

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

The Hope to Which You've Been Called

Ephesians 1:15-23

Mark Vroegop

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward 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 the Spirit of wisdom and of 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 toward 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 (Eph. 1:15-23, ESV).

As you entered the church atrium today, I hope you looked forward to reconnecting with church members. While the focus of Sunday mornings is our worship gathering, the relational connections and conversations are really important. To be a part of a church means that you belong to a people, a body. It's something bigger than each of us individually.

I'd like you to think about those important conversations in the atrium. Specifically, think with me about the kinds of questions/greetings that we offer to one another.

- How was your week?
- Did you do anything fun this weekend?
- How's work going?
- Any plans for the summer?

These aren't bad questions. Maybe they're a bit introductory and conversation starters. Hopefully, they will lead to other questions that relate to prayer needs, burdens, or joys—an opportunity to bear one another's burdens. These conversations and connections are vital to the health and vitality of a church. So, don't waste the opportunity to connect with each other.

Imagine with me another set of questions:

- What are you thankful for right now?
- What are you looking forward to in the next three months?

- What are you passionate about?
- What are you dreaming about?

Now, I'm not suggesting that you jump on those questions at the end of the service. You probably know why. There's a difference between the first set of questions and the second. Asking about gratitude, dreams, passion, and hopes in the wrong setting can be socially awkward, very uncomfortable.

Why is the second set of questions different? Well, they get to a deeper level. But they also touch on things related to identity—your core understanding of who you are. There are some questions that tend to reveal how you think about identity. Among those questions are: What makes you grateful? And what do you want or desire?

Gratitude and desire reveal and shape identity.

We're looking at Ephesians to discover how to "become who we are." And our text for today, Ephesians 1:15-23, helps us see the gratitude and desire that Paul had for the church at Ephesus. This introductory statement is meant to both affirm what is good and to encourage the church. Think of it as a "do more of that!" statement.

Let's take a look at how gratitude and desire reveal and shape Christian identity.

Gratitude: What makes us thankful?

The first two verses, 15-16, help us understand that what follows is really Paul's prayer for the church. There's much to learn here from the content of this heartfelt intercession. But before we even get into the meat of the text, I want to highlight the connection between identity and prayer.

Who you think you are and who you think God is are revealed in your prayer life. For example, if your identity is a self-sufficient person, then you'll neglect prayer. If your identity is self-centered, then your prayers will reflect perspective where God is merely your means to an end. So, when we think about our identity, we should take a look at our individual and corporate praying. How and what we pray reveals a lot.

Remember the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector in Luke 18? The Pharisee prayed, "I thank you that I'm not like other men..." His prayer revealed an identity problem. Our prayers, or lack thereof, also reveal how we think about ourselves and others.

But they also shape our identity. What we pray about, and for, have an effect on what we continue to value and how we think about ourselves. Parents who pray over their children are shaping their sense of identity. Pastoral prayers in a Sunday service are not merely times of intercession; they are also moments of instruction. Gathering in a group to pray over our new members at a Worship-Based Prayer Night helps to set a trajectory of a new member's spiritual growth.

So, it's instructive that Paul leads with sharing his gratitude to God for this church. He's doing more than just reflecting his thankfulness. Paul is encouraging and instructing them.

Verse 15 begins with the statement, "For this reason," and then verse 16 completes the sentence, "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." It's quite an affirmation. It seems that whenever Paul thought of this church, his response was gratitude and thankfulness to God. I'm sure this wasn't true of every church. But it was true of the people at Ephesus.

When he thought of them, his first inclination was to be thankful for the grace of God in them. Oh, I pray that is true of you if you are a Christian—that the first thought of people around you would be one of gratitude for the grace of God in you.

Paul remembered them in his prayers, and it created gratitude in his heart. As we'll see in a moment, it also caused him to dream of what he longed to see even further in the life of the church. It's pretty clear when you read Ephesians, and when you read the letter in Revelation 2, that this church was a blessing to Paul. I wonder if it did his heart good to pray for them, a reminder of the ways that God was at work.

I don't know about you, but my prayers tend to be occupied with problems and needs. I'm more inclined to pray about things that are troubling than I am to express gratitude to God for the grace that I see around me or in others. Here's a good takeaway from this prayer from the apostle Paul: we should spend more time expressing gratitude to God for where we see him at work in people.

The presence or lack of gratitude in your life reveals and shapes your identity. It's possible to allow the problems and challenges of life to create a base-level orientation—a way of seeing life. It happens easily. The burdens of life, the brokenness within us, and the sinful choices of others can create a spirit of negativity, grumpiness, and cynicism. Yet, Paul celebrates what he sees in the church at Ephesus.

It takes no special skill to see what is wrong with people, and to criticize them. But to see people robed in a righteousness not their own and to encourage them on this basis to be more of what they should be powerfully communicates the heart of Christ. The best leaders are those who develop the ability to see the good that is sprouting in people and water its growth with commendation, even when it is obvious to the leader (and perhaps to everyone else in the church) that more growth is needed. We provide spiritual support by commending others for the good we can see despite the growth that they still need.¹

Surely, Paul knows that this church has a lot of needed growth. But he starts his prayer with a beautiful statement of thanksgiving to God. He mentions two specific things: their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for all the saints (v. 15b).

