



ONE CHURCH

EPHESIANS

Ephesians 3:14-21
Lesson 6—The Prayer

January 23, 2022

Introduction

What someone prays for tells us much about the person.

In Luke 18, Jesus contrasts two men as they were praying. The Pharisee crowed to God about how wonderful he was and his incredible feats of piety. All the while, the tax collector, unworthy, begs for mercy.

What do you discover about each?

Or what about Solomon? Solomon comes to the throne to succeed his father, David. The nation has its faction, and it seems on the verge of revolt. God says he can ask for anything. We get to hear what he prays for.

- *“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days.” (1 Kings 3:9-13, ESV)*

Today, in our lesson, we get the opportunity to eavesdrop on Paul while he is praying. It tells us what Paul considered necessary enough to beg God for. Do we have the same prayer on our lips?

Discussion

Paul Praying

This lesson comes as a form of bridge between the two halves of Ephesians.

In the first half, the first three chapters, Paul has shown God’s grand plans, executed through Christ to bring all men under the umbrella of God’s grace, regardless of race or class or distinction.

He told the Ephesians how God was tearing down a wall to create a bridge.

The remainder of the book will concern itself with how we live in the church environment. How does redemption cause us to treat others as the brothers they are, despite significant personal differences.?

But first, he stops and drops to his knees to pray.

- *"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father," (Ephesians 3:14, ESV)*

Posture tells us many things. A man with a hop in his step portrays confidence and delight. Slouched shoulders betray fatigue or despair.

The typical posture for prayer was to stand. Sometimes, we stand for prayers out of respect for God. It is like standing for someone who enters the room to acknowledge their superior position.

When emotions ran deep and raw, a person would fall to the ground in prayer.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus, full of pain and sorrow as the cross gets ever closer, goes to pray. Notice his posture.

- *"And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him." (Mark 14:34-35, ESV)*

He fell to the ground. It is an imposing, passionate cry to God when you fail to your knees. It is important.

It tells us of the passion behind the prayer of Paul.

Paul has a reason for praying. He is fervent about the need to pray for this.

- *"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named," (Ephesians 3:14-15, ESV)*

Paul's reason is the mystery he has just revealed to the Ephesians.

- *"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." (Ephesians 3:6, ESV)*

Paul says that every family is named from the Father. It describes the entirety of God's family in the church. God is not only the one who gives birth to the church but also a father who cares for it.

We are who we are because we bear the imprint of our Father.

What Does Paul Pray For?

Verse 19 tells us much of the content of Paul's prayer.

- *"and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:19, ESV)*

For Paul, the idea of "filling" was necessary. He has used it twice before.

The first describes the time of God's revelation.

- *"as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1:10, ESV)*

God found the right moment to unite all things together. He filled up the time for his purpose.

In the same way, a little later in chapter 1, Paul uses the word again.

- *"which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Ephesians 1:23, ESV)*

The church is filled with Christ and his glory. It comprises the essence of the church.

So here, Paul pleads with God to fill those in the church with what they will need to accomplish the mystery of God in the flesh. The church will fill out God and his plan as they work together for God's purposes.

This verse tells us personally that there is room in all of us for growth. We are not full and will never be completely full.

For many, baptism is the apex of a spiritual journey, much like reaching the summit of Mt. Everest. Instead, it is emptying a life out of personal desires and wishes. In its place, God starts filling life with something else. He fills it with His grace, teaching, compassion, and purposes.

The truth is we have to pour something out for God to fill it with what he desires.

What does Paul want God to pour into the lives of the Ephesians. He lists several things.

Strength in the Inner Man

In verse 16, the supplication begins:

- *"that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being," (Ephesians 3:16, ESV)*

He asks that their inner being be invigorated and given energy.

It is similar to what we experience when we finish a restful vacation. Our minds are relaxed. We are ready for anything.

Paul asks that God give them the spirit to live for Christ and with Christians every day.

But this occurs in the "inner man."

Paul describes man's two parts: the outer, physical man and the inner, spiritual man.

He told the Corinthians:

- *"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." (2 Corinthians 4:16, ESV)*

The body grows old and weak. It is a banana peel body that rots over time. But the spirit, that part that lives on, gets newer day by day.

This term “inner man” that Paul refers to in our lesson. A part of you grows and flourishes despite the external challenges.

C. S. Lewis grappled with this essence of man. He described a person as having three parts. He had first a head, which was the logic with its reason. The opposite is the belly, which is the appetites of a man.

When the appetites want to be satisfied, they refuse to listen to the logic of the head (hence the fourth chocolate chip cookie!). In the middle stands the chest, which for Lewis, represented the heart. It was the seat of purpose. It is the values a man holds dear. When a battle rages between what the mind says is right and what the body says is pleasant, the heart decides what is best.

This is what the inner man does.

Paul says we need that part of us strengthened through the spirit. We will be tempted to do as we please, lash out because of hurt, and ignore others. In those moments, a strong inner man takes charge and says, “here is what God wants.”

