

Prayer

We praise You Great Lord of all Creation
You are the One who makes all things perfect!
You are the One who knows what is right and wrong!
You are the One who graciously forgives our sin!
You are the One who liberates us for Glory!
Alleluia – AMEN!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Ask the Lord to help you to do the mundane and ordinary tasks of the day, and do them well

On-going prayers

- ***This week, pray about children with special needs.*** *If there are any children in your family or your church with special needs, then pray for them*
- *Give thanks for medical advances that relieve suffering for many*
- *Pray about the coming Copenhagen 'environmental' summit*

Meditation

I see the marks of faith in the lives of others,
The saints of God who witness to my spirit.

A smile on the face of one who suffers
As faith is held high in the midst of hardship.

A truthful word inspired by the Spirit
Spoken with integrity and delivered to the heart.

A soul in tune with God and with others;
A faithful heart that is dedicated to the Lord

A helping hand, timely and trustworthy,
Serving where possible, whatever the cost.

A life lived through trials, but surely ascending,
Free from Satan's spiral of despair.

I see the marks of faith in the lives of others;
Thank God for the saints of God.

Bible Study - Ephesians 3:14-21

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, ¹⁶ so that out of the riches of His glory He may enable you to be strengthened in your inner being through His Spirit, ¹⁷ with Christ living in your hearts through faith. Being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ I pray that together with all the saints, you may be able to fully comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth... ¹⁹ indeed, to know the love of Christ that far exceeds all knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine by means of the power at work within us, ²¹ to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Thought for the day

Text

Ephesians 3:14,15

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, ¹⁶ so that out of the riches of His glory He may enable you to be strengthened in your inner being through His Spirit,

Thought

Roughly half way through his letter to the Ephesians, Paul prayed for his readers, unafraid to tell them that he prayed for them to receive their spiritual strength from its source, in the 'riches' of God's glory and through the Spirit.

There are times when I feel that some within the church are trying all manner of schemes and counselling in order to find spiritual sustenance. Let there be no mistake. The only source of this is to be found in our Maker and Redeemer. We can certainly help each other find Him, but to Him we must go; no one else.

Review

This is a truly wonderful passage of scripture, and it comes at the conclusion of the first half of Ephesians. These chapters contain a beautiful description of the Gospel and the saving work of God (ch. 1&2) together with Paul's defence of His right to preach (ch. 3), and the second half (chapters 4 to 6) contains his teaching. The first half reads like a great sermon, including this last part in today's passage, but why did Paul write this down? Surely, those who knew him had heard him preach these things. It could well be that these Gospel themes were Paul's hallmark in preaching, and helped those who first read the letter to recognise its validity.

So in today's reading, the first half of the letter is completed, and Paul draws his statement of faith together in prayer. He prays for the church at Ephesus, asking God that they might be firmly embedded in the Gospel (3:14-17), which is summarised by 'love' (3:17-19), the word Paul used to explain the character of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The last two verses (3:20,21) are a 'doxology', being a brief, self contained expression of praise to God for His glory in Jesus Christ. The distinctive feature of this doxology is its emphasis on God's limitless power and His never-failing glory in Christ; and not surprisingly, the church has often used it as a blessing.

Paul's prayer (3:14-19) is fascinating. You will find that it reads rather differently in different versions of the Bible available today, but the translation I have provided helps us to understand what Paul says by breaking verses 14 to 19 into two sentences. The first sentence (verse 14 to half way through verse 17) describes the amazing benefits we may all receive if we humble ourselves before the Lord in prayer, like Paul. The second sentence (half way through verse 17 to verse 19) contains Paul's prayer that God's people grasp the full extent of the love of God in Christ.

Paul reminds us that those who pray are united in Him, '*from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name ...*' (3:14). This insight reminds us that before God, all human privileges of nation, race, riches, sex, age or class become irrelevant. God sees us as He made us, that is, born into families, the basic human relationships that constitute all human society. However, all such families come from God. Despite the immense work done today by medical science in the bearing of children, conception and the creation of individuals in the womb remains a profoundly mysterious work of God. Science barely comprehends the immense glory of God that creates a sentient and spiritual individual. So in prayer, the human heart, the 'inner being', returns to its Maker to receive strength (3:16) and sustenance from Christ, the Saviour (3:17).

