

Filled with All the Fullness of God

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[0 : 00] Let us, for a short time, turn to the passage that we read in the New Testament Scriptures, Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 3, and we can look at verse 19 in particular.

We'll read from verse 14, which is the beginning of the introduction to what is a prayer of the Apostles.

For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you according to the riches of his glory to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.

So on. And to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge. There are countless passages of the Scripture, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, that are recognizable as prayers offered by God's people.

And Paul, the Apostle, is no exception to the role he is someone that we associate with prayer.

[2 : 05] Not only does he instruct God's people to pray and encourage us to pray, He also informs our prayers.

But he also does so by way of example. We are able to read his own prayers and to understand something of what the prayers of God's people should be like.

We have an example at the beginning of this epistle. In the first chapter. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

In Christ, according as he has chosen us in him. And so on. And so on. The introduction may or may not be considered to be a prayer.

Maybe it's just an introduction. But when he moves on, we find that he identifies what is on his heart.

[3 : 39] With regard to the needs of God's people. Verse 15. Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, of the Lord Jesus and love unto all the saints, cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, in the knowledge of him and so on. So not only can we recognize what can be considered to be prayer, but we also recognize that some of these prayers are introduced to us in the way that we recognize what is being prayed for.

And as is typical of the apostles, some of the outpourings of his heart seem to be energized.

It's as if he's just filled full of this desire to express himself prayerfully in the presence of God.

And it's as if what he has to say, the flow that comes from him is such that you cannot but understand that he is indeed energized by the spirit.

[5 : 15] And I'm sure we recognize that not just in a reading of the scripture, but we also recognize it when we see how others have prayed in our own hearing.

And I think it's it's not improper for us to remind ourselves of how prayer was something that we learned.

Because every one of us has had experience of being invited to join with others as they pray. And we've heard these others pray in our hearing within the home, perhaps, or within gatherings such as this one.

And it would be very, very unlikely if we didn't learn from the prayers of others. If we didn't listen to what was being prayed for.

And if we didn't imbibe some of that spirit of prayer and our language would be clothed with the language that we heard from others.

[6 : 34] I've told you, I'm sure. I find myself saying that so often. But as a young Christian being invited to pray in Durbanville in Glasgow and I'd only just made a profession of faith shortly before then.

But I was identified as a Christian invited to pray. And one of the elders came and spoke to me afterwards and he wanted to find out where I worshipped.

And his opinion was based on how I prayed that he recognised the preacher in the prayer.

Now whether you would agree with that or not I think it happens more often than not. We hear other people pray and we our own spirit inevitably unites with their spirit in prayer and their thoughts become our thoughts and their prayer becomes our prayer.

and sometimes it becomes more obvious than at other times. Now I'm not saying that we're encouraged to behave so that we pray parrot fashion or we encourage others to pray as we pray in that sense.

[8 : 12] but there is a sense in which we learn from Paul from the instruction that he gives from the prayers that he offers himself and the the twofold instruction is important to us.

We're not all going to be praying publicly but surely we're all going to be praying and when we pray our prayer is informed by many different things.

The preacher and teacher Don Carson makes a statement worth considering and he talked about his own background and his own background was somebody who was from a reformed conservative background and when he as a young man began to pray he prayed very much influenced by the authorized version and these and those featured in the way that he prayed but he said my home background was bilingual I was a French speaker and my prayer in French was a different prayer because of the Bible that we used it was a more modern translation but he explains how much he was influenced by what he heard outside from others but he makes this point prayer in the west he says has fallen on hard times and there are few models to hold up to a new generation of believers if our generation does not cast up many prayer warriors whose habits in prayer accurately reflect the standards of scripture it is all the more urgent that we return to the primary source then we shall learn afresh what to pray for what arguments to use what terms on which to focus what passion is seemingly how these prayers fit into a larger

Christian vision how to maintain the centrality of God himself in our prayer now that's his observation and whether you agree with it or not I think it is something that needs to be considered our tradition our experience within our tradition is very much still focused on the importance of prayer and prayer collectively and prayer in a uniform way but not everybody follows that tradition and not everybody has got that structure way of praying which allows a deviation or a departure from what you know to be scripture and what you know to be like we hear from

