

## Sermon – Eye-opening Prayer Sunday January 12, 2020

### VISION 2020

Welcome to our second Sunday of 2020! This is an exciting time to be at Cornerstone because God is doing a new thing here – we call it Vision 2020! We sense God is calling us to plant a new Cornerstone campus in another community sometime in the next few years.

Why are we doing this? God has blessed us and grown us so much. Not just in numbers but in the stories of people whose lives have been transformed by Jesus!

We sense that God wants us to plant a new church or campus. Not so we can build a name for ourselves, but so we can reach more people for Jesus so that His name would be glorified.

We covet your prayers for this. You can find more information including FAQs, key dates and prayer items on our website [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/vision2020](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/vision2020).

### SERMON INTRO

Last Sunday, we began a new series called *Paul's School of Prayer*. Pastor Steve began his message by asking us to think about this question:

*When I pray, what do I typically pray about?*

A few years ago, a Christian research organization wondered about this very question. So they surveyed over a thousand Americans who pray and asked them this question.

Here are some things that made the list.

- 21% of people prayed to win the lottery
- 20% prayed for success in things in which they put almost no effort
- 15% prayed that no one would find out about something bad they had done.

But the majority of people they found, prayed for their own needs and the needs of their family. Maybe that's reflective of your prayers as well? Of course, God invites us to pray for these things.

But that's what makes the prayers of the Apostle Paul so striking. Paul prays for things that many of us wouldn't think to pray about.

Throughout this series, we'll be studying the prayers of Paul and looking at how he prayed. These prayers serve as an excellent guide to show us how we can pray more in line with God's heart and priorities.

Today, we'll be looking at his prayer in Ephesians 1:17-21.

<sup>17</sup> I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit<sup>[f]</sup> of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. <sup>18</sup> I pray 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 his holy people, <sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength <sup>20</sup> he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Notice anything odd about this prayer? Paul doesn't say a single thing about their circumstances. Why is that odd? It's odd because the Ephesians were going a lot.

You see, the Ephesians were losing their homes, they were dying from disease, they didn't always have food to eat and on top of all that, they were being persecuted by the Romans. And yet Paul never prays for these things.

Tim Keller in his book, *Prayer*, writes:

It is remarkable that in all of his writings, Paul's prayers for his friends contain no appeals for changes in their circumstances.

Paul never prayed for better circumstances. Does that mean that we should never pray for our circumstances? Of course not.

- Paul would tell the Ephesians to *pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.*
- In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus himself tells us to pray for our needs, *Give us this day our daily bread.*

Paul's prayers aren't a model for everything we're supposed to pray about. But they do reflect God's priorities when it comes to prayer.

In his prayer for the Ephesians, Paul ignores the specific needs that you and I would be inclined to pray for. And instead he prays for the thing that matters most. He doesn't pray for comfort, safety or provision. What does Paul pray for? He prays that they would know God better.

*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit<sup>[1]</sup> of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. (v. 17)*

- See, the most important need for the Ephesians isn't their comfort, safety or provision. It's to know God better.
- The most important need in your life isn't your family, your finances or your health. It's to know God better.
- The most important need for Cornerstone isn't to fill more seats, raise more money, or develop more leaders. It's to know God better.

The primary thing Paul prays for isn't for better circumstances, it's to know God better.

### **Why is this so important?**

J.I. Packer, who wrote the book *Knowing God*, writes this:

Knowing God is crucially important for the living of our lives... The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction, and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.

See what Paul knows is that if you are growing in your knowledge of God, it doesn't matter what your circumstances are. You could be struggling at school or work, in your relationships, or in your health – and you'll still be okay.

In fact, Tim Keller says that if you don't know God, it doesn't matter how good your circumstances are. Because on the outside your life could be successful, but on the inside you could be a mess. Because if everything is going well, but you don't know God, you'll become proud, things will fall apart and you will be in despair.

It's actually worse to have good circumstances but not know God. You're actually better off having bad circumstances but a close relationship with God. Because that way you'll depend on him more and realize that, as Paul puts it, *his grace is sufficient for all your needs*.

So **how do you know God better?** How do finite creatures like you and me have a relationship with an infinite God? The answer is we can't. That's why Paul's prays that...

*God... may give you the Spirit<sup>[1]</sup> of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*

The truth is, you can't figure God out on your own. You need God to reveal himself to you. Spiritual growth is possible only through the Spirit.

