
Praying that They May Be

Ephesians 3:14-21

Introduction As we draw near to the end of our series on prayer over these months (there is only one more following tonight), let us consider briefly again, what our purpose in studying the prayers of the Bible has been: As D.A. Carson has put it, our purpose in studying prayer is, “That we might learn afresh what to pray for, what arguments to use, what themes on which to focus, what passion is seemly, how these prayers fit into a larger Christian vision, and how to maintain the centrality of God himself in our praying.”¹ That is why we have taken these many months to think and study carefully with you about the topic of prayer.

There is too much mindless, heartless, directionless prayer in our lives. **Mindless:** We often simply repeat the prayers of those we’ve heard over the years. This is by no means always bad, but some times it is very bad. In doing so we may disengage our thinking organ and simply let the oft-repeated words tumble from our lips much like the telemarketer who reads from a script – doing his or her job. It is not in conscience recognition of our great God or our great need that we pray. There is no mental apprehension of Christ’s glorious work in redemption. In fact, some of us can actually speak aloud in “prayer” and simultaneously think of something else all together. We say words, but they may mean as much to the family dog as they do to God

Heartless: Our hearts can be just as disengaged as our minds. There is no longing in our prayers for our home of heaven. There is no guilt and pain in our prayers in the confession of our black and shameful sins. There is no despair in consideration of the suffering in the world. There is no earnestness in our wrestling as we intercede for brother or sister. There is no outrage in our consideration of the wicked and their deeds. There is no frustration or anticipation in our requests for godward growth and maturation. And on balance, there is no genuine relief in our request for forgiveness. There is no joy in our reflections on redemption. There is no deep-rooted peace comforting our every sinew in our recognition of a sovereign and good God. There is no lingering pleasure in meditation on Christ’s perfect and completed work. If there is any doubt in your mind that prayer should be an activity that engages your emotions as well as your mind, consider the prayers of the Psalmists, Christ, and then Paul. You will find many examples of praying that engages much more than our vocal cords.

Directionless: How often I wander aimlessly in my prayers. Why? For me often it boils down to simple laziness and self-love. For you it may be distraction, worry, apathy, lack of knowledge, lack of faith and trust,... Certainly it cannot be for lack of models of how

¹ Carson, D.A. (1992) *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*.

or what to pray! If so, read again through these messages – take the sample prayers and set them before you during your own prayer time to use as guides. Think carefully about how best to pray for those you intercede on behalf of. What is God’s revealed will in this situation? What qualities and characteristics have the writers of the Scriptures praised and esteemed God for? The Scriptures themselves are the authoritative guide on *who* it is that God is and *what* it is we are to praise Him for and come to Him for. In them we find great guidance.

But why all this going on about mindless, heartless, and directionless prayer? Primarily because the prayer we are to study tonight, if God in His mercy is pleased to answer it, and He is, will result in us being people who pray mindfully, with full hearts, and clear direction. Two weeks ago in the first chapter of Ephesians we considered a prayer, “that we might see.” This week we consider another of Paul’s prayers for the Ephesians, and for us, “that we might be...” In order for us to be what God calls us to be, we must have power. And it is just this that Paul prays for – for power.

So let’s stop and pray for God’s blessing on the teaching of the Word before we go farther this evening;

Our passage tonight is Ephesians 3:14-21. Let’s read it together now.

Its Premise

(v.14)

We must at the very outset understand *why* Paul is praying the prayer of verses 16-21 – for this is where he begins, “For this reason I bow...” Although prayer may at times be spontaneous, it should often be intentional and purposeful – we come to God because...x, y, or z. It is on the sword of this type of intentionality that sentiments such as “I don’t *feel* like praying,” should fall on. This is to say that there are many times when reason tells us we should be in prayer – however, we often fail to go to God for lack of affection.

But back to the point – *why* has Paul chosen to pray at this particular moment in his letter to the Ephesians? One possible and likely reason is what immediately precedes this text, that is in v. 12, because of Christ, “we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.” But perhaps even more importantly, this “access” that we have is the culmination of an argument that runs through the whole first half of Ephesians.

Paul’s prayer follows very close on the heels of his glorious proclamation of the gospel, the good news, to ALL people now, both Jews *and* Gentiles. It is *our* redemption that he proclaims, our salvation, our being brought near through the blood of Christ – the mystery unveiled, that this God would not stop with the redemption of the Jews, but that His redemption was for the Gentile too. And he so clearly focuses this good news on the one who stands as the focal point of all redemptive history, v. 11, “This was according to the eternal purpose that he [God] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Christ died for us too! Should be our triumphant shout. We are fellow heirs! We are members of the same body! The promise is good for *us* in Christ Jesus through the gospel. We can be redeemed! What could be sweeter to the man or woman dead and ignorant in their sins? Our very lives depend on this glorious mystery here revealed.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte: Glorious discovery to a lonely wretch! This was wealth indeed!--wealth to the heart!--a mine of pure, genial affections. This was a blessing, bright, vivid, and exhilarating;--not like the ponderous gift of gold: rich and welcome enough in its way, but sobering from its weight. I now clapped my hands in sudden joy--my pulse bounded, my veins thrilled.

