

Big Bold Prayers

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[0 : 0 0] Our Father we pray that your word will take deep root in our lives for the sake of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Please be seated.

You may like to have in front of you Ephesians chapter 3. This is the sixth in this sermon series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It's page 182 at the end of the Bibles in the pew.

After this week we have a couple of weeks break before we resume with chapters 4 to 6 in a two or three weeks time. Our prayers are often an index of our knowledge of God.

Sometimes we don't pray because we don't know God. Often we don't pray very well because we don't know God well. Often we pray small prayers because our conception of God and his ability and power is small. Often our prayers are weak because we do not have a strong understanding and knowledge and relationship with God. Our prayer life is often an index of our knowledge of God or rather our ignorance of God. So the more we know God the better we will pray. The more we know God the more we will pray. The better we know God the deeper will be our prayers. The more we know God's will then the more confident we will be in our prayers. The more we know God's love then the more incentive we will find to pray. So the more we know the kind of God that God is the better, deeper, richer, more confident will be our prayers. And that is certainly the case for St. Paul as he comes now in this letter to the Ephesians to pray for the Ephesians. He begins in verse 14, for this reason

I bow my knees before the Father. For the reason of what? Well the preceding few verses he's had a digression in fact. He began chapter 3 verse 1 by saying for this reason and he's about there to pray but like most of us at times he digresses as we saw last week. So when he says for this reason he's actually referring to the preceding chapter, chapter 2 and indeed to chapter 1 as well. And in chapters 1 and 2 Paul has explained in some detail the extraordinary grace and love and mercy of God in coming to sinful people, both Jew and non-Jew, Jew and Gentile that is, and saving them by grace in Jesus' death and in his resurrection. And not only in saving them but establishing a new humanity of Jew and Gentile, new people of God relating to God through Jesus' death. That's the extraordinary grace and love of God that he's explained in chapters 1 and 2. And for all that

[2 : 5 3] God has done in Christ, in blessing us with every spiritual gift in Christ, Paul comes to pray. And he kneels a sign in ancient times of earnest prayer rather than the usual standing. And he prays, according to verse 14, before the Father. Not to a remote God, not to some nebulous concept of God but to the Father, indeed the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

There's a play on words with the words family and father. Family is patria, father is pater, related words. Some translations might even say, I pray to the Father from whom all fatherhood in heaven. But really it's the idea of family that is a group of people descended from the one father or the one common ancestor even going further back. This has, at least in the translation we have before us, the sense that every family is somehow modelled or should be modelled on the fatherhood of God to his people. That God is the, in a sense, the archetypal father. That's what fatherhood is meant to be. But rather than the translation for whom every family is though there's this family and that family, the translation possibly could be better done as all the family. Because Paul has been talking about the unity of Christian people, Jew and Gentile, all together in the household of God in chapter 2.

So possibly really what he's saying here is he prays to the Father from whom all the family, meaning all the Christian family, in heaven and on earth, derives or is named. So it's an expression of the unity of God's people again. And of course Paul's been explaining the unity that God brings.

So he prays to the Father of that unity. And then he goes on to pray according to the riches of God's glory. That is confident prayer. He knows the riches of God's glory. He knows what this God is like. He knows that he's not a stingy God or a mean God or an impoverished God, but rather a God who is rich in glory. And so he prays. And he prays a big, bold prayer for the Ephesian Christians and a church in Ephesus. He prays firstly, the second half of verse 16 and beginning of verse 17.

He prays that God may grant you to be strengthened with might through his spirit in the inner man and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. This is a prayer for power. A prayer that the Ephesians will be strengthened with might, almost tautologists, strengthened and might, a prayer for power. Paul prays this because he recognises that our own power is inadequate. We do not have enough strength in ourselves to do the things that follow. So Paul prays that God will strengthen the Ephesians with power. This is actually a prayer that jars with our society's values. For our society exalts those who are strong. It praises those who are self-made people. It has as one of its goals, its idols really in our society, self-sufficiency. That we can do everything that we want if only we think hard enough we will have the power to do it. But Paul recognises that that is folly. Spiritually speaking it's wrong.

