

“Lord Teach Us To Pray”

A Study in the Exposition of the Prayers of Paul: Ephesians 3:14-21¹
Two Week Study Guide: August 20 and August 27, 2017

*“Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made,
were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade;
to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry;
nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.”*

Frederick M. Lehman, *The Love of God*

“...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.”

The Apostle Paul, Ephesians 3:17-19

WEEK ONE: CULMINATING ON AUGUST 20

Introduction

Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, has provided a theologically rich introduction to his letter, a prayer that flows out of the theological introduction – an exposition of the glory of Christ in the redeeming of his people – and then he expounds on the beauty of the church which consists of a reconciled population of both Jews and Gentiles in one body. Then while he initially begins his second prayer at the beginning of chapter three, he takes a significant parenthetical break to further unpack the mystery of God’s redemptive plan as unfolded in the church. Upon completing this expansion of chapter two’s glories, he returns to his prayer to petition on behalf of the church. Paul prayed for them to experience the power of God in full sanctification and its accompanying privilege of knowing the unfathomable love of God. So, it is here that we will see that while the hymn writer Frederick M. Lehman poetically captured a beautiful image of the vast and unknowable expanse of the love of God – Paul is petitioning, that by God’s power and filling, we might just begin to secure an insightful capturing of the uncapturable magnificence of the love of God.

A Pause Before Prayer

The world in which we live and operate is a sensory bonanza. At every waking moment there is a flood of audio and visual stimulations and demands. Also, because so many of us live under the tyranny of the urgent there is a rapid transition from one activity to the next with little deliberate attention to what we have now begun to engage in before we are well into the activity. This pace and kinetic pattern of transitioning in activities likely all too frequently carries over to the life of prayer for most contemporary American believers.

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray’s Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School
ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

Therefore, to insert a clear intentionality about the momentous action that I am undertaking, I frequently silently pause before I begin praying. I want my mind, heart, and affections soberly fixed on the tasks like a marksman taking the necessary moment to steady his breathing before taking a shot from a great distance, knowing that this simple discipline will return great dividends. I do not want to engage in some rote introductory greetings in prayer that momentarily primed me for what I really intended to pray for – I want every statement to be sincere and treated as though spoken to my heavenly Father.

The Apostle Paul preceded us in this life by almost two thousand years and there were no means of securing audio recordings so as to have ever heard him pray. So, we hear his example by his words enduringly secured and kept in the New Testament Scriptures and we learn from them. Here, Paul paused. Whether he paused in the same intentional manner that I have expressed above we do not know, but he began engaging in a public prayer that was to God and in service to others when... he paused. His attention did not drift off topic and he did not chase a tangent, rather, when expressing a truth in the act of prayer (that he was a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles) he was impressed to take a moment to unpack and qualify that truth.

Paul's parenthetical break extends from 3:2-13 and speaks to the very matter of why a former Pharisee and now an Apostle of the long awaited Jewish Messiah has given his life, time, strength, and even freedom in serving the Gentile people. Paul explains that he does not simply serve the Gentiles indiscriminately. He serves the Gentiles who have submitted their hearts in faith and in repentance to the Lord Jesus Christ and who are now grafted into the blessings of God promised to Israel. This is a magnificent truth that we (who constitute an overwhelmingly Gentile assembly) have come to wholly expect and take for granted as God's clear plan for the Church. But, we sometimes fail to remember that we make our assumptions and conclusions because we have an almost two thousand year vantage point of what was in the earliest days of the Church a mystery unfolding.

In Ephesians 1:9 Paul first references the mystery of God's will being made known to them. Then through much of chapter two (2:11-22) he gives attention to the grafting in of the Gentiles into Christ and the blessings and salvation therein. Continuing to 3:1 Paul begins his prayer by directly addressing his ministry to the Gentiles

This is where we observe the parenthetical unpacking of his statement in 3:2-13 that he is in prison on account of the Gentiles' unique advantage in Christ, and he caps this parenthetical break with urging these Gentile believers not to lose heart over his tribulations which are to their advantage.

Note how Paul speaks of this mystery of the Church and its being an assembled body of both redeemed Jews and Gentiles through this break in the first half of chapter three.

Ephesians 3:1 "...how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly."

Ephesians 3:4 "When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,

Ephesians 3:5 “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.

Ephesians 3:6 “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.”

Ephesians 3:9 “and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things....”