If Jane Eyre is this excited and moved by what will perish, how much more effected should we be by an eternal inheritance that preserves our very lives. May it always be a very large red flag to us when we can nowhere find and at no time find our sense of privilege and profound and exquisite awe that God, being rich in mercy...made us alive together with Christ.

And thus is the context from which we enter into this prayer of Paul's, heaving ourselves out at the poolside of that great and grand story of redemption which is set forth from Genesis to Revelation, dripping wet with grace, cleansed and refreshed, coming before our God in humility, inclined to seek His good and giving hand.

Its Position - Bowing before God (v.14-15)

And in what manner does Paul seek God in prayer? Paul presents us with a very "physical" picture, so to say. It is not abstract or ethereal here – Paul is on his knees most likely in a jail cell – praying for those he is shepherding.

In Personal Humbleness (v.14a)

Is Paul on his knees to make official the "sanctioned" Christian posture for prayer? No, Paul is not recording this fact that believers might emulate his physical position – the Scriptures do not tie us to any physical position in prayer. It is just as holy to pray while driving in the car as it is while locked in the prayer closet; with eyes open as it is eyes closed; with hands folded as it is with hands open and raised... Paul is on his knees because, "...where the mind [and the affections] are affected, the body will move."² Paul's outward position here is reflective of an inward humility, dependence, and reverence. The fact is that our inward disposition is often reflected in our outward position [Give example here].

In Paternal Relationship (v.14b-15)

That Paul here identifies God as his father speaks volumes. First and foremost it tells us that believers *are related* to God. We are part of his family and this flows so naturally from the picture of the redemption story that Paul has just set forth in chapters 1-3 – *all* believers may call God their father - that is the God who has revealed his plan for our being saved, who has shaped all of history with the purpose of redeeming those that are of his household. Paul's understanding of God's nature and character as father become grounds for intercessory prayer.

Secondly, we can know not only that we are simply related, but that our relationship is as that between a father and his child. There is no mistake that God has given us on

² Gill's Exposition of the Bible

Earth an example of the perfect reality that exists in heaven. As such, we know God to be the one who seeks the good of his family, who cares for and protects his children, who dispenses favor to his sons and daughters, who rules and disciplines among those that are his own. Consider Christ's words, member of the triune Godhead as he speaks about the Father [Read Matthew 6:31-33; 7:7-11].

Undoubtedly, there are those among us at Clearcreek who have had fathers who beat them, abused them in many ways, ignored them, intentionally exasperated them, in short, failed to love them. Are you then unable to call God "Father" because you have no earthly model of what a good father is like? Not at all – hear D. Powlison on this question:

Life experience is not supreme. Lies that people believe are not supreme. God is, and he alone trumps what we bring to the table...Can you know God as Father even if your human father was violent, deceptive, cold...or even just occasionally disappointing? The Bible says, YES! Listen and believe, and join in fellowship with other children of the Father.³

The better we know this God, the better we will love him and come to him in joy and confidence in prayer.

Its Petition - Enabling by God

(v.16-17)

We now arrive at Paul's two petitions in this prayer, in verse 16, "...he may grant you to be strengthened with power..." and in verse 17, "...may have strength to comprehend..." In essence, in both requests, Paul is praying for POWER for the Ephesians. Now the word "power" has taken on an almost negative or nasty connotation in our society today when it is applied to people. It has become closely associated with politicians, pundits, wealth, social class, and anyone who can make decisions that affect our lives (particularly if we do not like their decisions).

I think we all desire power – which one of us really desires to be powerless? Perhaps in a world where abuses of power are so rampant, we hesitate to make our desire for power openly known. We want power to excel at our work, to influence our kids, to complete all the housework, to stick to our diets or exercise routines...but how much do we desire power for the things that Paul calls us to here? To what degree do our hearts actively want capacity, ability, enablement, – power – for the godly ends identified here? We will come to these ends in a moment – but stop and consider here: How different are our prayers from Paul's prayers? Russ brought this to my attention and it is well that he did. It is not merely a matter of Paul writing inspired Scripture. It is a fundamental difference in his thinking about how to pray and what to pray for people. Are our words, thoughts, and ideas shaped and formed by the prayers of the Apostles? Are we so bold as to ask God for "power?"

³ Powlison, D. (2003). *Seeing with New Eyes*. (pp. 175, 180).

