

The Church and A Prayer for Personal Development

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[0:00] I bow my knees before the Father, for 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 verse number 19. Now we want to return to consider what we've been looking at recently, that is, the idea of a church that is healthy, that is able to carry out the mission of God and do the things that God has sent the church to do.

And in doing so, so far, we have looked at the church collectively as a community. We have noticed in 2 Timothy the way in which the church is God's household and the pillar of truth.

We have noticed in John chapter 15 that the church is the vine. And we have noticed in 1 Peter 2 that the church is the temple. And we saw from these illustrations of the church as a community the way in which a healthy church works because of the way in which it is designed and because of the way in which people work and live and set themselves up within God's plan for his church.

But we know that the strength or the success of an organisation is dependent upon the individuals within it. So I want to think this evening not so much about the church with regard to it being a community and a gathering of people, but to think of the individuals that make up the church, to think of you and I as those who are Christians, who have been called by God to serve in the church, the importance of ourselves being healthy and ourselves having the right relationship with the Lord Jesus.

[1:53] And as we go on, we can perhaps keep in our rear view mirror the whole picture of the church in Ephesus.

We read in Acts chapter 20 that Paul is warning the elders in the church at Ephesus that after he goes, that wolves are going to come in and they are going to create havoc.

We see here that he's trying to put them on the guard against the culture around them and teaching them the doctrines of grace so that they may be able to stand.

We go to Revelation chapter 2 and we see the outcome. We see there that the church has lost its first love. So if we want to think of a church or think of individuals within a church, let's keep that picture in a rear view mirror, not just tonight, but every day that we live.

It's important to remember the way in which a church can decline. Coming to this letter, Paul begins, this first half of the letter is all about teaching them the doctrines of grace.

[3:02] And then he moves on to the more practical aspects of their Christian living and how, because of who they are, the kind of people that they should be.

And as we read through these chapters into chapter 4, we will recognize that there is the sense of their need to grow up and to develop and to be the kind of people that they must be if they're going to stand in the midst of a culture that is constantly against them.

And looking at this prayer, we want to think of the church and a prayer for personal development. We want to think, first of all, of the fact that there is a process.

There are steps to be taken to ensure that the Christians in the church in Ephesus, that they are healthy and strong and able to serve God in this city.

And the process is one which focuses in particular on the Spirit of God and upon the Lord Jesus Christ. And at the very center of what must happen in this process, we see that Paul is speaking in verse number 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.

[4 : 30] Paul is reminding them that they are weak. He is reminding them that in their inner passion, where everything takes place, where my thoughts are working, where my decisions are made, where I process the information that I receive, and where there are the outcomes of the way in which I live my life, in my inner being.

The invisible part of me that nobody sees but God alone, but where everything does take place. And because of the weakness of that part of their lives and of our lives, he is praying that God will grant them to be strengthened with power by his Spirit.

And we may ask, what kind of strengthening is Paul looking at? We may think of a person who is weak, and that person needs strengthening.

But I want us to think this evening, not so much about a person, but to use the illustration of a container or something that has limited capacity.

And it's designed for a limited amount of whatever it's going to contain. And if this container or this box, this utensil in any way, if it is going to house or contain anything more than that, a change needs to take place.

[5 : 59] In other words, this box, this utensil, it must be expanded, it must be extended, in order to accommodate something greater.

And that is that sense of the weakness that Paul is referring to here. They need to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit, who already dwells in their hearts, to make them the children of God.

And they need to be strengthened in order to have an increased capacity for a particular person to dwell within them. And we see that becomes obvious in the following verse.

And wherever we are in life, as the people of God, this is something that we need, because we are weak. However far we have developed on our journey of faith, we need to be, go through this process under the Spirit of God that increases our capacity for God himself.

And if we are going to develop in our faith, that is the thing that must happen. And how God does increase the capacity of our inner being to house himself and to house the passion of Christ may take place in different ways.

[7 : 15] And Joni Eriksson, Taddy, she speaks of the way in which her suffering increased her capacity for God. So when he is praying for them that they will have increased capacity for God, when we pray for ourselves and desire to have increased capacity for God, we don't know how God will answer that prayer.

