

Proclaiming the Unsearchable Riches of Christ

Family Prayer

Ephesians 3:14-19

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Family Prayer

Scripture

Today we get to the prayer that the Apostle Paul began in Ephesians 3:1. Having started to pray for the believers in verse 1, Paul then broke off into a digression in which he talked about the mystery of the gospel which had been revealed to him (namely, that God was making a new family of believers out of saved Jews and Gentiles), and about the ministry of the gospel to which God had called him. Now, in verse 14, the Apostle Paul gets back to praying for the family of believers.

Let's read about Paul's family prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19:

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19)

Introduction

In his commentary on Ephesians, John Stott writes, “One of the best ways to discover a Christian’s chief anxieties and ambitions is to study the content of his prayers and the intensity with which he prays them. We all pray about what concerns

us, and are evidently not concerned about matters we do not include in our prayers. Prayer expresses desire.”¹

That is so true, isn't it? Prayer expresses the desire of our hearts. When we ask for prayer requests, so many of our prayer requests are for ourselves or health concerns.

How different is the prayer of the Apostle Paul. In the last half of Ephesians 3 he pours out his heart to God in prayer for the believers in Ephesus.

Lesson

Ephesians 3:14-19 shows Paul praying for God to empower the family of believers and grant them a greater knowledge of his extraordinary love for them.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Reason for the Prayer (3:14)
2. The Addressee of the Prayer (3:14-15)
3. The Content of the Prayer (3:16-19)

I. The Reason for the Prayer (3:14)

First, let's look at the reason for the prayer.

In his commentary on Ephesians, Kent Hughes writes:

Perhaps you have the same problem I have—my mind sometimes wanders as I pray. As I begin to make petition I pray for my mother, and as I think about her I envision my family home where she still lives. The vision includes my high school hot rod—a gray-prime red '41 Ford with racing slicks and the pinstriped epigram “*Swing low, sweet chariot*” just under the driver's window. Next, I am behind the wheel heading

¹ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 131.

Proclaiming the Unsearchable Riches of Christ

down Beach Boulevard for Huntington Beach and some bodysurfing! What began so properly and spiritually ends up being a stroll down Memory Lane—or, even worse, a frenetic run through my worries! I need a prayer list!²

Does your mind ever wander when you pray? I know mine does. And so did the mind of the Apostle Paul. To be sure, his wandering mind was much more spiritual than mine. Paul began his prayer in Ephesians 3:1, only to break off into a digression about the mystery of the gospel and his call to the ministry of that gospel in verses 2-13, and then he returned to his prayer in verse 14. This is clear when reading verses 1 and 14 together: “For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...**For this reason I bow my knees before the Father.**” Perhaps Paul needed a prayer list too.

“**For this reason**” is stated in verse 1 and repeated in verse 14. Everything between these verses is a parenthesis. So, “**for this reason**” refers to what Paul wrote prior to chapter 3. Tony Merida writes, “Two chapters of God’s amazing grace preceded chapter 3. Gratitude for the grace of God in chapters 1–2 prompted this prayer in chapter 3. Paul was stunned at God’s grace in saving sinners individually and at his grace in uniting them corporately.”³

When we think about God’s amazing grace, about God who called us, regenerated us, justified us, adopted us, and forgave us, we should go to God in prayer too. Do we?

Before we leave the reason for Paul’s prayer, I want you to notice his posture. Paul said at the end of verse 14, “...**I bow my knees before the Father.**” This may not strike us as

² R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 112–113.

³ Tony Merida, David Platt, and Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), n.p.

unusual, especially if we are accustomed to kneeling when we pray. However, John Stott notes that “the normal posture for prayer among the Jews was standing. In Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Publican both men stood to pray (Lk. 18:11, 13). So, kneeling was unusual.” The question I ask, then, is: *why was it unusual to kneel in prayer?* Stott says, “It indicated an exceptional degree of earnestness, as when Ezra confessed Israel’s sins of penitence, Jesus fell on his face to the ground in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Stephen faced the ordeal of martyrdom.”⁴ The Bible actually does not prescribe a particular posture for prayer. It is possible to pray standing, kneeling, walking, sitting, and even lying down.

