Notes

21 March 2021 - Rachel Orford



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins) *Ice Breaker*

Have you had the time or inclination to develop new skills or interests during lockdown? Have you discovered any new talents? If so, what are they?



Looking Upwards (10 mins) *Worship*

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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Home Group Sermon

21 March 2021 - Rachel Orford

I am sure that over the last year we have become quite adept at looking for any small blessing we can find. With so many things missing from our lives and things we aren't able to do, we have gradually become more discerning about what matters most to us and we have come to realise that the small, seemingly unremarkable things in our lives are what are really important. These are the things which give us hope.

One of the blessings which I discovered quite late into lockdown was that St Mary's, the church in the High Street, has been open 4 days a week. Once I knew about this, I tried to go once a week to spend some quiet time there and it also felt very easy to pray there...and to think. We may not be able to sing our hearts out and worship at church services at the moment, we may not be able to celebrate communion together, we might not be able to meet in fellowship over coffee or gather in each others living rooms for our home groups. But we can still pray. We can pray anywhere and anytime. Not just in church and not just at quiet times. God is everywhere - he is always listening. When Paul wrote the words in today's passage to the Ephesians he was not able to spend time in prayer in the temple, or gather with friends at their houses either. He was a prisoner. Rather than being confined to a dungeon, it is likely that Paul was under house arrest and he was able to receive visitors - including Tychicus from Ephesus, with whom he entrusts this letter. But other than that, it must have felt to him very much like our time of lockdown. And yet by the sound of it, as well as writing letters, Paul spends much of his time praying. And the letter to the Ephesians is a particularly joyful letter; it's packed with prayer - particularly the first three chapters.

Already in verse 3 of the first chapter he is praising "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ". He says that he has "not stopped giving thanks for [them], remembering [them] in my prayers." Circumstance certainly did not deter Paul from prayer and it is clear he found it a blessing.

And we can find the same hope in prayer whatever our circumstances.

- in the very fact that we have prayer available to us; we have this privileged relationship with God
- in the things we pray about; we can say anything to God when we talk to Him
- in the prayers of others who intercede for us and for the world; we are never alone when we pray

Our Relationship With God

"For this reason I kneel before the Father...." begins Paul. If we had been reading the letter from the beginning we would know that the "reason" can be found in v 12 in which Paul tells us that "In [Jesus] and through our faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." He knew that he had this amazingly close, even intimate relationship with his God. And this was down to Jesus, who through his life and through the cross, has enabled this world-changing recon-

ciliation between ourselves and God, so that there is no separation between us, no fear and no boundaries. And it is our belief in this, our faith in Jesus and our trust in the truth of what he has done for us, that enables us to come before God as his beloved children. To approach him without fear in prayer. As St Gregory of Nyssa said “ Thanks to prayer, we can be with God.”

Jesus prayed continually. He prayed at the important occasions in his life - at his baptism, before he chose his disciples, before performing miracles and of course before his death. But he also regularly just withdrew from the crowds to spend time alone talking with his father. And he told us that we should do it too. He continually modelled for us how our prayer life should look and how we should handle this new and exciting relationship - not to use empty words or “keep on babbling like pagans” (Matthew 6:7), that we should be bold and confident and that “whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24) He even gave us a template to use in the Lord’s prayer. “When you pray....” He begins in Matthew 6:5 Not “If you pray...” If we are to have a relationship with God then we must pray.

And we pray to “Our Father”. Our relationship is that of a parent and child and Jesus paints a picture of a loving Father - a father like the one in the parable of the prodigal son who welcomes us with open arms no matter what we have done. It matters to God that we talk to him. Our requests make a difference. Things are not predetermined and this is our opportunity to work with God to shape our reality. Jesus taught us to pray “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.” If God simply knew what was going to happen and didn’t care what we thought, Jesus would not have encouraged us to make this part of our daily prayer. In his book “How to Pray”, our (then) Bishop Stephen Cottrell describes it as putting ourselves “in a relationship of co-operation with God.” Isn’t that exciting? Isn’t that a reason for hope? Particularly when over the past year it seems like we don’t have much control over anything. It feels like our lives have been governed by a series of government briefings with endless slides, gloomy news and the latest rules and regulations. Nobody has asked us for our input into any of this. But our God, our father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name wants hear what we have to say.

What Do We Say?

As he is our father, we can say what we like to God, but it’s right that we should be awestruck however familiar we are with him. He is still the sovereign over all and Paul uses “sovereign” language when he prays. He kneels before him and prays that “out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen” them. God is truly worthy of our praise and thanks and we should treat him with honour. Most of the time though we ask him for things. Material things that we long for, outcomes that matter to us, for things to go our way. There is nothing wrong with this - Jesus tells us “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” (Matthew 21:22). In his book, also called “How to Pray”. Pete Greig says that “our primary privilege as God’s children is to ask audaciously and repeatedly for everything we need, expecting him to answer, naturally or supernaturally.” Notice that he talks about our needs rather than our wants. Jesus taught us to ask for our daily bread - not our daily quarter pounder with cheese, extra fries and a banana shake. And he never promised to make us millionaires.

So what does Paul pray for the Ephesians? It seems like the first three chapters have been one long prayer (with some teaching in the middle). In chapter one he prays rather cryptically but memorably that “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...” and here, at the end of chapter 3, he returns to this prayer for his friends with

“Out of his glorious riches may he strengthen [them] with power through his spirit in [their] inner being.” A few weeks ago Christine talked about the Holy Spirit, this advocate that Jesus promised he would send to us to help us and be with us forever after he had ascended into heaven. How this “invasion of our natures by the Spirit of God,” means that when we turn to Christ we will have this spirit strengthening us, sustaining us, giving us hope and confidence that God will provide for us.

