



DEPTHS OF LOVE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 3:14-21
Tenth Message
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If we are honest, we have to admit that prayer is a puzzling topic. We readily grant the supreme importance of prayer, yet we are often ignorant as to its working and bankrupt as to its quality.

Prayer has always fascinated me, since it was through the vehicle of prayer that I made my five-year journey to faith in Christ. When I was 11 years old, I saw a John Wayne movie, "The High and the Mighty." The Duke's airplane was running out of gas and ready to fall from the sky, and he began to pray, saying, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." The thought occurred to me that I ought to begin praying too, so that very night I got down on my knees and prayed to God to bless my family. I have continued praying every night since. In junior high school, I uttered that well known prayer, "Help!" in the midst of various crises. In high school, as I felt more freedom in my prayers, I began asking God for things like good grades, a girlfriend, and success in athletics. In my junior year, I reviewed my life one day and concluded I was the luckiest young man on the face of the earth because God had heard my prayers. I prayed for about half an hour, enraptured with the love of God. Later that year, at the first Bible study I attended, held on the 12th floor of a Union Bank building at the intersection of Highways 101 and 405 in the San Fernando Valley, I found Christ.

That was 31 years ago. Now I am set apart as a servant of Christ, and I must confess that I find prayer a tough discipline. I thrive on activity. For me, being still and quiet is about as hard as teaching my dog to stop wagging her tail. Even when I find time for prayer I am easily distracted. And my mind often comes up blank as to what to pray for.

In this great letter to the Ephesians, where Paul expounds on the wonderful mysteries of Christ, I find it instructive that the apostle pauses to pray three different times. In the text we will study this morning Paul will help us overcome three of the difficulties we face when it comes to prayer: our motivation to pray, the content of our prayers, and the confidence we should have in our prayers.

We will begin by looking at the apostle's motivation.

I. The Motivation For Paul's Prayer 3:14-16a

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, by power...

(a) The Revelation of God's Plan

Ignorance, I find, is what stifles our motivation to pray. We are not sure what God is up to, and this makes us timid when we bring our requests to him in prayer.

In the words, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father," Paul is referring to the revelation of verses 1 through 13 of this chapter, which refer to the mystery that unlocks the gateway to prayer. Knowing what God is up to — he is calling out a people for his name from among the Gentiles — Paul is motivated to pray. In the OT, David prayed, "...you have made a revelation

to your servant, therefore your servant has found courage [literally: "heart"] to pray this prayer to Thee" (2 Sam. 7:27). God is the one who initiates prayer. The way to motivate yourself to pray, therefore, is to read the Bible and see what God is up to, and listen to the testimonies of Christians and discover what God is doing.

There is a second thing that impedes us in prayer — a wrong view of God's character.

(b) The Revelation of God's Character

Ignorance impedes motivation, but even more damaging to our motivation is a wrong view of God's character. How we view our Father in heaven affects how we approach him. Our access to him is often hindered by a damaged relationship with our earthly father because we tend to think of God in terms of our natural fathers.

When I was growing up, my own father was the silent type who never said much. My mother used this to her advantage in disciplining us. Whenever we got in trouble, the word that instilled fear in us was, "Wait till your father gets home!" On one occasion my sister and I accidentally scratched a beautifully lacquered table top with Christmas ornaments. My mother sent us to our rooms with the cry, "Wait till your father gets home!" ringing in our ears. After what seemed like an eternity, we heard my father's car arrive home, and then the sound of his steps in the hallway. A few minutes later, my mother put her head in the bedroom door and said, "I didn't tell him!" As a matter of fact, she never told him anything we did wrong. But this led to my practice of always approaching my father indirectly, through my mother. This carried over to school also. I could hardly approach a teacher or a coach to ask for anything without breaking into tears. I find this is what many people do in their relationship to God: They approach him like they approach their fathers.

This leads to many wrong views of God. Let's look at a few of the more common caricatures. Some people think of God as a Scrooge-like character — a crotchety, penny-pinching book-keeper who is forever reviewing accounts, concerned only for what is owed him. People who think of God in these terms tend to avoid him because they don't want to hear about their debts.

Others view God as a busy executive who lives by the book, The One-Minute Manager. If they manage to get his ear for a moment, they had better be brief, because they are but a very small cog in the vast machinery of the universe. They pass on their requests in short memo form, never taking the time to probe his mind and heart, let alone adore him.

Others view God as an irrelevant, ethereal pope who is occupied with other-worldly concerns like harps, organs, angels, choirs, missionaries, stained glass and the like. They never share with God the details of their life. Their prayers are businesslike: "Bless us this day. Bless my wife and children. Amen."

