

04. Ephesians 1:15-23



1:15-23 - a prayer of gratitude and a petition that the Gentiles will grasp the significance of God's design.

Ephesians 1:15-19

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God. so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, according to the working of God's great power.

Ephesians 1:20-23

God put this power to work in the Messiah 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 age to come.

And God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 1:15-17

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God.

Paul's prayer is addressed to 'the God of our Lord Jesus the Messiah' (see 1:3). This is the God to whom Jesus prayed, and who has shared with him God's glory by drawing him into the communion of love in which the risen life consists. In calling God 'the Father of glory', Paul picks up the refrain of the hymn: 'for the praise of God's glory' (1:6,12,14). God, who has filled God's Son with the glory of God's love, pours out this same grace upon all who belong to him.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord, Jesus

When we examine the meaning of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures, our first observation is that it is most clearly understood in the word 'faithful' (full of faith).

The Hebrew noun 'mnh is often translated 'faithfulness'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, secure, sure, and so trustworthy (which is not the same as trusting).

Faith (πίστις) and 'believing' (πίστευω) speak of listening to God, heeding God's inspiration, and acting accordingly.

Faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action.

As Jesus himself says: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

To speak of 'faith' is to speak of the truth about God's self-revelation, reaching its climax in God's self-revelation in Jesus. It is to speak of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

God has this quality (faithful, trustworthy) in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that God is the real God, not a false one, and that God always acts according to the truth. Because of this, we can find our security in God, we can rely upon God, we can place our trust in God.

‘The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness’ (Psalm 33:4).

‘I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord’ (Hosea 2:20).

When we speak of human beings having this quality, we are saying that they are trustworthy because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2 Chronicles 31:12), then we share in the faithfulness of God, and others in turn can rely upon us (Jeremiah 15:18).

Abraham is described as having a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1 Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1 Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

To 'believe' means to act in accordance with who we are and with our obligations. It means to behave faithfully, with the result that others can rely upon us. Since we are creatures who are totally dependent upon God, for us to behave in a way that is truly in accordance with our nature means to live in dependence upon God. This includes placing our trust in God's faithfulness.

The verb 'believe' then has two essential components.

- It means to place our trust in God's faithfulness
- and to give evidence of this by behaving faithfully ourselves so that others can rely upon us.

Since God is love, God can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith.

To believe in God is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed.

The Mosaic Law requires of God's people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor.

In the New Testament Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

To believe is, as the English word so aptly expresses, to 'be' - 'lieve', to 'be' in 'love'. It is to choose to be in God's love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God's being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts.

To have faith is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion.

When Paul writes: “I have heard of your faith in the Lord, Jesus’ he wants us to think first of what God revealed in revealing Jesus, his Son. He wants our minds and hearts to go straight to the faith of Jesus, to Jesus’ faith: his trust in God, his obedience, his fidelity, shown especially when ‘he gave himself’ (1:4) in obedience to his Father and out of love for us.

The faith which we are to have in God is a gift which Jesus gives us in giving us a share in his life. It is a faith which we receive from God, before it is a faith which we offer God as a response.

As Jews, the Judaeen missionaries know that it is not observance of the Torah that puts them in the right relationship with God.

Communion with God is a gift from God. As Christian Jews they know that it is the gift of Jesus that has brought them to enjoy communion with God who has embraced them and whom they have embraced.

Faith is a gift, What we have to do is to accept the gift. We accept in by ‘believing in’, that is to say, directing our faith towards Jesus, and welcoming his gift to us of his faith.

Ephesians 1:17

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God.

Paul's prayer is that we come to know God. For this we will need a special wisdom that, as the word 'revelation' indicates, can come only from God's Spirit. This wisdom is part of 'the riches of grace that God lavished upon us' (1:8).

We are reminded of the prayer Paul prayed for the Colossians:

'We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding ... as you grow in the knowledge of God' (Colossians 1:9-10).