The point is that Paul’s posture of kneeling indicated “an exceptional degree of earnestness.” We should also be earnest when we pray. Let us never pray in a flippant or casual manner.

II. The Addressee of the Prayer (3:14-15)

Second, notice the addressee of the prayer.

Paul wrote in verses 14-15, **“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.”** Paul was praying to our Father. Paul was making a deliberate play on the words in the original Greek, because **Father** is *pater* and **family** is *patria*. Because all believers are in Christ, they are sons and daughters of God the Father. They are united to Christ, and they are united to one another.

III. The Content of the Prayer (3:16-19)

And third, let’s examine the content of the prayer.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 132–133.

Proclaiming the Unsearchable Riches of Christ

Paul prayed four petitions for believers.

A. To Be Strengthened with Power (3:16)

First, Paul prayed that believers would be strengthened with power.

Paul prayed so earnestly for the Ephesians because he knew that they desperately needed something that can come only from God: power. So, Paul prayed in verse 16, **“...that according to the riches of his glory he [that is, God] may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”**

The reason why some of us struggle so much with sin is that we are relying on our own power to deal with it. We think that if we think it through on our own we will figure out a solution. Some of us struggle with relationships because we rely on our own power to deal with it.

But, dear friends, do we ever go to God earnestly? Do we realize that we are completely helpless and powerless apart from God? This is vividly illustrated in a story titled “Palm Monday” that was recounted in Tony Merida’s commentary:

The donkey awakened, his mind still savoring the after-glow of the most exciting day of his life. Never before had he felt such a rush of pleasure and pride.

He walked into town and found a group of people by the well. “I’ll show myself to them,” he thought.

But they didn’t notice him. They went on drawing their water and paid him no mind.

“Throw your garments down,” he said crossly. “Don’t you know who I am?”

They just looked at him in amazement. Someone slapped him across the tail and ordered him to move.

“Miserable heathens!” he muttered to himself. “I’ll just go to the market where the good people are. They will remember me.”

But the same thing happened. No one paid any attention to the donkey as he strutted down the main street in front of the market place.

“The palm branches! Where are the palm branches?” he shouted. “Yesterday, you threw palm branches!”

Hurt and confused, the donkey returned home to his mother.

“Foolish child,” she said gently. “Don’t you realize that without him, you are just an ordinary donkey?”⁵

Apart from Christ we can do nothing (cf. John 15:5). That is why we need to **be strengthened with power through his Spirit in our inner being.**

B. To Have Christ Dwelling in Them Through Faith (3:17a)

Second, Paul prayed that believers would have Christ dwelling in them through faith.

Paul prayed in verse 17a, “...so that **Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.**” Why did Paul pray this? Doesn’t Christ already dwell in the hearts of believers? Yes, he does. However, as the commentator Charles Hodge rightly observed, “The indwelling of Christ is a thing of degrees.”⁶

John Stott elaborates on Paul’s meaning in this petition, “What Paul asks for his readers is that they may be ‘fortified, braced, invigorated,’ that they may ‘know the strength of the Spirit’s inner reinforcement’ and may lay hold ever more firmly

⁵ Tony Merida, David Platt, and Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, n.p.

⁶ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1858), 186.

‘by faith’ of this divine strength, this divine indwelling.”⁷

Paul’s use of the Greek word for **dwel** (*katoikesai*) is important. It means “a certain, fixed and durable dwelling, as distinguished from *paroikéō*, to sojourn, dwell in a place temporarily.”⁸ It carries the idea of a permanent resident rather than a temporary, or short-lived, resident.

