New Year, Old Prayers

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*As we prepare to flip the calendar over to 2023, we are sharing a New Year's Engage God Daily from the archivesto give you something to reflect on as you begin the new year.*

We’re coming up on the New Year, and a lot of us have been looking forward to a fresh start in a new year. Yet, deep down we know that there isn’t a magical switch that will get flipped at midnight on December 31. We’re looking ahead to the New Year with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. What will the next twelve months bring for each of us, and for our family, friends, community, and nation? What changes and challenges will come? How will we see God work?

While we can’t predict the future, we can begin the new year determined to take every step with Jesus. Come what may, we can rest in the Father’s love, and allow the Spirit to guide us.

I know of no better way to wrap up one year and prepare for the new than by praying four very old prayers. The apostle Paul traveled through many cities in the ancient world delivering the good news of what God had accomplished through Jesus. After he planted a church and moved on, he still prayed intensely for its people. Paul wanted to see that gospel sink down into people’s hearts and minds, transforming their thinking and motivating their actions. He prayed that God would make it so. In his letters, he teaches, warns, and encourages these new believers, but he also records his prayers.

We should want the same things Paul wanted for ourselves and our church — to see the world as God sees it and act accordingly. But we won’t get there without prayer. So this week, let’s study four life-changing prayers that Paul prayed for his churches, and pray them for ourselves and each other as we look forward to the new year.

Day 1: Ephesians 1:17–19

For better or worse, the 1990’s saw the birth of reality TV. Late in the decade, Jim Carrey starred in *The Truman Show*, a movie that critiques the idea of a life lived completely in front of the camera. Carrey plays Truman Burbank, a man who didn’t know that from birth, his entire life was a TV show. Every person he comes in contact with is an actor and his entire town is a set. His parents, friends, and even his wife are playing roles. When he begins to figure out the truth, he tries to escape the massive dome that encapsulates his world, and eventually finds his way to the edge of the set and a hidden exit door. The director of the show, from high up in a control room, speaks to Truman over a massive intercom and tries to convince him to stay and continue being the star of his own show. Truman declines, takes a final bow, and walks through the door and into the real world.

Truman had been living a lie. Everything he thought was reality, turned out to be an elaborate fabrication. Once he knows the truth, he has to live according to it. He can’t go back to the life he’d known. Having been enlightened — he has to move forward in that knowledge.

In some way, the same is true for Christians. Once our eyes are opened to the reality of the gospel, how can we continue in a lie? We are not the star of our own shows; but have a much bigger and more important part to play in the Kingdom of God. Once we know that our life has eternal significance to God, who created and redeemed us out of his vast love, it changes everything.

Paul wanted all the first century churches he planted to live according to the truth of the gospel. In the first few verses of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul, in praise to God, reminds his readers of the astounding grace God has shown by choosing, redeeming, forgiving, and adopting them. He retells the story of what God has accomplished through Jesus. Then, he shares the way he has been praying for them.

Ephesians 1:17–19a

17I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you spiritual wisdom and revelation in your growing knowledge of him — 18since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened — so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe….

Look back at the verses above for three significant words that help us see the world as Paul sees it. “Since” and “So that.”

Since…

*Since* the eyes of our hearts have been enlightened we can receive spiritual wisdom and knowledge of God. Have you ever wondered why some people can know *about* Jesus but not know him at all? The knowledge of who he is and what he has done for them has not “opened the eyes of their heart.” The Holy Spirit hasn’t revealed Jesus to their innermost being so that they can see him for who he really is. For Paul it was impossible for people to see the glory of the gospel unless they were taught by God. But more than that, Paul understands that knowledge of God is life itself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But what should we do after we’ve been enlightened and understand how our individual story fits into God’s eternal one? We pray for more wisdom and revelation. We pray that we can know God more deeply and be led by him more fully. We pray that we will see our lives, relationships, vocation, and mission on this earth from his perspective.

So that…

The “so that” helps us answer the question “why?” Why is Paul praying that the Ephesian church gains more spiritual wisdom and revelation? Because he knows that increased knowledge is not an end to itself — it is only the beginning.

First of all, we have hope because we have been chosen by God in Christ “not for our own sake, but for the sake of what God wants to accomplish through us.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Secondly, we live in light of the wealth of the inheritance we are receiving as sons and daughters of the King. Finally, we come to recognize God’s incomparable power in the world and avail ourselves to that which the Spirit provides to defeat sin in our lives and reach out to others with the supernatural love of Christ.

Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians and for us is that our knowledge of God would grow and deepen *so that* we know the amazing difference Jesus makes in our lives and in this world. Let’s join in him in that prayer. May the truth of God be the foundation upon which we form every thought, feel every emotion and plan every action *so that* our lives would be different in the New Year.

