

AM Jude 17-25 Staying the Course

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 March 2025

Preacher: Dr Neil Macdonald

[0 : 00] Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Ephesians chapter 3, Ephesians chapter 3 on page 1175, Ephesians chapter 3.

For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation as I have written briefly.

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

[1 : 31] To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, 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, 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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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. May God. Please turn with me in your Bibles to the passage we read earlier, Ephesians chapter 3.

[4 : 01] I'd like to focus with you on verses 14 to 21, verses 14 to 21, under the title, Praying with Paul.

Praying with Paul. What gift can you buy the man or woman who has everything?

That's a question you sometimes see asked in magazines and newspaper supplements.

Not altogether seriously. And sometimes they suggest rather quirky gifts to give to someone who doesn't really need anything.

Well, in a sense, this passage answers a similar question. What do you pray for a Christian who has everything?

[5 : 12] What do you pray for a Christian who has everything? Why do I say that? Well, earlier in this letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul has described Christians as having been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

And he has listed the blessings Christians have received. Let me remind you of some of them. We were chosen in eternity past to be holy and blameless in God's sight.

We were predestined for adoption into God's family. Through Christ's death on the cross, we've been rescued from slavery to sin and been fully and freely forgiven.

We have been made heirs to a glorious inheritance. We have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. We belong to a worldwide family in which distinctions of race and gender, class and background are of no consequence.

These are amazing blessings. If we're trusting in the Lord Jesus, if we're united to him by faith, all these blessings are ours.

[6 : 44] No wonder the Apostle says that we have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

So if that's the case, what more could we possibly need? What more could we possibly want? It's in the context of all these blessings that Paul introduces the prayer which we find in the closing verses of Ephesians chapter 3.

That's why I suggest that this passage sets out things we should pray for as Christians, both for ourselves and for others.

It's interesting that most of this chapter, chapter 3 of the letter, is an extended parenthesis.

It's an interruption to Paul's line of thought. Paul begins the chapter with the words, For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, on behalf of you Gentiles.

[8 : 04] But his line of thought stops abruptly there. And he doesn't pick up that line of thought until we reach verse 14. And there, for this reason, is repeated to highlight the fact that Paul is picking up where he left off in verse 1.

Between verse 1 and verse 14, Paul launches into an explanation of his role as an apostle to the Gentiles.

And it's worth noting in passing that the Bible is both human and divine. In the words of Paul in his second letter to Timothy, all scripture is breathed out by God.

The men who wrote the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit. They wrote exactly what God wanted them to write. But they weren't dictating machines.

The Holy Spirit didn't override their personalities or iron out their idiosyncrasies. The doctrine of inspiration allows for interrupted thought as here and what we might regard as messy syntax.

[9 : 36] So why does Paul, as he puts it in verse 14, bow his knees before the Father?

What reason does he have to pray as he does? Well, I think that Paul prays here in view of all that God has revealed of himself and of his purposes.

That's what Paul has been explaining to the Christians in Ephesus. He has been painting on a broad canvas the story of salvation.

And here Paul is praying in light of all that God has done and all that he has promised yet to do. He's praying in view of all the blessings God has showered on his people, on his church. So let's learn then from what he prays for.

[10 : 53] The first thing I'd like to highlight is the challenge that's implied. The challenge that's implied. Let me explain.

One of the things Paul prays for is that the Holy Spirit might strengthen the Ephesian Christians with power in their inner being and that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith.

But the Spirit is already at work in these Ephesians. Christ already lives in them. Otherwise, they wouldn't be Christians at all.

Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ. There is no such thing as a Christian in whom Christ does not live by his Spirit.

Paul can't be praying for the Ephesian Christians to experience fellowship with Christ and the power of the Spirit for the first time.

[12 : 02] It has to be that he wants the Ephesians to experience Christ's fellowship and the Spirit's power in greater measure. He wants them to know Christ better and to live in greater dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The implication, then, of Paul's prayer is that there is yet more to be known and experienced. and experienced.

There is room for progress. That is the challenge that is implied. Let's think about that for a moment. Christians have received in Christ entitlement to every spiritual blessing.

But we don't yet have full enjoyment of every blessing. In terms of our status, we are holy and blameless in God's sight. Christ's righteousness has been put to our account.

But we are not yet holy and blameless in practice. We are no longer slaves to sin, but we still sin.

[13 : 22] We have received forgiveness, forgiveness, and yet we still need daily forgiveness for daily sins. We are heirs to a glorious inheritance, but all we have received so far is the down payment.

As regards the blessings which are ours in Christ, we need to distinguish between the now and the not yet. We enjoy the blessings in a measure now, but we don't yet enjoy them fully. And yet we can and should enjoy them more and more here and now. That's the implication of Paul's prayer. Progress is possible.