D. A. Carson illustrates the difference between a permanent and a temporary resident. When Christ takes up residence in a believer, it is like a couple who purchase a home that needs a lot of work. Over time, they clean it up, repair it, and eventually they say, “This house has been shaped to our needs and taste and we really feel comfortable.” Then Carson says,

When Christ by his Spirit takes up residence within us, he finds the moral equivalent of mounds of trash, black and silver wallpaper, and a leaking roof. He sets about turning this residence into a place appropriate for him, a home in which he is comfortable.... Make no mistake: when Christ first moves into our lives, he finds us in very bad repair. It takes a great deal of power to change us; and that is why Paul prays for power. [Christ is] transforming us into a house that pervasively reflects his own character.⁹

Christ lives in every believer. And he is working in every believer to make him or her more like himself.

C. *To Know Christ’s Love (3:17b-19a)*

Third, Paul prayed that believers would know Christ’s

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 135.

⁸ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁹ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 186–187.

love.

Paul prayed in verses 17b-19a, “...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.**” This is an amazing petition!

Paul acknowledged that believers are **rooted and grounded in** love, that is, in the love of Christ. Kent Hughes observed that years ago Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse pointed out that love is intrinsic to all aspects of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22. He said, “*Love* is the key. *Joy* is love singing. *Peace* is love resting. *Long-suffering* is love enduring. *Kindness* is love’s touch. *Goodness* is love’s character. *Faithfulness* is love’s habit. *Gentleness* is love’s self-forgetfulness. *Self-control* is love holding the reins.”¹⁰ There is no fruit of the Spirit without love! Believers are rooted and grounded in this love.

And then the Apostle Paul went on to pray that believers would **have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth** of this love. Commentators struggle to interpret exactly what the Apostle Paul meant here. Nevertheless, as Hughes notes that these dimensions can be said to suggest:

1) A love which is *wide* enough to embrace the world. John 3:16 tells us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

2) A love which is *long* enough to last forever (1 Corinthians 13:8). As Spurgeon said, “It is so long that your old age cannot wear it out, so long your continual tribulation cannot exhaust it, your successive temptations shall not drain it dry;

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 116.

Proclaiming the Unsearchable Riches of Christ

like eternity itself it knows no bounds.”¹¹

3) A love which is *high* enough to take sinners to Heaven (1 John 3:1, 2).

4) A love which is *deep* enough to take Christ to the very depths to reach the lowest sinner (Philippians 2:8).¹²

Paul wanted believers **to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge**. That is, Paul wanted believers to *experience* the love of Christ personally in deep and profound ways.

D. *To Be Filled with All the Fullness of God (3:19b)*

And finally, Paul prayed that believers would be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul prayed in verse 19b, “...that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” This is a staggering prayer! How may any believer be filled with all the fullness of God? We are finite. God is infinite. And yet Paul prayed that believers **may be filled with all the fullness of God**. There is no way, this side of heaven, we can fathom that truth. We can only believe it and praise God for it.

John MacArthur writes that J. Wilbur Chapman often told of the testimony given by a certain man in one of his meetings:

I got off at the Pennsylvania depot as a tramp, and for a year I begged on the streets for a living. One day I touched a man on the shoulder and said, “Hey, mister, can you give me a dime?” As soon as I saw his face I was shocked to see that it was my own father. I said, “Father, Father, do you

¹¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Volume 12 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1973), 478.

¹² R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 117.

know me?” Throwing his arms around me and with tears in his eyes, he said, “Oh my son, at last I’ve found you! I’ve found you. You want a dime? Everything I have is yours.” Think of it. I was a tramp. I stood begging my own father for ten cents, when for 18 years he had been looking for me to give me all that he had.¹³

That is a somewhat inadequate illustration of what God wants to do for believers. Paul prayed that believers would realize all of the incredible riches in God, and that they would rejoice in all that God is and has for them.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Ephesians 3:14-19, let us pray as Paul has prayed.

As we pray, let us pray for ourselves and for others:

- (1) To be strengthened with power so that we might do all that Christ calls to do,
- (2) To have Christ dwelling in us so that he might make us more and more like him,
- (3) To know Christ’s love so that we might comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of this love, and
- (4) To be filled with all the fullness of God so that we may know him better now and in eternity.

May this kind of prayer be characteristic of each one of us who knows Christ as our Lord and Savior. Amen.

¹³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 111.

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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