[6 : 30] Paul recognises that we need God's power. That we in our own strength are inadequate and that we need the power of God in order to accomplish spiritual maturity. And so that's why Paul prays for power.

And the power that he has in mind, he's already explained in chapter 1, is the power of Christ's resurrection. That that power is working within us. And Paul prays that it may work effectively within us. And he prays that we will be strengthened with might through God's Spirit in the inner man.

Again, this is opposite of the world. For the world is concerned, obsessed with physical strength, physical beauty, with outward appearance. But Paul recognises that what's more important is the inner person. Inner character is more important than physical beauty. Inner strength is more important than physical strength. Paul prays for what is of greater significance in God's sight.

Not that our bodies physically are unimportant. Not that we should despise them or neglect them. But rather that what is more important is inner character. Inner strength from God.

The parallel to this is the first half of verse 17. That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. That's in effect another way of saying the same thing. The heart is mentioned there. That parallels the inner man in the preceding verse. Christ dwelling in the hearts parallels the Spirit dwelling in the hearts. For in the New Testament if Christ dwells in you then the Spirit dwells in you. If the Spirit dwells in you then Christ dwells in you. They are inseparable in that sense. So Paul is explaining what he means by strengthening in the inner man. That is that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. That's what it means. And that's what Paul's praying for.

[8 : 28] But you may well ask indeed a good question is isn't it the case that for Christian people Christ already dwells in their hearts? That if you're a Christian Christ necessarily is in your heart?

And of course that is true. It's interesting that the idea that Jesus is in my heart is actually a very rare thing in the New Testament. This is really the only reference in the New Testament to Christ being in the heart.

There are some related type things. But something for us is a common expression for many of us that Jesus comes into my heart is actually very rare in the New Testament. But what Paul is praying for here is not that these people become Christians.

They already are. Christ is in their heart. He's praying for actually something a bit bigger and a bit deeper. For the word to dwell here is not the word to lodge.

It's the word to set up a permanent residence. For the first time in my adult life coming here there's a sense in which I'm setting up permanent residence.

[9 : 29] Not that I'll live in Doncaster all my life I expect. But for the first time in my life I've come to a place for an indefinite period. I'm not here for one year or two years or three years or four years as every time I've moved in the last since I was 17 when I left home I've moved to about 10 different locations.

All for short periods of time. That's a sort of lodging. That's a temporary dwelling. But now for me for the first time coming here it's a in a sense of permanent dwelling. And that's the sense in which Paul has in mind here.

That Christ may dwell permanently in your hearts. Yes he's there but that his residence within these Christians will last forever. It'll be permanent not temporary.

So that's one sense in which Paul is praying. But the other sense is possibly also that there will be some change effected by Christ's permanent residence in the hearts of these people.

He's sort of praying that the residency of Christ will leave its mark. Again it's like us moving house. We move into a house but there's a sense in which it's not really yet our home our residence because it takes time to get the garden right to rip out those things we don't like and put in the things we want.

[10 : 44] To change the colour scheme in this room. To bring about our furniture or realise that some of our furniture doesn't fit and we need different things. And so in a sense place our stamp on the place we live.

We only do that if it's a permanent or long term sort of place. Paul is praying that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith that is a permanent thing that is that Christ will leave his mark in your life that he will shape it.

When people take up residence somewhere their presence eventually becomes evident or characterises that dwelling. But it takes time. And that's what Paul is praying for that Christ's residence in the hearts of the Ephesians will actually leave its mark will shape their character will change or even transform their lives.

That's what Paul is praying in this prayer. The force of this prayer is that Paul is praying that what God has begun already in Christ will be completed and effective in the lives of these people.

That the character of Christ will increasingly become evident in these people's lives. That all the rich spiritual blessings that Christ has already given us or God has given us in Christ that he's explained in chapters 1 and 2 that they will have deep root and effect in the Ephesians lives.

[12 : 09] And for this to happen they need power and so Paul prays for power. We think we say that God helps those who help themselves but that's not a biblical point of view.