You see, the Christian life isn't static, it's dynamic. There's more to be enjoyed. There's more to be experienced. There's more to being a Christian than simply becoming a Christian.

We don't sit back and fold our arms because we've got it all. There's a life to be lived. There's a race to be run. There's a fight to be fought.

[14 : 43] As someone has said, we may not be sinless, but we should sin less. The Christian life has been described as becoming what we are.

I rather like that. If we're Christians, we are holy as regards our status before God. That's what we are. But the challenge is to become more holy in practice.

To become what we are. If we're Christians, we are adopted sons and daughters of the living God. That's what we are. But the challenge is to become more like sons and daughters of the living God in how we behave.

We need to become what we are. The saintly Christians of whom we read in church history were very aware of the need to make progress in the Christian life.

They weren't satisfied with what they'd already attained. You probably know that the Reverend Mary McChain was a minister in Dundee in the 1830s and 1840s.

[16 : 10] He is famous for his prayer Make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.

And he put his conviction like this I am persuaded that I shall obtain the highest amount of present happiness.

I shall do most for God's glory and the good of man and I shall have the fullest reward in eternity by maintaining a conscience always washed in Christ's blood by being filled with the Holy Spirit at all times and by attaining the most entire likeness to Christ in mind will and heart that is possible for a redeemed sinner to attain to in this world.

The Christian life means lifelong obedience to Christ. It's a long obedience in the same direction. It can't be reduced to an initial response to a gospel invitation.

It can't be reduced to a decision made months or even years ago. The Christian life is as much about how we are living now.

[17 : 37] The Apostle Paul came to faith as a result of an encounter with the risen Christ on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus.

But he writes to the Galatian Christians, the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God.

Elsewhere he writes one thing I do forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul didn't live in the past he wanted to make progress in his Christian life and his ambition for the Ephesian Christians was the same.

He wanted them to grow in their faith to grow in practical holiness to become what they were. That's the challenge which is implied in his prayer.

[18 : 53] And the same challenge comes to us if we are followers of the Lord Jesus. Are we becoming what we are? Are we growing as Christians?

Are we making progress? Or are we putting little or no effort into our Christian life and if anything falling back?

That's the implied challenge of Paul's prayer. The challenge that's implied.

Secondly, in a little more detail, the requests Paul makes. The requests Paul makes. I would say there are basically three requests in Paul's prayer.

And they build on each other to a climax. The first request in verse 16 is that according to the riches of his glory, the Father 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.

[20 : 12] I suggest we treat this as one request, since it is by the Holy Spirit that Christ dwells in our hearts. Paul here prays that the Holy Spirit may empower the Ephesians and make them strong.

You might think this would manifest itself in dramatic ways, but what Paul has in mind here is the inner life of the believers.

He wants them to be strengthened in their inner being. He wants Christ to dwell in their hearts through faith. I wonder if you have noticed how the question where do you stay has different connotations very often, north and south of the border.

other. In Scotland the question is often used to ascertain where a person's home is. Where do you stay? But in England the question, where do you stay, usually refers to short-term residence. You stay in a hotel or guest house when you are on holiday or away in business. If you want to know where a person has his home, you ask not where do you stay but where do you live?

[21 : 45] Live denotes permanent residence rather than temporary occupation. And the Greek word which is translated in verse 17 as dwell denotes permanent occupation.

The Lord Jesus already indwells the Ephesian Christians but Paul wants him to enjoy all the benefits of a permanent resident.

He wants him to feel more and more at home in their hearts. How does that come about? By the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is through the Spirit Christ lives in us. It is the Spirit who makes Jesus real to us. The Holy Spirit has to do his work in us. His power is indispensable.

And yet at the same time Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. And faith is something we have to exercise even though it is not something we do in our own strength.

[22 : 57] There are things we can and must do to nurture our faith. As we saw this morning we need to read our Bibles we need to pray we need to meet regularly with our fellow Christians.

As we do these things the Holy Spirit grows our faith. As we cooperate with him he enables us to lean more and more on Jesus and live in greater dependence on him.

A minister I knew used to say that no one has less of God than he or she really wants.

No one has less of God than he or she really wants. I suspect he had a point.

We do not have because we do not ask and we do not ask because we do not really want. We need to see our need of the Holy Spirit's power.

[24 : 09] That's why we need to pray that God would strengthen us with power through his spirit in our inner being so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.

Paul's second request for the Ephesians is in verses 17 and 18 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 wants the lives of the Ephesians to be lives of love. He mixes his metaphors here. He speaks of them as rooted in love.

He's thinking of them as plants which have their roots deep in the soil of love. And then he speaks of them as grounded in love.

That's an architectural metaphor. He's thinking of love as the foundation on which the Ephesians build their lives. Paul sees love, love for God and love for others, as the natural outworking of a life of faith.

[25 : 39] Elsewhere he speaks of faith working by love. Faith expresses itself in love. love. That's what practical godliness looks like.