Look back at the three “so that’s” Paul lists in verses 18–19. What difference could a deep down, soul-knowledge of those realities make in how you approach the new year?

How does (or would) engaging God individually on a daily basis through prayer and his Word help you gain a deeper understanding of God and his ways?

Pray Ephesians 1:17­–19 for yourself and at least one other person today.

Day Two: Ephesians 3:14–19

Some of us dive into a new year with optimism. “Out with the old, in with the new.” Some of us, depending on our personality and circumstances, are a bit more nervous about the future. We spend sleepless nights worrying about our jobs, our health or the health of loved ones, and the choices our family and friends are making. Situations in the world cause us anxiety. What will the new year bring?

Worry and anxiety find their root in fear. Fear of losing what we have, of not getting what we think we deserve. Fear that the coming weeks and months will bring more pain than prosperity. Fear can squeeze out faith and causes us to doubt the goodness, provision, and promises of our Father. Because it causes us to be so inwardly focused, a life dominated by fear cannot be effectively lived for God.

Even if you wouldn’t consider yourself a worry-wart, you probably have times when your mind is troubled by an anxiety. So, what can we do? The future is as uncertain as it is unknown, and we all know bad things still happen to good people. What can we use to combat fear?

**Love**. In particular, God’s love and the comfort, peace, assurance, and security it provides for all who trust in Christ. We need Jesus to chase away the fear of the future and envelop us in enduring, faithful, and all-satisfying love.

In Day One we looked at Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1. Today we will turn to the prayer he records later in the book. In Ephesians 3 Paul asks God to root his children in the vastness of his love.

Ephesians 3:16–19

16I pray that according to the wealth of his glory [the Father] may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner person, 17that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, so that, because you have been rooted and grounded in love, 18you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19and thus to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Notice the “so that’s” in this prayer. What results does Paul pray to see?

So that…

In between the prayer we read yesterday in Ephesians 1 and the prayer we just read in Ephesians 3, Paul has laid out for his readers several breathtaking truths that define the our relationship with God in Christ. He speaks to us as individuals and as the church. Individually, Paul tells us, God has raised people who were dead in their sins to life through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and now all believers can have access to God. Corporately, God has unified Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ so that his wisdom in all its rich diversity can be lived out through the church.

Paul prays for strength and power from the Holy Spirit. Like the steel girders that hold a sky scraper together, we need force and fortitude to live out our salvation and give Christ his rightful place to dwell in our hearts. It is by the Spirit’s power that we also gain the strength to comprehend, alongside all our brothers and sisters in Christ, the vastness of his love.

We hear all the time that God loves us. We teach children to sing “Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.” But do we believe it? Do we allow the love of Christ to banish insecurity, worry, anxiety, and envy? Are we so immersed in his love that we know peace? Come what may in 2023, will we be able to stand firm knowing that our faithful Savior loves us? That he died for us, will never forsake us, and guarantees our eternal future will be spent in his divine presence?

If we are going to be filled with all the fullness of God, we need to. All the empty places within us that cry out for satisfaction can be filled by God, with God. But God’s fullness isn’t given only to satisfy ourselves. We need to pray that our glorious and merciful Father would allow us to grasp his love, power, strength, that and goodness so we can share them. We need to be full so we can overflow into the lives of others.

Of course, those who are starving and parched are too fixated on their own lack to be any good to another. Like the flight attendants say, we have to put the oxygen mask on ourselves first so we can help those around us. So will you pray to more deeply inhale the love of God as you start out the New Year so that you can extend yourself to those around you?

What difference would it make in how you thought, felt, and acted if you had a deeper understanding of God’s love?

What would it mean for you to be “filled with the fullness of God”?

Consider writing a prayer in your own words based on Ephesians 3:14–19 and praying it for yourself and others throughout the day.

Pray Ephesians 3:16–19 today for yourself and someone else.

Day 3 | Philippians 1:9–11

How do you feel about New Year’s resolutions? If you are like a lot of people (myself included) you often begin January with a firm goal and great determination, but by Valentine’s Day you’ve lost your resolve and are back to your old, bad habits. December rolls around again and you find yourself needing to make the same resolution you made last year. Frustrating, even disheartening, isn’t it?

The Bible has good news for people like us. We are not working alone to make ourselves into better people. Having rescued us from the penalty of sin, God will one day complete the job by rescuing us from its effects. As Paul writes to his beloved church in Philippi, “For I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

But that doesn’t mean we sit passively waiting for some blast of magic that will remove all our temptation to sin. We fight for the faith to trust God and desire him more than the sinful habits we resolve to break every January. We pray for ourselves and for each other, and the prayer Paul prays for the Philippians gives us an excellent model.

Philippians 1:9–11

**9**And I pray this, that your love may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight **10**so that you can decide what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, **11**filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

Where do you find the “so that” in this prayer?