Reflection and Application

Do you find that you are cavalierly rushing into the act of prayer – spinning out some introductory niceties before getting to the heart of your petition, praise, and/or thanksgiving? How might you ready your mind and heart before engaging in even the first elements of your prayer before the Lord?

Are you intentional in your words and thoughts when you pray? Paul did not chase a random thought floating through his mind, but unpacked the breadth of his very intentional words in even the opening elements of his prayer. How might you discipline yourself in being increasingly intentional about your words in prayer?

A suggestion is occasionally writing out prayers for matters of unique weightiness either in burden or content.

Paul was not drifting off on a theological tangent or exploring intellectually stimulating concepts – he was musing over and unpacking the mystery hidden for ages in God. Why do you think this was important enough to interrupt the beginning of his prayer?

Have you given proper attention to the now revealed mystery of Jews and Gentiles being grafted into one body or have you allowed two thousand years of this mystery having been revealed to develop a theological complacency in you (choosing not to think and wrestle through the magnificent redemptive plan of God from Genesis through Revelation)?

Take time to very thoughtfully read Romans 9-11 and record how Paul's statements here might better inform your insight into this mystery and its tensions. Then record how this mystery and its elements impacts your own praying.

Petition(s) in Paul's Prayer, Ephesians 3:14-21

There are various positions regarding how many distinct petitions Paul is actually making in this prayer for the Ephesians – ranging from one to three. The differences here are not with the elements, but their relationships as either distinct or more interconnected.

One Petition:

It is argued that Paul is only making petition for one thing: to be strengthened in the inner man – all the other elements develop from this one central petition.² So, the reason that Paul petitions that the Spirit of God would empower their inner man is for the following reasons:

That Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith.

That they might know the incomprehensible love of Christ.

That they might be filled with the fullness of God.

Two Petitions:

Carson argues for two central petitions: "Two petitions emerge directly from the text. Paul prays (1) that God might strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inner being (3:16-17a) and (2) that we might have power to grasp the limitless dimensions of the love of Christ (3:17b-19)."³

Three Petitions:

The last position is argued from the text's grammar – making the argument that each of the three petitions are framed by "ὅτι clauses" or "that/so that clauses"

Ephesians 3:16-17 That/So That - may grant them to strengthened with power.

Ephesians 3:18-19 That/So That - may have strength to comprehend.

Ephesians 3:19 That/So That - may be filled with the fullness of God.

This final position, of three petitions, will be how these portions of the text will be broken down for further examination, if for no better reason than the grammatical advantages it provides.

² The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament; John Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; Ephesians: Harold W. Hoehner; David C Cook, 1983; (Hereafter: Cook), Pg.631

³ A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Praying with Paul; D.A. Carson; Baker Academic, 2014; (Hereafter: Carson), Pg.161

Ephesians 3:14-15, A Bended Knee Before The Father

As stated above, Paul executed an extended parenthetical pause from 3:2-13, but here he has returned to his prayer and effectively begins again. The first statement in his prayer at this time is “for this reason” which serves to bridge the content for what follows with what has preceded (both the contents of his pause and the larger sweep of contents of chapter two). Therefore, Paul is in part referencing back to the wonderful benefit of the revealed mystery of the Church which consists of Jews and Gentiles in mutual benefit of the salvation and blessings in Christ. In view of this he is petitioning for them to be empowered in their sanctification, knowledge, and maturity in Christ.

This was his context and reasoning, but Paul also provides a statement of physical action that clued us into this being a time of petition to God, namely that he bows his knees before the Father. This expressed posture was neither foreign to Paul or others:

Luke 22:41 Jesus was kneeling down to pray.

Acts 9:40 Peter knelt down to pray.

Acts 20:36 Paul was kneeling down to pray with the Ephesian Elders.

Acts 21:5 Paul was again kneeling down to pray – here with the disciples in Tyre.

Bending the knee would likely be communicating humility and submission in prayer, but there are numerous postures assumed in prayer throughout the Scriptures ranging from prostrate on the ground to standing with lifted hands. As with all such matters it is the heart that needs to be examined and not necessarily the posture. However, there is often an appropriate accompaniment of prayer and posture. It is as natural to be prostrate with one’s face to the ground when wrestling and laboring before God in petitions for mercy and help as it is to stand with lifted hands when rejoicing over matters of great victory and joy. Here the prisoner of Christ Jesus and Apostle to the Gentiles is bending the knee – affirming the wonder of God’s mystery and urgently petitioning for the power of God to effectually work itself in the life of the church.

