

Prayer for God's Family

Ephesians 3:14-19

Halifax: 20 January 2008

Introduction

Today, as we continue our study of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians,

- We come to another of those places where he tells us what he prays for...Ephesians 3:14-19.
- This passage has much to say to us a congregation that is welcoming new members today...
 - It reminds us that we are a family, called together by God to be members of His household,
 - and that as such, we have reason to pray that He would powerfully work in us to be what we ought to be as His children.
 - Paul teaches us that we ought to pray for one another, and He teaches us what we ought to be praying for.

My outline is very simple this morning.

1. The reason Paul was stirred up to pray.
2. The first thing he prays for.
3. The second thing he prays for.

Let's begin with point number 1:

I. The reason Paul was stirred up to pray...

A. Verse 14 begins with the words,

- Eph 3:14: "For this reason I bow my knees."
- 1. Obviously, Paul is talking here about prayer...
 - a. Bowing the knees is a prayer posture...
 - We all know that when Paul says he bows His knees, he is referring to prayer.
 - b. And you can see in the words that follow that he is making requests of God for the Ephesian Churches...
 - verse 14 shows that he is addressing the Father of Jesus Christ,
 - and in verse 16, he says, "that He would grant you..."
 - He is praying to God for them.

2. So what is the reason that he refers to for his prayer when he says, “For this reason I bow my knees?”
 - a. At first, you might think he is talking about the stewardship God had given to him to bear the gospel to the Gentiles...
 - That is what he has just been talking about, and it certainly was a part of the reason that he prayed...
 - You ought to pray especially for those things that God has given you stewardship over...
 - If you are the head of a home, you ought to pray especially for your household...
 - If you are an elder in the church, you ought to pray especially of the congregation God has placed under your care...
 - b. But Paul is referring to more than that...
 - 1) If you look back at verse 1 of chapter 3, you will find that he started to say what he says in 14 back there.
 - He says “for this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles...”
 - and then he interrupts the thought to talk about how God had given him the responsibility to bring the gospel to them...
 - Verses 2-13 are a digression, and it is not until v. 14 that he picks up on what he was going to say with the words,
 - “For this reason...”
 - 2) So to find out what he is referring to as the reason for his prayer,
 - we must look back at chapter 2...
 - And at the end of chapter 2, we find that Paul reaches a climax in all that he has been saying to the Ephesians up until that point.
 - In 2:19-21,
 - he explains to the believing Ephesians that God is forming them and believers from all over the world in a holy temple!
 - God is building a house for Himself out of people from every nation!
 - He is making them into His very own dwelling place!

B. Brothers and sisters, what a reason this is to pray!

1. I know that you all struggle with prayer—every Christian does... but here is something to motivate you!

- a. A couple of weeks ago when Missionary Vince Ward was here, we were discussing different aspects of ministry.
 - Then Vince asked me about prayer and I told him that it was a struggle.
 - He said “Good” and then he corrected himself, and said something like:
 - “Not that it’s good that you struggle in prayer, but I mean, it’s good to know that I’m not alone in the struggle.”
 - And he went on to say that he finds almost everyone he speaks to says that about prayer.

 - b. Certainly it is true.
 - If you want to humble almost anyone other than Pharisee (who will only tell you how often he prays), ask him about his prayer life.
 - It seems to be a universal struggle—not only that we feel we don’t pray as often as we should, but that even when we pray, we don’t pray well—we are distracted and our minds wander about all over the place.
 - Even the Apostle Paul speaks of prayer as a struggle—he speaks of labouring in prayer—
 - Praying well is not something you do to relax!
 - Real prayer is intense labour.

 - c. And because it is hard to pray well, you need all the encouragement you can get to motivate you...you need good reasons to pray
2. And here is an excellent reason to stir you up to pray!
 - a. When you realise that God is actually taking people from all over the world and is shaping them into a holy house for Himself—
 - what good reason you have to pray!
 - The God of heaven is taking ruined sinners and by His grace, He is transforming into a house, a family, for Himself!
 - Brothers and sisters, this is God’s glorious work for us!
 - This is something to be excited about and to pray earnestly for!
 - He is shaping us into a beautiful family!

