

A Prayer for Christian Development

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Preacher: Rev. Malcolm Macleod

[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to Paul's letter to Ephesians and to chapter 3, and we can read at verse 14. Ephesians 3 and at verse 14.

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.

And so on down to the end of verse 19. We spoke in the morning from the book of Numbers about the fact that we are all on a journey.

And as we journey on through the world, we do have that sense of progression, sense of leaving things behind, and the sense of moving forward.

And we saw that in a kind of visible, physical way through the journey of the people of God in the Old Testament. There is another way in which we can see progression as well, and that is in our personal development.

[1 : 13] We see it in our families with our children growing up from being infants, growing up to being adults. And so it is for those who are the children of God.

They are those who are going to journey on in their personal development, as well as journeying on leaving things behind, and going forward as they journey on through life.

And I want us to look at this passage from that perspective this evening. And when we look at this letter and understand something of the background to the letter, we can perhaps make some connections with the world in which the people lived in the days of Paul.

And there are two particular things that were a problem to the people in Ephesus. And one of them was wrong teaching or false doctrine.

And we see that as we follow down into chapter 4, where he speaks in verse 14 about every wound of doctrine. And we also see that in Ephesus, there were many other religions and many other gods.

[2 : 24] And these gods interfered with the lives of the people of God, of the church of God, and of their progression and development as the children of God.

And in many ways, we find ourselves as the people of God, as the church of Jesus, in that kind of world. There are many false teachings which distract us from the pure gospel of Jesus.

There are many religions which in many ways affect our thinking and sometimes influence our thinking. And we need to learn how to deal with that so that we can develop as the children of God.

And we might ask, what is it we need most in order to ensure that you and I develop as the children of God? And it seems for Paul, what he saw they needed most was prayer.

And that should not surprise us. He prays for them here. He has prayed for them earlier. He is a man who sees the difficulties and the challenges. And he prays for them that they would develop and grow up and be champions for the Lord Jesus.

[3 : 37] Be strong in their faith and live for them in the world in which they live. And so tonight, I want us to look at something of this prayer against that background.

And to remember that what we need ourselves more than anything else is this kind of prayer. And I want us to notice first of all that Paul is praying for their capacity.

He wants them to be bigger than they are. He wants them to be able to accommodate some things a lot more than they are doing. And that's how we enter into the body of the prayer in verse 16.

That according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being. And as Paul enters into his prayer, he makes it quite clear that what they need more than anything is going to come from God.

And that's the essence of prayer. We come to pray out to God, not because we're in control of things ourselves. We pray out to God because we know we cannot do it.

[4 : 48] And we know that God in his grace will do it. And so the prayer begins with the fact that God is going to grant them, give them a gift. What's the gift going to be?

That you may be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being. To know strength. To be able to cope with certain things. To know strength in the sense of being able to accommodate certain things. To embrace certain things.

In other words, to know strength to embrace the things that are beyond them. And that's life, isn't it? We come to places, we come to points in life, in our journey as the people of God, as those who are looking for the salvation of God, and things simply go beyond us.

And we need the strength that God can give to us so that we can reach the unreachable. And so we can embrace the unreachable. And so we can bring that unreachable to be part of our own personal experience.

[5 : 59] And that strength with which they are going to be strengthened is a strength which comes completely from God himself. May grant you to be strengthened with power through the spirit in your inner being.

That hidden part of your life and mine that no one knows but yourself and God alone. Where you do all of your thinking.

Where you do all of your choosing. Where you feel different emotions in the depths of your inner being. It's the inner being that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4 as the place where God is renewing him in the inner being.

It's what happens inside of us. And we know tonight that the work of the grace of God, it's invisible. We look at each other, we cannot see that there is the grace of God.

We see it. It's not visible. It's in the inner person. And all the children of God tonight, they have that grace of God invisibly dwelling in their hearts.

[7 : 12] And it is where that invisible dwelling of the grace of God dwells. That's the place where God is looking, where Paul is looking. For his people to be strengthened so that they will develop.

And for sure we all have to admit that not only does our intellect let us down, but our way of thinking lets us down. Our way of choosing lets us down.

Our emotions let us down. We are so wrong in so many different ways. And this prayer hits at the very core of the problem that they had in Ephesus. And it's so real and so personal to you and to me tonight as the children of God.

And if the strengthening is going to take place, it is going to be a strengthening by the Spirit of God in your inner being.

That powerful person of God, which is the third person of the Godhead. He's not an it. He's not something that's just a mass.

[8 : 26] He is the third person of the Godhead. In all of his power, in all of his ministry, in all of his influence, he is praying that he will come and will strengthen them in their inner being.

