

Need to Know (Ephesians 1:15-23)

A few weeks ago, while on vacation, I took one of our boys fly-fishing on the Yakima River. This is one of the premier rivers in our area for fly-fishing. I've been on it several times, but there's been lots of time between my excursions there. I'm no expert when it comes to fly-fishing. Basically, I love the places where fish live and enjoy being out there with them, even though most of the time they don't know I'm there. More likely I haven't always known where they are. No matter—I enjoy the experience, and a catch is a bonus. But I wanted to make sure this trip was successful, so I hired a guide to take us down the river. One of the primary benefits of this is that the guide does all the rowing so that we can just fish. But the other important piece to this is that the guide knows the river because he's been on it several times a week for nine years. Apart from his labor in rowing, we hired him for his knowledge, and that paid off—we stopped counting how many fish we were catching—it was a great day.

But here's what I want to stress about this. Our guide knew the river well enough to know where we should cast, how to let the line drift, how deep to let the fly sink, and what we should expect when the fish bit. There were stretches of the river where the guide told us to reel in the line and relax because that particular area wasn't optimal for a catch. There were other areas where an initial pass didn't yield a catch, but should have, so he rowed us back up the river to do that section over—and more often than not, we were successful on the second pass. Honestly, much of what we fished looked pretty much the same to me in terms of what was happening on the surface. The difference was that he knew what was below the surface based on where we were by the landmarks we were passing. He knew that river and by relying on him, we enjoyed catching fish which was the point of our being there in the first place.

As our day progressed, I found myself paying attention to where we were on the river so that I could remember at least some of that for the next time we ventured down that river on our own. I tried to see what the guide saw in terms of the river flow and how he positioned us on the river for the best opportunities for a catch. I paid attention to the way he set up our rods for the section ahead, and tried to remember the areas we should just drift past and enjoy the scenery. I tried to think like the guide so that I could duplicate that experience in the future; the point being that if I wanted to gain the benefit of his wisdom, I had to pay attention to what caught his attention.

Something like this meets us in our passage for today. In writing to the Christ followers in Ephesus—folks he knew fairly well—Paul was acting like our guide on the river, leading them, and us, by example, in how we navigate the circumstances of our life to gain the benefit God intends for us in Christ. And this happens as Paul described his prayer for them, and us. You'll recall that Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter—separated from a community of believers with which he had spent three years. Deprived of their company, he nevertheless remained connected to them through prayer, recalling their strong faith and love for one another. Though he wasn't with them personally, he was able to renew his connection to them by giving thanks for them as he prayed.

Before we look any further at this, I want to pause for a moment to say that as we read a passage like this, our goal here isn't simply to understand the content of Paul's prayer, as helpful as this is. An equally important component is for us to learn from Paul's example—what does his life teach us? What do we learn about following Jesus from the way Paul did this? Paul began his letter to the believers by recounting the great truths of faith that firmly established them as belonging to God through Christ, but before he expanded on these ideas, his recollection of these convictions led him into prayer—a prayer of thanks for what God had done in them and how that positioned them for whatever lay ahead of them. And he did this while imperiled in his own moment of crisis. The example Paul set points us in the same direction—that our primary response to living the life God made possible for us in Christ is to pray even, and perhaps especially in the crises we experience in life.

Surprisingly, this isn't always our response as Christ followers. Or when we do think along these lines, we have a tendency to think of it as something passive—of course we should pray, but more importantly, we think, what should we do? Sadly, as Christ followers, we often

mirror the world's approach to prayer. Recently, as major unrest has surfaced in our city centers, our newsfeeds have carried a new mantra that says something along the lines of we want more in response to these issues than just thoughts and prayers. The gist of this meaning that thoughts and prayers are essentially useless—something must be done. And that may well be how the world thinks of prayer, but friends, this is what Christ followers do—this is what makes us different in the world—this is a major feature we bring to the table, because the world, by and large, doesn't pray in response to issues in life. The world looks to itself to solve the problems it creates. Heaven help the world if believers mirror the world's thought when it comes to prayer. Prayer is what we do because of what we know to be true about the state of the world and who is ultimately in charge. Before we learn anything of what Paul prays, learn from Paul to pray as the first act of those who belong to God through Jesus Christ.

Moving on from his example to pray, what was the content of Paul's prayer for them and for us? We have time to look at just one feature of this, but it is the heart of Paul's concern. Listen to how Eugene Peterson put it in the Message: "I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally..." The NIV similarly frames it asking that "you may know him better." To know God fully is the heart of the prayer, and this feature we do well to adopt. Regardless of our particular circumstances, the goal of our life, the point of our life is to know God personally, to know God better.

Imagine how our lives might change were we to follow Paul's lead and pray to know God better? This idea didn't originate with Paul—it came from Jesus himself as recorded in his prayer from John 17:3—"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." To know God through Jesus is the basis of the life we've been given in Christ. Growing in that life depends on knowing God better. And this knowledge isn't just intellectual grasp—to know more about God, but to know God first-hand, as Peterson intimates: to make us intelligent and discerning in knowing him better. It is experiential, to grasp the presence of God, the essence of God, to know the power of God at work in us developing our perspective to see what God sees, in the same way I sought to see how our fishing guide saw the river, to see God moving in our historical moment, and to see ourselves moving with God in the challenges of our world.

This is what God desires for us, for as we know God better, we more fully grasp how to respond to whatever is before us, for we understand what God is after, we know God's heart in the moment, we follow the lead of God's Spirit to tap into the resources of God as we discern outcomes consistent with God's will. Again as Peterson represented it: "your eyes are focused and clear so that you can see exactly what it is God is calling you to do," and in that, "grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians."

So as you pray in this season of challenge, seek to know how God is using this moment to deepen your personal knowledge of God. How has the absence of some aspects of your life served to improve your awareness of God? Perhaps you've lived a life of distraction that has dulled your senses to God's life alive in you. Perhaps you've focused more on what serves you rather than on how you serve. Perhaps you've given more attention to the perks of life rather than its substance. Perhaps you've discovered that your knowledge of God has done little to draw you near to God, to the place where you truly know God personally. You've, perhaps, relied on the knowledge of what others have experienced with God rather than what you yourself have. Perhaps now is the time to put pretense aside and to earnestly seek God for who God is rather than for what God does. And perhaps this begins today by simply praying, "God I want to know you as fully as is possible for me to do—lead me to that place."

One final note—we've all been experiencing the loss of fellowship with sisters and brothers in Christ to some degree because of the present circumstances. But just as Paul stayed connected to his friends in Ephesus through prayer, you can stay connected to each other by praying for one another in the same way Paul prayed while isolated. Pray for those you know in our congregation by name asking that the God of our Master of Jesus Christ, the God of glory would make them intelligent and discerning in knowing God personally, that their eyes would be focused and clear, so that they can see exactly what it is that God is calling

them to do, that they might grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life God has for Christ followers—oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength! Imagine our life together as we pray like this for each other! AMEN