Paul petitions God as Father and there is debate regarding the intended scope of fatherhood being expressed here: all of creation or only the redeemed (the reference to heaven being the redeemed who have passed from this natural life). I am inclined to conclude that this is communicating a large view of God in the likeness of what was expressed in the Psalms and the Prophets. Heaven and earth consistently appear to speak to the sweep of creation - the natural and supernatural domains. Further, it is the Lord who named everyone everywhere demonstrating that they are in subordination to him.

I also see support for this conclusion in view of the language employed in the exultation of Christ in Ephesians 1:20-23 which is also preceded by a reference of his power toward the redeemed.

This appears to be setting the foundation for a big view of God whose power is indispensable for one’s success and necessary progress.

Reflection and Application

Do you give thought to your posture in prayer? Without becoming formulaic, does your posture reflect the nature of your petition, praise, and/or thanksgiving?

Be careful to remember the matter is one of the heart – posture does not shape sincerity.

Do you give proper thought to petitioning the Lord of Glory as Father? How does affirming his sovereignty over creation impact your praying?

WEEK TWO: CULMINATING ON AUGUST 27

Ephesians 3:16-17, That/So That - may grant them to strengthened with power.

Here Paul begins to express for what reason he is submitting himself in prayer to the Lord of all creation - so that the believers would have Spirit empowerment for Christ to dwell within them. Paul is petitioning to draw on the riches of God's glory, which are themselves an inexhaustible source. The very nature of this is extraordinarily magnificent as Paul is seeking to access an incomprehensible source.

Riches in glory is a very Pauline expression to showcase the abundance of God's perfections and praiseworthiness - from which he also has the capacity to resourcefully draw to uniquely empower his people (here in the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God and in Philippians 4:19 in supplying all one's true needs). Regarding these riches John MacArthur stated that *to give from* one's wealth/riches is effectively only to give something, but *to give in accordance* is more of a giving in proportion - this is immeasurable as God's riches are immeasurable and therefore his giving here is seen in proportion, to be, as will be expressed to be immeasurable.⁴

The source of empowerment is addressed: the riches of his glory

The means of empowerment is addressed: the Spirit of God

The place of empowerment is addressed: the inner man

Therefore, this this is a petition – that out of his abundant help the Spirit of God would empower the inner man – and the reason immediately follows in the next three verses.

⁴ The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians; John MacArthur; Moody Press, 1986, Pg.102

An Empowered Sanctification

Fundamentally this is the power of God in sanctification, and while we would affirm this we are all too often susceptible to more consistently champion the power of God for salvation and less so in sanctification. Paul, by the very nature of his prayer, makes it clear that we cannot be content to have the Spirit of God coupled with some effort on our part. Rather, we must petition God to *make* our effort effective *by* his empowerment *through* his indwelling Spirit.

D.A. Carson expresses the nature and work of this empowerment in the process of sanctification as power to do what we have been called to in the Scriptures, "This first petition, then, is a plea for power – power to be holy, power to think, act, and talk in ways utterly pleasing to Christ, power to strengthen moral resolve, power to walk in transparent gratitude to God, power to be humble, power to be discerning, power to be obedient and trusting, power to grow in conformity to Jesus Christ."⁵

Paul then goes on to further explain the necessary reason for this empowerment in sanctification: that Christ would dwell in their hearts and that they would be rooted and grounded in love.

Christ dwelling in them is not a statement of his not being within them presently, but a more complete saturation and natural identification with Christ, "...it denotes the desire that Christ may, literally, 'be at home in,' that is, at the very center of or deeply rooted in, believers' lives. They are to let Christ become the dominating fact in their attitudes and conduct."⁶

"The verb indicates that the focus of the prayer request is not on an initial reception of Christ but on believers' experience of his constant presence."⁷ Further, Christ is to consume the whole of one's person, while they indeed continue on as their own person, but as a person in Christ.

Christ dwelling here is the work of sanctification, to emphasize this Carson states, "Make no mistake: when Christ first moves into our lives, he finds us in very bad repair. It takes a great deal of power to change us; and that is why Paul prays for power. He asks that God may genuinely take up residence within us, transforming us into a house that pervasively reflects his own character."⁸

"Through faith" is expressing the continued relationship one maintains in Christ. Yes, one is first justified by faith, but being justified they are called to walk in faith too.⁹ A helpful articulation of this is Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me.