So that…

Yesterday we saw how Spirit enabled strength can give us the power to comprehend the love of God at a deep level. Today we are going to talk about love along the horizontal plane, between fellow Christians.

Our individualistic society has encouraged us to view our spirituality as a private thing. But the Bible makes it clear that in Christianity, community is essential. The love that we share in and through each other is a powerful force in our spiritual growth. Paul prays that the love the Philippian church shares will “abound more and more.” The Greek word translated “abound” means “to be in excess.” Paul is not just talking about a casual fondness between acquaintances, but about excessive, abundant, sacrificial love that mirrors what God gives to us in Christ. That’s what we should pray will be present among believers.

As Paul describes it, the outgrowth of this love is not something we might usually consider. Think about how you’d finish the prayer “And I pray this, that your love may abound even more and more in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” What would you put in the blank? Unity? Mutual sacrifice? Dedication to the mission of Christ? All of those are characteristics of the church the apostle talks about elsewhere. But here we see him asking God to give this beloved church **knowledge** and **insight**.

Our culture has trained us to think of love as a feeling, and often an irrational one. We separate the heart from the head as if our emotions aren’t worthy influencers of our thinking and vice versa. But here Paul connects the two — genuine, Christian love and wise, thoughtful perception.

In verse 10 comes two words that we have seen before in other prayers, the big “so that.” What result is Paul praying will come from this abundance of love, knowledge and insight? Discernment and lives that are well lived for God’s glory. Personally, wise, godly discernment is something I need daily. How about you?

If we want 2023 to be a year in which we live out God’s will, bless others, and make much of Jesus in the world, we need discernment in our day to day lives. And that is precisely Paul’s point. For us to demonstrate the sincerity of our faith and be blameless in our actions, we need to live according to the knowledge of God and in a community that relies on and shares the love of Christ.

Our relationship with Jesus fills us with the “fruit of righteousness” by the Spirit. It also enables us to bring glory to God. And that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Don’t you want your life to be all about Jesus? This week so far we’ve seen that incomparably great power, the filled-to-the-brim goodness of God and the excessive love of a Christ-centered community all come from a greater and deeper knowledge of God.

If only we would earnestly pray Philippians 1:6–9 for ourselves and our church. Can you imagine what our faith community could look like if it abounded in love? What would it mean for us to have greater spiritual insight and knowledge leading to greater discernment? What if more Christians lived in ways that truly reflected the righteousness of Christ? What kind of impact could we have for the good of other people? Starting today, let’s pray this prayer and see!

In what areas of your life do you most need discernment in the new year? What tough choices are you having to make that need God’s wisdom?

What could greater love and discernment by the people of Christ Fellowship mean for the church and for our impact in the community?

Pray Philippians 1:9–11 today for yourself and someone else.

Day 4| Colossians 1:9–14

It took less than three hours for me to realize that I was completely out of my depth. As soon as the highly qualified nurse left the room and I was alone with my tiny, sweet, baby girl, a wave of panic swept over me. I had read all the books, gone to the classes, talked to other parents, but I still felt completely ill-equipped to take care of the most precious and amazing thing I had ever seen. But it wasn’t just the thought of caring for a helpless infant, which is intimidating enough, but within seconds my mind ran through all the challenges I knew were coming, from the toddler tantrums to the teenage drama to the possibility of problems I didn’t even know existed. I knew I was going to need Jesus, and a lot of him, to do this parenting thing. And I wasn’t wrong.

Colossians 1:9-12, the prayer we are going to look out today, became my “go-to” prayer. It’s not directly about parenting, but about asking for greater understanding of God and his will — something every parent needs. It is a prayer that I pray often and the hope it provides sustains me. No matter what you need wisdom for in your life, Paul’s prayer for the Colossians is something that is worth praying as we prepare for whatever lies ahead in 2021.

Colossians 1:9–14

**9**For this reason we also, from the day we heard about you, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, **10**so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please him in all respects—bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, **11**being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness, joyfully **12**giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light. **13**He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves, **14**in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Notice all the results following the “so that” in verse 9.

So that…

We all want to know what God’s will is for our lives. What career should we pursue? Should we get married and if so, to whom? Should we have children? Where should we live? Should we buy a house? How should we serve in our local church? How should we support God’s work around the world?

Paul doesn’t give us a “Step by Step Program for Determining God’s Will” (even if that’s what we’d like when we have a difficult choice to make), but these verses do indicate that spiritual wisdom is available through prayer. The purpose of that wisdom is to live a life that is fully pleasing to God and that bears good fruit.