The Measure of its Giving

And how much power is Paul asking that the Ephesians receive? What is the measure of the resource he desires for them? Consider this amazing phrase in v. 16, "...according to the riches of his glory..." What an amazing phrase. Paul is effectively saying, "May God grant to you what I am asking in proportion to the vast riches and wealth of His glory, his supreme magnificence." Will God have enough, or great enough power to accomplish his will? [Example here – VUE on mountains] Do you doubt God's ability to change your wretched heart? To renew and reshape your sinful desires? To make you a new creation? To replace your heart of stone with a heart of flesh? We are right to doubt our own abilities, but we are not right to doubt God's. He who has orchestrated all of history for his own pleasure and glory is not unable or unwilling to orchestrate all of you for his own pleasure and glory.

The Means of its Enabling

But how will this power be deployed? What is the means for its application? To where do I look for its exercising? It is as it says in v.16, "...through his Spirit in your inner being..." This is wholly natural and supernatural simultaneously. It is natural in the sense that God has set forth those normal means of grace through which enablement is imparted and applied by his Spirit – the hearing of the preaching of the Word, the sacraments, the body as it fulfills its prescribed roles, etc. To the world, however, it is supernatural. And it is in this sense that believers are rightly labeled when they are called supernaturalists. How change occurs in the believer is wholly an act of God through the Holy Spirit – both whom exist outside of the natural world and do not employ natural means.

The reality, however, is that we often live as those who are naturalists – bound to the means, programs, and solutions this world offers. We Christianize these by running them through a Christian publishing house or setting them forth as a "movement" which is correcting the ailments of biblical (or historical or contemporary) Christianity. At best this looks like tips, tricks, and techniques to improve your spiritual life (how-to books, spiritual boot camps, # of day/weeks programs, performance-based improvement, etc.) At worst there is gross but subtle perversion of the gospel which leads whole masses of people into error under the rhetoric of "movement."

Have we replaced the work of the Spirit with spiritual techniques? In other words, if I took all the techniques I live by as a Christian, could an unbeliever do them as well and have largely the same effects in his life? Or is there a fundamental difference in that the way I live demands strengthening power by the Spirit? Do we realize that a difference should exist? Have we come to be convinced in our own hearts that it is only the work of the Spirit which can bring true godward change? Do we value the work of the Spirit so much that it takes precedence in our praying for others? Does our faith cling to the glory of God as the measure by which God will grant this to us and to others? Or do you struggle in pride and desolate isolation trying to change yourself by human means?

Turn with me to Colossians 1:9-12 that we might have this truth again reinforced.

As a brief sidebar, there is a strange twist on these themes taking place in contemporary society. As some of you know my research is in the area of religiosity and spirituality. As such, I am regularly passing through the secular writings about religiosity and spirituality and what I increasingly come across is the secular world employing “spiritual” techniques – or in other words, attempting to co-opt the supernatural for natural ends. A case in point is the use of clergy, pastors, spiritual counselors, priests, coaches in corporate settings...giving new meaning to the idea of selling the gospel [Give example if time].

Its Purpose – Experiencing of God

(v.17-19)

If the world is wrongly attempting to use pseudo-spirituality for empowerment toward earthly ends, what is the purpose of this empowerment through the Holy Spirit for believers? Why has Paul prayed that the believers in Ephesus be strengthened?

Indwelling by Faith

(v.17a)

Paul has two ends in mind, not dissimilar in nature. The first is found at verse 17, “...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...” The idea of “dwelling” here is akin to dwelling in a home. Another way to state this is that Christ would grow comfortable at his station in your heart. When Beth and I purchased our home... [Give example of our home becoming comfortable]. So it should be with Christ’s tenancy in our hearts, he should find the accommodation increasingly pleasing to his senses as his Spirit makes renovations. This is why Paul prays that the Holy Spirit would be at work in our inner being – it is here that real change occurs and it is where Christ dwells. And significant life-long renovation is required. Sometimes the work requires demolition, the structure must be torn down and the foundation laid anew. Trash needs hauled out, bathrooms need scrubbed, the home is full of filth. In time, through grace, it is floors that still need sanded, walls that need new paint, or furniture that needs rearranging. Christ is increasingly formed in us.

It is in self-examination that we must ask ourselves if, truly, Christ is more pleased with the dwelling of our heart than he was five years ago, two years ago, last year. Have we grown in practical holiness? Are there the tell-tale signs of the Holy Spirit present? Are we more loving? Is our joy more sustained? Is our peace less vulnerable? Are we more patient with spouses and children? Are we more kind to those who irritate us? Are we more apt to engage in “good-doing” even at the cost of real sacrifice? Has faithfulness increasingly marked our thoughts and behavior? Would friends and family recognize you as more gentle than you use to be? Are we less often distracted by things of the world because we have grown in self-control?⁴ And we have so many excuses... It brings Christ great pleasure to dwell and walk in the garden of the heart that is full of the ripe and sweet fruit of the Spirit. And while it is the Spirit at work in our inner being that produces these fruits, it is through the instrument of faith that we receive, retain, and have communion with Christ.

