

PRAAYER AND PRESENCE

THE PURSUIT OF GLORY

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

October 22, 2017

Discussion Guide

WHAT IS PRAYER?

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- IN YOUR MIND, WHY IS PRAYER IMPORTANT?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- USING THE NOTES, TALK ABOUT THE TWO MOVEMENTS OF REDEMPTION. YOU MIGHT NOTICE IF IN YOUR EXPERIENCE ONE OF THESE MOVEMENTS HAS BEEN EMPHASIZED OVER THE OTHER.
- READ EPHESIANS 1.15-23 AND THEN EPHESIANS 3.14-19. PAUSE. READ THESE TWO TEXTS ONCE

MORE, SEEKING TO HEAR THE TIES BETWEEN THEM.

- IN THESE TWO PRAYERS, PAUL ASKS GOD TO GIVE THE EPHESIANS MORE OF HIMSELF. IN WHAT WAYS DOES HE MAKE THIS REQUEST OF GOD. SEEK TO DISCOVER AS MANY ASPECTS AS POSSIBLE IN THE TEXT.
- THINK ABOUT WHAT PAUL IS REQUESTING OF GOD. WHAT IMPLICATIONS, IF ANY, MIGHT YOU DRAW FROM THESE PRAYERS ABOUT THE PURPOSES FOR WHICH GOD REDEEMED US THROUGH JESUS.
- IN WHAT WAYS DOES PAUL USE PRAYER TO INVITE GOD TO LEADING THE EPHESIANS TO AN EXPERIENCE OF THESE PURPOSES?
- DO YOU THINK PEOPLE TYPICALLY USE PRAYER AS PAUL USES PRAYER HERE? COULD YOU ELABORATE?
- ONE MIGHT SAY THAT PAUL USES PRAYER FOR THE EPHESIANS TO GET MORE OF GOD AND FOR GOD TO GET MORE OF THE EPHESIANS. WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE TO PRAY LIKE THIS TODAY? WHY MIGHT WE WISH TO PRAY IN THIS MANNER?
- CONSIDER CLOSING YOUR TIME AS A GROUP BY "RIFING" ON THESE TWO PRAYERS OF PAUL. "RIFING" ON A PRAYER INVOLVES USING THE BIBLICAL PRAYER AS A TOPICAL AND STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR YOUR OWN PRAYER, A PRAYER WHICH EXPANDS UPON THE PRAYER FOUND IN SCRIPTURE.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

REDEMPTION

ONE OF THE MOST CENTRAL THEMES IN GOD'S STORY AS IT RELATES TO PEOPLE IS THAT OF REDEMPTION. REDEMPTION IS THE PROCESS OF RELEASING SOMEONE OR SOMETHING FROM A LEGAL OBLIGATION OR OBTAINING DELIVERANCE FROM A DESPERATE CIRCUMSTANCE. GOD LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE CONCEPT OF REDEMPTION IN THE LAW OF MOSES. THROUGH MOSES, GOD INSTRUCTED THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL TO ENGAGE IN THE ACT OF REDEMPTION. THE ISRAELITES WERE TO REDEEM THEIR FIRST-BORN CHILDREN (EXODUS 13.11-15; NUMBERS 3.44-51) OR INDIVIDUALS (LEVITICUS 25.35-55). THEY COULD REDEEM PROPERTY WHICH HAD BEEN LOST (LEVITICUS 25.23-34), AND THEY COULD REDEEM THEMSELVES FROM A VOW OR TITHE WHICH PROVED TOO BURDENSOME TO BEAR (LEVITICUS 27.1-33). IN EACH OF THESE SITUATIONS, SOMEONE OR SOMETHING WAS BOUND IN SOME WAY UNTIL IT WAS RELEASED BY AN OUTSIDE SOURCE MEETING OR SATISFYING THE OBLIGATION SO THAT WHICH WAS BOUND COULD BE FREED.

