

Paul's Prayer
Knowing God's Power and Love That We May Be Filled To All God's Fullness
Ephesians 3:14-19

Introduction

Paul interrupts himself at this point until verse 13. Now before we go onto the prayer which Paul has been praying for them, let me give you a short summary of what he just said. Folks, we are flying at 10,000 feet, not touching on every principle we find in our text, but hopefully touching upon the most important ones.

What Paul explains here is the mystery of God in which He has been planning all along to bring the nations to know Him and His salvation, and to become His people along with the Jews. He explains how this mystery has now been fully revealed in Christ. Jew and Gentile have now been reconciled to God and have been made one body before Him, and that includes all ethnic groups. Believers from every people group have now been reconciled to God and reconciled to each other, and for many years this plan was not clearly known, it was a mystery. (This truth ought to create a deep gratitude in our heart that we live in the time in which we do, because before Christ came to earth, very few people among the nations were coming to know God and His salvation. The nations in that day lived in great darkness, and if you and I would have lived during that time we would have likely died in our sin and never known the salvation of God, but now we do know it, because Christ has become a light to the nations).

God through Christ has uncovered the mystery and now He is reconciling people from every nation, and together we are becoming members of God's family. And Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, was instrumental in bringing this about.

And as God is reconciling people from all nations to Himself and reconciling them to one another, the manifold wisdom of God is being shown to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, in other words, the angels. Now we don't know exactly how they see the multi-faceted wisdom of God in all of this, but we can surmise in some ways. Peter T O'Brien says that "This multiracial (multicultural) community in which Jews and Gentiles have been brought together in unity in the one body is the manifestation of God's richly diverse wisdom....Although Paul does not make explicit the nature of the testimony given to the rulers, it has been inferred that the church 'provides the angelic powers with a tangible reminder that their authority has been decisively broken and that all things are to be subject to Christ.' The powers cannot hinder the advance of the gospel to the Gentiles or their incorporation, along with the Jews, into the body of Christ" (p.247). So according to O'Brien the existence of the church is a reminder that the authority of these heavenly powers has been decisively broken, and that their final defeat is imminent, even though they have been scheming to defeat God ever since their fall. They see that they are outmatched.

But O'Brien also suggests that for the angels who are true to God and who are serving as instruments to carry out His plan, for them the existence and advance of the church is also a great encouragement in their spiritual warfare that God is winning the war and will bring everything he has purposed to its final end. I'm sure that there is far more revealed about the manifold wisdom of God than this, but we get a taste of what this means.

I wanted to encourage you by explaining a few of these things in brief, but now, let's move on to the prayer that we see in verses 14-19.

Introduction to the prayer:

In this text the Apostle Paul teaches us how he prayed for the church. If there is ever a need for growth, it is in this area, because prayer is our communion with God, prayer is our practice of drawing near to God. If we don't learn to pray, our relationship with God remains at a distance, and we end up rarely feeding ourselves on the food our soul needs most of all, which is, fellowship with our God. So I

invite you to use this prayer along with the other prayers of Scripture to teach you how to pray and draw near to God.

But as Paul teaches us how he prayed for the church, he really outlines for us two vital areas in which we must grow, in order for us to experience the fullness of our life in Christ. This is what I believe is the primary significance of this text. In a sense, this prayer teaches us the journey we must travel in order to experience God's fullness. We must travel the path in which we receive power from God that we do not have in ourselves. And we must also travel the path which leads us to God's primary intent in bringing us to Christ. And what is that primary intent? That we may know the full measure of His love for us.

These are the two petitions of Paul's prayer: Father, grant them power so that they may be strengthened and grant them power so that they may be able to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth, in other words, the full measure of Christ's love. And as they are strengthened with power and comprehend your love, may they be filled in every way with everything you are, and with everything you want to be toward them, and with everything you intend them to become.

Proposition: It has been my prayer for us that as we go through this text that we would understand the fullness of life that God wants to bring us into, but we would also understand these vital aspects in the process. The journey is sometimes difficult...ah...but it is always full of evidence which reveals to us the greatness of our God.

1. First Petition-To Be Strengthened with Power

Now let's consider these two petitions. The **first one is for power**. "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."

One of the things that I love about these letters from the Apostles is that every phrase is packed with meaning. What I hate is not having the time to unpack all that is here. But let me stop whining and get on with what God wants to teach us.

A. We need power

First of all, for us to experience all that God intends for our lives, we need power, and it is not power that we ourselves have. It is power that God alone can provide.

Now the first question is, how much power does He want to make available to us? Our text says, "according to the riches of God's glory." Folks, our need for power is great. When we think about the power of sin within us, Paul in Romans 7 reminds us, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." This is a description of a believer even after regeneration. And this is the personal description of an apostle who followed Christ for 22 years. Our need for supernatural power is great.