The life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God.

⁵ Carson, Pg.167

⁶ Cook, Pg.631

⁷ Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians; Andrew T. Lincoln; Thomas Nelson, 1990; (Hereafter: Lincoln), Pg.206

⁸ Carson, Pg.165

⁹ Lincoln, Pgs.206-207

Sidebar: We Do Not Ask Christ Into Our Heart

This passage does not serve to support the common evangelistic petition to ask Christ in one's heart because in view of the context it is a matter of sanctification. Therefore, it would be out of order to exhort an unregenerate person to petition the Lord to continue the work that has never begun in their heart. To use this language here for a salvific call is to exhort an unbeliever toward a sanctifying work that they cannot comprehend or experience as their hearts are outside of Christ and have no capacity to mature and be comprehensively submitted to him. Further, even if this is simply a matter of terminology then it would at the minimal be wise to submit to the Scriptures' use of its own terminology as words communicate meaning and the meaning here is sanctification and not salvation.

Reflection and Application

Do you recognize your continued need for God's empowerment of your progress? How does the source of this power coming from God's riches in glory impact your petitioning for it?

Faced with struggles and failures to be holy, to think, act, and talk in ways utterly pleasing to Christ, to have strength in moral resolve, to walk in transparent gratitude to God, to be humble, to be discerning, to be obedient and trusting, to grow in conformity to Jesus Christ – what do you do and what should you do in view of Paul's petition?

Are you content to have the Spirit of God dwelling within you or do you strive to make your inner man a welcome abode for Christ? How does your prayer life speak to this?

Ephesians 3:18-19. That/So That - may have strength to comprehend.

Paul was praying that they would have the power to know the unknowable – in a greater context that rejoices in the revealing of the mystery of the Church, he is here petitioning that they might have capacity to know that which all would affirm having a measure of understanding but which is knowable only in limited measure... he is seeking that they

might know exceedingly more and beyond the natural man's capacity the unfathomable love of God.

Paul frames this petition with complimentary parallel statements. The first statement is a petition that the believers would have the supernatural strength provided by God to comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth of an unexpressed object. He is giving unrestricted measurements that would imply no expressed limitation for its object. Then with the second statement, in parallel with the first, he provides the object of the unrestricted measurements: the love of Christ.

Therefore, Paul is petitioning that they, the church, would have the supernatural empowerment of God to know that which surpasses knowledge – the love of Christ. Paul has already petitioned in prayer that the Ephesians would know the immeasurable or surpassing power of his greatness toward the beloved (1:19). Paul has already expressed the incomparable/immeasurable riches of Christ's grace toward the beloved (2:7). Now Paul was praying that they would know what only God can illuminate to them – the incomparable/immeasurable excellencies of Christ's love.

This is quite striking because the nature of this petition communicates that one can read the Scriptures and cognitively grasp their content. One can be emotionally overcome by the crushing of the Son by the Father. One can be in awe of the humble obedience of the Son in submitting in absolute obedience – even to death. One can rejoice that the Son sent the Spirit who is a comforter, empowering agent, and indwelling help. But one must have the power of God to comprehend and know the incomparable love of Christ. Further, one cannot passively presume upon the imputation of this rich knowledge as Paul is petitioning for this very grace for the church. One might know the love of God as a redeemed child of God, but the Apostle who expresses that his great zeal is to now know Christ and the power of his resurrection petitions that they might genuinely and fully know the incomprehensible love of Christ.

Sidebar: The Temporary Tutor of Pain

While experience is no substitute for the Scriptures, it is nevertheless a valuable tool that need not be disregarded – there is a reason that wisdom is usually the fruit of many years of living and not always much reading. One of experience's most poignant means of shaping and teaching is the temporary tutor of pain which will accompany experience until one is laid to rest and ultimately enjoys the glory of resurrection. Regarding this Carson states, "A genuine and deep perception of the love of Christ rarely comes to the person who is not spending much time in the Scriptures. Even so, such perception may be triggered by tragedy – a terrible bereavement, for example, or prolonged suffering."¹⁰ He then goes on to share a personal account of suffering from a substantial illness as a child and observing the pain and affectionate care of his mother through this process and he concludes, "...the illness gave me opportunity to witness my mother's tears, and that gave me cause to reflect."¹¹