The Apostle Paul says:

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup> For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 2:10-11)

Only the Spirit can reveal God to us so that we can truly know him.

Because **there's a difference between knowing about God and knowing God**. Knowing about God is about information.

For example, I know a lot about Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. I know that he's in movies like Jumanji, Fast and Furious and Hercules. I know that he's a 10-time world heavyweight champion in the WWE. I know that his wrestling moves include the Rock Bottom and the People's Elbow. I even know all his catchphrases... if you smell what the Rock is cooking!

But that doesn't mean I know The Rock. I wish I did, but I don't. Because **knowing someone isn't about information, it's about relationship**. In the Bible, knowing someone involves intimacy, closeness and trust.

When my wife Joanne and I were dating, we came up with something called Snatch cards. I know it sounds weird, but a Snatch card is something you use in the event that an alien abducts the other person and you need to confirm their true identity. (These are the kind of things you do when you're dating and in love.)

For her birthday, I made her a personal set of Snatch cards. I don't know where she put them, but I found the electronic file on my computer. Do you want to see it?

Here's the thing about Snatch cards. You can't answer a question just by knowing *about* someone. You need to *know* them. You need to spend time with them, you need to share your hearts with each other.

I know a lot about the Rock. But I know my wife. And Paul prays not that you would know about God but that you would know God... deeply, personally and intimately for yourself.

There are many Christian disciplines that help us know God better, but I want to touch on three of them real quick.

The first is **Reading the Bible**. Regularly reading the Bible is essential to knowing God better because that's where God reveals himself to us. But many people find the Bible overwhelming. That's why we highly recommend the Read Scripture App by The Bible Project. This app includes a Bible reading plan and creative videos that explain difficult concepts and themes.

The second discipline is **Prayer** – which is what this series is about. Prayer is the means of knowing God better.

One person says that:

Prayer at its highest is a two-way conversation and for me the most important part is listening to God's replies. (Frank C. Laubach)

Prayer is spending time with God, sharing your heart with him and listening to what he has to say. Later in February, we'll be providing a Lent Prayer Guide that you can use to deepen your prayer life with God.

And the third discipline is **Community**. We can't just know God better on our own. We need other people. We need to be plugged into Christian communities like small groups, semester groups and discipling relationships.

Last week, our small group rallied around a family during a difficult time. We connected with them, prayed for them and brought meals to them. And God showed up in a big way. Not only to comfort and strengthen them but to fill all of us with his love and to draw us closer to each other and to him.

That's why we encourage everyone at Cornerstone to plug into a group. There are semester groups and support groups that you can check out in our Learning Opportunities flyer. There's Group Launch which is a 90 minute lunch event where we help launch you into a 7-week Starter Group where you'll get connected, make friends and grow in your faith.

But no matter what you're going through right now, your greatest need is to know God better. What would it look like if you made that your New Year's resolution? To read your Bible and pray more regularly, to check out a semester group or attend Group Launch.

Because when you grow in your relationship with God, Paul says in verse 18 that your eyes will be opened.

*I pray 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 his holy people,<sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

For the remainder of our time, we're going to unpack these three things.

**The first thing is the hope to which he has called you.**

If you had to answer the question, *What's the reason you were put on earth?* How would you respond?

I think many of us would say that deep down we just want to live the good life. I mean, if we're being honest, don't we just want to be comfortable and for things to go well?

In other words, our hope is in the present. But the problem with this kind of hope is that it makes us miserable when we don't get what we want. When we have to wait, when we have to suffer. That's why we get impatient, angry and depressed.

But Paul says that as you know God better you'll see the hope that He's calling you to. And it's not a hope based on our present circumstances, it's a hope based on God's future.

Last year, we preached a series on the Kingdom of God. The hope we have as Christians is a future hope. It's the hope that God will one day fully restore his fallen creation, including you and me.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright reminds us:

The great story of the Bible from beginning to end is the story of God making a wonderful world—a world which somehow, really does go badly wrong—but God promises to sort it out one day and set everything right that has gone wrong with the whole creation. Indeed, there are many sweeping statements throughout scripture that speak to the hope of the ultimate restoration of this world when God's kingdom—his rule and reign—comes to earth in all its fullness.

When we see this hope more clearly, it profoundly impacts not only how we think about the future, but also how we live in the present. We understand that we weren't put on earth simply to live a good life. We were put on earth to reflect God's goodness and advance God's kingdom in the way we live and relate to others.

