

Sermon 32, How Big Are Your Prayers?, Ephesians 3:16

Proposition: We need to pray bigger prayers, prayers based on the Father's wealth.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, one of the most convicting questions we Christians can be asked is "How big is your God?" How much power and control does your God exercise? If you lose your keys, is your God big enough to handle it? How about if you lose your job — or even your child? How big is your God? The smaller your God, the bigger your problems — and vice versa. But parallel to that question regarding the size of the God you worship comes the question I want to address in today's sermon. How big are your prayers? This prayer that we see the apostle Paul praying in Ephesians 3 is a gigantic prayer, one of the biggest that can be found anywhere in Scripture. This prayer asks for some absolutely amazing things. And based on the principle that we ought to imitate the apostle Paul, who says repeatedly "follow me as I follow Christ," we can understand that we ought to pray like he prayed. The reason he wrote down this prayer was not just so that God could hear it and answer it, but so that we too would learn to pray in this way. What I hope to show you today is that we need to pray bigger prayers, prayers that measure up to the standard of the Father's wealth.

I. The Obvious: Prayer Asks things from the Father, v. 16a

The obvious point in this verse is contained in the first phrase: I pray "that He would grant you." The Greek word here is the word *do* from *didomi*, to give. An obvious truth, then, is that prayer asks the Father to give us things! To pray is to say, "God, please grant me this; please grant me that." Prayer is indeed about spending time with your Father, but it also about making your needs and desires known to Him.

This is so obvious that I don't think that I need to spend a lot of time on it. All of us have some kind of experience of prayer as asking. We have all made our needs known to God in prayer at one time or another, and many of us make requests of God fifty times a day and more. So to imitate Paul's prayer in one sense is easy. If you are asking God for things, then you have done the bare minimum of what prayer is.

II. The Not-so-obvious

But the rest of the verse is not so obvious. You see, it's obvious that prayer asks God for things. But the method by which Paul constructed his prayer is not obvious. Think about it. He goes on to say that he asked for things not according to whatever popped into his head regarding what he might need, but rather, he asked based on the character of the one he was addressing in prayer.

That's the principle here, the not-so-obvious approach to prayer that St. Paul took. So let me ask you: What is your approach to prayer? Are your prayers mostly based on what it occurs to you that you might want, or are they mostly based on what you know about the God to whom you're praying? Really, of course, this is a larger point about communication in general. When you speak to someone else, do you try your hardest to shape the conversation according to that person's knowledge and expertise? Or do you talk about what you know and want to talk about and hope that the other person is able to follow along? It's the first kind of conversationalist that can talk to virtually anybody. The second rarely creates a mutually enjoyable conversation. Well, Paul's point in this prayer is that we need to ask based on who God is and what He has offered us, what He has promised us. Don't let your prayers mostly be shaped by what you're feeling like at the moment. Make them take on the shape that is fitting for a petition addressed to the King immortal, eternal, invisible, the only wise God.

A. The Father's Wealth Is the Standard of Prayer, v. 16b

Paul begins by identifying the standard according to which he will ask. This standard is the wealth of God's glory. This is the measuring rod which indicates the approximate size of the request.

Let me put it this way. Let's say you want to borrow some money to buy a house. You go talk to your loan officer and ask if you can have \$10. What will she say? "No!" You don't take out a mortgage for ten dollars! The wealth of the bank is the standard according to which you have to ask when you want to borrow money. And in the same way, the wealth of the Father is the standard according to which you have to ask when you want your prayers answered!

Well, what is the wealth of our Father's glory? The answer, of course, is that God literally owns everything that exists. We speak of millionaires and billionaires. We speak of the annual budget of the U.S. government as being in the \$4 trillion range. That's an awful lot of money. That money keeps Social Security checks coming, Medicare payments flowing, fleets sailing, bases open, highways maintained, and millions of bureaucrats in air-conditioned offices. Those four trillion dollars go a long way. Yet that amount of money is a mere pittance to our Almighty God. The wealth of His glory cannot be measured in dollar terms. It cannot be measured in light years. It cannot be measured at all, for it is infinite.

Do your prayers ask according to the measure of infinity? Do they call on the resources of omnipotence? Brothers and sisters, I fear that they don't. I know that mine almost never do! No. What standards do we more typically use in prayer? Generally, we use standards like what's reasonable, what can be expected, what isn't greedy or ridiculous — indeed, maybe the most common standard for prayer is what we think we can actually get! After all, that's how we judge

our requests in the rest of life. If you want a sweet treat from your mother, you don't start by asking for the 5-pound Hershey bar. You start by asking for an M&M. If you get that, then you might raise your demands a bit. If you're negotiating a salary in the business world, you don't start by saying, "At my last job I made \$55,000. I think I would like to make \$100,000 here for doing the same job." Not at all! We measure our requests based on what we think we can get. But Paul measured his requests based on the Father's wealth. He asked according to what the Father had to give.

