

Preparation for Prayer

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Bible Text: Ephesians 3:14-21
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Tonight I want us to look at Ephesians 3 for an exhortation about prayer from the Apostle Paul's exhortation or, really, his testimony of prayer as he prayed for the church at Ephesus and certainly for all the body of Christ. Ephesians 3, beginning in verse 14 and, of course, this section ends with one of my favorite passages of Scripture and favorite in the sense because I believe it summarizes the heart and the passion of God and so we'll end with 3:21. Beginning in 3:14 of Ephesians, Paul says,

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. 20 Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, 21 to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Certainly don't have time to unwrap all of this but a couple of exhortations to guide us in our prayer time. First of all, note Paul's passion in prayer. There is a particular passion here because he begins in verse 14 by talking about the fact, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." Paul is feeling something very heavy. He's quite passionate about what he's concerned about at this moment. His burden is so great that he's compelled to his knees.

Now, kneeling in prayer is a humble posture and I think it reflects when we have deep emotion or deep passions in our heart about a situation and I'd like to remind you that posture is not a requirement for prayer. The Bible doesn't say, "When thou shalt pray, thou must go to your knees." It's not there. It's a good thing. I think it's a right thing but sometimes we just feel the need to kneel and pray, but more than the physical fixture of your body is the spiritual possession within your heart. Paul is very passionate about the

church that he's started here in Ephesus and all the churches and about God being glorified in them.

I remember years ago, our elders, we prayed on Wednesday mornings. I think we met at 5:30 or 6:00. We did that for years. We've since moved that to early Sunday morning. And it just became a habit. I don't know, we didn't really announce it but we would just pray on our knees. Now you've got to understand this is pushing 25 years ago when we first started and as the years went by, all the groaning and the moaning of getting on our knees and getting back up again, I thought, "I'm going to have to buy these guys some of those padded garden kneeling little things to kneel on in the prayer room." You know, we were in the early stages, a lot of challenging things and things we all wondered ourselves, "Man, are we doing the right stuff? We know it's biblical. We know church history is with us, but we have a lot of people saying we're not on the right track." We just felt as elders we needed to pray and we prayed on our knees and, I don't know, we don't do that anymore. I don't know why we stopped or when it stopped. I think the fact that we're all 20-25 years older may have something to do with that. But the parallel I want to make here: the Apostle Paul is not in a nice, carpeted, air conditioned, heated conference room like we pray in. He was actually in a cell, a prison cell, a Roman prison. He has committed no crime. He is there for preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul knelt on what was probably a dirt floor; it could have been a stone floor. He's behind a locked door. There is no telling what conditions he's in: the stench, the vermin, the loneliness he endured. We probably cannot imagine his circumstances, yet he prays and he prays on his knees. He's filled with passion about it and he prays not for himself but we see from chapters 1 through 3 already, particularly in chapter 1 where three times he's unfolding the great glories of sovereign grace in our salvation and how it's all of God and he continues to say this phrase in one way or the other, "God did this to praise of the glory of his grace. To the praise of the glory of his grace. To the praise of his glory." Then he gets to the end of this prayer section and he says, "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus."

So Paul is passionate about the glory of God and, in essence, the glory of God is wanting God to be made much of; wanting God to be seen or manifested for who he really is, and it just is so that God is most seen and expressed or manifested for who he truly is when the church is truly the church. God has ordained that the church is the most vivid, clear, true reflecting and manifestation of who he is and what he can accomplish. So Paul is so passionate for two things and as we pray tonight and as you pray anytime in your life, you're always safe with these two passionate principles as the undergirding foundation on motives in your prayer life: the glory of God through the good of the church. Pray for the glory of God. Now, we pray for many things. We pray for our spouses. We pray for our children. We pray for our jobs. I know some people on our staff, they've been praying for their benefits. I mean, lots of things we pray for and those are good things. There are no little things or weird things or insignificant. We pray for everything but in back of those things we should have a heart that says, "Lord, to the end that you would be glorified and your church would be blessed and be helped." As a Christian, you have no real foundational purpose in life outside of you and your family being effective for God in a

local church. There is no plan B. There is no Lone Ranger, unique role for guys that can say, "Well, I love Jesus and I'm serving Jesus but I can do it outside the church." I don't see that anywhere in Scripture. Every ministry in Scripture is in the church or connected to the local church. So Paul's heart is passionate. He's driven to his knees. He's not thinking about the predicament of being in that prison but he's praying for the glory of God and for the good of the church.