Following this, verses 17 to 19 contain wonderful and well known phrases about the extent of God's love. It is difficult, however, to try and recreate what Paul was saying because of the complexity of the language used here. You will understand this perfectly if you read several different Bible versions of this text. The heart of it is this; Paul prayed that whilst 'rooted' in love, God's people might realise that His love is far bigger than they can imagine (3:18). Then, adding to this, Paul says that the love of God can fulfil all human need; we may know the '*all surpassing nature of the love of Christ*', and '*be filled with all the fullness of God*' (3:19)! This is astonishing, and no one can claim this unless they are totally confident that they have found the truth of the universe in the heart of God, through Christ.

Paul is bold enough to claim that this is exactly what the Christian possesses, and he gives glory to God for '*this power at work within us*' (3:20); something all of us who own Christ's name may do throughout the generations.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What does it mean to be 'strengthened in the inner being through the Spirit'? (3:16)
- What is Paul saying about the true nature of love in verses 17 to 19?
- What do the words 'far exceeds', and 'fullness of God' mean here? (3:19)

- In what ways does the 'doxology' give praise to God? (30,21)

Notes on the text and translation

- V14** *'... before the Father'* In the Authorised Version of the Bible, you will find the following words added to this verse, 'the father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Since the days of the translation of the Authorised version, ancient papyri have been found that indicate these words have been added later perhaps by a scribe. They are not present in the earliest available manuscripts of Ephesians.
- V17** *'Being rooted and grounded in love ...'* If you were to read different versions of the Bible, you would find that they all come across rather differently. I explain the way that this message of Paul fits together in my notes, but what Paul wrote contained no punctuation, so each translator has to try and place full stops within the verse in a way that will help us make sense of it. I have started a new sentence here ('Being rooted and grounded in love') because Christ's love is the next subject of what says, so it seems right that the sentence should start with it.
- V19** *'indeed, to know the love of Christ that far exceeds all knowledge ...'* As previously, the way in which this Greek sentence fits together is awkward, but I have followed the logic of maintaining that this part of the text is exclusively about Christ's love. I have translated this clause as being like an additional thought to what is written in the previous verse about the 'length and breadth (etc.) of Christ's love, because in my view, this is the only way to make sense of what Paul has written.

Going Deeper

What does it mean to be 'strengthened in the inner being through the Spirit'? (3:16)

Verses 14 to 16 are deeply moving. Paul's prayer suggests that we return to God as the source of life and the only one who can fully understand each individual. As with most of us, Paul knew about a certain amount about his own background, for example, he was born a Jew and a Pharisee. People tend to know something of 'who they are' in terms of ancestry and the nurture of the years, and today, people can research their background and ancestry. However, God knows much more. To go to the Father is to seek the most radical and complete form of 'self understanding'. The modern quest for self knowledge and self understanding will be achieved when people do what Paul did, and come in prayer to the Maker, touching once again the '*riches of His glory*' from which they were gloriously made.

More than this, Paul kneels '*before the Father*' in order to pray not just for self understanding but also that the Ephesians will do the same, and gain a greater understanding of themselves through Him who is love. By being ready to submit everything to God in prayer and selfless praise, they will stand ready to receive the blessing and strengthening of the Father, and the strengthening of the 'inner being'. Instead of 'inner being', Paul could have used the word 'soul', 'heart', or 'body' at this point, but each of these would have been suggestive of his other teaching, distracting his readers from what he was saying.

The truth is that the human spirit can only be renewed by the breath of the Spirit that created it. We all have many experiences and feelings about our lives, our family members, and what has shaped us. We accept and live with some of this, but it can be a matter of great struggle. Standing before our Creator, however, we can have confidence in Christ that our God can deal with everything, even rebuild or remake us. He can heal our minds, our feelings, our bodies or our memories, and so much more. All things become possible through Christ, because through Him, we have access to the Father by the Spirit.