But he will because that is how God works. That is the process that God uses to ensure that you and I develop in our faith.

In the prophecy of Isaiah, there's that sense in chapter 54 of enlarging your tent and removing the pegs and stretching them out further so that the accommodation is greater.

Tonight, that's how you and I will be healthy Christians. That God stretches our inner being in the spiritual way. Stretches it in such a way as to make space for more of Jesus.

And that's what he's saying here. So that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith. And the focus of this part of the prayer is that Christ will become a permanent resident in their hearts.

[8 : 46] And the suggestion is that as Christians, we can live and Christ Jesus in the sense of our experience he is an occasional visitor.

He does not live in our hearts in the sense of our experience and of walking with them. And Paul is praying for them that their hearts will be increased in its capacity for the Lord Jesus so that the passion of Christ that comes periodically and then that is ushered out the door at different times in life, that he actually comes to dwell in their hearts.

And for me, and I hope for you, that is really meaningful. Paul says in Galatians 2 that it is no longer he who lives but Christ lives in me.

He is a permanent resident. His heart is a place where Christ dwells. And we may ask ourselves this evening when we try to gauge our health as Christian people who are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we may ask ourselves how much does Christ dwell in our hearts?

Is he nothing more than an occasional visitor that our paths cross perhaps on the Lord's Day or occasionally during the week and other activities, but for the rest of our time that he is a distant friend?

[10 : 28] You will know in your heart tonight where the Lord Jesus is. Is he always with you? Or is it the case when we come to gather together for prayer that suddenly we're alerted to the fact that Jesus is not what I thought he was and that he is absent and that I move to cry out for myself in the

first place that there will be this sense of Jesus coming home to my heart and to making his home in my heart and giving to me that sense of him being always before my eyes.

There is a process. It's a process that we must all go through and we notice here that in version number 16 that he's praying that God will grant you.

It's the gift of God. It's what they need. It's what they cannot bring to themselves. It is what God has purposed to give to them.

It is the gift of God. They are steps that God puts in our hearts so that Christ will dwell in our hearts. Secondly, because of the process there is participation.

We actually take part in the activity of God in the activity of the Church of Christ. We are part of the mission of God and what God has sent his church to do.

[12 : 10] And when we look at the participation in this prayer we see there are two aspects to it. And the first of these is that there is a sense of being empowered.

Once Jesus fills my heart there's a sense of power. not because of myself but because of him. And as soon as I sense he's home with me that's empowering.

And the empowering here is in version number 17 that you being rooted and grounded in love.

There is the kind of horticultural picture of being rooted.

There is the building picture of being on the foundation. it reminds us of the vine and of the temple in 1 Peter. There is that sense of being embedded.

Being embedded in the sense that our life thrives and being embedded in the sense of being steady and being steadfast and being on the foundation so that we are immovable.

[13 : 22] And it is being grounded in the greatest place of all grounded in love in the love of God in the love of Christ.

As soon as Jesus comes home to me then my heart is filled with energy because of the love of Christ and the love of God.

I'm filled with a sense of wonder at the God who loved because he loved God and for no other reason than he purposed to do so. I'm filled with a sense of wonder that this is love that God sent his son into the world.

I'm filled with a sense of wonder that as Paul says in Galatians 2 that he loved me and gave himself for me. It's to be empowered with a sense of the love of God and to have the strength to comprehend that as we go into version number 18.

It's having the ability to be fully capable of experiencing all that the love of God is all that the love of Christ is to grasp it.

[14 : 40] And we're going to see that it is impossible to do so because it's an everlasting love. but it is the sense of being empowered to lay hold of more and more of the love of Christ.

And in laying hold of it and grasping it and having the capability of entering into it then there is the participation of experience.

to know the love of Christ in version number 19 knowing something. I can spend my time reading the greatest doctrinal books alongside of my Bible and I can learn so much about what the Bible is saying.

I can know it in my head but there's knowledge that Paul is speaking of. it's a prayer that's knowing through experience. It's something that not only do I process in my mind but it descends into my heart.