But Paul reminds us in this prayer of the great source of power that is available to us from God. As great as our need is, the source is even greater. The measure of power that God is able to provide is "according to the riches of His glory." And how glorious is God? Well, let's think a moment about how His glory is revealed in His power to create. God has created a billion galaxies with millions of stars in each galaxy. Think of how the sun is just an average star which would contain a million earths. Think of how the sun burns more energy in one second than all the energy man has ever produced throughout his entire history. Folks, we produce and use an enormous amount of energy every day here on the earth. But one average star that God has created burns more energy in one second than all the energy we have produced throughout our history. And when you add to that billions upon billions of stars in one second burning this much energy, then we get a glimpse of the riches of God's glory. And according to the riches of this glory He can provide the power we need.

B. How God provides the power we need

And how does He provide this power? It is through His Spirit. And where does He desire to demonstrate this power-in our inner man.

This brings us back to Spiritual Life 101. God knew that in our salvation He not only needed to redeem us from the penalty of our sin, but He also needed to rescue us from the power of sin. So he gave the Holy Spirit to regenerate us so that we are brought to life out of death and are given a new heart which loves God. But even with this work of regeneration, sin still lives within us as Christians. And the sin that lives within us remains just as evil as it was before regeneration. The difference is, it is no longer master over us, its control over our lives has been broken. But the fact remains, the sin nature is still a great evil force within us. So God also gives every true believer the Holy Spirit to live within us. And God assures us in Gal. 5:16-“Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Why? Because His power is great. God the Spirit now lives within us, and the great power God has is made available to us through His Spirit.

Therefore, the Apostle Paul concludes in Romans 8 that if you are a true believer you have the Spirit, and because you have the Spirit you are now walking according to His life and influence in you. Therefore, you and I cannot live the way we once did. And because we have the Spirit we are led by the Spirit and are putting to death the deeds of the flesh. And this power that works within us is evidence that we are children of God.

C. God provides power so that Christ may be at home

Paul's prayer is that we would experience this power even more and more, so that in the end, verse 17 tells us, “Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.” Now wait a minute, I thought that Christ did dwell in our hearts through the Holy Spirit? Why does he say, “that Christ MAY dwell? The word that Paul uses can be translated “dwell” but it also has a richer meaning than simply existing within something. It refers to a “settling down” into. So Paul is not referring to Christ's initial indwelling in the believer through the Spirit, but he is asking for the power of God to work within them, so that Christ, as it were, may be “made at home” in their hearts.

When Christ initially comes to live within us, on the one hand, his regeneration creates within us a whole new direction in our life. That is why we are described as a “new creation.” But on the other hand, there is a lot of things in our life that still need to be renovated. There is a lot of old thinking and practices which need to be addressed. This doesn't automatically get cleaned out. It's a process. And there are ways of thinking and believing and living that, quite frankly, Christ is not comfortable with. He actually, really doesn't like. So He is not “at home” in our heart.

DA Carson in his book *A Call To Spiritual Reformation*, which addresses the prayers of the Apostle Paul, shares the illustration on this point of a couple who moves into their first house. They don't like the black and silver wallpaper in the master bedroom so they take it out. There are also mounds of trash in the basement that need to be removed, the roof leaks, the electrical supply is too small, the furnace needs repair, and as their family grows they also need to do a little expansion to make room for the kids. All of these things are taken care of, and after a few years, the husband says, “You know, I really like it here. This place suits me.”

This is indeed what Christ does when He takes up residence in our inner man. When Christ first moves into our lives, He finds us in very bad repair. DA Carson says, He finds the “moral equivalent of mounds of trash, and black and white wallpaper, and a leaking roof.” But through the work of His Spirit, He goes about replacing and repairing these things. But because change in these things takes true power, Paul prays for this power to continue to be at work in their lives.

Sadly, what I have found in my own life is that I often become satisfied with the changes which Christ has already brought about. I begin to think that everything major has been repaired, and it is only a few “touch-up” things that need to be taken care of. But what happens when I think this, is that I begin to walk less and less by faith and in the power of the Spirit. I just assume that I can kind of take it from here.

But then, God in His grace opens my eyes to see how sin is still deeply rooted in me, and the roof that I thought was in good shape is in reality still needing serious repair. Or all of a sudden, the furnace goes out, and I am brought back to the reality that much still needs to be done. I still desperately need the Spirit's power and work in me. And I come back to the reality of this little phrase in our text, "so that Christ may be made at home in our heart *through faith*."

Godliness or spiritual sanctification, if it is progressing, does not think that we need to walk less by faith, but even more by faith as we live out our days. Is your heart becoming convinced that you must walk more and more by faith each day so that you experience more and more of the Spirit's power? Or are you kind of assuming that you can take it from here?