It was because of this hope that Paul could give these words of encouragement to Christians who were suffering and discouraged.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

As you know God better, you'll discover the hope of your calling. You weren't put on earth to live a good life. You were put on earth to reflect God's goodness and advance God's kingdom wherever you go.

**The second thing you'll see more clearly is the riches of his glorious inheritance.**

We almost expect Paul here to tell the Ephesians about the riches of *their* glorious inheritance. But he doesn't say that. Instead he talks about the riches of *God's* glorious inheritance.

So what is God's glorious inheritance? Paul says in verse 18...

the riches of his glorious inheritance *in his holy people*.

In other words, God's glorious inheritance is you, and it's me. His people are his glorious inheritance. You are his beloved son, you are his beloved daughter. When you begin to understand this, it will change everything for you!

As a father of two girls, I'm extremely conscious of their sense of self-worth because I know how much pressure girls face when it comes to their body image, popularity or how they're expected to behave.

One report finds that once girls think of themselves as unlovable, inadequate and worthless, it affects all their thoughts and assumptions, leading to ongoing self-defeating behaviour.

Low self-esteem is linked to mental health issues like anxiety and depression. It leads to self-destructive behaviours like cutting, smoking, drinking and promiscuous activity.

But it's not just girls who suffer from this, is it? We all engage in destructive behaviours simply because we believe the lie that we are unlovable and worthless.

**But how do you determine how much something is worth? It depends on what someone's willing to pay for it.**

Here's an example. If I blew my nose into this tissue, how much would it be worth? Absolutely nothing. But if I were famous that would be a different story.

In 2008, actress Scarlett Johansson came on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. She blew her nose into a tissue and a week later, that snotty nose rag was sold on eBay for \$5,300!

How do you determine how much something's worth? It depends on what someone's willing to pay for it.

Question: How much are you worth? To find the answer, look at the cross. God sent his Son into the world. When he was flogged and whipped, when he went to the cross, when they pounded nails into his hands, God says, This is how much you're worth. You're worth the price of my son.

Henri Nouwen writes:

I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection... When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions... Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.

As you get to know God better, you'll discover that you are his Beloved – and that's the most true and important thing about you.

Once a year, we run our Identity in Christ workshop. It's a powerful and experiential workshop designed to move that truth from your head to your heart. People who've taken this workshop have said that everyone should take it so we hope you sign-up.

The third thing you'll see more clearly as you know God better is **the incomparably great power you have.**

Some of you here this morning are at your breaking point. You're exhausted. Life is hard and stressful and you feel like you don't have the strength, patience or perseverance to go on. So what do you do?

Paul says that as you know God better, you'll see the power that you have in Christ. In fact, he says that this power is the same power that God used to raise Jesus from the dead. Do you realize that you and I have resurrection power!

Understanding that is like Luke Skywalker watching Yoda lift his X-wing fighter out of the swamp in Dagobah and realizing that he has the power to do that too!

Only our power doesn't come from the Force; it comes from Christ. Jesus gives us his resurrection power to live the Christian life. Things you could never do on your own, you can now do through Him.



- In Christ, you have the power to love your enemies,
- (in Christ) you have the power to forgive those hurt you,
- (in Christ) you have the power to be joyful in all situations,
- (in Christ) you have the power to overcome your addictions, your pride, your resentment, your fear, your despair.

Anyone remember how Paul put it?

I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. (Phil 4:13)

[Invite Worship Team back up.]

We've been saying today that no matter what you might be going through, your greatest need is to know God better. This was the primary thing Paul prayed for. He didn't pray for people to have better circumstances, he prayed for people to know God better. Why?

Because when you do, you'll discover the hope to which he's called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance and the incomparably great power for us who believe.

This week, I want to give you a challenge. Are you up for it? I want to challenge you to pray this prayer everyday: **God, help me to know you better.** (Everyone say that.)

- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal God to you.
- Pray that you wouldn't just know about God, but that you would know him intimately and personally.
- Ask him to show you what you need to know.
  - Maybe you feel like you don't have direction.
  - Maybe you believe the lie that you're worthless.
  - Maybe you don't know how to overcome your problems.
- Ask God to show you what he needs to show you and deepen your experience of him.

Because the most important need in your life right now is to know God better.