THE NEW TESTAMENT BUILDS UPON THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF REDEMPTION AS FOUND IN THE MOSAIC LAW. HOWEVER, IT TURNS THE FOCUS TO PEOPLE WHO ARE BOUND BY THEIR SIN (HEBREWS 2.14-15). GOD OBTAINS THE RELEASE OF PEOPLE THROUGH THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS WHICH SATISFIES THE OBLIGATIONS WHICH SIN HAD PLACED UPON PEOPLE (1 CORINTHIANS 1.30; 6.20; 1 PETER 1.18-19; MATTHEW 20.28; MARK 10.45).

ONE MIGHT CONSIDER THIS THEME AND CONCLUDE THAT REDEMPTION INVOLVES GOD FIRST TEACHING PEOPLE OF THE NEED FOR RESCUE SO THAT THEY MIGHT HAVE A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING HIS MOVEMENT TO RESCUE PEOPLE. IN MANY WAYS, THIS PORTRAIT IS ACCURATE, BUT IT IS ALSO INCOMPLETE. THE CONCEPT OF REDEMPTION, THOUGH EXPLICITLY ABOUT RESCUING FROM OBLIGATION, ALSO INCLUDES THE IMPLIED CONCEPT OF RESCUING TO ANOTHER SITUATION; THAT IS, REDEMPTION IS ACTUALLY A PROCESS THAT MOVES SOMEONE OR SOMETHING FROM ONE STATE TO ANOTHER. THE STATE TO WHICH REDEMPTION MOVES A PERSON OR OBJECT IS GENERALLY UNDERSTOOD TO BE ITS FORMER OR TRUE STATE OF BEING. OFTEN IN REDEMPTION NARRATIVES, THE FORMER OR TRUE STATE IS UNDERSTOOD OR ASSUMED. THEREFORE, THE FOCUS IN THESE NARRATIVES FALLS UPON THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF REDEMPTION, RESCUING FROM.

WITH RESPECT TO PEOPLE, REDEMPTION INVOLVES GOD'S MOVEMENT TO RESCUE PEOPLE FROM THE OBLIGATION THEIR SIN HAS PLACED UPON THEM SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT EXPERIENCE LIFE AS GOD CREATED THEM TO LIVE. THIS FULLER PICTURE OF REDEMPTION BECOMES APPARENT WHEN ONE READS REDEMPTION TEXTS WITHIN THE LARGER NARRATIVE OF SCRIPTURE. AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL, SCRIPTURE TELLS

THE STORY OF HOW GOD CREATED, LOST, AND EVENTUALLY RESTORES HIS CREATION TO HIS ORIGINAL INTENTION. WHEN REDEMPTION IS DIVORCED FROM THIS LARGER STORY OF GOD IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT IS REDUCED TO THE SINGLE MOVEMENT OF REDEMPTION FROM, FAITH IS SIMPLE AND TRANSACTIONAL. ONCE GOD HAS "SAVED" PEOPLE FROM THEIR SIN THERE IS NOTHING MORE TO BE ACCOMPLISHED OR PURSUED IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER. HOWEVER, WHEN REDEMPTION IS KEPT WITHIN THE LARGER STORY OF GOD, GOD'S RESCUE OF PEOPLE FREES THEM TO MOVE BACK TO AND EXPERIENCE THE LIFE THEY WERE CREATED TO LIVE. IN THIS SENSE, FAITH IS A JOURNEY BACK TO ONE'S TRUE HOME AND REDEMPTION IS THE FIRST OF MANY STEPS.