And we know that's where God begins his work. Jesus says you must be born again. Unless you're born again by the Spirit or by water, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

Paul says the Spirit of God dwells in your heart. You are the temple of God. It's something that happens in the center of your being. And the Spirit of God, as a Spirit who brings about new life, is the Spirit of God who is going to increase your capacity for more of that same life.

In the invisible place of your heart. And St. LaFraigson says that the most wonderful and magnificent work of the Holy Spirit takes place where prying eyes cannot see.

Isn't it marvelous that right now the Spirit of God in all of his glory, in all of his power, can be ministering in your heart and no one can see it. You can feel it, but you cannot see it yourself and no one else can see it.

[9 : 51] It's the mystery of the working of the Spirit of God. to stretch your very intellect, to stretch your capacity to understand, to stretch your capacity to accommodate, pushing out the boundaries.

Why? Would he pray such a prayer? What does he want for them? Why does he want to stretch their minds and stretch their hearts and stretch their lives?

Because he wants the royal son of God to be resident in their hearts.

And he's not going to live in a hovel. And he's not going to live in a ruin. He's going to live in a palace. And that's the way that Paul goes on, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

The Christ who has gone to heaven that he speaks of in chapter 1. The Christ who has secured our redemption. The Christ with whom we have so much in common, connected to him.

[11:03] He is our Savior. That very Christ who is in the glory of God, at God's right hand. That very Christ. that he may dwell in your hearts through faith.

We have a tourist season. And sometimes it seems to go on forever. It begins very early in the year and it goes on very late in the year.

And perhaps in some countries and in some parts of our own country, the tourist season goes on all of the year round. But we see our camper vans. We see people with their tents.

We see them camping in different places. They're moving around. They're here for a short time.

They're there for a short time. They are temporary residents.

But we live here. Our homes are here. Our dwelling places are here. This is where we are fixed.

And that's what Paul wants for the church in Ephesus.

[12:12] He doesn't want the Lord Jesus to be an occasional visitor in the hearts of this people. He doesn't want the Lord Jesus to be somebody who just comes and goes out of their lives occasionally.

And they manage, they carry on without him for the rest of their days. No. He wants the glory of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners, your Savior and mine.

He wants him to be permanently resident in their hearts. He does speak of them being a temple of God by the Holy Spirit.

And Jesus only dwells in their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus himself said that when the Spirit comes, he will not show you himself.

He will not make himself look great. He will not glorify himself. He will take my things and he will show to you. And Paul wants them to know every day that this Christ is in their hearts, that he dwells in their lives, that he is one who fills their hearts.

[13:28] And that he does so by faith. Believing in his name. Simply put, persuaded, intellectually and emotionally, persuaded in our whole beings that this Christ, this whole Christ, has to be my Christ.

and that this whole Christ must dwell in my heart. And you and I know that if that's going to happen, things will have to change.

Our whole lives will have to change. Our whole attitude to Jesus Christ and the Gospel will have to change. That's where he comes.

That's where he dwells. In our hearts. But we need to have the capacity to accommodate such a royal visitor so that he will become a royal resident and that he will dwell with me forever because I am a royal son of God and my royal daughter of God.

And what gives me royalty is the presence of the royal son of God. the capacity. C.S. Lewis in his book Mere Christianity speaks about his own conversion and he speaks of the way in which God came into his life.

[15:03] And it was as if God was fixing the windows in his life and fixing the roads and curing the leaks in his home in the home of his life. And he was content with that.

But suddenly he says God started knocking down walls. God started putting up pillars. God started extending this home.

He couldn't believe what God was doing in his life. I thought he said that God was making a cottage for himself where I would have him in my religion.

but he discovered that God was building a palace and that he was building the palace because he himself intended to come and to live in it.

Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that the capacity that we need? It's a capacity that they need it but tonight to know our hearts our minds our lives stretched in that way so that the fullness of Christ Jesus as the savior of sinners as my personal savior so that the fullness of all that he is will fill my life will fill my heart will fill my mind.

[16:28] A prayer for capacity. Do you need that prayer tonight? do you have strength enough yourself to accommodate this salvation this gospel of Jesus Christ do you have the strength yourself to accommodate it?