Ephesians 1:18

so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you

As God's Spirit draws us into that communion of divine love in which alone we can come to know God, we will also come to see, with a knowledge that penetrates to our hearts, that God wills to share God's glory also with us, and that God's power to achieve God's purpose has no limits. Again we recall his words to the Colossians in which Paul gives thanks 'to the Father who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light' (Colossians 1:12). We recall also Paul's words to the Corinthians in which he speaks of God: 'who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Hope

One who loves is attentive to present communion with the one loved. But the present moment is not static or isolated; rather, it points to and opens up a future communion for which we long, and to which we are called. Our present union encourages us to leave the future confidently in the hands of him in whom we have placed our trust.

When Paul speaks of ‘**eagerly waiting**’, and when he speaks of ‘**hope**’, these are related, but not the same. There is a place for eager longing. There is also, and more importantly, a place for hope, where the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on present assurance because of the God in whom one now places one’s confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks.

A perfect expression of **hope** is found in Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and too marvellous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, **hope** in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

We know our frailty. We know how easily we fall back into sin. We know that the fullness of communion with God is something for the future. Paul is encouraging us to eagerly await the promised communion, but to trust that God knows our longing. It is, after all, God's gift to us. God is faithful. Let us believe in Jesus and live accordingly: which means giving ourselves to his Spirit. If we do this, we will find that the love which we see burning in his heart will set fire to our own, and this is all that matters: **'The only thing that counts is faith working through love'** (Galatians 5:6).

This is not without importance in recognising the distinction between faith and hope.

Faith is concerned with objective reality: the fact that God is real, the fact that God's will has been revealed, and that our basic response (our 'faith') is to accept this truth revealed in our history, base our life upon it and act accordingly. In Paul, as we have seen, the objective reality in which we believe is what God has revealed in Jesus.

Hope speaks of an attitude of trust whereby, because we believe, we can live in the present and entrust the future to God.

Ephesians 1:18-19

that you may know what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, according to the working of God's great power.

In a special way Paul wants us to know from experience the call of God 'who calls you into God's own kingdom and glory' (1 Thessalonians 2:12). It is this call, coming through the risen Jesus, and proclaimed in the gospel, that assures us of God's love and invites us to place our hope in God. As we saw in the hymn of praise, the experience of the Holy Spirit is '**the pledge of our inheritance**' (1:14). While we trust in the fullness of life that awaits us, we know that God is already working powerfully in our lives.

Paul will explain in the following verses that God's life is mediated by the Risen Jesus and that it is by belonging to the Church that we will come to grasp the wonder of what God wants for us now and of the inheritance that will be ours.

In his letter to the Romans (see especially Romans 6:1-11 and 8:1-11). Paul develops both these themes: the glory awaiting us, and the new life that is being engendered in us now.

Ephesians 1:20-21

God put this power to work in the Messiah 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 age to come.

Paul speaks first of 'the power of God, who **'raised the Messiah from the dead.'** He speaks also of the power exercised by the risen Jesus, who has been 'declared to be Son of God with power by resurrection from the dead, Jesus the Messiah our Lord' (Romans 1:4).

God's design in creating human beings, and God's design for the Messiah are fulfilled in him who is **'seated at God's right hand'**. 'The Lord says to my lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool' (Psalm 110:1). Whatever beings exercise power, God has made the risen Jesus Lord of all.

Ephesians 1:22-23

Paul concludes his introduction with three statements that are to be read in the light of the opening hymn of praise and that prepare us for the main themes which he is about to develop in the body of the letter. They are themes that he develops also in his letter to the Colossians.

1. God has put all things under his feet (Psalm 8:5-6) and has made him head over all things [see Colossians 1:15-20]
2. for the church which is his body [see Colossians 1:18, 24]
3. the fullness of him who is in everything and fills everything [see Colossians 2:10]

While everything shares in the grace of the Risen Jesus and reflects something of his fullness, it is to the Church that we must look if we wish to see his fullness, for he fills the Church with his Spirit (it can be called, therefore, his ‘body’) and pours out the fullness of grace into her. The Church is the body which he fills with his life, which radiates his glory throughout the cosmos, and which draws the whole of humankind and all creation into his fullness as it is built up and grows into him.