 - b. I have spoken to you many times about the Father’s house!
 - It is so different from any other house because it is holy and full of love!
 - There is not the bitterness and the rivalry and the resentment.
 - There are no harsh words...

- There is a mutual delight and appreciation and sweet service—there is a total delight in each other in this house.
- God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have dwelt together in perfect harmony for all eternity in this house...
 - God the Father has always been a Father, even before He created anything, because He is the head of the holy trinity.
 - But who would have ever supposed that He should create a world of human beings,
 - allow them to fall into sin and corruption,
 - and then redeem some from every nation in order that He might add them to His family?
 - This is mind boggling!

C. See how Paul prays to God as the Father of this great house...

1. In verse 14, he says that he bows his knees to Him...
 - a. This reminds us of how great our heavenly Father is!
 - He is the creator of the whole universe.
 - The more we know of Him, the more we know that He is worthy of our reverent worship!
 - Every father is to be honoured, but how much more our heavenly Father.
 - There is none to compare with Him!
 - b. I might mention here that posture in prayer matters...
 - Certainly, reverence is a matter of the heart, but when reverence is in the heart, is ought to be seen in the actions...
 - Slouching is not an appropriate prayer posture.
 - In our public worship, we stand for prayer to show reverence to God,
 - Kneeling is also proper in public prayer.
 - In your private prayers it is proper for you to stand or to bow or to kneel before Him.
 - We do this because our Father is such a holy, majestic, mighty Father and we must never forget it.

TRANS> Having seen Paul's posture, now look at how Paul describes our heavenly Father to whom He prays...

2. He calls Him "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."
 - a. This distinguishes Him from all other claimants to divinity.

- We must realise that the God of the Muslims or the gods of the Hindus or the Buddhists are not the real God...
 - The real God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...
 - He has always been His Father and Jesus has always been His Son.
- b. And the Jesus whose Father He is is none other than the Jesus who came and lived among us and who is now our Lord Jesus Christ,
- the Messiah we trust for our eternal salvation.
 - If someone claims to worship God and the one they worship is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—
 - the Christ who is revealed to us in the scriptures and no other,
 - then they are not worshipping the true God at all.
- c. The character of the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is totally different than any other who claims to be God...
- 1) He alone is holy, requiring nothing less than the blood of His Son to atone for our sins...
 - 2) He alone is gracious, so gracious that He willingly sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins!
 - 3) There are many other pretenders, but you will never find another God who is anything like the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus.

TRANS> This is the One to whom Paul prays...

3. And thirdly, Paul describes Him as the Father “from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.”
- a. What does Paul mean by this?
- The idea is what Paul has been talking about in Ephesians 2 and 3—
 - Namely, that the elect from every nation are brought together as one in God’s house...
 - And this house has members on earth and members in heaven where Christ is and where the Father is,
 - and they bear the name of God...
 - Just as every family takes the name of their father, so the great family that God has called together takes its name from Him!
- b. We now belong to Him, we are identified with Him.
- He is our God and we are His people.

- His very reputation is bound up with our reputation, for we are His children.
- As our Father, He has an interest in our training, our behaviour, our provision, our comfort, our happiness, and our relationship with Him.
 - He is committed to His children, and this is our encouragement to pray—God is going to work in us!

TRANS> Take all of this together and you can see how motivating it is to prayerfulness!

