



Sermon Title

Series: The Grand Plan of the Glorious God

Passionate Prayer for the Glorious Church

Ephesians 3:14-21

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No denying that Paul was a brilliant man – chosen of God, rescued out of life of religiosity to declare the eternal mysteries and wisdom of God, chosen to develop and to articulate most of the main doctrines of our faith, to write so much of the New Testament... but Paul was no dry theologian. Paul was fervent. He was zealous. He was passionate – passionate about the truth, passionate about the gospel, passionate about holy and righteous living, passionate about the church, passionate about Christ. The very passion that he had for Christ and for His church -- for the church to be all that God has made it to be -- this is what fuels Paul's prayer that we are going to look at this morning. So as we start, the first thing I want for us to do is to glean

Some Principles Regarding Prayer

Paul writes: For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named (Eph 3:14-15) There are chiefly three things that I want for us to notice here.

1. The attitude of his heart is one of humility and submission and awe before God. Paul is compelled to pray is because He is astounded and astonished over God's plan of redemption by which through the blood of Jesus Christ, God has redeemed for Himself a people from every tribe nation and tongue to the praise of His glory and for the glory of His Son whom He has made the head over all things. He prays because of the glories of the mystery of Christ and of His church that has been revealed to him and Paul prays because He is blown away by the glorious purpose that God has for His church – having made the church, out of Jews and Gentiles, one new man, a new humanity – the Kingdom of God, the family of God, and the Temple of the Living God.
2. Paul has earnestness in his heart. Paul is blood earnest in his praying before the Lord. This is not a casual kind of praying, a short obligatory prayer, but one of great importance to him before God. That Paul is bowing is noteworthy. The most common posture for Jews as they prayed was to pray standing. Bowing the knees before the Lord is a picture of a heart that is

passionate and burdened, that is deeply and intensely burning for the thing for which Paul is praying. This church and the display of God's glory in it meant much to him.

3. Paul is calling upon the Father. This is not just any spiritual power that may be floating around in space. This is a particular God — the only God — and this God is personal and relational. Paul calls upon the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named -- that is the right reading of this verse contextually. There is play on words in the Greek right here that does not translate well into English, but this is the gist of it. Some members of this spiritual family are on earth and some are in heaven -- the church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven. He is calling upon a Father who deeply cares for His church. As Paul comes he has in mind

Two Main Petitions for the Ephesians: Paul has in mind two main intertwined petitions for the Ephesians and by extension, the church of God, us. He prays that the church would be strengthened with power through God's Spirit in the inner being and that the church would have the power to comprehend the limitless extent of the love of Christ. Let's look at the first petition:

1. To be strengthened with power through God's Spirit in the inner being. Paul prays first that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, (Eph 3:16)

He prays for spiritual strength for the church. Notice how it works. He prays that out of the glorious riches of Father God we would be strengthened in our inner being. Why? Because there is no strength innate in us. Because as soon as we try to rely upon our own strength, our own flesh, and our own ability, we are setting ourselves up for failure because every kind of strength or wisdom that we may think we have in ourselves is weak and worthless for spiritual life and well-being. But here we see in contrast the riches of God's glory, the measureless immensity of God, the great reservoir of grace and power that is in Him. Paul is asking God to answer this prayer out of His enormous riches, His inexhaustible resources – that he would strengthen us by His Spirit in the inner being.

I want us to see how vastly different this is from the popular teachers of today who talk about looking within yourself, believing in yourself, discovering the champion in you and on and on. Paul understands clearly that the power that we need is not to be found in ourselves. The power we need must come from somewhere outside of us, must come from God. Paul is praying that the grace of God would be poured out in our hearts anew and afresh by His Holy Spirit, that we would be **strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being**. What does that mean?

Well, in a culture that is far more concerned with preserving our outer man that is wasting away, Paul is desiring that our inner man, our soul would be renewed day by day. Paul is praying for God to infuse our inner man with life, with hope, with strength, out of His abundant grace...

so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. At first, this petition may seem out of place. If we are truly saved, hasn't Christ already taken up residence in us by His Spirit when we believed? The answer to that is yes, so what is the point of Paul's prayer here? The word that is translated as "dwell" is a strong one – it carries the idea of taking up residence in the heart as believers trust Him, of making our hearts fit for His home. When Paul prays that Christ will dwell in the Ephesian Christians through faith, Paul is praying that their faith in Christ will grow and that they will thus increasingly experience the powerful effects of Christ's living in them.

Don Carson offers a great illustration of what this means. He tells us to picture a couple that has finally scraped together enough money for a down-payment to buy their first house. They buy it, recognizing full well that it needs a fair bit of work. They can't stand the black and silver wallpaper in the master bedroom. There are mounds of trash in the basement. The kitchen was designed for the convenience of the plumber, not the cook. The roof leaks in a couple of places, and the insulation barely meets minimum standards. The electrical box is too small, the lighting in the bathroom is poor, the heat exchanger in the furnace is corroded. But still, it is this young couple's first home, and they are grateful.