It becomes the controlling influence in my life. Having the capability to experience and then coming to discover what the love of Christ is like.

[16 : 12] what the love of God is like. How great is his love. And we know of course that we cannot become Christians without knowing the love of Christ.

But our knowledge can be so limited that we can be infants on the ladder of the development of the children of God and remain in that infancy state with regard to our knowledge of the love of Christ because the pros isn't working because we're hindering the work of God and the work of Christ. Infants in our knowledge of the love of God in Jesus Christ. And in this prayer and because of the expansion and because of the increased capacity for God there is the increasing awareness and experience of the love of God.

It's Christian experience and the Bible shows to us in different places that God is speaking to his people because they are not producing the fruit that he called them so to do.

And that can be so often that the kiss in our own lives that we are not producing the fruit that we are not basking ourselves by faith in the great ocean of the redeeming love of God in Christ and sailing on that ocean and having our hearts filled with a growing sense of wonder and it's a question for me and I think it's a question for all of us that as I spend each day how much is my day spent experiencing more and more of the love of Christ that's the health that Paul is looking for in the Christians in Ephesus it's a health that God is looking for in the hearts and lives of all of his people to know to experience the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge there are no limits of course to the love of

[18:43] God and our experience of it is limited only by our capacity and God increases our capacity we will never be able to understand it all but there's a growing sense of discovering more and more of the love of God learning to appreciate because we're learning to experience and we're learning to wonder more and learning to worship more so there's a process there is participation and finally there is a product what is the outcome and in the wonderful words that we have in verse 19 we read of the outcome that you may be filled with all the fullness of God that it goes back more to capacity to be filled completely and we have seen in the past looking at the way in which the Old Testament the priests in the temple their hands were filled to equip them for their work God equipped them to serve in the temple and the product is now that we are filled we are equipped we have the capacity to receive more of Christ and we now have the capacity and the ability to serve him better that's the product that's what Paul is looking for in Ephesus that's what God is looking for in us what are we to be filled with the words that are a great mystery in many ways that we are to be filled with all the fullness of God Paul tells the church in Colossians chapter 1 that in Christ Jesus the fullness of

God is pleased to dwell if Christ is dwelling in our hearts then the fullness of God is dwelling in our hearts we we we are filled with a sense of who God is and who Christ is but the filling has more to do with maturity and capacity and we read further on the letter and we see in chapter 4 the way in which Paul is speaking of the need to attain mature manhood and the stature of the fullness of Christ chapter 4 verse 13 it's the maturity the growing up into adulthood it's growing in the likeness of Christ the hands filled to to equip to be equipped to serve the Lord Jesus and walking as those who have a clean bill of health because

God's process is working God's Son is in our hearts God's love fills our hearts and we walk on life with a sense of wonder at what he has done for us and in us and with the sense of wonder at what he will yet do and in many ways the product should inspire us to pray for the process to rescue us from perhaps our slowness and perhaps our sloth in our faith to rescue us from that to pray earnestly!

for ourselves in the first place to pray earnestly for each other that all of us together here this evening would have an increased capacity for the Lord Jesus would have an increased capacity for the love of God and would grow up from being infants in the faith where we all begin to be mature and there were giants in the faith in every generation of the church and perhaps we can think of ourselves of those around us in past generations and they were giants in the faith they never saw themselves as giants but others saw them as giants because they were going through this process they were walking with the Lord the Lord was in their hearts and that spoke for itself and so tonight let's reflect on this prayer let's keep in our rear view mirror the whole history of this church in Ephesus that they were warned and that ultimately

[23:44] God left them but that we will not be like them this will be our prayer as we leave the seminary this evening and that we will know in our hearts that you are praying for the person next to you that I am praying for all of you and that you are praying for all of us for this product to be evident and that kind of healthy christian humanity and that developing faith will be effective and will show itself in a powerful light and witness in our congregation in our community in our town and wherever we go as people of God may God grant that he will bless us in such a way so we conclude by singing in Psalm 91 may