The Church as the Body of the Risen Jesus

‘God has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

When Paul speaks of the body of the Messiah, he is thinking of:

1. Jesus in his human condition, and especially in his self-offering for us on the cross. ‘He has now reconciled you in his **body** of flesh by his death’ (Colossians 1:22). Paul recalls the words of Jesus at the last supper: ‘This is my **body** which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’ (1 Corinthians 11:24). We are to do what Jesus did. We are to offer ourselves for others in love: ‘You have died to the law through the **body** of the Messiah, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we might bear fruit for God’ (Romans 7:4).

When Paul speaks of the body of the Messiah, he is thinking of:

2. The community of those who commit themselves to Jesus and to his self-offering do so because they are empowered by his Spirit. Since it is the Spirit that gives life to the community, it is called his 'body'.

'We who are many are one **body**, for we all partake of the one bread' (1Corinthians 10:17).

'By one Spirit we were all baptised into one **body**' (1 Corinthians 12:13).

'You are the **body** of Christ and individually members of it' (1 Corinthians 12:27).

'As in one **body** we have many members, ... so we, though many, are one **body** in the Messiah, and individually members one of another' (Romans 12:4-5).

‘Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in the afflictions of the Messiah for the sake of his **body**, that is, the church’ (Colossians 1:24).

‘Let the peace of the Messiah rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one **body**’ (Colossians 3:15).

‘For he is our peace, who has made us both one ... that he might reconcile us both to God in one **body** through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end in his own person.’ (Ephesians 2:14,16).

When Paul speaks of the body of the Messiah, he is thinking of:

3. the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now, raised to the fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus - the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father - that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcome. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus' **body**, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God's love.

‘He is the head of the **body**, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell’ (Colossians 1:18-19).

‘In him the whole fullness of deity dwells **bodily**, and you have come to fullness in him’ (Colossians 2:9-10).

I have heard of your love

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God’s self-giving, a ‘word’ of love. When God revealed God’s Self to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God’s instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God’s love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus’ self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God’s gift of self, to God’s love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

One of the central texts of the Torah reads: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the word ‘love’ is translated in the Greek version by ἀγαπάω, the Beloved Disciple is always using this verb to speak of our basic relationship with God.

It may come as a surprise to discover how seldom Paul uses ἀγαπάω to speak of our basic relationship with God. He does so only three times:

1. He uses it in the following quotation: ‘As it is written: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who **love** him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).
2. ‘Anyone who **loves** God is known by him’ (1 Corinthians 8:3).
3. ‘We know that all things work together for good for those who **love** God’ (Romans 8:28).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of our loving Jesus only once, in the final sentence of his Letter to the Ephesians:

‘Grace be with all who have an undying **love** for our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (Ephesians 6:24).

Furthermore, Paul never uses the noun ἀγάπη with either God or Jesus as its object. In the context of human behaviour, the noun always, and the verb on every occasion other than the four noted, refer to our relationship with other people. In speaking of our response to Jesus and to God Paul prefers to speak of 'faith'.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God's love flowing through us to others. Paul sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and, thanks to this gift, from us to each other. Jesus' disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where Jew and Gentile share in the same Spirit.

In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves; to love with his love. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus' own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship, beautiful as that love is. Noe is it the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well, or a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals.

As Paul writes: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners the Messiah died for us' (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: 'Live in love, as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2).

When Paul says that ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6), he is quoting traditional Jewish wisdom. Judaism does not separate faith from obedience; it does not think of faith as an intellectual assent that leaves one’s behaviour untouched. To believe means to commit oneself to do God’s will ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5), and God’s will, as revealed by Jesus, is that we love.

Ephesians 1:20-23

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