- Here is God most holy, most gracious, most high,
 - taking us into His very own household and declaring Himself to be our Father—
 - taking us! sinners that we be as His own children!
- Surely He is minded to do great things for us!
 - Surely He will do great things for His children!
 - Surely there is reason to pray for His family, the church!
- But what ought you to pray for the church?
 - To that we now turn once again to look at Paul’s example given to us in our text.
 - There are two things He prays for:

II. The first thing he prays for is for the strengthening of the Ephesians.

- You can see that in verse 16-17:
 - Eph 3:16-17: that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...
 - He prays that we would be strengthened with might...
- A. If you know anything about God’s family that He is gathering on earth, you know that God’s family has its strength from Him...
 1. First, you know this because you know that we did not establish ourselves as His house.
 - a. Paul made that clear in chapter 2 when he said that both Jew and Gentile were dead in trespasses and sins.
 - Now it is obvious that at that time, we were, as Paul puts it Romans 5, “without strength...”
 - A person who is dead is certainly without strength, and it was up to God to make us alive.
 - We had no clear understanding of who God was, or of our sin before Him until He began to give us life.

- We were not gripped with the reality of our perilous condition.
- b. And even if we had known our condition, there was nothing we could have done...
- there was nothing we could do to clear sin from our record—our sins rose up to condemn us...and we had no strength to deal with them...
 - it was only God, sending His Son to die for our sins, that could reconcile us in order that we might become His children.
 - besides that, there was nothing we could do to turn our stony heart from idols to the true and living God.
 - It was only God, working by His Spirit, who made us come alive that we might live in His house.
2. Secondly, you know you have your strength from Him because you know that you cannot sustain yourself in God's house.
- a. There are a thousand temptations that pull at you from within and without.
- There is a Devil who is stronger than you...
 - There is a world full of enticements to lead you away from the Lord...
 - There is your own flesh that rises up in rebellion against your renewed Spirit...
 - Hell would surely swallow you up in a second if left to yourself...
- b. But you know, if you are a believer, that you are kept by the power of God...
- He defends His house.
 - He is the one who turns you from temptations...
 - He is the one who provides the way of escape when you have fallen...
 - It is by His Spirit only that you are able to persevere to the end.
 - He is the One who strengthens you!
3. Thirdly, you know that you have no strength to grow in God's house...
- a. How is it that you could ever reach of the goal of holy love?
- How could you ever become perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect?
 - How could you ever become like Jesus Christ?
 - perfectly obedient even to the point of death—no malice, no bitterness, no sinful thought, no sinful word?
- b. Brothers and sisters, in John 15, the Lord Jesus tells you that you are to bear much fruit,

- you are to grow in holiness...
 - but when He tells you this, He also adds:
 - “without me you can do nothing!”
 - It is not on your own, but only by the grace that He provides!

TRANS> Brothers and sisters,

- There is a huge amount of work that God has to do to make us sinful stones into a holy house for Himself...
 - You know good and well that this work is not done by your own strength, but by His...from beginning to end, it is by His strength.
 - That is why it is for you to pray, as Paul does, that He would strengthen us...

B. Paul prays, as you should, that this strengthening will go on...

1. First, that we would be strengthened with might by God’s Spirit in the inner man.
 - a. This is a change from sin to holiness that occurs within...
 - It began with effectual calling when the Spirit of God began to open your eyes to the truth about God and about you—to show you your sin and your need of Christ...
 - And then He renewed your will and enabled you to repent and believe.
 - And then, after you come to Christ,
 - The Spirit continues to work in you to sanctify you.
 - He works in you to shape you into what you ought to be as God’s child, to make you gracious and loving and pure.
 - He makes you into a new creation,
 - not that He obliterates your personally, but he removes from you all that is unholy.
 - b. His influence is a secret influence...
 - What I mean is, you do not see the Spirit...
 - you see the changes as they come,
 - you realise that you have been made alive,
 - and then you realise that you are growing...
 - but you do not see the Spirit Himself...