The Text

EPHESIANS 1.15-23; 3.14-19

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS IS ACTUALLY A LETTER MEANT TO BE CIRCULATED AMONG THE CHURCHES OF ASIA MINOR. IN THE 2ND CENTURY, THESE CHURCHES WERE CENTRAL TO A MOVEMENT OFTEN REFERRED TO AS GNOSTICISM, AN APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY WHICH SEPARATES THE PHYSICAL FROM THE SPIRITUAL. THIS APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY WAS DECLARED TO BE HERETICAL BY THE CHURCH AS A WHOLE, WHICH THEN WROTE THE NICEAN CREED TO CODIFY ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN CONTRAST WITH GNOSTICISM. WHILE THIS THEOLOGICAL DEBATE TOOK PLACE ALMOST 100 YEARS AFTER PAUL, THE SEEDS OF THIS WAY OF THINKING WERE ALREADY BEGINNING TO SURFACE IN HIS LIFETIME. WE SEE PAUL ADDRESSING THEM IN EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS. IN EPHESIANS, PAUL ADDRESSES AN APPARENT DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK IN CHRIST (SPIRITUAL) AND THE WAY A BELIEVER LIVES HIS EVERYDAY LIFE (PHYSICAL). IN ORDER TO DO THIS, PAUL FIRST OUTLINES THE NATURE OF GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK THROUGH CHRIST (EPHESIANS 1-3) AND THEN EXPLAINS HOW THIS WORK FREES PEOPLE TO A NEW WAY OF LIFE (EPHESIANS 4-6). THIS KIND OF THEOLOGICAL/PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK WHERE A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION IS LAID AND THEN UPON THIS FOUNDATION A PRACTICAL EXHORTATION IS BASED IS TYPICAL TO MOST OF PAUL'S LETTERS. HOWEVER, IT WOULD BE MISTAKEN TO CONCLUDE THAT IN PAUL'S THEOLOGICAL SECTIONS THERE ARE NO PRACTICAL EXHORTATIONS OR NO THEOLOGICAL TRUTHS IN THE PRACTICAL EXHORTATIONS. SUCH IS THE CASE IN THE PRAYERS WHICH BRACKET THE THEOLOGICAL SECTION OF EPHESIANS.

IN EPHESIANS, PAUL BEGINS AND ENDS HIS THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION OF GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK IN CHRIST WITH PRAYERS ON BEHALF OF THE EPHESIAN AND OTHER CONGREGATIONS OF ASIA MINOR. THESE TWO PRAYERS ARE SIMILAR IN CONTENT AND FOCUS, WITH THE SECOND PRAYER BUILDING UPON THE LATTER. BOTH OF THESE PRAYERS INVOLVE THE BELIEVERS IN ASIA MINOR MOVING TO A GREATER EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN THE DEEPEST PARTS OF THEIR PERSON. BY BRACKETING THE THEOLOGICAL SECTION WITH THESE PRAYERS, PAUL CREATES SOMETHING

of a "literary sandwich." This is an important literary technique in the ancient world, a technique by which an author gave context for what lay between the bracketing sections. In other words, the theme or content of what bookended the discussion in the middle told the reader what to take away from what lay in the middle. In Paul's letter, what lies in the middle is a discussion of God's redemptive work in Christ, his movement to rescue people from their sin. However, Paul has bookended this theological discussion with prayers for believers to move to a greater experience of God. This bracketing therefore implies that God's purposes in redemption lie in people experiencing him in a greater way in the deepest parts of their being. Here Paul provides the fullest picture of redemption by locating it within the larger story of God. God moved to rescue people from sin so that they might move to an experience of him at the center of their being. This is the life God intended from the beginning, the life to which he is moving all of creation.

In his first prayer (Ephesians 1.15-23), Paul begins by noting he has heard about the faith and love of the believers in Asia Minor. He gives thanks for them and wants them to know that he is praying for them on a consistent basis. The general content of his prayer involves a request that God the Father would give the believers the Holy Spirit of wisdom and revelation so they might know God better. This is the guiding request of the entire prayer and is therefore instructive in understanding the prayer. What is important to first note is that Paul is asking for God to give the Holy Spirit to the believers, something he has already done (Ephesians 1.13-14). This implies that there is more of the Spirit to be had. Second, he asks that the Holy Spirit interact in such a way that he gives wisdom and revelation. In Scripture, wisdom is an understanding of God's desires for people and revelation is an understanding of God's actions. Simply put, Paul prays that the Holy Spirit would reveal more of the life God intends people to live and more of the life God himself is living. Paul asks for this so that the believers might know God (in an experiential way) better. This implies that God's redemptive work is about moving to an ever-increasing possession and experiential knowledge of God.