He goes one to ask that “Christ may dwell in [their] Hearts through faith.” This is not the only time in his letters that Paul talks about Christ living in us and what this might mean for us. In Galatians 2:20 says “I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me...” He didn’t say, “I live in a Christ-like way,” He said, “Christ...lives in me.” It is not a matter of us trying to behave like Christ, but of allowing Him to live in and through us. In Galatians 4:19 he talks about Christ being “formed in them”. He lives within us from the moment we come to faith but we need to give Him the opportunity to grow and be formed in us so that he can be revealed to others through us in our daily lives. Isn’t that an exciting and awe-inspiring thought? But also if we are honest - a bit daunting too.

But Paul prays for understanding that they might be “rooted and established in love” - that they could comprehend what this love of Christ actually means “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep” it is. It reaches out to the whole world and continues for as long as we live and beyond. It is with us when we are at our most joyful and when we are in the depths of our despair. If we did truly understand this, wouldn’t it be amazing? Wouldn’t the last 12 months have been different? Wouldn’t we feel less alone? Wouldn’t our self esteem have been given a great boost knowing how much we are valued? Wouldn’t we have more gratitude? Wouldn’t we expect more miracles? Wouldn’t we feel more hopeful?

Well it is hard to grasp and even Paul admits that the extent of Christ’s love “surpasses all knowledge” but nevertheless prays that they may be “filled to the measure of all the fulness of God”.

When was the last time we prayed for anything like this? Wouldn’t it be asking for too much? Perhaps it is a bit too bold. Well, Jesus didn’t think so. He promised his disciples in John 14: 13-14 “... I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”

Difficult Conversations

In any close relationship where we can be completely ourselves, it is inevitable that during bad times we might find ourselves taking it out in the other person. We should be able to express painful emotions, when things go wrong, when our prayers seem unanswered, when others have hurt us, when things are just...bad. Much lamenting has gone on in recent months. To name our complaints, our anger, our deep sadness to God has helped to contain the apparent chaos and keep it from overwhelming us. The writers of the psalms knew about this when they wrote in psalm 130 “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!”

On the Daily Prayers resource page on our website there is a Prayer of Lament for lockdown by Jayne Manfredi: “How long must we all suffer?” she asks God. “How long? Do not hide your face from us Lord. We need you now more than ever.....In our distress we cry out to you, in Jesus’ holy name.” Even when our lament continues over months and years, God can sustain us in such moments and the fact that we can bring it all before him can give us hope.

... Interceding For Others

Sometimes, however, it is just impossible to think of what to say and despair can even start to chip away at our faith. But others will pray for us. When we intercede we have the privilege of standing in the gap between God and those who are in need of His help to ask for his mercy.

During the last year Pauline has faithfully circulated prayer needs and requests to our church family, our WhatsApp group has bristled with messages asking for prayer for others who are suffering and during the first lockdown our Home Group met each week on zoom to pray for each other and those who we knew who had been particularly affected by the pandemic. Even if they are finding it difficult to pray or if they are physically unable to do so, everybody needs the hope that prayer can bring and it is their right to ask for it. Paul prayed for the Ephesians after all and he asked for prayer for himself. Fast forwarding to the end of his letter he says in ch 6:19 “ Pray also for me.....Pray that I may declare [the gospel] fearlessly as I should.” If we need prayer, there is always someone who will pray on our behalf.

Prayer can also bind us together in our home groups, our church family, our communities and even as a nation - isn't that a great thought? Our church leaders certainly think so as evidenced by the calls to prayer over the past year and our own clergy clearly think so, judging by the opportunities they have given us to meet and pray online. Just think what the power of prayer as a community could achieve. Paul closes by reminding us in v20 of the God who “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work in us.” Not just in “me” or “you” but in “us”. In his commentary on Ephesians, Tom Wright says “...think of what God might do in you and though you - you as a community and as an individual. Now reflect on the fact that God is perfectly capable of doubling that, trebling that, going so far beyond it that you would look back at the present moment and wonder how you could be so short-sighted.”

Our Hope Is Found In Prayer

So there is plenty to encourage us when we pray:

The close relationship which we have with God that enables us to approach him with confidence that what we say can make a difference and the knowledge that he will welcome us no matter what we have done.

The reality that we can talk with God about anything. As well as showing our appreciation for all he has done for us we can ask for things - for ourselves and others - boldly and with confidence, we can cry out to him in pain and disappointment, and we can simply spend time with him being filled with his holy spirit and learning the truth of the vastness of his love for us.

The comfort of others who intercede for us and the immense possibilities of the power of praying as a Christian community.

Emmanuel Church Text for 2021

*“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul,
firm and secure.”*

Hebrews 6:19



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. What circumstances do you think might deter you from praying? Have you ever found yourself in this situation?

2. Do you feel that it matters to God that you pray? How do you imagine he might feel when we don't?

3. Have you ever prayed for Christ to dwell in your heart? What does this mean to you? Is it exciting, scary, impossible to imagine or something else?

4. How has the fact that we are able to have difficult conversations with God - to lament - helped you (if at all) during the past year?

5. How do you feel about asking others to intercede for you?

6. If we were to pray together as a nation, what kind of things do you think would be possible?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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