Then if you do you haven't yet understood what this gospel means. You haven't yet understood what Jesus as your savior means because tonight if you need him and if you want him and if you're longing out to have him then your prayer will be give me the capacity I may feel strong in myself I

may feel like I can achieve anything myself but this I cannot achieve and Lord for this I need you I need you to knock down the walls in my life I need you to extend my life in such a way as to accommodate you in it Lord I need you to come and to stretch me and to push me and to make a place for yourself to dwell in the capacity the second thing that we can see he prays for is confidence he wants them to be strong to be assured and to have confidence in their faith and that flows out from the capacity of Jesus dwelling in their hearts by faith this is how they will find confidence 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 that you being rooted and grounded in love he uses two ideas two metaphors to speak of the way in which he wants them to feel secure and he wants them first of all to feel secure with a sense of the life of Christ filling their own lives and a sense of the life that they live being rooted and united to the life that there is in Christ that you being rooted he wants to be rooted in something and we plant something and the roots go down and from the roots come through the roots come the life for the plant and makes the plant develop and grow he wants them to be rooted the first psalm speaks of those who are like trees planted by the river which in their season yield their fruit and their leaf never fades they are rooted in the right place they are fixed firmly on where their life comes from and Jesus speaks of himself being the vine and you are the branches you see the life that there is in him is the life that is their life and we hear Paul in Romans 11 speaking about the way in which the root of the olive tree nourishes the olive tree and if the root is holy the branches the fruit will be holy it's a prayer for a confidence that comes not only from understanding but from knowing that the life of the spirit of God which is the spirit of Christ is the life which flows in their hearts to feel alive there's nothing like it I feel alive in my home I feel alive in my family I feel alive in my work I feel I'm enjoying my work but to feel alive in my church to feel alive in my faith to feel that the life of Jesus fills my whole being then that's being alive and if you haven't experienced that yet then you're not alive you don't know what it is to be alive but tonight the prayer is that you will have the confidence in God and in your salvation that comes from knowing that you're alive in him flourishing you can almost touch the way in which Paul is speaking about life flourishing you can picture it in your mind that fruit bearing tree that fruit bearing garden it's flourishing because the life flows through it he wants them to be rooted he wants them to be alive living pulsating people with faith who are alive for God and to find confidence in the fact that their life is the life of God and that's why Paul himself was able to say it is not me but Christ lives in me what a claim what a testimony he was rooted in Christ he knew where it was to be alive for Christ and as well as being rooted he was praying that they would be grounded he didn't want them to wobble around in their faith he didn't want them to wobble around in their daily lives he wanted them to feel secure to stand on a rock Jesus said in Matthew 7 at the end of the sermon on the mount those who hear my teachings and do them they will be like someone who builds their house on a rock Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16 on this rock I will build my church security it's stability it's where I place my anchor it's where I stand it's where I rest my soul it's firm and it's secure they were tossed around with every wound of doctrine they were wobbling in their faith and so he prays for them that they will be grounded on the foundation of the apostles and prophets and Jesus the chief cornerstone he wants them to be grounded and when he wants them to have confidence in their faith because of their rooting and of their grounding we need to ask where where are they going to be located where is the garden where is the rock where is the place in which they're going to be alive and remarkably they're going to be rooted and grounded in love how does that work that love that the bible speaks of the love that freely flows from the heart of god that chooses objects that will be his delight who are not in the least but attractive the love that comes at great cost to change those who are his objects to recover them to put his arms around them to bring them to himself he wants them to be rooted in love he wants them to be grounded in love their sense of being alive is being alive from the love of god and being alive in the love of god their sense of being secure in the love of god on the love of god standing secure and we can let the bible explain the bible as we should and john makes that remarkable statement love is from god and god is love dare we say tonight that what he prays for them that they will find their confidence rooted in god and found it grounded in god where else could they be more secure than to be able to trace everything that they are and everything that they have back into god himself doesn't depend on intellect it doesn't depend on my feeling it doesn't depend on my emotions it goes right back to the root to the ground to the first cause where the freeness of the love of god begins that overflowing river that connects us with him and he with us and finding yourselves living

your lives fixed in that love isn't that wonderful and attractive we can have confidence in so many different things and in so many different places and in all of our achievements and in everything that God has given to us in our lives we can put our confidence in these things but this is where we must come back to if we are going to have confidence in life confidence to face that to face this to overcome that the confidence that comes

[26 : 56] from knowing that I'm in Christ that I'm loved by God that I'm in the love of God and that confidence will be something that will touch every area of my life every experience on my journey every stage of my development every place that I go to every place that I need to be rescued from that confidence will follow me and look at the way in which he expands the prayer with regard to confidence to reflect on this love may have strength to comprehend with all saints what is breadth and length and height and depth he wants them to have that intellectual strength which gives them confidence because they begin to see the absolute all encompassing nature of the love of