Paul expands upon this request by asking that the eyes of the heart would be enlightened. In the ancient world, the heart was the seat of decision making in a person, the command and control center of one's life. Paul asks that this deepest part of a person be opened in such a way that they grasp the hope (future) to which God is moving people, that God

would possess people. And, he asks that this deep part be opened so they grasp the resurrection and restoration power of God which is in them. These prayers build upon the request for wisdom and revelation as they focus on what God is doing and what a person is to do (heart). What is important to grasp in this prayer is Paul assumes that the believers do not yet know God as deeply as they can. They do not yet know what he intends for them or who they are. They are meant to possess and be possessed by God, to experience him in their person and working out through their person.

Paul builds upon this prayer in his second prayer (Ephesians 3.14-19). He notes that he is praying for the believers so that God would, by the Holy Spirit, strengthen the inner person of the believers so that Christ could dwell in their hearts in faith. Simply put, Paul prays that the Spirit would do a work so that Jesus himself might take up residence within and control of a person. This implies that this is not now the case in their lives. Further, he prays that in the same way that their faith was rooted in the love of God—Paul probably is thinking of redemption and the response to such as acts of love—they might have power by the Holy Spirit to understand and experience the vastness of God's love. In the experiencing and presence of this love the believers would be full with all of God. Once more we encounter the idea that the believers have not yet experienced all of God or their intended relationship with him. There is more to life, a more made possible by redemption. God's redemptive work in Jesus freed people to move to this more which includes the experience of all of God's person at the center of their being with this working out experientially in their body.

Clearly, Paul envisions redemption to be the beginning step of a growing relationship with and experience of God, something which involves God dwelling within and controlling a person and the realities of such working out in one's body. How the believers go about moving into this "more" made available to them involves prayer. It is the work of God, but a work which is done as Paul reaches out to God in prayer. Thus, prayer is the means by which Paul pursues a greater experience of God on behalf of the believers. The letter may conclude with an exhortation for the believers in Asia Minor to pray in this same vein as Paul concludes with the exhortation to be strong in the Lord and in his power. This seems to echo the two previous prayers. After urging them to take up what God has given them, he returns to the idea of being strong in the Lord and urges them to pray in the Holy Spirit (connected and guided by), which is the means by which Paul is praying for them.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

PRAYER IS IMPORTANT. AT LEAST THAT IS WHAT I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TAUGHT. HOWEVER, NO ONE EVER EXPLAINED TO ME WHAT WAS SO IMPORTANT ABOUT IT. MOST OF THE TIME, PRAYER WAS EXPLAINED AS THE WAY TO GET THINGS FROM GOD. THERE IS TRUTH TO THIS, BUT IN MY MIND, THIS JUST DIDN'T RISE TO THE LEVEL OF "IMPORTANT" BECAUSE GOD ALREADY KNOWS WHAT I NEED AND HAS PROMISED TO PROVIDE IT. SO, WHY IS PRAYER IMPORTANT? I AM COMING TO UNDERSTAND THAT PRAYER IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT IS THE MEANS BY WHICH I GET GOD. I KNOW THAT SOUNDS STRANGE. LET ME ADD A BIT MORE STRANGE TO THE MIX. THERE IS MORE OF GOD WE ARE MEANT TO EXPERIENCE. FEELING THE WEIRD YET?