As a matter of interest, this passage is one of the few places in scripture where God is described in terms of the Father (3:14), the Son (Christ Jesus – 3:17) and the Holy Spirit (3:16). Here, these are not doctrinal entities, but a real Christian experience of God; where the Lord God is received openly by His people in prayer, as 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. Only the whole revelation of God can completely strengthen and heal the human condition.

What is Paul saying about the true nature of love in verses 17 to 19?

When we realise the depth of what Paul is describing here (3:14-17), we can understand why he turns immediately to the theme of 'love'. Paul consistently teaches that love is the very nature of God, shown through the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus (see 1 Cor 13, for example). To come before the Creator empty in heart and mind, is to stand openly in need of the one thing He longs to give us and the one thing that will heal, repair and strengthen us, and that is His love.

Paul begins this part of his prayer; '*Being rooted and grounded in love, I pray that together with all the saints, you will be able to fully comprehend the breadth, length, height, depth ...*' (3:18). But there, the sentence stops, broken off as Paul's mind thinks of yet another way of expressing what he has to say (in the next verse). If you read all the verses (17 to 19), it is obvious that Paul is speaking about 'the love of Christ'.

However, because he does not actually say these words in verse 18, no translator can place them in the verse, although it is obvious to all who read the Greek text that this is what Paul means.

Nevertheless, Paul's phrase in verse 18 about the extent of God's love has captured the imagination of Christians for generations; that '*you may be able to fully comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth ...*'. Before the world of mathematical analysis and our understanding of 'three dimensions', Paul described the full extent of the world by speaking of the two obvious 'dimensions' of the earth; that is the general extent of the world that stretches out around us, its 'breadth and length'. Added to this, he described the two 'dimensions' that separate the earth and the heavens; that is, 'height and depth'. The message is obvious. The love of God is as universal as God Himself with the whole of His creation including heaven and earth. Just as Paul said in his letter to the Romans;

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38,39)

What do the words 'far exceeds', and 'fullness of God' mean? (3:19)

There are some who believe that wherever the word 'fullness' (Greek 'pleroma') appears in Paul's letters (as it does here in verse 19), this indicates the influence of 'Gnosticism' or Greek 'mystery' religions upon Paul. Then, together with other parts of Ephesians we have already studied (3:3f.), these small references have been said to imply that the letter cannot have been written by the apostle, who would have had nothing to do with the words of such paganism. Such literary arguments however cannot be proven one way or the other; they are pure supposition, because there is not enough evidence of the use of the word in the first century to draw such conclusions. Moreover, such ideas are profoundly unhelpful to our understanding of Ephesians, because they draw our eyes away from what these words can mean for those who read them with the intent to discover God's Word, as written by Paul.

After breaking off from his expression '*the breadth, length, height and depth ...*' (3:18), Paul used two other phrases to express the supreme and universal nature of love, which is the very character of God. Firstly, he said that it '*far-exceeds all knowledge*' (3:19). The Greek word used for 'far-exceeds' means quite literally 'covering completely over', as if speaking of a tent covering that stretches over an entire tent dwelling. You will find that other translations of the Bible describe the love of God here as 'all-surpassing', or 'far in excess'. However, the Greek word tells us that God's love does not just extend beyond all knowledge, it is like a covering that truly protects us, and more than this, it does not just exceed our knowledge, it even protects what we do know of ourselves and of God (our 'knowledge' – 3:19).

Lastly, this prayer of Paul 'that you may be completely filled with all the fullness of God.' (3:19) expresses the inexpressible and asserts the impossible, at least in this life! However, it is indeed our destiny to know all things, to be filled with love, to find complete forgiveness, to be content with all things and be complete and 'full' when God's Kingdom comes in glory! It seems that it was Paul's aim to lift the sights of his readers higher, so that they aspire to the greater things of God even whilst they live, and he speaks to us. We will never be completely filled with the fullness of God' in this life, but one day, we will, and what glory there will be!