God that all encompassing nature which reaches back to the very beginning where there is no beginning because it comes from God himself that reaches forward to where there is no end because God's love is an everlasting love that reaches down to the deepest places all in life and that raises me up to the highest possible experience of life in my relationship with God and as I journey on through life and as I seek to have this confidence in God there may well be times when I will ask the very question that Paul is answering here has the love of God stopped serious experiential question has it stopped with regard to its continuity has it stopped with regard to the depths which it can reach when I descend into the depths has it stopped with regard to its ability to take me to heaven to be with

Jesus and to be with God and God's family home these are serious questions that crop up in our minds from time to time as we will as the people of God but understanding that comes from the capacity to accommodate the Lord Jesus and to know where our foundation and our roots are that understanding gives us confidence gives us courage and gives us to know that this will never fail everything else will fail everyone else will fail us we will fail ourselves we will be surrounded by failings as we journey on but the deeper I go the more I understand that the love of God goes much deeper and the deeper I go the more I understand that Jesus himself went much deeper in his love for me

I understand that his love is greater always greater than my need and when I question whether I will ever finish my course or whether my faith will take me home and whether I question if I have the strength to continue I understand through this capacity God has given to me to comprehend I understand that the love that has begun in the heart of God and that in chapter 1 had its design that will be presented faultless before his throne that love will never fail the confidence that comes from the very love of God and the discovery every day that as big as my problems might be his love is much bigger and that as big as my trials might be his love goes much deeper and that as much as I question the glory my arrival and the glory that lies beyond the love of God reminds me that he will take me safely and securely home the capacity the confidence what a blessing it would be tonight if we shared that confidence in the love of

God accommodating in our minds and our hearts all that Christ is and thirdly and finally he prays for their contentment don't we live in a world which knows nothing about contentment perhaps we are in as Christians in the world contentment seems to be so elusive it's something that I cannot reach but Paul prays step by step he comes to the place where he wants them to be content and content in the love of God and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God to know the love of Christ how well do you know yourself yourself it's an interesting question as you explore your way of thinking your way of living how well do you know yourself how well do you know those whom you love in the world how well do you know them do you really know them we hope in the world help

[33 : 53] We can speak to each other in the passing. We can have a conversation with each other. But we may not know each other at all. But Paul is praying for a knowledge that is experiential.

It's something that takes place in the inner being, which has been strengthened by the Spirit of God. It's in that place where there's the feeling, where there's the thinking, and where there's the choosing, where all my emotions are, my affections, everything about me.

It's in that place that I know whatever Paul wants them to know. And we wouldn't be surprised that we move from the love of God in general terms to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

To know what cannot be known doesn't make sense. But that's the marvel of it. That's why the prayer works. Because it gives to us the capacity to experience the very thing that is beyond our thinking and beyond our imagining and beyond us reaching its boundary.

It cannot be known. And yet it can be known. And tonight you will know if you know it in this way.

[35 : 30] Do you really know yourself as I said? If the love of God is in your heart if the love of Christ has been poured into your heart by the Spirit of God you will know because you have felt and having felt you would have asked and having asked God would have explained and God would have explained to you exactly what's happened to you that He has come to dwell in your heart in your innermost great being.

If you haven't felt it it hasn't happened. If it has happened you have felt it for sure. And God continues to make it known to you in such a way that you will have confirmation upon confirmation of this relational love of Christ in your heart.

That you are caught up with His beauty with how attractive He is and that nothing else can reach that level of satisfaction in your life.

That elusive contentment becomes yours. He loved me and gave Himself for me said Paul.

Said Jesus greater love has no one in this that He should lay down His life for His friends. Being in such a place that we find the love of Christ satisfying now and stilling up our hearts in such a way as to give us a springboard to go forward in living for Him because we are content that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[37 : 35] His expressions are astonishing. His prayer for them what He prays for them is in itself astonishing. but for Paul it's real.

And it's not just real it's achievable. And it's achievable because this is what God can do. And tonight that's the prayer of Paul the prayer of the Word of God for you that under the Gospel of Jesus that God will increase your capacity to accommodate Jesus in your life that He will give you confidence in the love of God and that He will give you to understand and to feel and to think and to know the love of Christ the fullness of God.

It says Paul in Colossians 1 the fullness of God dwells in Him and He dwells in your heart. We cannot understand it. We believe it and it is possible because it is what God can do.

And in the words of Paul again godliness with contentment is great gain. When I survey the wondrous cross in which a prince of glory died my riches gain I count but loss and poor contempt on all my pride.

Where the whole realm of nature mind that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all.

[39 : 23] Find your contentment in the Lord Jesus. You will discover a level of joy and of well-being and of experience that has so far eluded you and will bring you to a springboard that will bring you to greater heights in the enjoyment of God's salvation as it is in Jesus Christ.

Amen. May God bless his word. Let us pray.