This is a Spirit fed motion. The spirit reinforces God’s initial efforts to move his plan even further. God must strengthen. As much as we can do, we will never be full by trying to do it alone.

This comes because of the second.

Christ Dwelling in the Heart

Paul continues in verse 17:

- *“so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,” (Ephesians 3:17, ESV)*

Paul asks for Christ to “dwell” in the hearts of the Ephesians.

Paul uses a particular word. One form means to “live with.” This term has a stronger sense. It describes taking up permanent residence and not leaving.

Our world now uses shared housing for vacation rentals. The biggest company is Airbnb. You rent a house, and you can go and stay for your vacation as if it were your home.

But at the end of your stay, you leave and go back home. Home is where you live. It is your residence, where your roots are.

This is the sense Paul brings to the passage. He asks that Christ move into their lives and never leave.

This comes from the continuing presence of faith. Jesus doesn’t barge into a life but is invited by obedient faith.

The Ground of Love

Paul’s petition continues in the second half of verse 17.

- *“so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,” (Ephesians 3:17, ESV)*

Paul describes what stabilizes Christian living in the church. It is love, and he describes it using images.

One is the foundation of a building. When the foundation is firm, the structure will stand.

We discovered that in a gruesome form in June of 2021. The Champlain Towers South in Surfside, Florida, collapsed, killing several. Investigations revealed that the structural supports at the base of the building were cracked, making them unable to handle the weight and strain of the building itself. When it became unstable, the building fell.

The second image is soil. We know that the earth affects plants. The better the soil, the better the plants will grow.

We had that experience. After the bitter freeze of February 2021, all the mondo grass in a planter box died. We needed to replace it, but we wanted to add the soil.

We went to the garden center, bought the plants, and then asked the clerk, "what kind of soil works best?" He showed us what he would recommend. We went home and dug out the old soil and replaced it with the recommended substitute in which we planted the new grass.

It was amazing the difference. Within a short time, the plants doubled in size and filled the space. We are both astounded at what happens when the soil is better.

Think of these two images—the foundation that holds a structure and the soil which grows the plants.

God's plan has saved people who were so different in so many ways. When you put people together, it begins with excitement, but then the living starts. People with their personalities start to rub up against each other, creating friction.

What happens to the church if it is one donnybrook after another? It soon rips the fabric and it will be destroyed.

But if they rest their spiritual relationships on the love Christ had for them and showed it to those who were different, the church would stand firm. And with that same love, it would grow and flourish.

It is here that Paul brings depth to the words:

- *"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."*
(Ephesians 3:17-19, ESV)

This love is so much greater than a simple greeting on Sunday. It has a dimension that is unable to be measured. Paul wants them to perceive this kind of life. He wants them to understand the profound work of God to make the church what it is.

Yet, the life of Christ cannot be completely understood. It goes beyond knowledge. When you ponder the greatness of what God has done in Christ and in the church, it will drive you to your knees.

Never underestimate the atmosphere of a church, for it will determine life or death.

In these ways, God's plan attains its fulness. It was established by God and revealed by Paul. But something still needed to happen. The people in the church had to be filled with Christ and show it in their lives.

The Close

But Paul closes the prayer with a doxology, a giving of glory to God.

Yet, this is not a way to close a prayer. It is more. It expresses confidence in what will happen in Ephesus with their blended family of Gentiles and Jews.

How can such a dramatic shift in living happen? Scoffers would dismiss it as a pipe dream destined to fail. Others just diminished it as some kind of social experiment.

Yet, that's not what Paul believes:

- *"Now 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." (Ephesians 3:20-21, ESV)*

God can do more than can be done to accomplish his purpose. When he works in the Christian and in the church, the plan of God can be executed. It will not fail because

God is behind it. And if we will let God fill us with his power, we can be his channel for the mystery.

Conclusion

Listen carefully to Paul pray. He is passionate about something too many people take for granted on his knees. He wants God's family in the church not just to survive but to flourish.

For him, it is personal. It is like the saying that the difference between minor surgery and major surgery is simple. Minor surgery is when you have it, and major surgery is when I have it.

That was true about the church. Paul was pouring his life on the altar for it. He was paying the price. No matter who we are, we need more of that in our lives. There is room for the filling of all that Paul speaks of. We all need more strength, more faith, more love. In the filling with the fulness of God, we become the family of God.

This is what makes the church what it should be.

The truth is growing church is comprised of growing people.

For the church to be the church, two critical factors for which Paul prays must happen.

Make room for God to fill you with His Spirit. We will fill our lives with many things, most of them trivial. Give God the space to work in your life.

But we also **make God's love for you the basis of your love for others.** When we let the basis for our decisions and our treatment for our brethren be the love Christ had for us, we will show it to others. This foundation, this soil, produces what God wants in his church.

What would we overhear in your prayers? We already know because it is reflected in your life.