Paul's prayer something that is steeped in the scripture that he has in his heart and mind so we look at the prayer that's offered by Paul and we're not going to look at the whole prayer I think we've looked at it before as a whole and it's quite a fertile ground for reflection I want to narrow our focus to see what Paul is praying for in verse 19 in particular prayer the prayer is divided into two main parts first of all that God would strengthen the believer with spiritual power through the spirit and that to be experienced inwardly and secondly that the believer might have power based on his grasp of the limitless the inexhaustible resource that is his or that is hers through the effect or the influence or the extent of the love of Jesus

[13 : 00] Christ so as I said there's a wide scope for study in this prayer but a brief word about what he wants us to know he wants us to know the love of Christ he wants us to know the love of Christ secondly he describes the love of Christ as something that passes knowledge and thirdly he wants us on the basis of the knowledge that we have of that love that we might be filled with all the fullness of God so what then are we expected to know well simple isn't it we are to know the love of Christ but surely there's more to it than simply an understanding of the fact that the scripture describes to us the love of Christ and that the knowledge that we have of the description of that love which is contained in the scripture we can assimilate we can gather together a whole host of different expressions that contain for us what the love of

Christ entails and there is obviously I would suggest more to it than simply a gleaned knowledge of how the Bible describes to us God's love in Christ Jesus it shouldn't be without that because without that without that information that knowledge is incomplete it should at least contain that knowledge with the court B.B.

Warfield and he says that the information is ours by way of publication through the gospel through the reading of scripture through the interaction we have with God's word it's publicized to us it's revealed to us and we have access to it in that way but what is at the heart of Paul's prayer to God is that there is more to this knowledge of the love of Christ than simply head knowledge and we all understand that I hope that there is a difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge it is as Warfield says it is not merely that they be in an intellectual and mechanical way in form that nothing can account for Christ's worth but love compelling him to leave glory his glory behind him in heaven he wants them to understand feel and realize this he wants the real knowledge of full feeling or apprehension not just head but heart heart and that is really essentially it so

I've said often to you there are plenty of people who occupy academia who pursue the knowledge of Christ from scripture and from writings that are extra biblical and they accumulate that knowledge but it is entirely a head knowledge they might even be able to make very powerful cogent arguments with a believer that may appear to defy the believer's knowledge because of how extensive it is but always remember that the genuine believer in Christ Jesus has a knowledge that the mere academic can never have as they are it needs to go deeper than the head into the heart what

Paul is praying for is that we have a firm grasp of Christ love flowing from an experience of that love a personal experience of it and this is something that is crucial to us all it is one thing to know about love we all know that love exists in the world but we would be very poor creatures if we had never experienced ourselves if we had not experienced love being loved or loving in return if that was just something that we read about or heard about I've never been to Antarctica I've never been to Asia or any of these countries I've read about them but I've also read from people who have been there the difference between the knowledge that I possess and the knowledge that they have is quite vast some of you may have been to

[19:17] St Kilda I'm privileged to have been there once and the privilege of being there defeats the privilege of reading about it or hearing about it reading the history books about it and all of these things the actual experience itself is something different but spiritually it is far more an intensely personal experience that depends upon the ministry of God's Spirit and that ministry that interaction with God by his Spirit intensifies this experience one of the preachers divides the text up into four parts and I just want you to think about one of these there's the appropriation there is the operation there is the reflection and we can we can appropriate the love of Christ in the sense that it is ours when we experience it as something that he bestows upon us and we take it to ourselves we operate within the sphere of that love and we reflect on we're all able to reflect on we're all able to think about what way it affects our life and so on but one word that is subjection we are under subjection to that love now ask yourself about that one word to be under subjection to the love of Christ is crucially important to the believer because the love of Christ compels them to behave in a certain way the love of Christ is something that makes them and you amongst them willing to hear his word and to act on his word and to feel shame when you're going against his word and to have your conscience enlivened by reason of how the love of

Christ impacts upon your life and it's something that a believer is able to think about and respond to to be under subjection to the love of Christ is the root to understanding as opposed his great love for his people and there is greater love has no man that he laid down his life for his friends and if you understand that if you go to that if you think about that if you experience that then you understand that this is a love like no other and as I said there are many powerfully gifted people whose intellect is like produced to shame but you're able to enter into this aspect of the love of Christ and you are submissive to Christ because of your understanding of it not something you look at from afar it's something that touches your heart and touches it effectively so that takes us into something and I think these two things are very intimately related he says to us here to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge now that seems some some of the commentators say this is a contradiction to know something which is beyond knowledge how can that possibly be but what he is saying is this that this knowledge is a knowledge of a love that surpasses that goes beyond ordinary bones the bones that you would customarily be used to thinking about no one of us can ever say about our understanding or our grasp of or our however experienced we are as Christians we can never say