God helps those who acknowledge they need help. So many people in our world are so stubborn in their self-sufficiency that they keep on rejecting God. God helps those who acknowledge they need his help and all of us do it's a matter of whether we acknowledge it or not.

Paul is praying for power for the Ephesians because he knows they need his help and so do we. Self-sufficiency is not a Christian virtue it's a vice and a sin.

Paul prays for power but he goes on to pray perhaps an even deeper richer more extraordinary prayer in the second half of verse 17 through to the end of verse 19.

He prays that the Ephesian Christians being rooted and grounded in love may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[13 : 29] He prays that they being rooted and grounded in love that that's a premise of his prayer a basic stage of his prayer being rooted is an agricultural sort of idea like a plant that is rooted has got its roots going down into the ground to get sustenance and nourishment roots that provide some stability and continuity of life and so on but also that it's grounded an architectural term a building which has got a sure foundation that is grounded on a solid foundation Paul's already mixed up the two sorts of metaphors before the end of chapter 2 he talked about that Christians are built into a building a sort of spiritual building but not just a building a building that grows so he's already used architectural sort of language to talk about buildings and foundations but he recognises that the church is really people and it's growing so here the same sort of metaphors are put together a growing building and that's what he's praying that they already are really in effect but it's rooted and grounded in love but that doesn't mean the love that people have for each other it doesn't mean a sort of soppy romantic sense of love he's not talking about weak character that's sort of all lovey-dovey and sweet and all that sort of thing

Paul is talking about being rooted and grounded in the love of Jesus Christ for us in gospel love that's the love on which the church must be rooted and grounded not in sweetness and niceness of character but hopefully will follow but what is rooted and grounded in is the love of Jesus Christ in his death on the cross in his resurrection from the dead the love that means that you and I can have a relationship with God our sins forgiven that's the love that we're to be rooted and grounded in that's the basic the hard core if you like of our church life that's the essence of what it means to be a Christian and part of God's family knowing the love of Christ that saves us that forgives us that establishes us as God's people that's a given an essential there is no person who's not a Christian if they're outside of that love that's gospel love in Jesus' death on the cross so Paul is praying that they are rooted and grounded in that love a concrete love not a vague idea at all but then being rooted and grounded in that love

Paul again prays for power this time it's power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth because Paul recognises that Christian gospel is not accessible for those who are intelligent but rather is a spiritual gift in a way that God gives the power to comprehend and indeed he recognises that unless if we're to be spiritually mature then God needs to give the power of comprehension of the gospel he's not praying that the Christians love more he's praying that they comprehend more the love that God loves them with he's not praying that they love each other more or that they love God more but rather that they understand the love that God has for them more and notice that this is with all the saints power to comprehend with all the saints there's no place for in a sense isolated meditation or esoteric thinking of lone ranger

Christians who dream up their own theologies or philosophies rather Paul's conception is that any person who's a Christian is an essential part and necessarily belongs and participates in the body of the church of God there's no place for people on outside the church as Christians they are within the church if they are Christian people and it's together that they grasp the love of Christ or the love of God it's together that they learn to understand it's together that they exercise their minds in comprehending with God's power the love of Christ for them all believers need all other believers to fully understand the love of Christ that's why coming to church is important that's why sermons are taken seriously here that's why Bible studies are important that's why reading the Bible is important not just praying that we can learn together comprehend together the love of Christ for us and Paul goes on to talk about the breadth and length and height and depth he doesn't actually say what of he just says that you may comprehend the breadth length height and depth of what well it seems to suggest in the next verse that it's talking about the love of Christ that you may comprehend all this and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge over the ages commentators have thought of all sorts of nice ways of thinking about the height depth love length and breadth that the breadth means that

Christ's love is for all people as broad as there are many people that its length is for all eternity it never expires that its height is to lift us to heaven and give us a relationship with God and that its depth is that Christ's love extends to the deepest of sinners well all those things are true but I'm not sure that that's exactly what Paul meant I think he was speaking rhetorically he's just putting together all the dimensions and saying that Christ's love is in the end infinite it extends or exceeds all the dimensions that you could think of that's how vast it is as he goes on in verse 19 to say to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge not that it's unknowable that we can't know anything of the love of Christ but that we can't know the full extent of it because our knowledge will run out but Christ's love will keep going the more that we know Christ's love the more we know that there is more to yet know if that makes sense Christ's love exceeds what we can know however much we know the experience and experience the love of

