

## Praying Like Paul

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Ephesians 3:14-19

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14-19, ESV)*

### Introduction: How Then Should We Pray?

How should we pray for one another? Have you ever felt like your prayers for other people are vague, repetitive, superficial or an endless list of medical problems? Do you get the feeling that you should pray more specifically for people than just asking that God would bless them or heal them? But do you ever wonder how to get more specific and clear while still keeping biblical priorities? After all, it's not like the Bible gives us a clear instruction guide on how to pray for others.

Well, the Bible may not give us a chapter specifically titled, "How to Pray for Others," but we do have two examples in Ephesians of how Paul prayed for others and one place where Paul asks for prayer for himself and for all other Christians.

Paul first expressed how he prays for the Ephesians in chapter 1, verses 15-23. We looked at this first prayer of Paul's back on October 18th in a message entitled, "Our Greatest Need." We saw that Paul's prayer for the Ephesians was marked by thanksgiving to God for their faith in Christ and their love for one another and that his request for them was focused on their need to know God better.

Now, we come to Paul's second prayer. This passage is actually the longest prayer of the Apostle Paul recorded in the Bible, and it is beautiful and powerful in both its single-minded focus and its detailed specificity. If we could summarize Paul's prayer in just a few words, we can say that He asks God to strengthen the Ephesians *so that* Christ may dwell in their hearts *so that* they may understand the love of Christ *so that* they might be filled up with the fullness of God.

In other words, it's just like taking a trip to Paris. Is that not obvious to you? Think about it: If you want to go to Paris, you first need money. You use the money to get a Passport and a

plane ticket. You use the plane ticket to get on a plane, which takes you to Paris. If the connection is still not clear, we'll come back to it later.

Paul understand the needs of the human soul so clearly and has such a rich understanding of the wealth and power of God and the working of the Holy Spirit that his prayer is able to very specific and clear, laying out step-by-step what we need to reach the final destination: to be filled with the fullness of God.

This is a passage worthy of focused consideration and of intentional imitation. Every phrase, almost every word, is packed full of glorious truth and stunning implications for how we view ourselves, how we understand our faith, how we grasp the promises of God, how we pray and how we live.

## **I. Introduction of Prayer**

Paul begins by introducing why he prays, how he prays and to whom he prays: *“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.”*

### **A. For this reason . . .**

“For this reason . . .” For what reason? Well, Paul has just been talking about the mystery of the Gospel and how Gentiles and Jews are both full members of Christ’s body, fellow partakers of the promise of God in Christ Jesus. He’s also been talking about how the goal of Gospel ministry is to see the church become a living, powerful display of the manifold wisdom of God for all the heavenly hosts to see. So, we have unity in the body of Christ and the living witness of the church in immediate view, but if we look back at verse 1 of chapter 3, we’ll see that Paul began this chapter with “For this reason . . .”

These two phrases are linked. The reason Paul stated at the beginning of the chapter is what he comes back to now. So what do we find when we go back to chapter 2? We see that God is building up His church as a living holy Temple in the Lord, built together in Jesus to bring glory to God.

So, whether go back to earlier in chapter 3 or we go back to chapter 2, we essentially find the same truth, being developed in slightly different language, and here’s how I would summarize and simplify it: Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God is bringing Jews and gentiles to Himself and is reconciling them to Him and to each other, building them into a

church, founded on Christ and inhabited by Christ, a church that is a Living Temple glorifying God and a living cosmic display of God's wisdom and grace.

We can add to this overarching positive reason – the glorious calling of the church – a closer and more negative reason. Right before his prayer, Paul says, “So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.” It is out of his desire to see the church become all that God calls her to be and to not lose heart that Paul prays.

And when he prays, Paul drops to His knees in prayer.

### **B. I bow my knees**

Paul says “For this reason I bow my knees.” This was an earnest prayer, nothing casual or flippant. Kneeling in prayer is not the only posture for prayer described in the Bible, but it is an important one. It shows humility and dependence.

When the Iranian government wanted to humiliate American sailors this past week, they had them kneel. This posture showed the submission of the American navy to the Iranians, and they made sure to take pictures and send them out to the world for all to see. In a culture where shame and honor, pride and humiliation are so centrally important, images of captives on their knees is never an accident, especially when followed by a videotaped apology from the captain of the American ship.