If we genuinely started doing that, how would our prayers sound? I am persuaded that they would sound a lot more like the prayer in front of us here in Ephesians 3! We would be praying for God's fullness. We would be praying for ecstatic experiences of the love of Christ. We would be praying for the conversion of Gillette, for revival in America, for the gospel to sweep powerfully through Japan and Australia. Brothers and sisters, our prayers need to be measured by nothing smaller than God's infinite resources to answer them. To ask as though we were negotiating with someone whose resources are scarce is entirely the wrong approach. Scarcity is a function of life on earth, but it has no place in the economy of Heaven!

B. You aren't yet strong enough to bear the answers to your prayers!, v. 16c

But this, in turn, implies that you and I are not yet strong enough to bear the answers to our prayers! We talked last week about the folly of thinking that you could stand up against a 15-foot wave crashing in on top of you, or the absurdity of believing that you could hold on to a roller coaster while experiencing six times the force of gravity. In the same way, Paul's first actual request in this prayer is for strengthening with might.

Do you think in these terms? Again, I highly doubt it because I know how rarely I think in these terms! Our default is to ask for what we think we can get and what we think we can handle. We don't ask for 5000 people to show up for worship at our little church building, because we can't even imagine the craziness of trying to figure out what to do with a crowd that size. This whole neighborhood wouldn't be big enough to accommodate the cars — and never mind where all the people would stand and how they would all be able to hear! Yet Paul encourages us to pray prayers whose answers would overwhelm us in our present state. He wants us to receive answers that we are not yet equipped to handle — and so to that end, he prays that we would get equipped to handle them!

Will you commit to praying for strength to handle the answers to your prayers, and praying that prayer every day for a month? That might be enough time to get you habituated to asking God for the strength to receive the answers to bigger prayers. But just think about your Heavenly Father. Think of how tremendous His power is, and how much He is willing to do to answer your prayers and to bless you. You can't even take it, unless and until He strengthens you.

C. Prayer should often focus on the inner person, v. 16d

Paul prayed that the strength of the Holy Spirit would be applied to the Ephesians in their inner man. How many prayer requests for the inner person will you hear at a typical prayer meeting?

Almost none! Why? Because we don't trust each other like that. Yet you won't find Paul recording prayers for the outer person, praying that the Ephesians would be healed of their health problems. He asks, here and in ch. 1 and in his other letters too, primarily for the inner man! The point is not that it's never right to request things for the outer man. Obviously God created us as whole people and takes care of us as whole people. The Lord's Prayer specifically instructs us to ask for our daily bread. But most of the Lord's Prayer, like most of this prayer, relates to God and His work in the world and in our hearts. The outer man is important — but it should probably not receive most of our attention and most of our prayer time.

Do you primarily pray for the inner man in yourself and in other people? If you were to keep statistics on your prayers for a week, what percent of your prayer would you find had been devoted to God's name, kingdom, and will? What percent would have been devoted to daily bread — i.e., physical needs? And what percent would have been about coming to understand and know Christ's love more? Brothers and sisters, prayer is not exclusively about any one thing. It is simply talking with God. Prayer can and should go anywhere and everywhere that conversation in general can go. But it should be balanced, particularly in its petitions. Again, let's ask primarily for the inner man over the next month. Let's get in the habit of focusing on God's strength for our spirits, that we might receive His fullness.

D. The fundamental prayer request is for the Holy Spirit, v. 16c

Well, as in the prayer in ch. 1, we see that the fundamental prayer request that Paul makes is for the Holy Spirit. Paul asks first and foremost for the Spirit! And, even more than asking for the inner person, your prayers should be Spirit-saturated. If you can pray to God without mentioning the Spirit, then you aren't praying like the apostle Paul. If you don't ask regularly for the Holy Spirit, then you are missing out on God's greatest gift. The Spirit is God's way of giving Himself. You need the Spirit in order to have Christ, as we will see next week. And you need the Spirit in order to obey God. So ask for the inner man; ask for strengthening; ask according to the riches of God's glory — but above all, ask for the infinite, for the Holy Spirit Himself. If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! Amen.