[19 : 21] Christ there is more the hymn writers loved to praise God for this extraordinary love of Christ love so amazing so divine love divine all loves excelling there is no greater love that hymn says than the love of Christ for us my song is love unknown my saviour's love for me not love unknown in the sense that I don't know what it is but love unknown in the sense that it surpasses knowledge it's greater than the knowledge that I have of it and as we'll sing shortly oh the deep deep love of Jesus vast unmeasured boundless and free that's the love of Christ it's a love which surpasses knowledge we can never plummet steps we can never reach its heights we can never get to its farthest bound because it goes on and on and on so there's always more of it to find there's always more of it to experience there's always more of it to discover Christ's love for us goes far beyond anything that we've known or experienced but what a prayer this is what a prayer

Paul prays because he prays that the Ephesian Christians will know something that surpasses knowledge that they will know the unknowable it's an impossible prayer they can't know the unknowable but Paul prays that they will know the unknowable vast extent of the love of Christ and indeed he goes on at the end of verse 19 to pray that they may be filled with all the fullness of God again almost an impossible prayer to conceive that a human being could be filled with the fullness of God the perfect standard of God perfect holiness but Paul can pray such a big bold prayer because he knows God well because it comes out of his theology his praying and so does ours even if we don't realise it and that was my point at the beginning that's why we need to have a strong and a deep appreciation and relationship with God in order for our prayers to be strong and deep as well and Paul prays for power because he knows that God is powerful that's what he says in this doxology at the end now to him verse 20 that's God who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think to him be glory in the church and in Christ

Jesus to all generations forever and ever Paul has prayed for power because God is powerful indeed God is able to do he is not impotent he is able and he's able to do what we ask Paul says because he listens to our prayers and is able to respond to them but more than that God is able to do not only what we ask but also what we think because God knows our thoughts even the things that we don't express in prayer but not only is God able to do what we ask and think God is able to do all that we ask or think not just some of it but all of it because God is indeed powerful but even more than that God is not only able to do all that we ask and think but God is able to do more than all that we ask or think so it doesn't matter how much we ask and how much we think God's able to do more but God's able to do even more than that because God's able to do more abundantly than all that we ask or think because God doesn't hold back he's abundant in his answer but Paul doesn't even stop there because actually what Paul says is that God is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think

God is able to do beyond the limits of our imagination and our asking think of the greatest thing that you would like to pray for and God can do more use your imaginations to their wildest limit and God can do more because he's not restricted by our small minds he's not restricted by our imaginations because God's power is infinite and his love is infinite so think big Paul says and pray big and God is yet bigger and keep thinking bigger and keep praying bigger and God is bigger still but you see our prayers are so weak and so puny sometimes we've got such small conceptions of the power and love of God our theology of God is so small we might have a relationship with God but it's a relationship that's often very ignorant you see

Paul has a strong and robust appreciation of the love of Christ that is boundless and the power of God which is infinite and the riches of God's glory all those things he's spoken about in chapters 1 and 2 they should feed our prayers so think big pray big but recognize that God is bigger still our prayer life should be transformed by our relationship with God Paul's prayer is grounded in a rich appreciation of God that's why it's important for us to read our Bibles that's why it's important for us to be in Bible studies that's why it's important for us to be in church that's why it's important for us to listen and appreciate sermons and read Christian books to recognize more and more the extraordinary power and love of God and when we know that more and more when we appreciate God's will and his purpose more and more then will our prayers be big then will our prayers be effective then will our prayers be bold because we will know that God is powerful when we pray for power we will know that

[25 : 06] God's ability is beyond our wildest imaginations and so we'll pray big and not small think big pray big but know that God is even bigger that's why Paul concluded with a doxology now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever amen to laughing to