And some view God as a hard-as-flint, righteous judge whose sole concern is upholding his holy law without showing partiality to anyone. They think God is like Javear, the Constable in Les

Miserables, a compassionless lover of law and order. Their role as lawbreakers, of course, is like that of the fugitive, Prisoner Number 24601. Javear's words hound them as they seek to escape once more,

*“There out in the darkness
A fugitive running
Fallen from grace
God be my witness
I never shall yield
Till we come face to face.*

*And so it has been and so it's written
On the doorway to paradise
That those who falter
And those who fall
Must pay
The price.*

*Men like you can never change,
Number 24601.”*

Worst of all, perhaps, some of you have grown up in homes ruled over by alcoholic fathers. Rather than protecting and loving you, your fathers abused you. Naturally, you find it hard to come to the Heavenly Father in prayer.

With images like these in our minds, no wonder we lack motivation to pray.

The very good news of this text, however, is that God is none of the things we have described in these caricatures. God is not a miser, a busy executive, an ethereal pope, or a severe judge. Most certainly he is not an abusive father. What is he like, then? He is our Papa, says Paul, a caring and generous Father: “I bow my knees before the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.”

To a Jew, this imagery would evoke fond memories of Israel's days in the wilderness. Describing this Father, Moses wrote,

**“He found him a desert land,
And in the howling waste of a wilderness;
He encircled him, He cared for him,
He guarded him as the pupil of his eye.
Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
That hovers over its young,
He spread His wings and caught them,
He carried them on His pinions.”** (Deut. 32:10-11)

These beautiful verses describe the great scandal of history: the fact that the Creator God humbled himself and came down from heaven to dwell in a tent in order to care for Israel in the wilderness. He carried them, fed them and delighted in them as the apple of his eye.

But this relationship, once unique to Israel, is now open to all the families of the earth. Knowing this should motivate us to pray to God: He named us; he cares for us. I enjoy watching some of you high tech engineers changing diapers and wiping slobber off your jackets, proudly smiling all the while over your newborn. This is what our Heavenly Father is like. He has named us, and he cares for us as a doting father cares for his newborn.

And he is a generous Father, too. Paul prays, “May he give you power ‘according to the riches of His glorious might...’” God is not a tightwad who scrimps on his resources. He is generous, even lavish, sparing no expense with those whom he loves. Don't just ask God for a loan when you want something, there-

fore. Ask him to underwrite everything. He will give you “according to the riches of His glorious might,” not “out of” his riches. Knowing this should motivate you to go to him in prayer for everything you need.

It took me 23 years to discover that my father was a generous man. Following our marriage, Emily and I saved about half the amount we needed for a car. After much hesitation, I drummed up the courage to write and ask my father for a loan of \$1,700, the amount we needed. I promised to pay him back \$70 a month until I had paid off the loan. He called me on the phone and said no problem. So I bought the car and paid him back as we had agreed. A couple of years later I asked him to lend us half the amount of a down payment on a condominium, under the same conditions. Again he agreed. Some years later we wanted to move to a house and I called him up again. I asked him if we could use the money he had lent us to get into a new home, thus postponing my repayment plan. “What loan?” he asked. “Just keep it!” And all the while I had been pressuring myself about that loan. I need hardly say I never again called my mother to intercede for me!

How many years we waste before we learn that our Heavenly Father is a kind and loving Papa! Have you discovered that your Father is generous and he wants to lavish his wealth on you? Or do you still have a wrong view of him?

What is it that draws us in prayer to God? The Father has revealed what he is doing, and he has revealed his care and generosity toward us.

This brings us to the content of the apostle's prayers.

II. The Content of Paul's Prayer 3:16b-19

(a) Strength and Stability: For Christ To Take Residence In You

...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; being rooted and grounded in love...

The apostle desires that the full measure of God's power be given to believers by the Holy Spirit.

Where is the power of God manifest? We hear much today about the Spirit “coming in power.” Some hold that the sign of the Spirit is wonders and miracles. This, of course, was true in the miracles of Jesus and his disciples. But Paul does not pray here for these signs because signs are only the first order of things. The miracles of Jesus were visual aids from the old creation that merely picture for us what he wants to do in the new creation. If we remain in the old, we will grieve him.

God still does miracles, yes, but we should be seeking for the reality that these miracles portray. I want the miracle that was done for the blind man — the restoration of his sight — to be done for me because I am blind spiritually. I want my lameness, my enslavement to my addictions healed. I want to hear the words, “Rise up and walk,” so that my will can be set free to live in newness of life. I want my leprosy of sin, which makes me an outcast, to be cleansed by the blood of Christ so that I may be welcomed into the Holy of Holies. Paul himself had a physical “thorn in the flesh,” an ailment that he asked to be delivered from. Yet he was not healed. This was why he wrote that God's power was perfected in his weakness, in his human frailty. So here the apostle prays that we will experience the full measure of God's power in the inner man.

And through what means? The apostle says, “...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...” It is the task of the

Holy Spirit to make the person of Christ more and more at home in our hearts until they become his permanent abode. The Spirit reveals to us the glory of Christ in order that we might cease living for ourselves and allow him to live in us. John Stott puts it this way, “may He settle down in your heart, and from his throne there both control and strengthen you.” We cannot experience the full measure of Christ’s strength if we have not made him Lord. We can’t have his strength without ethics. Allow him to enter every part of you so that he can make you his permanent abode.

The result will be stability in your life as you are “rooted and grounded in love.” You will have deep roots and firm foundations. Stability comes from where you place your center of gravity. Where is yours? The paranoid Saul in the OT, says one commentator, “placed his center of gravity outside himself, thus he could not retain his equilibrium and made himself completely dependent on what took place outside himself.” Saul’s equilibrium was dependent upon how David was doing at any given time. Psychologists call this “co-dependency.” Paul’s counsel is, cut the strings and let Christ take up full residence in your heart. Then others cannot affect you because your center of gravity is in the Lord.

Do you want the power of God? Do you want stability? Then let go and let Christ enter into every area of your life. His strength is available only in the midst of holy ethics, so allow him to have full Lordship in everything.

This leads to step two.

(b) Comprehension: For You To Take Your Place In the Temple

...being rooted and grounded in love that you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...

Have you ever thought you needed strength in order to comprehend something?

The word “comprehend” is used as a military term in the Greek translation of the OT. It means “to overtake, seize or capture an enemy.” The word conveys the idea of active pursuit with a single focus until you reach or attain something (cf. Josh. 8:19; 11:10, 19:47; Psalm 7:5; 18:3). For example, the psalmist wrote, “I pursued my enemies and overtook them, And I did not turn back until they were consumed” (Psalm 18:37).

Paul is saying that it takes tremendous inner strength to comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love, just as it takes a huge telescope and a knowledge of physics to begin to comprehend the size of the universe.

How can we comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love, which is an abstract thing? I used to ask one of my daughters when she was little, “How much do you love me?” She would say, “This much,” throwing apart her arms, the only equipment she had for measurement, to demonstrate her love for me. “Only that much?” I would respond. Then she would wrap her arms around me and squeeze me until I would stick out my tongue. But that, of course, did not begin to measure her love for me.

We have the same problem understanding Christ’s love for us. We lack the capacity to measure it. This is why Paul helps us here by giving a measuring standard to give the “breadth and length and height and depth.” We find the same terminology in Ezekiel 40. The prophet had a vision of the new temple and the new city to come, and a man with a measuring rod was measuring the width, length, height, and depth, the wall, gates and entrances, the whole city. In the book of Revelation, we find the

same concept: “And the one who spoke with me had a gold measuring rod to measure the city, and its gates and its wall” (Rev. 21:15). In the NT, we discover that this new city is made up of living stones, as the apostle Peter wrote, “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5). Putting these two concepts together, it may be that the dimensions of the city hold the secret to the dimensions of God’s love in Christ.

If you want to comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love, examine one of those living stones. You will discover that God’s love has length: He has patience with people; he waits a long time for them to repent. God’s love has depth: He went into the depths of hell to rescue sinners. God’s love has height: His love lifts us all the way to heaven. As you examine one of these living stones your heart will begin to be enlarged as you see the love of Christ. So measure the temple. Go into every room. Examine a stone. Then examine another and another. Travel to a foreign country and examine other living stones. Then you will have an idea of the breadth of God’s love for the people of all the nations. Then add to it all of history. As you do, your heart will keep expanding with the love of Christ.

I have a friend named Arthur whose testimony of the love of Christ has touched me deeply. He told me that one night he awoke to find what he felt was the presence of Christ in his room. Christ’s love was so real and so sweet that at that moment he gave his life to the Savior. He became a free, stable man. In 1989, we traveled to Romania to minister together. One afternoon we were sitting in a tent on a hillside with some Romanian brothers and sisters, all of us hiding from the secret police who wanted to question us. There in that tent God came among us. As we looked into the eyes of our Romanian friends we were melted in holy love. I asked Arthur to say something, but he was so overcome all he could say was, “This is love twice.” The love that he had found that night in his bedroom a few years earlier he now found multiplied in the faces of our friends.

But we were to experience this love yet again. In 1990 we went on our church’s men’s retreat together. Among the 500 men attending was my 82-year-old father, who committed his life to Christ at the end of the retreat. The following week we had a celebration dinner with 20 men. During the dinner, I looked at Arthur and saw that his eyes were filled with tears of joy. “There is a third heaven,” I said.

So God takes up residence in us; then we take our place in the temple; and finally, God fills all in all.

(c) Glory: For God To Take His Place In the Temple

...that you may be filled up to all God’s fullness. (3:16-19)

In 1 Kings, we read that when the construction of the glorious temple was completed and every last stone was in place, the ark was brought into the Holy of Holies, then “the cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8:10-11). This is a visual aid of what is going to happen on the great day when the temple will descend from heaven and God will take his place in it. He will fill out the whole temple; the temple will fill out the whole city; and the city will fill out the whole creation, until God fills all in all. Then the words of Isaiah will be fulfilled,

**“For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
As the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9)**

C. S. Lewis wrote about this in *The Weight of Glory*,

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side

of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.

What should Christians pray for? We should pray for the full measure of the strength of the Spirit, to comprehend the love of Christ, in order to be filled with the fullness of God.

Lastly, we come to the apostle's confidence in prayer.

III. The Confidence of Paul's Prayer 3:20,21

Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power working within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

(a) The Omnipotence of God

Paul says he had confidence in his prayers because the omnipotent God is able to do more that we ask or even think.

In 2 Samuel 7, David's prayer was to the effect that he wanted to build a house for God. But God appeared to him in a dream and told him that he was going to build a house for David instead, a house that would endure forever. And he promised David a line of sons which would come to a climax in the Messianic King. He was the one who would build God's house. The stunned David could only respond, "God, you have made a revelation to your servant. What you said, do according to your power."

This is what prayer is: finding out what God is about, and asking him to do so according to the full measure of his power.

(b) The Commitment of God

...to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

The second thing that gives Paul confidence is God's commitment to what the apostle is praying for.

When I picked up my daughter from a neighbor's house last week, my neighbor said, "Do you want to touch my hand?" "Why?" I asked. "Because I shook his hand," she said. "I shook President Clinton's hand!" She is the wife of the chief financial officer of Silicon Graphics, a company visited by the President last week during his visit to this area. This is the kind of company (4,000 employees and no layoffs) that the President and his administration want to promote in his plan for economic recovery. Wouldn't you be excited to work for a company that is backed by the commitment of the President himself and his new administration? But long after Silicon Graphics has come and gone, the church will remain in glory.

God is committed to the church through all the generations. This is no temporary arrangement. For all of history and all of eternity the church will remain the display-case of God's power. Knowing that this is God's commitment ought to give us confidence.

Last night, I opened up a little book of my prayers, a 14-year dialogue which I have had with God in prayer. As I read it, I confess, I still seem beset with the same weaknesses. In fact, in one place I wrote, "As I read my prayers past, my yearnings are deeper, but I feel my will is no stronger. By your redeeming grace, bind my heart to you. Keep me tender in my affections."

My weaknesses have not changed. Yet God keeps strengthening his commitment to me by revealing more and more of the beauty of this temple in ways I could not ask or think.

I would like to conclude by reading a prayer of thankfulness, built around Psalm 27. I wrote this after my friend and I returned home from Romania, where he discovered love twice.

*Who am I, O Lord
And what is my house,
That you have brought me thus far?*

*To take me on chariot's wings,
Down into your greenest pastures,
Where You give your people
A feast in the wilderness.*

*Was it not enough of your grace,
To see love Divine in the Book
And in the eyes of those simple ones
From upon the shores.*

*But to drink from the river,
To know its tracking over the earth;
And to wade deeply in distant lands,
O Lord, this is too much for me!*

*Who can forget their faces,
Their eyes full of pure light,
Their hearts swelling with love,
Their voices in sweet song.*

*Then when our adversary came
To devour our flesh,
And a host encamped against us,
He stumbled and fell.
But You hid us in the secret place
Of your tent, weeping
You lifted up our heads above our enemies,
And we offered sacrifices of praise to Thee.*

*The intensity of our love
Could find no words
But as we gazed into each others eyes,
Our hearts spoke freely.*

*Though the enemy forced us to leave in tears
We turned back and saw your saints
Lifting their hands in praise
Anticipating the morning victory.*

*O this is to dwell in your temple,
To meditate on your glory,
Living stones in Antimony!
To probe the dimensions of Christ's love.*

*Who am I, and what is my house Oh Lord,
That in your secret plan
Of saving the world
You found it in your heart,
That we could support each other
Along the road to salvation.
And maybe pass together,
Embraced at the gate of Eternity.*

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