And it's as we live like that that we can truly know Christ's love for us. We love him because he first loved us. But as our love for him deepens we understand and appreciate his love for us all the more.

There's something of a chain reaction. When Paul speaks of the length and breadth and height and depth of Christ's love in verse 18 he's trying to get across just how vast it is.

It reminds me of the old children's chorus. Jesus' love is very wonderful. Jesus' love is very wonderful. So high you can't get over it.

so low you can't get under it. So wide you can't encompass it. Oh what wonderful love. Christ's love embraces the unlovely.

[26 : 57] It reaches out to those who are his enemies. My song is love unknown. My Saviour's love to me.

Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be. Oh who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die.

In verse 19 Paul says something very striking. He describes Christ's love as surpassing knowledge.

love to In other words Christ's love can never be known exhaustively. It can never be fully known. But Paul wants the Ephesians to know that love as best they can even though there never will be a time even in eternity when God's people will have grasped it completely. There will always be more to know. So do we pray that we might know Christ's love more and more and increasingly live in the good of it.

[28 : 26] Paul's final request is in verse 19 that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

This is the climax of the prayer. Paul wants the Ephesians to be filled with all the fullness of God and so be transformed into his image.

As they live in dependence on Christ by the power of the Spirit as they grasp his love with ever increasing clarity Paul expects them to be transformed into his likeness.

He expects them to assume more of the family likeness. In the words of John Stott God's fullness or perfection becomes the standard or level up to which we pray to be filled.

And he helpfully adds, the aspiration is the same in principle as that implied by the commands to be holy as God is holy and to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

[29 : 45] three requests for the Spirit strengthening and Christ's indwelling to know Christ's love and to be filled with all the fullness of God.

By any standard these are big requests. they are big but are they impossible?

Could the Ephesians for whom Paul prayed have any confidence that Paul's prayer for them would be answered? And what grounds do we have for making the same requests for ourselves?

let's consider then thirdly the provision that's assured the provision that's assured look first at what Paul says in verse 16 he prays there that the Father would strengthen the Ephesians with power through the Spirit and their inner being according to the riches of his glory according to the riches of his glory that's the measure Paul has in mind as he prays he's addressing a God whose glory is infinite and whose riches are limitless can he do what Paul asks?

of course he can given the riches of his glory and look at how Paul describes God in verse 20 he describes him as one who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think according to the power at work within us if the Ephesians are tempted to think that Paul is asking for too much he reminds them just how great their God is he can do all that they ask him to do more than that he can do all that they could possibly dream of asking him to do and it doesn't end there he can do far more abundantly than all they ask or think Paul uses a sort of super superlative to make his point nothing absolutely nothing is impossible for the

[32 : 34] Lord not only that the Ephesians already have evidence of what God's power can do it's already at work in them they've already been raised from spiritual death to spiritual life they're already indwelt by the Holy Spirit they already have new God given capacities and interests God has begun a good work in them and he will not stop he will bring it to completion at the day of Christ God is still the same the God who was able to answer Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is equally able to answer our prayers there's no inability in him he is able to do!

more abundantly than all we ask or think according to his power at work within us that's the provision that's assured finally and briefly there's the goal that's envisaged the goal that's envisaged Paul Paul concludes his prayer for the Ephesians with what we call a doxology we saw one this morning in the letter of Jude it's an ascription of praise to God to him Paul writes here who is able to do far more than we can ask or think to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever amen this doxology is a fitting conclusion to the first half of the letter but it's also a fitting conclusion to

Paul's prayer because the ultimate goal of Paul's prayer goes beyond the good of the Ephesian Christians important though that is it's nothing less than the glory of God did you see how in verse 10 of this chapter Paul writes how through the church the manifold wisdom of God is now made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places the church is God's master plan and it exists for his glory it exists to bring him glory being a Christian brings us many blessings but the ultimate goal of our salvation is to give

God glory remember the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism what is man's chief end man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever and that goal will be fulfilled in and through the church that's the goal that is envisaged here so for the Christian who has been blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ what do we pray for we pray that they would recognize the challenge of becoming what they are we pray the spirit would strengthen them in their inner being and

Christ would make himself at home in their hearts we pray that they would live a life of love and grasp more and more of Christ's love for them we pray that they would be filled with all the fullness of God God and we pray with confidence because the God to whom we pray is a God who has limitless resources and who is able to do far more than all we can ask or think he will be glorified in his people shall we pray oh

[37 : 42] Lord when we look at a prayer like this we recognize just how small and inadequate our Christian lives so often are Lord have mercy upon us we pray that you would strengthen us by your spirit that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith we pray that we might be rooted and grounded in love and comprehend that love more and comprehend Christ's love more and more and we pray that we might be filled with all the fullness of God and give you glory in Jesus name
Amen

Amen