In what ways does the 'doxology' give praise to God? (30,21)

Little wonder, therefore, that Paul turns to give praise and glory to God at this point in his letter. The doxology is not, as some suggest, Paul's first attempt to end the letter before realising afresh that he had a further message to give (recorded in the rest of Ephesians!). It is a natural conclusion to this part of the letter. Neither does it conveniently speak of all the 'persons' of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit', for as we have already noticed, Paul has already done this in our passage (see verses 14 and 15).

The doxology captures the heart of the entire first three chapters of Ephesians, which is a magnificent prayer of praise to God. It catches the clear theme of these chapters, which is the overflowing generosity of God, and it does so with a wonderful phrase that is worth remembering. This is because it powerfully summarises God's characteristics and His generosity in Christ; '*Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine by means of the power at work within us*' (3:20). This is the God, says Paul, who is our Saviour, and '*to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus ...*' (3:21).

This is only a small point, but Paul urges that glory be given to God '*in the church*'. I am well aware of the deep unhappiness many people have with the church today, to the point of many deciding that they do not care to live with it. Some feel that the complexities of being part of a community of people are intolerable, even Christian people, as are the compromises and challenges to be faced in order to live at peace with others. Unfortunately, this is a modern social trend used by the devil to pull people away from the true unity of God's people, and the heart of God longs for His people to live together at peace in His church. In this way, the church gives glory to God on earth, indeed, one of God's greatest desires, according to Scripture, is that His people give this witness on earth so that more may come to know Him.

Application

This passage is a challenge to all God's people, because it speaks deeply about the life of prayer. It describes Paul's prayer that God's people may know the full extent, measure and protection of His love, and it gives praise to the Almighty for His supreme generosity in love. It also suggests that the Lord loves the prayers of His people not just individually, but together, the prayer of His people the church, 'throughout all generations' (3:21).

The passage illustrates how we may know ourselves most fully and be strengthened for the life of faith through returning to our God in prayer. It also assumes that people who have come to know the Lord find it natural to pray and that they know the presence of the Lord Jesus in their hearts. His prayer or 'doxology' is an example of the overflowing of the human heart in praise to God that illustrates his theme. Even though Paul undoubtedly has issues to deal with in the church at Ephesus, and as we will find out later, he needs to speak forthrightly about key issues of faith to them, his heart is bursting with praise to God. It is certainly my experience that when God's people turn from their own contentions and strife to give the Lord glory and praise, then the earthly issues by which they are divided pale into a less significant light. Real prayer accepts that nothing is more important than the love of God, and real prayer accepts that all things are possible through Him who loves us.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. After studying this passage, discuss what this passage teaches God's people about prayer.
2. What are the main characteristics of God revealed in this passage, and what do they mean for us now, in our own day.
3. In what circumstances would the words of the 'doxology' (3:20,21) be appropriate, given that they do not represent the 'Trinity' of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Discipleship

Some of the discipleship issue found in this text

- *Prayer and dedication*
- *The origins of humanity in the love of God the Father*
- *The call to open up our hearts to the full measure of Christ's revelation of the Father*
- *The praise and worship of God*

Personal comments from the author:

I find this passage incredibly challenging. On the one hand, it is profoundly simple and straightforward to understand. On the other hand, it asks us to plum the heights and the depths of God's love, and it is surely impossible for any of us to do this because of the limitations of our personal experience. I reckon however, that we are not limited. The Lord longs to reveal Himself to us more, but He can only do this if we are truly willing to respond to what He reveals. That is the real challenge.

Ideas for exploring discipleship issues

- *Ask yourself the question, 'How does Christ make me strong?' over a number of days. As you do this, read the passage over several times. The Lord will reward the honest seeker for truth.*
- *Write down a form of prayer along the lines of Paul's prayer, summarising what he says, and making this easier to use in either a church or a personal setting.*

Final Prayer

Bless us this day, Lord Jesus. Bring praise to our lips and open our hearts to offer You the highest praise our hearts can offer. Speak through spiritual tongues which transport us to the throne of grace and into the presence of Almighty God Himself, and may our praises be worthy in His presence; AMEN