Now, one other quick word and that's the providential perspective of prayer. Not only do we see Paul's passion in prayer, glory to God and the good of the church, but providence. He says in verse 15, let's see, and 16, he's already mentioned in verse 14, "I'm on my knees praying to the Father." Then he continues, 15, "from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name." Now, we don't know exactly what that means. This is one of those sections that could mean a couple of things. He could be talking about all those who are truly the children of God; every family that is truly of God, both those who are still living on the earth and are part of the church on the earth and those who have already departed and are glorified in heaven and are part of the glorified church in heaven. Or he could be just generically saying all men come from God. Now, all have sinned and been separated from God but his point is God is over, he is sovereign, he is providentially over all things.

So the point I'm convinced Paul is making here is he's imploring in prayer the ultimate source. He said, "I'm not going to Mary. I'm not praying to a departed saint. I'm praying to God the Father, the ultimate source, the Almighty, the Creator Lord, the God of all." And that's what we need to remember when we're praying and asking God and seeking God. We need to know that our prayers are to the one, or rather are not to the one who has great power. Our prayers are not to the one who has great wisdom. Our prayers are not to the one who has great concern for his children or great control over all creation. No, our prayer is not to one who has great power but to one who has all power. Our prayer is not to one who has great wisdom but has all wisdom. He is not one, we do not pray to one who has just great concern, he has full concern. The concern of the infinite Godhead is for us. We do not pray to the one who has a good or great control but he has all control of all things.

That's the God we pray to and that must have been resonating in Paul's heart as he's in this scummy, vermin infested, filthy, probably dirt floored prison cell for nothing but pleasing God. And he has to know that the providence is involved in this and we pray to a God of providence and there's been that wrestle through the ages of pastors and theologians that have said, "God is absolutely sovereign; he's providential behind all things." The Bible even says he made even the wicked for the day of evil. How are you going to wrestle with that? It's just an expression to tell you that nothing is outside of God. There is not the image or the reality, I guess you could say, of God over here doing things and Satan and evil kingdom over here and they're just kind of fighting it out and we know one day God will win. That's not the way it is. As Martin Luther said as he would teach his congregation during the great Protestant Reformation, what, 400 or so years ago, he said, "The devil is God's devil." His point is the devil can accomplish

nothing but what a provident God allows and even in all the devil's doings, he will ultimately fulfill God's final ends and purposes. Providence is over everything.

In verse 16, Paul uses this phrase, "according to the riches of His glory." He's saying, "I'm praying to the Father that he's going to do these things for you according to the riches of his glory." Charles Hodge, the Presbyterian theologian who is, by the way, very worthy of your study and reading, Hodge said it means according to the plenitude of divine perfections. The plenitude, the multifaceted, the great number of divine perfections. Everything in God is glorious and the combination of all that God is is glorious. Now, each particular aspect of God's being is overwhelmingly wondrous and glorious but then when you put them all together as a whole, they're like all the thousands of pieces of an automobile that make it work. Well, all the thousands, if you will, or infinite number of character qualities and attributes of God altogether are glorious. So he says when you take the being of God, you've got to realize you're praying to a being of such magnanimous worth and value and glory.

So Paul says, "I'm praying for you that God would work according to the riches of his very person." That's overwhelming in the sense of the resource, and I don't mean to be trite or trivial. He's not just our resource but, in a sense, he's the one we go to for our provision. But it's overwhelming in the sense of the resource God is. Paul says, "I'm not just praying to somebody that's capable of getting you through something. He is rich in glory." The quality of God is glorious and the quantity of God is glorious.