Their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ would have caused them to be separated from the rest of their society which was steeped in idolatry, especially the worship of Diana. It would have proven costly,

¹ Bryan Chapell, [Ephesians](#), ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 62.

which is probably why the letter in Revelation says, “I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake...” (Rev. 2:2). Paul was thankful for their faithfulness. But he was also grateful for their love for one another. Later in the book of Ephesians, Paul will talk about the wall of separation being torn down between Jews and Gentiles. While I’m sure it was still messy and challenging, he was thankful for the love that he heard about in the church.

Paul was thankful for this church, and his commendation both revealed and shaped how he thought about gospel identity.

Here are a few questions to consider:

- If you are a Christian, what does your level of gratitude say about how you think about yourself?
- Have you allowed gratitude to take a backseat in your life?
- What grace do you see in others and around you?
- Who might you commend and encourage today or this week?

What you’re thankful for reveals a lot about what you think about your identity. But even more, it’s formative. Christians are a people who have been graced by God. Gratitude is normal because of who we are. We’re thankful because of who we are.

Desire: What do we want?

The rest of this prayer highlights Paul’s requests for this church. There are four statements that both reveal and shape identity. They’re connected to what Paul desired or hoped for as he thought about the Christians in Ephesus.

Desire, hopes, and what you want are deeply connected to your understanding of identity. They both reveal and shape our identity. Imagine asking someone, “What’s your greatest desire?” and their answer is “I want to be rich,” “I want to be popular,” or “I want to be loved.” That would be pretty revealing, wouldn’t it? But imagine if you grew up in a home where those identity values were communicated in some way. Identity desires are caught, and they are deeply formative.

That’s why the content of Paul’s prayer is so important. It highlights what he desires or wants for the church. Each of them is stunning and miraculous. They are supernatural and are all a product of God’s grace.

“That you may know Jesus”

Paul’s first prayer for them is that they might have a deeper and more intimate knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Remember, Jesus is the subject of verse 15, and Paul continues with this focus. However, in verse 17, he adds a trinitarian focus: “the **God** of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the **Spirit** of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.”

The end goal is the knowledge of him, Jesus. This means more than knowing about him. The idea is personal, intimate, and experiential knowledge. It's the kind of knowledge that is deeply transformative and foundational. What's more, it's the kind of knowledge that is connected to wisdom and revelation. It's a growing understanding, not static understanding, of who Jesus is.

And it's something that is miraculous: "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened." This knowledge of Jesus is a supernatural work of God that changes everything. Instead of knowing ourselves, Christian identity focuses on knowing Christ.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Phil. 3:7-10).

"That you may know what is the hope of your calling"

The second desire or longing of the apostle is connected to hope and their calling. Now, when Ephesians talks about "calling," it's not referring to some personal mission. In our present context, there's a lot of talk about finding your calling, which is a reference to how one's life could count or make a difference.

But in the Bible, calling isn't discovered inside of you. It's a divine calling, something outside of yourself. It's the directive and invitation from God where he invites his people to be a part of his work and his plan in the world. So, the hope of this calling is their connection to the bigger picture of what God is doing in the world and in the universe.

This is a calling that is rooted in salvation, and it is the hope of God's activity. Paul's prayer is that they would understand this divine plan and that their identity would be connected to it.

"That you may know what are the riches of his inheritance"

Taking that calling another step, Paul prays that the church would be reminded of the glorious inheritance that is theirs in Christ. God's people are "in Christ," and with that comes a beautiful positional grace that is deeply transformative.

Paul prays here that his readers will appreciate the value which God places on them, his plan to accomplish his eternal purpose through them as the first fruits of the reconciled universe of the

future, in order that their lives may be in keeping with the high calling and that they may accept in grateful humility the grace and glory thus lavished on them.⁸

It seems that Paul wants to remind the Ephesian Christians about what they have in Christ. He wants them to understand the beauty, wealth, glory, and grace that is already theirs in Christ. You see, so much of identity malfunction arises from discontentment or a desire for something other than what we already possess. Paul wants the church to know about the incredible blessing of God in their lives.

“That you may know what is the greatness of his power”

Finally, Paul wants the people to appreciate the power of what God is doing and what he will do. Verses 19-23 show us the various elements of this incredible work of God.

- It’s described as “immeasurable greatness”
- Our first experience was in putting our trust in Christ
- It’s a work that was modeled in the resurrection of Jesus
- The power is still operational as Jesus is seated about all earthly powers
- All things are under his feet and he is head over all things
- And the powerful expression of his victory is the church, which is the fullness of him

In other words, Paul is calling this church to realize the amazing display of power that is observed in their lives and in the life of the entire church. He wants them to see and know the greatness of God’s power.

Given the brokenness of the world, it can be easy to forget what is really going on. It can be easy to focus on the work of the Devil and the effects of sin in the world. That mindset and perspective can begin to shape your identity. Paul wants these Christians and us to be reminded that:

- God’s at work!
- He’s going to win!
- Jesus is already victorious.
- He’s at work in ways that we cannot see.

Christian identity means that this is what we know, love, and long for. This is what we want new believers to understand. This is what we need to remember and rehearse.

Identity is revealed and shaped by what makes us thankful and what we desire.

So, Christian, what are you thankful for today? What could you be thankful for? And what do you really want? What do you desire?

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 271.

Christian identity is revealed and shaped by gratitude and desire.

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead
(Phil. 3:10-11).

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