TRANS> But having prayed for this inner renewal by the Spirit,

2. Paul also prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith...
 - a. The indwelling of Christ is always present where the strengthening of the Spirit is... but it is not exactly the same thing...
 - I mentioned that the Spirit's work is a secret work—
 - the result of this work is seen, but the Spirit himself is not seen.
 - b. But the indwelling of Christ occurs when you are consciously drawn to Christ to serve Him and obey Him and walk with Him and trust Him...
 - You respond to Christ as a promising, instructing, commanding, comforting Lord and Saviour...
 - as one whose person you follow and whose help you seek.
 - I don't mean that you actually see Him or hear His voice in a physical, bodily way,
 - but you hear His voice as the One who speaks through His Word.
 - You know Him personally as He is revealed in scripture, and so you walk with Him by faith.
 - That's what Paul means when he prays that Christ would dwell in your hearts through faith...
 - Faith is believing what is revealed in God's Word...
 - It is no wonder that in John 15,
 - Jesus equates abiding in Him with abiding in His Word.
 - We abide in Him by abiding in His word through faith.
 - Paul is praying that this abiding in Christ, this communion with Christ in our hearts, would increase.
 - He is praying that would believe the word and receive the word and obey the word and be comforted in the word.
 - c. This work is very closely related to the Spirit's work in us—in fact they go hand in hand.
 - When the Spirit does His strengthening work,
 - it is actually the work of revealing Christ to us and enabling us to walk in the faith of Him.
 - Do you understand the contrast?
 - The Spirit's work is an inner transformation...

- The indwelling of Christ is a personal walk with Christ, a response to His person, a conscious obedience to His commands, a conscious dependency upon Him...
3. Paul speaks of the result of this indwelling of the Spirit and of Christ at the end of verse 17 as our being “rooted and grounded in love.”
- a. You see how he speaks of this as the result of having the Spirit strengthen us and Christ abide in us...
 - the idea is “that you,” therefore, “having been rooted and grounded in love”—
 - rooted and grounded in love because the Spirit has strengthened you with might so that Christ dwells in your hearts by faith...
 - b. Once we are converted and made members of God’s house, we are planted in the soil of love and founded on the foundation of love.
 - Love is the thing that has always characterised God’s house, and He begins to feed it into our lives.
 - Love for Him and love for our neighbour summarises the transforming work that He does in us.
 - He makes us into a people who are growing in love and being built up in love.
 - c. When you look at yourself, perhaps this seems impossible!
 - “How can I ever love as Christ loves? It seems so out of reach!”
 - But see how Paul prays!
 - It is for God to produce this change in us as His children...
 - It is God who grants us the strengthening of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ “according to the riches of His glory!”
 - He has gives out of His infinite storehouse and so is able to build us up and give us an inheritance among the saints—to make us into all that He has called us to be—
 - even as those who love one another as Christ has loved us...
 - as those who are perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect...
 - as those who are holy as He is holy.
 - It will take time—indeed it will, and we will not know perfection in this life...
 - But still we work out our salvation with fear and trembling because we know that God is at work in us, both to will and to do of His good pleasure...

- We pray because we know that He is at work in us.
- He is faithful and also will do it!
- He is able to strengthen us to live as His children ought to live!
- That is the first thing Paul asks for.

III. The second thing he prays for is that the Ephesians would know how much the Lord loves them.

A. He says:

- Eph 3:17b-19: “that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge;”
 - This is a marvellous thing!
1. He is praying that they would see the grand dimensions of Christ’s love that they have been rooted and grounded in...
 - a. They have begun to see it by the working of the Spirit and by the indwelling of Christ in their hearts through faith... they have been planted in it...
 - but Paul’s prayer is that they would begin to see more and more the vast proportions of this love!
 - that they would see the width and length and depth and height...
 - these words are not meant to be pressed into some special meaning...
 - they are simply used to highlight the fullness of His love.
 - b. The words that follow,
 - “to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge”
 - make it clear that the width and length and depth and height refer to the fullness of Christ’s love.
 - 1) Paul focuses on the love of Christ in particular because it is through Christ that the Father’s love is most clearly demonstrated!
 - John 3:16: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...
 - 1 John 4:10: In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
 - Romans 5:8: “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
 - 2) You will get to know the love of your heavenly Father as you look upon His love revealed in Christ.