The months slip past, then the years. The black and silver wallpaper has been replaced with tasteful pastel patterns. The couple has remodeled their kitchen, doing much of the work themselves. The roof no longer leaks, and the furnace has been replaced with a more powerful unit that also includes a central air conditioner. Better yet, as the family grows, this couple completes a couple of extra rooms in the basement and adds a small wing to serve as a study and sewing room. The grounds are neatly trimmed and boast a dazzling rock garden. Twenty-five years after the purchase, the husband one day remarks to his wife, 'You know, I really like it here. This place suits us. Everywhere we look we see the results of our own labor. This house has been shaped to our needs and taste, and I really feel comfortable.'

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. There will be a lot of cleaning to do, quite a few repairs, and some much-needed expansion. But his aim is clear: he wants to take up residence in our hearts, as we exercise faith in him. When people take up long-term residence somewhere, their presence eventually characterizes that dwelling.

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. He asks that God may so strengthen us by his power in our inner being that Christ may genuinely take up residence within us, transforming us into a house that pervasively reflects his own character."

This is exactly what Paul is praying for when he prays **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.** There is a transformation that accompanies the indwelling in our hearts through faith. Colossians 3:5-17 gives us a great picture of what this looks like. Listen, put your eyes on it, and consider these words prayerfully and soul searchingly: **(Col 3:5-17)**

Do you see what Paul is after? In clear, powerful, certain terms, these words spell out the transformation that Paul expects to take place in the lives of believers. Paul is praying for Christians like us, people who already have received the Lord Jesus, who have received His righteousness, His forgiveness, who have Him as our mediator with God. He is praying that Christ and His character would shape every area of our lives. That by trusting in God more consistently, more confidently, more fully, Christ may dwell in our hearts more fully. Unless we are strengthened by power in our inner man, we will not live in the manner that is described in Colossians 3. We will make excuses – it's our temperament, the pressures that we face, our family and friends, it's just the way you are...but none of those excuses can hold weight in the light of the power available to us in Christ, by the Spirit of God.

But, as Paul is praying we need to understand something -- this is not prayer minus the appropriation of all that has been for our growth. It is not prayer to the exclusion of the use of the means of grace that God has given for us that we may grow in Christ. It is praying that the means of grace would be fruitful in the Ephesians, in the church. Saving faith is a gift from God, but God grows our faith through His means of grace and we must pursue them. Spiritual life and growth is a miracle which only God can give. Yet we can pursue the means of grace which grows our faith, which are the Word, personal worship, prayer, fellowship, and corporate worship.

So this first petition is a prayer for power – power to be holy, power to think, act, walk and talk in ways that are fully pleasing to Christ, power to strengthen moral courage and strengthen the will, power to walk in thankfulness, power to be content in plenty or in lack, power to be humble, power to be gentle, power to discern what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise, power to trust and obey, power to grow in the likeness of Christ so that Christ will be at home in us and so that our lives would be

rooted and grounded in love, (Eph 3:17)

A heart in which Christ is at home by faith will be rooted and grounded in love. It will be motivated and characterized by love. What did Jesus say was the most important commandment? **(Mar 12:29-31)**

Paul mixes metaphors here. The first is an agricultural one. To be rooted in love is the idea of being deeply tied into the soil of God's love for us, to be immersed in God's love for us so that we are able to love God supremely and others unconditionally. The degree to which you can love like that is directly tied to the depth of your understanding of the love of God, the depth of your roots. A tree with deep roots is hard to move. Paul then uses a building metaphor. He talks about being grounded, or establishing a foundation for your life on the love of God, and the way you build upon the rock of God's love for His people is by comprehending the limitless extent of the love of Christ. That is why Paul prays that we may have

2. Power to comprehend the limitless extent of the love of Christ. Paul prays that the church 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 3:18-19)

How can you know something which cannot be known? How can you define something which is so great that it cannot be defined? What is the point of talking about measurements if it is immeasurable and eternal? Though this love of Christ is itself beyond all computation, and can never be truly measured, Paul desires that we would know the love of Christ in reality. I am not sure what Paul had in mind when he spoke of the breadth, length, height and depth of the love of Christ. Perhaps he was speaking metaphorically, but it does give us four compass points by which to consider the love of Christ.

Consider the breadth of His love. We have already seen that it includes Jew and Gentile, but the Word of God makes clear the scope of Christ's love in this scene in Scripture: **And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, (Rev 5:9) In chapter 7 we find out the number of the redeemed is a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9-10)** This is the breadth of Christ's love.

Consider the length of His love. Christ's love to us began in eternity. It did not have its beginning when we were saved or when we first heard the gospel. Christ's love was there before the beginning of time. The love of Christ for His own is from eternity to eternity. It began in eternity, and it continues through eternity. There are no interruptions in it. This "length" is

an unbroken line. Whatever may happen, it goes on; it is not a variable, it is a constant. It does not suddenly stop, and then start again. It is a love that never gives us up or turns us loose. The Apostle Paul expresses this truth in these words: **(Rom 8: 38-39)**.