I love how God works in even the ordinary things that we assume we can take care of, and He shows us that even these things require faith and the power of His Spirit, things like loving our wife and reaching our goals at work and doing our school-work. God wants to lead us to increasingly walk by faith so that we experience the Spirit's power.

2. Second Petition-To Comprehend the Love of Christ

A. What is Paul praying for?

Now Paul goes on to the second petition in his prayer. "That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength (or 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." He prays that as his readers are strengthened through God's Spirit and Christ is made at home in their hearts through faith, that they would also be rooted and grounded in love and would know the full measure of Christ's love.

This is not a petition that they may love Christ more, but rather, that they might understand Christ's great love for them. And this is not simply a mental exercise, but it is grasping through the experience of life the true dimensions of God's love.

B. How you and I move in and out of understanding God's love

You and I are continually moving in and out of understanding and experiencing the dynamics of the Christian life that are prayed for here. We so easily slip back into a Christian life that is primarily about what they do for God. And if we are not careful, this perspective of the Christian life will lead to the Galatian dilemma where the focus of our sanctification is not the reality of God's grace, and eventually the focus of our salvation is neither about the grace of God.

I find that my thinking and the way I function moves between something like an Antinomian perspective of the Christian life where holiness is not a big deal or a law-based perspective of the Christian life where the gospel is not central to my relationship with God. And neither one is biblical. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul addresses both of these errors in Philippians 3 as he presents the centrality of justification by faith for our Christian life.

We can grow our Christian life and relationship with God out of the soil of our own performance or we can grow it out of the soil of being sure of God's grace offered through Christ. And what Paul teaches us here and in many other places, is that the only soil which will lead to a true love for God is the comprehension that our relationship with God is built upon Christ's finished work and God's love and grace toward us. This is why we can accurately say that God's primarily intent for the Christian life is for us to know the full measure of His love, and out of a comprehension of His love for us, then we grow to love Him.

This is the way the human heart is moved to extraordinary love-by first experiencing love.

DA Carson tells of the story of a colleague and his wife at Trinity Seminary, Perry and Sandy Downs. It is interesting that as I was going to school in the Philly area, Perry was teaching at a Christian prep college in Coopersburg, PA. And even at that time they were foster parents.

Carson mentions a case of twin eighteen-month-old boys that they took care of. Perry and Sandy hesitated but then agreed to take these boys into their home when the agency assured them that the boys would be with them only for about six weeks.

The first night in their home, the boys were put to bed, and not a peep came out of their room. Curious, Perry crept into their room a half hour later. He found the boys wide awake, their pillows wet with tears, but neither was making a sound. What happened in the past is that they were beaten in several of the homes for crying, and this was their ninth home. Some therapist had concluded through testing that the twins were incurably damaged emotionally and intellectually.

As it worked out, the twins stayed with Perry and Sandy for close to two years. And by the time that they were adopted both of them were judged to be within the "normal" range emotionally and intellectually.

What this illustrates is the reason Paul prays that we might have power to comprehend the full measure of Christ's love. We will only be set free from our fears and we will only grow to love God, as we first comprehend His love for us, a love that is so great that it "surpasses knowledge," in other words, a love so great that we will never be able to comprehend it fully....

Brothers and sisters, how often we are like the prodigal son who was living under the blessing of his Father, but did not realize the true measure of his love? So what do we do? We begin to think that life is better without God or we at least keep Him at a distance. Do you know how we do this? We do this especially with our besetting sins, in those areas of sin that we have a hard time surrendering and seeing a breakthrough.

If you and I have a hard time truly repenting of a sin, I am talking about having a real change of heart and turning away from it, one reason that we may be struggling to truly turn from this sin is that we are not believing God's love. We are not believing, for example, that what He has commanded or what He has allowed into our life is truly for our good.

What God did through Christ reveals to us God's true heart. While we were still enemies, Christ died for us. While we were helpless, Christ rescued us. When we realize the true measure of Christ's love, it will change the way we view God, and things like His commands, because it helps us understand the heart of the One who is giving those commands. If God truly loved me to take my place and to pay the penalty for my sin, I know that when He speaks His commands to me, He is not trying to cheat me out of life, but He is really seeking to guide me to experience the fullness of life.

Do you know His love, the kind of love that if you and I spend the rest of our life seeking to know it, we will never be able to comprehend it fully?

C. The life of comprehending God's love

In the end, if we do comprehend God's love, He will lead us to be filled to all the fullness of God. Everything that God is, and everything that He intends to be to us, and everything He intends us to become will be ours.

What a great prayer. What a great life God has planned for us.