⁴ Galatians 5:22-23

Apprehending of Christ

(v.17b-19a)

Paul's second petition before God, the other reason he prays that we might have power, is that we might be enabled to grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love. Note that Paul is speaking to believers here and that he describes these believers as "being rooted and grounded in love." The implication here is that even these believers who are rooted and grounded need to continue to grow not in their love for Christ, though that be a good prayer, but in their understanding of Christ's love for them.⁵

So Paul resorts to the language of dimensions to describe this love of Christ worked out in the plan of redemption – breadth, length, height, and depth. And Paul is not calling us to mere cognitive appreciation – it is one thing to say, "oh yes, 14,309 feet is quite a tall mountain!" But not nearly as tall as the actual experience of standing on top of Mt. Uncompaghre in Colorado panting for breath, head pounding, and heart racing and having a 360 degree view of literally everything! Again it is one thing to say that 4,163 miles is a great distance, but it is quite another to hike the entire length of the Great Wall of China. Paul does not mean for us to simply have some mental idea that Christ's love is very great and very large – but rather, he uses these terms reserved for describing the physical dimensions of things to emphasize that knowledge is not sufficient, we must know, appreciate, touch, feel, and taste the greatness of God's love, marking off its dimensions over the course of life. And those of you who have walked faithfully over time with your God do not wonder at what Paul prays for here. You have known the wonderment in large and small ways of God's love – sin forgiven, prayer answered, life changed, peace maintained, hope sustained...and your faith is stronger than ever because no longer do you simply sing that the fountain is deep and wide, but you have tasted of and rested in that fountain. [I Peter 1:8-9; I Peter 2:3].

Note danger of
mysticism and
danger of intellec-
tualism if time

Fullness of God

(v.19b)

In the end, Paul resorts to paradox, "...and to know the love that surpasses knowledge..." and then moves on to make an extraordinary statement, "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." This is not mysticism – we look inside for an "experience" and then label it divine. God sets that standard of what it means to know him fully. God's self-knowledge is a person, the Lord Jesus. This person of Christ is revealed to us not in some small quite space in the midst of our chest cavity, subjective and open to personal creativity, no, this person is revealed to us by God's Word, wholly external to ourselves. We come to be filled "with all the fullness of God" as the "Spirit in our inner being" empowers teaches us, changes us, and forms us in the image of Christ. The historical person of Jesus Christ revealed to us in Scripture is God's self-revelation to man. There is no other way to know God.

Its Praise – Exalting God

(v.20-21)

Paul closes his prayer with a benediction of praise.

⁵ Carson, D.A. (1992) *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*. p. 191

His Surpassing Greatness

(v.20)

Do you doubt that God can and will answer this prayer of Paul's? Can God make my heart a place that Christ is pleased to dwell? Can I grow in learning and experiential knowledge of the love of Christ? God, through Paul, says, "No problem." Paul ends in praise not only because God is able to answer his prayer, but because this high and mighty God has stooped and taken note of us and our plight. He has redeemed us. He is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think. And praise Him because we ask little and think small yet he graciously exceeds these things.

His Everlasting Glory

(v.21)

Here is the reason God exists; here is His chief end - to glorify and enjoy Himself. Since that is so, it is also our chief end. Does the way you think about salvation, sanctification, the church and prayer all inevitably drive you to magnifying God's glory?

So what can we learn from this passage. First, two primary observations.

Lessons

1. In sum, or in essence, this prayer is that as those who call God father, *saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone*, we would live as children of God.
2. Love transforms and true love transforms truly.
3. When we pray, in flock perhaps... Are we mindless? Or do we pray in a manner that recognizes our utter dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit for change? Are we heartless? Do we fail to express awe and praise of our glorious God's love as it is expressed in Christ? Are we directionless? Or do we ask for power for ourselves and others that we might be evermore transformed into a dwelling comfortable for Christ?
4. Tips, tricks, techniques – who or what are you depending on for change... or are you depending "power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts in your hearts..."
5. Posture of heart
6. Measuring depth, height, width, and breadth (youth especially...)
7. Are you hopeful that God will finish his work?
8. You might pray:

Father, I bow my knees before You, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. I ask that, according to the riches of Your glory, You may grant _____ to be strengthened with power through Your Spirit in their inner being, so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith. Grant that they, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all God's people what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that they may be filled with all the Your fullness. (Ephesians 3:14-16)

Let me leave you with this benediction:

Not to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen