

October 1, 2023

A PRAYER AND THE POWER OF GOD'S TRANSFORMATIVE LOVE

Ephesians 3:14-21

(6 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

John Stott has noted that one of the best ways to discover a believer's chief anxieties and ambitions is to study what he or she prays about.¹ No doubt Stott is onto something with that. What matters most to us are surely the things we pray about. And yet I wonder what someone would conclude that you and I treasure if they were to listen to our prayer requests and the content of our prayers? Perhaps they'd conclude that we prize our health above all else, or maybe our financial well-being would rise to the top. Whatever the issue that takes priority, I wonder if we'd be pleased or embarrassed to see what it is.

Regardless, I'm sure we'd like our prayers to be shaped more by what the Bible holds up as model prayers for us. And, therefore, this morning is a gift to us as we continue our study through the book of Ephesians because we get a chance to observe and study one of Paul's prayers in Ephesians 3:14-21.

Looking at Paul's prayers does two things for us. First, as I've hinted at, it allows us to adjust our prayers in light of his. As we see Paul's prayers and see what he values and focuses on, it allows us an opportunity to shape our prayers according to what we see in his. And I'm sure we all have space in our prayer lives to shape our prayers a bit differently in light of what we see in Paul's prayer. Second, studying Paul's prayer should also shape our desires. Here's what I mean. As we look at what Paul prays for as he prays for the Ephesians, it helps us see what we should value. In other words, it may be that you and I are ambitious for things in life that we really shouldn't prize as much as we do. And as we listen to the contents of Paul's prayer, my hope is that we might find our heart's desires reorienting a bit—away from what we may treasure that we shouldn't and toward those kinds of things that we should deeply desire and that fill Paul's prayers.

In order to walk through Paul's prayer, let me show you briefly how I think it's structured. Paul begins and ends this section by reflecting on God's nature and willingness to respond to this prayer—which is one of the boldest prayers you'll ever come across. We'll end our time focusing on these verses that should encourage us to pray bold prayers, as we see Paul praying here. But the content of Paul's prayer is seen in three sections that each begin with the word "that." You can see it in verse 16 ("that according to the riches of his glory . . ."), verse 17b ("that you, being rooted . . ."), and verse 19b ("that you may be filled . . ."). Therefore, we'll follow that structure, noting each of these three requests that Paul makes in his prayer, and then we'll end by reflecting on how he frames this prayer in verses 14-15 and 20-21 so that we might see why we should pray boldly and what should be the aim of our prayers. We'll begin, then, with Paul's first

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Ephesians*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 131.

request where he prays for the Ephesian believers to be strengthened in order to be transformed by Christ.

Strengthened in order to be transformed by Christ (vv. 16-17a)

Now, I know that when you look verses 16-17 you don't necessarily see anything about being transformed by Christ explicitly, but I hope that by the time we work through Paul's request in these verses you'll see why I've stated the point as I have. Paul begins by asking that God answer this request "according to the riches of his glory" (v. 16). This already can make us hopeful that God will answer this bold request Paul will make because God is infinitely glorious. If we were to ask a billionaire to do something "according to the riches of his wealth," we'd be hopeful because he has a whole lot more money than we do. But even then he does have limits, doesn't he? It's hard to imagine, but something could exceed even the amount of money that a billionaire has available. But when you ask the Lord to do something according to the riches of his glory, and he is infinite in glory, then you're noting up front that God is not limited in his ability to answer this request. He may desire to do other than what we ask, but if he doesn't answer, it isn't because he's lacking ability to do so.

But then gets into his request, writing, "That . . . 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" (vv. 16-17a). You no doubt noticed that Paul asked that God would strengthen them, but then he qualified it in three ways. He wants God to strengthen them with power, through his Spirit, in their inner being. Let's first look at these first two elements—strengthen with power, through the Spirit.

This kind of reality of the Holy Spirit strengthening someone with power is seen in the Old Testament. Think of the Samson narrative. We're told, for example, in Judges 14:6, "Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat." The Spirit comes upon him and strengthens him with supernatural power. And we also see it in the new. The Spirit is poured out in Acts 2, and we see demonstrations of power as people are healed and signs and wonders are performed in the following chapters. So the idea of the Lord giving power to his people through his Spirit is seen throughout the Scripture.

But that doesn't seem to be precisely what Paul is praying for here, does it? He's not asking for us to have power to go physically overcome our enemies or even to perform signs and wonders. In fact, he's not even focused on this power coming in the form of physical strength or outward demonstrations of power at all. Rather, he prays that this power given to us through the Holy Spirit would strengthen them "in [their] inner being."

This phrase may sound odd to us, but it's not the only time Paul references our inner being (or inner man). In the text we heard read earlier, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "Though our outer self [or man] is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." There, Paul is clearly referring to our outer self, or outer man, as who we are physically. And if you're at least

into your thirties, you're beginning to see what Paul is saying is true. We begin to strain things more easily, hurt more consistently, lose our sight and hearing, slow down, and on and on. What makes us up physically—including our brain itself—starts to show deterioration at some point in our lives, and it just keeps wasting away until we die.

But Paul also notes that there's part of us that is not material, not physical. He calls this our inner man. This refers to that part of us that isn't our outer man and that part which will survive even when we die. In other words, he speaks of our soul. This is what he's referencing here in verse 16. He wants the Spirit to strengthen us with power in our souls. So, this clearly isn't to the end that we might demonstrate a feat of physical strength. So why?

Paul answers, saying, "So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (v. 17a). But even this can cause a bit of confusion for us, can't it? After all, Paul is writing to believers, and the moment we believe Christ comes to dwell in us through his Holy Spirit. So why is Paul praying that the Lord would strengthen us through his Spirit so that Christ might dwell in the hearts of people who have already believed in Christ and are already indwelt by him?

I think Don Carson is probably right in an illustration he provides of a family moving into a home.² Imagine you buy a home that is a fixer-upper. You're going to have to work hard on this one, but it's in your price range, and so you buy it and move in. In that moment that you move in, you dwell there. However, as you really begin to dwell there, that is, settle into that space, it changes. You start replacing old wallpaper with fresh paint, tear up some carpet and put down more flooring, fix those leaky pipes and hang some pictures on the wall.

Then, let's fast forward ten years later. Now, the house looks a lot different, doesn't it? People walk in who only knew the house before you bought it and say, "This is great. I knew you'd make it look like you, given enough time." In this situation, one might say that you're no more dwelling there than you were the second you moved in. And in one sense, that'd be right. But in another, you've begun to really dwell there. You've settled into it and your presence has shaped your surroundings so that the house is completely different.

That's likely what Paul means here. He's not denying that Christ dwells in their hearts through faith if they're believers. But he wants them to continue to believe and Christ's presence within them to shape them more and more. He wants their lives to picture more and more that Christ dwells in them. Instead of wallpaper being taken down and carpets ripped up, he changes the way you speak, think, act, dress, etc. Someone sees you ten years after you first came to faith, and they comment on how different you are and how much more like Christ you are. We might say that he's settled in and his presence has completely changed you as you've become more like him.

² D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 186-87.

That's what Paul is praying for. He's asking the Father to strengthen these believers by giving them power through the Spirit to allow Jesus to transform them so that they are made more like him. He doesn't lay it all out, simply using the phrase "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts," but he's asking that the Lord would enable them to be more loving, peaceful, patient, kind, joyful, faithful, self-controlled, humble, etc. because those are all things that characterize Christ. That's Paul's first request. And though it's a bold one, he doesn't stop there. Next, he prays that they would be enabled to comprehend Christ's love.

Enabled to comprehend Christ's love (vv. 17b-19a)

The second request Paul mentions is found in the second half of verse 17 and runs through the first half of verse 19. He writes, "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."

Paul begins this request by first noting the position of these Ephesian believers. He notes that they are "rooted and grounded in love." If you've paid attention to the first two chapters of Ephesians, you'll see why Paul says this. He's already noted that these believers were predestined to be God's adopted children "in love" (1:4). Then, he's told them that he wants them to know how treasured they are as God's glorious inheritance (1:18). Then he's mentioned that God made them alive in Christ when they were dead in their sins "because of the great love with which he loved us" (2:4). So, in love from eternity past God planned for them to be his sons, treasure them as his own possession in love, and because of his love for them gave them eternal life when they were dead in their sins. You can see why the terms "rooted" and "grounded" are used. God's love is why they are believers and provides security for them as his beloved children.

So, in that position Paul prays once more that the Father would give them strength. But this time the strength is needed in order to comprehend—with all the saints—God's love for them. He wants them to know the full dimensions of his love for them. But if you read this and think that we could measure God's love for us, as if it's limited, then Paul clears that up adding that he wants them to comprehend and know the love of Christ "that surpasses knowledge" (19b).

They'll never be in a position to grasp fully God's love for them because it's greater than they can comprehend. But he wants them to know it more. And, he presupposes that they need divine strength to do so. Isn't this amazing? Paul knows that apart from the empowering work of God, giving us strength in our lives, we'll not begin to "appreciate the limitless dimensions" of God's love for us.³ We'll doubt it, underestimate it, and assume otherwise.

I wonder how much we feel this. Do you find yourself overwhelmed at God's love for you? If not, then it means you're not seeing it clearly because it is indeed overwhelming. Your salvation

³ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 193.

is rooted and grounded in his love. And his love is so deep and vast that none of us will ever be able to grasp it fully and need God's help to understand it truly. And some of us still doubt that God loves us.

But, brothers and sisters, do not doubt it. And don't look at this text and think that somehow God's love was for these Ephesian believers in a way that it's not for you. Notice that Paul wants them to have strength to comprehend the limitless dimensions of God's love together "with all the saints." All the saints are objects of his limitless love.

So, we might anticipate the first request. It makes sense that Paul wants believers to be holy, and if we are to be holy, then we need Christ to dwell in our hearts and begin to shape us according to his desires. He must direct our lives. But why would Paul be so intent to see that they begin to grasp how much God loves them. Why does that matter?

Well, there are many answers we could give to that as we reflect on the whole of Scripture. We might note that we are told that we will not love God without recognizing that he first loved us. We could note that our security and assurance is rooted in the reality that nothing can separate us from the love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. And we could say much more. But let's simply limit ourselves to this text and look at Paul's third request where he asks that these Ephesian believers will be brought to full spiritual maturity.

Brought to full spiritual maturity (v. 19b)

Paul's third request is at the very end of verse 19 where he says, "That you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Now, once more, this phrase may not be familiar to us. This isn't common vernacular that we use, saying to one another that we long for one another to be filled with all the fullness of God. So what does it mean? Well, thankfully Paul uses a similar phrase later in the book. In chapter 4, as Paul is talking about all the gifts God gives the body of Christ for our upbuilding, he says that we equip one another for ministry, for the building up of the body, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children" (4:14-15).

And here, as he speaks of us growing in maturity (i.e. to mature manhood) and no longer being children, he places another descriptor right between these two, namely, that we would attain to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." That seems to suggest, then, that attaining to the fullness of Christ means reaching spiritual maturity so that we're no longer spiritual children but spiritual men and women. And since that phrase (the fullness of Christ) is quite similar to "filled with all the fullness of God," I'm going to suggest they mean the same thing. That is, when Paul prays that we'd be filled with all the fullness of God, he's praying that we'll all attain to full spiritual maturity. Or, we might say, that we'd grow into "all that God wants us to be."⁴ This is a prayer for us to become spiritually mature.

But what's interesting is that Paul sees our spiritual maturity as being dependent on our ability to grasp God's love for us. Isn't that the logic of verses 17b-19? He prays that we'd have strength to comprehend the love of Christ *that* we may be filled with all the fullness of God. So, one key reason we need to begin to grasp how much Christ loves us is so that we will grow in greater maturity as believers. Just as a child needs to know that he or she is loved in order to mature properly, so it is with us as God's children. We need to know his love for us so that we might grow in greater maturity.

Now, let's pause and reflect on these requests which Paul prayed for the Ephesians and which reflect his desire for all the saints. He prays for believers to be strengthened with power through the Spirit so that Christ will dwell in our hearts and continue to transform us. He prays for strength to comprehend the limitless dimensions of God's love for us, and he prays this so that we might grow in spiritual maturity. Are these things we pray for? If not, let's start. Again, imagine what might happen if we began to pray these things for ourselves and one another. Imagine what our prayer services might look like if our concerns and priorities were realities like these instead of simply our health and finances. Imagine how we might live differently if we made these things our aims. And yet we might counter by asking, "But how can we know God would even be pleased to answer our prayers if we asked for these things? After all, they're big and bold." And this brings us to our last point, God's ability and desire to answer such requests.

God's ability and desire to answer (vv. 14-15, 20-21)

Paul has already noted God's ability by asking him to answer according to the riches of his glory, and we noted that his glory is infinite. Similarly, he identifies him as the Father from which every other family is derived in heaven and on earth. So, in as much as angels are divided into families and there are earthly families, we all get this idea from the fact that God is our Father. And this expresses an image of caring and provision. In fact, Jesus says that our Father knows our needs and cares for us better than any earthly father could. So, already in verses 14-15 we see God's care for us and ability to answer such a prayer. But that is ratcheted up in verses 20-21.

In the last two verses of this text Paul writes, "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" (vv. 20-21).

With this, Paul reminds us of God's ability to answer such a bold prayer. He's not only able to do what we ask but more than we ask, even more than we think. So pray bold prayers. Pray bold prayers for one another to be outrageously conformed into Christ's image and grasping more and more how much our Father loves us so that we grow into maturity.

But he also subtly reminds us of God's willingness to answer these kinds of prayers by reminding us that God has already begun a work in us through the Spirit who indwells us and is shaping us

⁴ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 195.

and by reminding us that God will be glorified in Christ and the church throughout all generations. Now, it's not surprising that God would be glorified in his Son. But it is amazing to think that God promises to be glorified through his church in all generations. Brothers and sisters, we're part of that church. And if God is to be glorified in us, then it will involve us being made more like Jesus, knowing his love more, and growing into spiritually mature men and women. So trust that God wants to answer prayers to that end and pray boldly. O what God might do if we faithfully pray this way for ourselves and one another! And would we doubt his desire to do so when he's already sent his Son to live, die, and be raised for us? Surely not. So let's come to him boldly now even as we come to the table. Amen.