All these good ends that result from knowing and living God’s will require strength and power from the Holy Spirit. Our lives will need to display a good deal of patient endurance as we follow Christ, and the Holy Spirit is ready and willing to provide it. God’s power has already delivered us from the Kingdom of darkness and into Christ’s Kingdom. That same power will enable us to live according to God’s design.

When I was a young believer wrestling with making decisions, a mentor encouraged me to focus less on trying to figure out God’s will and more on knowing God. She was right. As we grow in intimacy with Christ through prayer, his Word, worship, fellowship with other believers, and serving his Kingdom, we will find that our perceptions will change. We will grow to see the world more and more as God sees it and desire to see his love, wisdom, and justice permeate every corner. When we live out our gratitude to God who has rescued, redeemed, and forgiven us, we will want our lives to reflect his goodness and glory. Decisions that we make based in the knowledge of our Lord will please him and point others to him.

Paul paints a vivid image for us when he compares the Kingdom of Jesus with the dominion of darkness. Does that resonate with you as you look out at the world? So many people are in the dark, stumbling around, arms extended, fingers grasping, wanting to find the way to joy, peace, acceptance, justice, and hope. As Christians we can point them to the light. We who have been rescued know the way to a better Kingdom. And his name is Jesus.

What would it look like for you to “live worthily for the Lord and please him in every respect” (verse 10)? Is there something that comes to mind right now that you know will have to change?

How are you going to need wisdom, strength and power from the Holy Spirit to make this change?

How will remembering how God delivered you “from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves,in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (verse 13–14) motivate you to make these changes?

Pray Colossians 1:9–14 today for yourself and someone else.

Day 5 | So That

Reflect

Look back at the four prayers we looked at this week.

* [Ephesians 1:17–19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+1%3A17%E2%80%9319&version=NIV)
* [Ephesians 3:14–19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+3%3A14%E2%80%9319&version=NIV)
* [Philippians 1:9–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+1%3A9%E2%80%9311&version=NIV)
* [Colossians 1:9–14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Colossians+1%3A9%E2%80%9314&version=NIV)

Which one resonated most with you? Why?

Pray that prayer out loud today and consider memorizing it. Write it on a notecard and put it on your bathroom mirror, take a picture of the text and set it as the lock screen on your phone, record yourself reading it and play it in the car as you drive, or whatever method works for you. Make Paul’s prayer your prayer as you begin 2021.

So That

There is no magic in repeating the prayers of Paul like an incantation. God cannot be compared to a cosmic wizard who zaps unsuspecting frogs and turns them into princes. Wishful thinking will not make us Christlike. But neither are Paul’s prayers just motivational mantras to inspire us to do better. We cannot become more like Christ with simple human effort.

Prayer is so much more than either one of these misconceptions. It is an acknowledgement that the key to living the Christian life is found in God himself. That it’s a relationship with the Creator who designed us out of love. That the one who is powerful enough to raise Jesus from the dead has the power to shape us into the image of his son, making us fit citizens for his Kingdom, and children who bring honor to their Father. Prayer reminds us of who we are and who we are becoming. It invites the Holy Spirit to complete the work begun in us at the moment of salvation.

Every one of these prayers saw Paul asking God for knowledge and power, but never as an end unto themselves. There is always a “so that” that reminds us that the insight and wisdom we receive from God are fuel to propel our lives forward. A greater and deeper comprehension of God and his ways, infused with power from the Holy Spirit will transform us.

*So that* we become people of prayer.

*So that* we can make God-honoring decisions and wise choices in our lives.

*So that* we will have the strength, patience, and endurance to live for Christ and resist temptation.

*So that* we live with an eternal perspective, knowing the pain and struggle of this life will pale in comparison to our future life with Christ.

*So that* we would abound in love toward our brothers and sisters in Christ and find unity within our church body to live out the mission of Jesus.

*So that* we stop buying into the lie that we are the stars of our own show, and that only our needs and wants, and the needs and wants of our family are worth pursuing.

*So that* when the news of the day finds its way to us, either through a Facebook post or the Dallas Morning News, we see it through a gospel lens with a heart that longs for justice, peace, and love and is willing to act sacrificially on behalf of another.

*So that* our new year will be one in which we were more often moved to action to help a world full of people that need the tangible love of God.

Pray

Pray over the following questions. Consider journaling your responses.

* Take some time to reflect back on 2022. What has God shown you over the past 12 months? How have you grown in your knowledge of him?
* What “so that” could you add to this list for 2023? What difference could a greater understanding of God and his ways do for you in the new year?
* Let’s all imitate Paul and pray for our church family. Pray that we will all grow in our knowledge of God and may our lives reflect that knowledge.

Happy New Year!

1. Foulkes, F. (1989). *Ephesians: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 10, p. 68). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. N.T. Wright. (2004) *Paul for Everyone: Prison Letters* (2nd ed., p. 8) Westminster*:* John Knox Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)