- c. Paul describes this love as a love that passes knowledge!
 - He is deliberately paradoxical—
 - He prays that we would know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge!
 - How can we know something that surpasses knowledge?
 - The point is, we can know it more and more, but we can never know it exhaustively!
 - The more we understand, the more the dimensions of it stagger us!
 - Just as with the universe that God has made!
 - The more we search it out, the more there is to see and the more we marvel at the width and length and depth and height.
 - Let us occupy ourselves in searching it out!
2. And what will be the result of knowing that love?
- look at the end of verse 19:
 - “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”
 - a. We will be filled with all the fullness of God as we come to know this love...
 - Our human size vessel, though it be small, will be completely filled with the fullness of God...
 - His life will be in us.
 - Not that we will be infinite and eternal...
 - but that we will be perfect likenesses of Him just as Jesus was when He appeared in human flesh...
 - perfectly pure, perfectly holy, perfectly wise.
 - To illustrate, if God is like an ocean of pure gold,
 - we will be like a cup of pure gold...
 - All that we are will be as He is—we will be filled with His likeness to perfection with no corruption and no unhappiness.
 - all because we come to know His love.
 - b. God wants us, as His children, to know how much He loves us!
 - This is our fullness—to come to know His love!
 - It is our happiness for all eternity!
 - That God actually delights in us and loves us even as He loves His own son Jesus!

- The very thing that He has demonstrated so clearly by sending His Son to die in our place.
 - O brothers and sisters, this is such a marvellous thing!
 - The Creator has come to bear His own curse for His sinful creatures who fully deserve to bear it themselves!
 - As soon as they see Him, they deserve to be engulfed in His fiery indignation, tormented day and night forever and ever!
 - But for those who deserve this, Christ has come...
 - for those who are that detestable in God's eyes, Christ has come...
 - and He Himself has allowed Himself to be engulfed in that fiery indignation!
 - Jesus, the Lamb of God, has borne the curse for all those He came to redeem!

B. This is a love so amazing, so great, that it will fill us with praise for all eternity!

- Paul's prayer is that we would know the dimensions of it!
- 1. Brothers and sisters, we must never become hard-nosed Calvinists who cannot talk about the love of God!
 - It is right for us to recoil against the sappy sentimentalism that has taken such a foothold in the Christian Church today.
 - I mean that unprincipled unholy love that is passed off as God's love...
 - That love that does not consume with wrath all that is sinful...
 - That love that does not hate all that is not holy...
 - We will have nothing to do with such love!
 - But we must never react so as to become those who never speak of God's love!
 - We ought to know it all the more than those who cheapen it!
 - The love of Christ revealed in the Scriptures is a far more excellent and praiseworthy love!
 - It is a holy love, a pure love, a love that shines most brightly when it is seen how much God hates sinners!
 - It is that He has chosen to love what is detestable to Him,
 - not by saying it doesn't matter...
 - but by doing what He had to do to take away our sin!

2. The world cannot understand such love!
 - a. They have their gods...
 - Some gods are said to be holy,
 - but none of them are so holy that they require nothing less than the blood of God's own Son to die on the cross for sin...
 - And some gods are said to be loving,
 - but none are so loving that they would send their only Son to die on the cross for what is detestable to them...
 - The gods of man-made religion are very different than the One true God who is the Father of Jesus Christ.
 - b. Paul's prayer is that we will see how great His love us...
 - a love so great that it caused Him to send His Son to bear His own curse that was rightly put upon us.
 - It is that love that we are called to proclaim to the nations...
 - It is that love that we are to know and to bask in for all eternity!
 - It is knowing that love that will make us to be filled with the fullness of God!