I know it all we can never say that I've achieved the full limit of what there is to know because the love of Christ is inexhaustible and your capacity to contain what is inexhaustible is clearly not there you will always be grasping for greater and a deeper appreciation of what the love of Christ is all about there is essentially a love that is infinite a love that is eternal E.W. Pink in his own comments and Pink has a book about collects the prayers of the apostle Paul in it and he says that when we talk about what is the love of Christ this he says can never entirely be composed about it can never be explored or exhausted by us we shall never know anything of the love for with

Christ as love does either in time or in eternity but he says by its fruits and its effects you can never know it except in these two ways by the fruit and the effect of the love of Christ experientially that is essential for the believer remember the words of Robert Murray McJane and they probably came from this very passage we may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height McJane says the love of Christ is like the deep deep sea into whose bosom you can look a little but its depths are unfathomable it is a breadth without a bound length without end height without top and depth without a bottom describe something that is virtually impossible to describe but just immeasurably great and that is how it is for the believer he wants nevertheless he is praying to God for the believer that they may come to a knowledge of what is beyond our capacity to know but to strive after to seek it out for ourselves and then finally to be filled with the fullness of

God but that we might be filled with all the fullness of God now is that possible how can it possibly be that the fullness of God can be contained by any vessel that's not what he's saying he is saying at least that it is out of his fullness that we are filled but it's not just that it is filled unto the fullness of God now that word isn't clearly seen in this translation but in the Greek translation that's what it insists upon that this fullness is a fullness that takes us to God and it is inevitable that that is the attraction the attractive power of

[28 : 02] God that as we stretch ourselves towards what is beyond our capacities to contain that this is to be seen to to quote Warfield again that all of God's inestimable treasures of spiritual blessings life strength love holiness shall be poured out immeasurably unto them poured out immeasurably unto them some of the commentators they say well when you think about God when you talk about God there are divine attributes that are what are called incommunicable there are divine attributes that are communicable there are certain things that are true about God that can never be true about any of his creatures these things are they ever remain the same he is divine and you are not divine he is infinite you are not you are finite he is intangible you are not and he doesn't communicate any of these attributes to you but the gifts and graces that he has decreed that will be the possession of his people he has decreed that they will be bestowed upon them according to their capacities as they look to him for them so that you are looking to someone who you know has a resource that will never be exhausted and encouraged to go to it knowing that by going to it that you are doing what he has sought from you to do here is what he has promised to his people that his gifts and graces even his only spirit as he has promised it promised him to us that he supplies us with all that is necessary to meet our need can't remember the quotation but it doesn't matter in a sense what we are reminded of is this prayer of the apostles and that this is his desire for you and we know that the prayers of the saints of

God will be answered because they are offered in Christ's name and they are offered at a throne of grace and for our experience in this world we may think that we're never going to get to this point where will we be so filled full of the knowledge of Christ and yet the day will come when our capacity in this world will be reached and we will pass into the next where that capacity will continue to increase as we grow into the likeness that is his well there is much there that we ought to learn from remember the privilege that we have of praying for and being prayed for and to endeavour to follow the example even the things that we don't understand do you ever pray for something and you say to yourself well

I'm praying for it but I don't know how that prayer will be answered and is that not true about many of the things that we may pray for we don't know how God will answer these prayers but we're told that it is wisdom for us to pray as God has directed us and the glory will be his as he answers all all all our prayers in Christ let us pray Lord our God we give thanks that you are a prayer hearing God and that you're a prayer answering God and even though sometimes we in our foolishness believe that our prayer has not been answered because it does not conform to our request we are still reminded of our wisdom that is far surpassing our own we give thanks for the love of

Christ which defies description in many ways and that he has poured it out into the heart of his people and that he draws us with cords of love and that he teaches us to love him as he has loved us even though we recognize that his love is greater than any love that we can have for him remember all our needs and all that we pray for watch over all our homes and families our loved ones our congregation here and all who form part of it especially those of our number unable to be with us at this time here and petitions grant mercy for sin in Jesus name Amen our closing psalm psalm 86 we're singing in khalik psalm 86 and we're singing from verse 11 singing from verse 11 thank you saying and from to to 1 who wants and that

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[36 : 01] O be a check in the show O be a check in the show O be a check in the show

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