Consider the depth of His love. As we consider the depth we can do nothing better than to read what the Apostle wrote to the Philippians in the second chapter. **(Phil 2:5-11)** This is the measure of the depth of His love. He came from heaven, He went down to the depths of the iniquity and sin of this earth, laid down His life and rose again for His people – though we were sinners.

Consider the height of His love. Something of this height is seen in the fact that He died not only that we might be forgiven; He died to make us holy, to make us children of God, sons of God, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ. He has made us part of Himself, of His own body. That is why we were "made alive with Him" and "raised with Him" and are "seated in the heavenly places" with Him. The love of Christ is broad enough to include the nations, long enough to last from eternity to eternity, deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and high enough to exalt us to heaven.

That is love in which to root your soul; on which to build your life. Paul wants us to grasp this with all of the saints. He wants us to know this love, to be gripped by it. He wants it to fill our minds and hearts with wonder. He wants us to experience, to know in your soul the love of Christ and you need the power of God to know that. It must be a work of God in our souls to grasp that love – it is unknowable.

And look, this is not an individualistic thing, Paul is praying that the whole church, everyone who faithfully names the name of Christ, would come to grasp the greatness of the love of Christ. He wants us together, as the saints of God, to know this love, to experience this love. He wants this to be a bodily, family experience – to know and to express the love of Christ. He wants this so

that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:19) So that you may have a life that is immersed in and filled with the life of Christ. This is really just Paul's way of saying – I am praying all of this for you so that you will be spiritually mature.

Do you see why the comprehension, the grasp of Christ's love to us is so important? It is because of what the knowledge of Christ's love does in us. **(2Co 5:14-15)**

There is no other sufficient encouragement to holiness like the love of God in Christ. It is knowing this love and responding to this love that is the power behind the transformation by the Spirit for which Paul is praying. It is the power of a greater affection for Christ that drives out sin from our lives and motivates holy and righteous living. The real hope of spiritual

maturity is not merely theology, is not education, is not years of experience or religious traditions – it is grasping the greatness of Christ’s love and doing it together as the church. He wants every Christian together in the body to know the love of God in Jesus Christ. It takes us together as believers to know and to comprehend and to express this love of God in Jesus Christ. This seems like almost too much to pray, doesn’t it? But don’t miss the

The Two-Fold Confidence Behind Paul’s Prayer The confidence behind Paul’s prayer is clearly expressed in this doxology: **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. (Eph 3:20-21)**

1. God is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. This is truly a staggering, mind-blowing thought. If we truly believe that God is all-powerful, if we believe that all power is in Him, then there are no degrees of difficulty with Him. A stubborn will, a clinging sin, a cold heart are no more match for God than the Red Sea or cold Judean tomb. We the Psalmist, we can sing: **(Psa 21:13)**

God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think not only because He is mighty, but also because He is generous and kind. He delights to give good gifts to His children. Jesus said: **If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!** (Mat 7:11) Paul wrote in light of the sacrifice of Christ to save us: **He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:32)** All things that may be necessary for our well-being, these things He will give freely and graciously.

Paul’s praying reflects the greatness of the God he proclaimed. This needs to shape how we pray; it must characterize our own seeking of God. Our prayer needs to be deepened and strengthened by the awareness of the power of God and His graciousness to His children. Paul was convinced that God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think and he was convinced that

2. It is God’s will that He be glorified in the church and in Jesus Christ. The church is the glory of God revealed on the earth; it is the primary theatre of the revelation of God’s glory to man. God’s glory is revealed through His church, in us, as we trust with all of our soul in Christ alone for salvation. He is glorified as we are joined together as the people of God to offer to Him spiritual sacrifices, worshipping Him, serving Him by serving His church, witnessing to Him, discipling one another and discipling the nations. God is glorified when there is a holy unity in His people born of spiritual maturity flowing from the work of God in our lives to strengthen our inner man and make us to know the love of Christ. God’s glory is at stake in us so Paul has confidence that God will hear his prayer.

How we must guard against the subtle temptation to desire good things for merely selfish purposes. How easy it is to desire the power of God to operate in our lives so that we become more holy or more grasp the love of Christ so that we may be thought of as spiritual giants or merely for our own self-improvement. The root of that sin is pride that desires to make use of God for our own gain, to usurp God's place, and to make much of ourselves, a spiritually justifiable -- we think -- self-absorption.

We must seek to come before God in prayer with both an immediate desire to have the thing for which we have asked, but also with an ultimate desire that God would be glorified through it. This is the very heart of Paul's expression of praise. He prays that there might be glory to God, both in the church as the church progressively grows in obedience and pleases God and honors Him and glories in Him as the center of her existence, and also in Jesus Christ as Christ is exalted in His people as they find supreme satisfaction in Him and as He dwells in His body in all fullness.

The clear question for us is – Do we pray in this manner? Do we pray with this motive and this perspective? Is this the substance of our prayers or are our prayers mastered by the outer man?

We are a new people, transformed by the power of Almighty God. Are we living according to this truth?

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