But I digress . . . sort of. The point is that kneeling is a posture of humility and dependence, of submission and confession of need, even helplessness. We should make a habit of kneeling in prayer regularly – not that God can't hear our prayers otherwise, but because it helps remind us of who we are and of what our true position is before the God of the Universe.

### **C. Before the Father**

*“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.”*

The ESV says “before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” But this expression is not so simple. The ESV's footnote says it could also be translated “from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named.” Another option for translating this is what the King James and New King James say, “from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth is named.”

Now, all three readings - “every family” or “all fatherhood” or “the whole family” – are legitimate possibilities, but I favor the translation “the whole family” as in the whole church, both those already glorified in heaven and those still on the earth, those from a Jewish background and those who are Gentile – the whole family. I favor this because the context is clearly focused on the church.

This is a prayer for the church in order to ask God to do the work necessary to fulfill His plans and purposes for the church, His people, His family. Paul calls upon Him as “the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth is named” as a way of saying: “We are your children. You are our Father. You have named us as your own. We are the family of God. I come to you as Your child on behalf of Your children who need You.”

## **II. Request of Prayer**

Now with this introduction as to why, how and to Whom he prays, Paul gets into the heart of what he prays, and his first request is this: *“that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being”*

So, the first thing Paul prays for is for strength.

### **A. Strengthened with Power**

Specifically, Paul’s request is that God would make the Ephesians stronger in their inner being with power that comes through the Holy Spirit, and that He would do so according to, or in accordance with, or according to the measure of, the riches or wealth of God’s glory.

So we see, right up front, that if we’re going to be what God has called us to be, if we’re going to live the life God has given us in Christ, we need to be made stronger – not physically stronger, but stronger on the inside, in the core of who we are, in our souls.

#### **I. According to the riches of His glory**

We need God our Father to strengthen us according to the riches of His glory – this is another way of saying that we need God to strengthen us according to the wealth of who He really is, in glory, in His glorious person. If we’re going to be what God calls us to be

and if we're not going to lose heart in the face of suffering, we need God's power to strengthen us according to who He is and not according to who we are.

## **2. Through His Spirit**

The way God strengthens us is by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Godhead and He is the one who directly applies the grace of God and the benefits of the Gospel to our souls. The Father ordains, the Son accomplishes and the Spirit applies.

This is not self-help. This is the very opposite. This is help for those who know they can't help themselves. Why do they call it "self-help" anyway? Did you ever wonder that? If I buy a self-help book, I didn't write the book, so how can it be a self-help book? They should just call them "good advice books." Of course, some of them aren't such good advice. If they really wanted to be helpful, they would label them – "really good advice," "pretty good advice," "average advice," "not-so-great advice" and "really lousy advice."

But I digress again . . . The Bible doesn't offer self-help or good advice. We don't need to be told how to strengthen our souls. Some self-help spiritual gurus would probably tell us we can strengthen our own souls, perhaps through breathing exercises and meditation, but I probably shouldn't tell you how I would classify those kinds books. We would need a new category, somewhere below "really lousy."

One such guru says, "You must find the place inside yourself where nothing is impossible." Well, the only One for whom nothing is impossible is God. Thankfully, for believers, God has promised to come and strengthen us by His Holy Spirit in our inner being, so we can have hope and real power.

## **3. In your inner being**

What does Paul mean by "inner being"? He means the you that is the real you on the inside, beneath the exterior you that project to the world. In your heart, in your soul, in the inner you, your desires, fears, beliefs, thoughts and will all determine who you are and who you are becoming. This is where you need to be strengthened because this is the real you. Those of us who are reading through the Gospels right now are seeing how much emphasis Jesus places on the heart, on the inner man.

And so this leads us to the next part of Paul's prayer –

## **B. That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith**

“, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” – Of course, by “heart,” Paul and Jesus don’t mean the organ that circulates blood through your body. They mean the very core of who you are.

*Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matt. 5:8)*

*He also said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt. 6:21) If you know what a man really values, you know where the core of his self lies.*

*Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34)*

*He also said that it is what comes out of the heart that defiles a person, makes a person unclean before God. (Matt. 15:18-19)*

And so, knowing how centrally important the heart is, Paul prays that Christ may dwell in the hearts of the Ephesians through faith. Two things to note here:

1. The word “dwell” means to take up permanent residence, to inhabit. Paul knows that Christ is with every believer through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but Paul wants us to know and experience the presence of Christ as a permanent resident in the very heart of who we are. We need to be strengthened for this to be a reality, which is why the prayer is “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts.”

2. Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. It is as we believe, as we trust, as we seek to abide in Christ that we know His indwelling presence through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works through the Word to strengthen our faith and to bring us a greater awareness of the indwelling presence of Christ.

**Romans 10:17:** *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”*

**John 15:5-7:** *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”*

As Christ takes up permanent residence at the core of who we are by the Holy Spirit through faith, something wonderful happens . . .

### **C. That you may know the love of Christ**

*“that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,”*

Oh, this is all too wonderful for words! I have not the skill nor the wisdom to properly describe what Paul is saying here. But here goes . . .

As Christ takes up permanent residence in the core of who we are, we become more and more rooted and grounded in love. His love, working in us and through us, strengthens our love for Him and for others, and as our love is strengthened by His presence and His love, we become more deeply rooted and more securely grounded in love.

As we grow in this way – not in head knowledge of theology or academic knowledge of the Scriptures – but in real love for God and for others, fueled and sustained by Christ’s indwelling presence, we grow stronger and are able to comprehend, to grasp, to grab hold of the full dimensions – the breadth and length and height and depth.

Now there’s some debate as to exactly what these dimensions are, but I think since Paul doesn’t name anything else and his focus here seems very clear, then the dimensions are of the love of Christ. We don’t have strength to comprehend or grasp the dimensions of this love alone. That’s important to note: We have strength to comprehend “with all the saints.” This means that our spiritual growth is not a solo activity. We grow together. Together, we are stronger and better able to grasp –

- The breadth – How broad and wide and encompassing the love of Christ is; it’s not a narrow matter of our religion and our time in church, but the love of Christ encompasses our whole lives and all of our relationships.
- And length - to what lengths will Christ’s love persevere with us – all the way into eternity
- And height – Christ love lifts us all the way to heaven, to the Father’s right hand
- And depth – Think how low Christ’s love took Him, to the pain and shame of the cross for us

And then, somehow, as we're strengthened to comprehend, we're enabled to know that which is beyond knowledge. "*to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*" – on the surface of it, it seems impossible.

And yet we have all had the experience of knowing truly something which we knew we would never be able to know fully. I have been to the ocean and looked out over its vastness. I have flown over both the Atlantic and Pacific. I have stood in Hawaii and looked out and thought about being 3,000 miles from both Los Angeles and Tokyo, Japan. I have had the experiential knowledge of the ocean, yet I know it also surpasses knowledge. Never could I fully experience the ocean and never could we fully know the love of Christ, but we can know it truly by God grace as we're strengthened and empowered to do so.

One of my favorite verses of any hymn is from "The Love of God" –

Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
 And were the skies of parchment made,  
 Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
 And every man a scribe by trade,  
 To write the love of God above,  
 Would drain the ocean dry.  
 Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
 Though stretched from sky to sky.

### **III. Outcome of Prayer: Filled with the Fullness of God**

And the final outcome of Paul's prayer is as amazing as the love of Christ: "*that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*"

We don't have time to explore this wonderful conclusion in detail, except to say this: We are made in God's image, but sin has marred and defaced God's image in us. Jesus is the perfect image of God, who came to redeem and restore us to our place as God's image-bearers. We were created to be the one kind of creature in all of creation who would be like God, reflecting His character and showing forth His presence in the world.

To "be filled with all the fullness of God" is to be a living Temple of the Eternal God and is to be His redeemed and restored image, reflecting His character and manifesting His presence in His world. That's the goal Paul has in mind in his prayer, but he knows that for us to get there, we need to understand the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge,



and we need to have strength to comprehend the full dimensions of that love, which is only possible as Christ takes up permanent residence in our hearts through faith, which will only happen as the Holy Spirit strengthens us with power in the inner man.

It's like this: Say you want to go to Paris. How will you get there? You need to fly on a plane to get there. How will you be able to fly on a plane to Paris? You need a ticket and a passport. How will you get a ticket and a passport? You need money.

We need God to strengthen our hearts so that Christ can take up permanent residence there so that, through His indwelling presence, we can know the full dimensions of His love, and then – and only then – we will be filled with the fullness of God.

Do you know Christ? Has He taken up residence in your heart by the Holy Spirit through faith? Do you know Him? Do you love Him? Do you know His love? I pray that you would.