No one particularly enjoys the temporary tutor of pain... but remember its headmaster is Christ, and even with his beloved Lazarus there was an intentional delay for the glory of

¹⁰ Carson, Pg.171

¹¹ Carson, Pgs.171-172

God (John 11:4). The glory of God included putting the love of the Son of God on display in a unique way, “And he said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept. So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” (John 11:34-36) Jesus’ delay was intentional, it was painful, it was not immediately clear to those who knew and loved him, but it was to the glory of God, and it put his love on display through both sorrow and ultimately joy. It is true, good, and proper to affirm to one another that Christ is sufficient, but occasionally the temporary tutor of pain teaches us just how sufficient Christ really is through life’s experiences. To see this clearly and to know the full benefit of such lessons one will need to the power of God.

Reflection and Application

We want to be better worshipers and to do so we would be wise to better comprehend the love of Christ. With this in view consider what D.A. Carson states and how you will respond. “What [Paul] presupposes, rather, is that apart from the power of God Christians will have too little appreciation for the love of Christ. They need the power of God to appreciate the limitless dimensions of that love. And so Paul prays for power.”¹² Reflect on this and write out a response of action in prayer.

How does Paul’s petition for the believers to have strength to comprehend the unknowable and magnificent love of Christ impact your own thoughts and prayer?

How does the power of God grace you to profit from the temporary tutor of pain?

Can you think through examples of this in your life? Were your conclusions informed by the power of God or were they spoiled by a short-sighted lack of appreciation for God’s use of pain?

If you are struggling with working through this take time to read and mediate on John 11:1-44

¹² Carson, Pg.170

Ephesians 3:19. That/So That - may be filled with the fullness of God.

In many ways, the petitions in this prayer are naturally building on one another, and while they are individually examined they should still ultimately be seen as a whole unit with this final petition serving as a culminating conclusion for them. It is here that Paul requests that the believers be filled with the fullness of God.

Immediately this final petition has its challenges as the same language is used by Paul in Colossians to speak to the deity of Christ. But, as students of the Scriptures and understanding the non-contradictory qualities of the parts and whole of the Scriptures we recognize that Paul is plainly using these like statements in two distinct ways. However, it needs to be further recognized that while Paul is clearly using these statements in two different ways, he is nevertheless using them consistently within their respective uses. In Ephesians, it is the fullness of God in the believers in a full sanctifying way. In Colossians, it is the fullness of God in Jesus Christ as a reflection of deity.

Fullness of God – Sanctification of Believers

Ephesians 3:19 "...that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Ephesians 4:13 "...until we all attain... the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...."

Fullness of God – Deity of Christ

Colossians 1:19 "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...."

Colossians 2:9 "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily...."

So, again, this petition was effectively expressing a desire for their full spiritual maturity – to having much of God.¹³ As provided above similar language is used by Paul in Ephesians 4:11-13 where the association with maturity is seen more clearly – maturity being equated with the fullness of Christ.

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ....” Ephesians 4:11-13

Reflection and Application

Does your prayer life reflect a conclusion that you can achieve full maturity in your Christian life outside of the supernatural empowerment of God?

¹³ Carson, Pg.172

Desiring to see your own race be finished well and to see every man complete in Christ how might you change or mature your prayers for yourself and other believers?

Ephesians 3:20-21, Doxological Affirmation

Paul has petitioned the Lord for the beloved to be strengthened in their progress and richness of faith – now he has transitioned from petition to glorious affirmation. All of the requests were rooted in the glory of God and now the attention is on the expression of that glory.

Paul affirms that there is not a sincere request that can match the magnificence of what God can or will do.

Paul affirms that while he consistently was petitioning for God’s power that this very power was mightily at work within the church.

Finally, Paul erupts with worshipful praise to God, declaring to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever.

Reflection and Application

Do you pray with unrestricted confidence when you petition in line with God’s expressed purposes and will? How might you mature your requests or your confidence?

Do you find yourself exclusively making petition in prayer or do you also give glory and thanks to God from an abundance of worshipful delight? What are some ways you can further fuel this delight in God?

One suggestion in giving a worshipful response in prayer is to make use of some of the hymns and songs used in corporate worship which affirm these very truths.

“Prayerlessness is often an index to our ignorance of God. Real and vital knowledge of God not only teaches us what to pray, but gives us powerful incentive to pray.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Carson, Pg.179