So out of God's omnipotent wealth and resources, Paul prays on behalf of these Ephesian elders. We have to remember that God's supply is limitless and God's supply is absolutely perfect and that's why as we as a church go forward and we realize that the way things are at this point, again, there's much to be thankful for. I think we would be above average in our giving, however, we're having to look at things very, very closely and to be honest, personally I'd like to be out from under the stress of being concerned about it for a while. Just being honest. Things just being tight all the time and so we're thinking, "Okay, if God is limitless and the way he provides for his people is perfect, then let's look at some things." And we've been spending a lot of hours looking at things, however, part of God's purposes may be to humble us and to cry out to him. As a matter of fact, I think it's clearly taught in Scripture and it's consistent in church history that God often brings us to lean times because we need to lean on him and not lean on ourselves.

Now, we know that during Jesus' public ministry on another thought, Jesus warned against praying for a show before men and the reason he said you don't need to pray out loud and pray in public in a showy way. That doesn't mean public prayer is wrong, just that the Jews had learned to be eloquent and sophisticated and he prays on themselves for their public prayers and it wasn't something where you had to discern if his heart was right, it was obvious his heart wasn't right, okay? The Pharisees were blatant, brazen hypocrites. I mean, when you study the situation in Israel 2,000 years ago, you're just kind of taken back at how obvious it is that they're walking in such phony hypocrisy but you've got to understand they've been working under hundreds and hundreds of years of great emphasis on externals. When you put on these externals, then that's true godliness, and so

they just learned to put on all of this external shows and exercises: the clothing of the priests was so externally extravagant and then their prayers were publicly showy. And so Jesus said, "Don't do that." He says, "Pray in secret because," Matthew 6:8, "your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Providence. He knows all things. There is a providential aspect in all of this.

So we've been talking about providence, God knows what we need. He has a purpose. However there is a balance. James 4:2, "You do not have because you do not ask." "Well, Pastor, which one is it?" It's both. It's both. It's always been he's infinite and he's providential and he rules over all things, even our lean times, but it's always been that we have not because we ask not. And we wrestle with those things but we must exercise what the Scripture tells us to do.

So he says and I'll end with this simple thought in the last part of verse 16, maybe we can finish this another time, he says, first of all, the first part of verse 16, "that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory." Wow, just the infinite wealth of being that he is. "That you would be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man." And that's what performs the prayer, if you will, the spirit that God has put in us to want to, to need to, to find a connection in God. There is something in us when the Spirit of God indwells us that causes us not to feel a vital connection with the things we used to feel a vital connection to. The old song says, "The things of this earth grow strangely dim." There is a switch that begins to be the dimmer switch of worldly attractions and allurements begins to be slowly turned off after conversion and then there's another dimmer switch of spiritual light and closeness to God that's turned on and gets brighter and brighter as you're sanctified. So that's the new spirit in you that gets drawn more to God and pushing more toward God and looking more to God and dependent more on God and treasuring more of God. Well, prayer comes into that. You pray because he's the one you look to. He's the one you're connected to. He's the one you now have the spiritual DNA connection with. We're born again and we have the DNA of our new heavenly Father. So this is the providential perspective of prayer.

So let's remember a good biblical perspective and that is a passion for the glory of God and the good of the church. That would be a great guideline for our prayer meeting tonight. That's what we're praying. Now, specifically our show is Christmas praise, that it would be for the glory of God and it would be for the good of the church. Our Christmas love offering, that it would be to the glory of God. And I can tell you with all of my heart, I wish we'd get 2.4 million dollars Sunday and pay off our loan. We've got two or three men here that could do it. Does that put you on the spot? Good. That would be thrilling, but honestly if it glorified God and we got \$25, I would like that. If I had a piece of my heart that glorified God, then it's going to be for the good of the church.

That's got to be a our passion. Trust me, if my passion was not for the glory of God, we would not have gone through the things we've gone through in developing the convictions and the standards and the practices of the doctrine that we believe. It hasn't been an easy trip and one would say and I've had it said to me many times, we "had it made" had we not made the changes we made along the way. But you've got to decide,

are you going to try to obey God or are you just going to go along because you've got it made. So that needs to be our passion and then as we pray, remember we're praying to a God of infinite riches and glory. He has no limit whatsoever in any way and here Paul is in a prison cell, locked up, yet glorying in the infinite riches and glory and provision and power of God. Wow. The passion and prayer and the providential principle of prayer.