I WAS ALWAYS TAUGHT THAT WHEN I BEGAN THE JOURNEY OF FAITH, I GOT ALL OF GOD I WOULD EVER GET. I GOT THE HOLY SPIRIT AND I NEEDED TO LEARN TO LOVE HIM AND LISTEN TO HIM. I AM BEGINNING TO THINK THAT IS NOT REALLY THE CASE, THE FIRST PART THAT IS. I DON'T THINK WE GET ALL OF GOD. WE MOST CERTAINLY GET GOD, BUT WE DON'T GET ALL OF HIM. THERE IS MORE OF GOD TO BE HAD, MORE WE ARE MEANT TO HAVE. I CAN'T GET AROUND THIS TRUTH AS I READ THE PRAYERS OF PAUL IN EPHESIANS, PRAYERS WHICH INVOLVE REQUESTS FOR A GREATER EXPERIENCE OF GOD, A GREATER POSSESSION OF GOD AND BY GOD IN THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY ON THE FAITH JOURNEY. IN PAUL'S MIND THERE IS MORE OF GOD TO BE HAD, MORE OF THE GOD THEY ALREADY HAVE. THERE IS A LIFE OUT THERE, A LIFE MARKED WITH AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S POWER AND PRESENCE I CANNOT IMAGINE, BUT IT IS REAL AND I AM MEANT TO LIVE IT. IT IS A LIFE WHERE I AM TREASURED AND LOVED AND NEVER ALONE. THAT LIFE IS OUT THERE. HOW I EVER MISSED THIS IS ANOTHER STORY, ONE WHICH HAS TO DO WITH AN INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF REDEMPTION. WE'LL SAVE THAT FOR ANOTHER TIME. LET'S STAY WITH THE IDEA OF THAT LIFE THAT IS THERE. IF IT IS THERE, AND I BELIEVE IT IS, THEN THE QUESTION IS HOW DO WE MOVE TO IT? HOW DO WE GET MORE OF GOD, MORE EXPERIENCE OF HIM, MORE OF THE LIFE HE INTENDS FOR US? IF WE FOLLOW PAUL'S LEAD, WE DO IT THROUGH PRAYER. SOMEHOW PRAYER INVITES GOD TO DO A WORK INSIDE US, A WORK WHICH MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO EXPERIENCE THIS "MORE" LIFE WHICH IS OUT THERE FOR US. WHEN I VIEW PRAYER THROUGH THIS LENS I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING MORE IMPORTANT FOR ME TO DO THAN TO ENGAGE IN PRAYER, BECAUSE IT IS PRAYER WHICH LEADS ME TO THAT "MORE" LIFE. I GUESS THE QUESTION NOW IS, WHAT DOES THIS KIND OF PRAYING LOOK LIKE?

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

PRAYER IS IMPORTANT. IT IS THE MEANS BY WHICH WE MOVE FROM A SELF-CENTERED LIFE TO A GOD-CENTERED LIFE. PRAYER IS THE MEANS BY WHICH WE ADDRESS OUR MOST CENTRAL ISSUE, OUR IDOLATRY OF SELF. WE PLAY GOD AND IT IS KILLING US. HOWEVER, JESUS HAS FREED US FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR DABBING WITH DIVINITY, BUT FOR WHAT HAVE WE BEEN FREED? WE ARE FREE FROM CONSEQUENCES, AND WE ARE FREE TO LIVE THE LIFE WE WERE INTENDED TO LIVE. WE WERE MEANT TO LIVE WITH GOD AT THE CENTER. WE WERE MEANT TO LIVE WITH THE FULL EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S PRESENCE AND POWER. THIS IS THE LIFE FOR WHICH WE WERE CREATED, THE LIFE FOR WHICH WE WERE FREED. WE MOVE TO THIS LIFE THROUGH PRAYER. PRAYER INVITES THE SPIRIT TO DO THE DEEP INTERNAL WORK WHICH MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO LIVE THE LIFE FOR WHICH WE WERE CREATED. IT OPENS US TO THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD AT THE CENTER, A GROWING EXPERIENCE OF GOD AT THE CENTER AS MORE AND MORE OF GOD TAKES UP RESIDENCE IN US IN AND THROUGH OUR PRAYERS. PRAYER IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE PRAYER LEADS US TO THE LIFE FOR WHICH WE WERE CREATED. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO PRAY IN THIS WAY? PAUL GIVES US SOME INSIGHT IN THE PRAYERS HE PENNED FOR THE EPHESIANS AND BELIEVERS OF ASIA MINOR (EPHESIANS 1.15-23; 3.14-19). THIS WEEK, I ENCOURAGE YOU TO USE ONE OR BOTH OF THESE PRAYERS AS A GUIDE OR FRAMEWORK FOR YOUR OWN PRAYER. PERHAPS YOU CAN "RIFF" ON THESE PRAYERS USING THEM AS A STARTING POINT. OR MAYBE, YOU CAN PERSONALIZE THEM AND MAKE THEM YOUR OWN BY INSERTING YOURSELF INTO THE REQUESTS. WHATEVER FORM THIS TAKES, SPEND TIME EACH DAY ASKING FOR MORE OF GOD BECAUSE IT IS IN GETTING GOD THAT WE GET LIFE, REAL LIFE.



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