

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY *in* CHRIST

A PATTERN OF PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD
(PART 3)
EPHESIANS 3:14-21

Introduction

For me, prayer doesn't come easy. Does it for you? And yet prayer is something that I value. One reason I came to this church nearly five years ago is because of the value – or at least the *stated* value – placed on prayer. It was even written into my job description!

Even though I value prayer, and even though prayer has been an important part of my life and ministry over the years, I still struggle with prayer. In fact, I would say that I struggle more *with* prayer than I struggle *in* prayer. Honestly, I would like it to be the other way around.

Here in Ephesians 3 we find the second of Paul's two prayers for these believers. But we need to remember that Paul is praying not just for the Ephesians, but for you and me. Given the character of this letter and its application to the universal church, I believe it is fair to say that his prayer has you and me in mind also. Even as Jesus prayed in John 17 for those sheep who would be added to the fold, so Paul prays for believers down through the centuries. More than this, Paul here leaves you and me a pattern of prayer for the people of God. And from this patten we can learn important lessons about our life of prayer for one another.

I. *WHY SHOULD WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER?* (*verse 14a*)

Notice how Paul begins his prayer in verse 14: "*For this reason...*" You may not have picked it up before, but Paul actually begins his prayer in verse 1, but then he gets sidetracked.

(Background picture of pastor in prayer). Do you ever get distracted when you pray? Finally, you get a few moments away, alone where you can just talk to the God. Or maybe you plan a more extended time...and then, before

you know it, your mind begins to wander. Everything you would never have thought of at another moment suddenly comes flooding in on your mental air waves. For me personally, this happens all the time. Maybe that's why I like to walk when I pray; it helps to keep my mind focused...as long as I'm walking in a relatively uncluttered area.

Well, take heart! Something similar happened to Paul, the great Apostle! Here he bows to pray for these believers (v 1), and he doesn't return to his prayer until verse 14 (*"for this reason I kneel before the Father..."*). The difference is, it's not his own thoughts, but the thoughts of the Holy Spirit that lead him into a thirteen verse parenthesis in which he gives a more complete exposition of the unique revelation that has been entrusted to him and the other prophets and apostles.

And here we find the first reason that we should pray for one another. *Instruction is internalized through intercession.* Just as Jesus watered with prayer his seeds of instruction in the upper room, so Paul. In both of Paul's prayers in this letter, he moves from exposition to intercession, from preaching to prayer. Why? Because *instruction is internalized through intercession.* In the Bible God discloses His will; that's *revelation.* In prayer we ask Him to do it; that's *intercession.* Even as Jesus prayed: "May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Honestly, this has been a concern for me as it relates to our church and to the church at large. Central Bible has historically been strong in the area of instruction, but I fear that our teaching has not been watered as it could be and should be with the intercession of God's people. When intercession waters the seeds of biblical instruction it results in the practical application of truth in our lives. But apart from intercession, we have a form of spiritual abortion. The truth is implanted in our hearts, but not implemented in our lives.

Remember the image we drew several weeks ago? At conception each child is in possession of his full potential. Everything is there (though not fully developed), provided for in the genes and chromosomes of the individual. Likewise, when you and I are "born again," conceived in Christ, we immediately possess all the spiritual potential that Paul details for us in Ephesians 1-3. It is all there in our spiritual DNA. But it is now our prayer for one another that empowers us to experience this in our lives.

Apart from intercession leading to application, we become like the Dead Sea. The fresh waters of truth flow in, but they have nowhere to go. There is no outlet. And that which is fresh and living becomes dead and stale.

Paul's exposition of verses 1-13 is followed by intercession in verses 14-21. Paul's preaching is followed up by prayer. And so it should be the case in our lives.

This coming Thursday we will join with thousands of believers around the world to pray for church and community. Here at CB we'll be praying into our lives the truths we have been speaking out week after week. Where there is exposition, there must be intercession if this truth is to be internalized. I encourage you to lay aside other plans and activities and join in with what I believe will be a remarkable time of prayer as we ask God to meet us in a new and fresh way.

II. *HOW SHOULD WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER?* (verses 14b-15)

Not only do we see in these verses *why* we should pray for one another, but also *how* we should pray for one another. Paul says, "*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*"

Our body language speaks worlds about the earnestness of our hearts. Personally, I love to get up in the morning, get a good cup of coffee and spend time in God's Word and prayer. Often, I talk to God in a more casual way. But in times of great earnestness I find myself on my knees or even prostrate before God. Frankly, I have a hard time imagining Paul with a cup of Starbucks coffee in one hand and his prayer list in the other.

Here, Paul kneels before the Father. Though kneeling was not unknown, the more normal posture among the Jews was to stand to pray.¹ But here Paul says he kneels, or more literally, he bows. The New Living Translation says, "*I fall to my knees...*" This is a sign of earnestness. It is a sign of desire.

When Ezra humbled himself and cried out to God on behalf of God's people, he fell to his knees (Ezra 9:5ff). When Jesus earnestly prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane it says, "*He fell with his face to the ground...*" (Matthew 26:39). When Stephen passionately prayed before taking his last

breath he fell to the ground crying out for God to forgive his accusers (Acts 7:59-60).ⁱⁱ

Prayer is an expression of desire, even desperation. Where there is little desire, there is little prayer. Paul says in Romans 10:1 – “*My hearts desire and prayer to God for Israel is this...*” As C.S. Lewis reminds us, our real problem in the Christian life is not that our desires are too strong, but too weak.ⁱⁱⁱ We are far too easily pleased with the ordinary, the mundane, the status-quo. And that is why we pray so little.

But here, Paul would have none of that...not for himself or for you and me. He prays with desire, even with desperation. He has laid out for us our *position* in Christ. He now longs for us to experience our full *potential* in Christ.

Our prayer time this week is for those who are desperate. It is for those who desire that God would break through in a new way in our experience and in the life of the church. It is for those who recognize that, apart from God, nothing is going to happen. It is for those who are dissatisfied with the status quo and earnestly long for God to meet with us.

Some may say, “But I don’t have that kind of desire. I’m not desperate.” A. W. Tozer says, “The desire for thirst is the beginning of thirst.” If you are not thirsty for God, simply ask God to give you that desire, that thirst. After all, He wants you to seek Him far more than you want to seek Him. Ask Him to do that and then come and join us as we seek Him together this Thursday night.

Paul prays *earnestly*. But he also prays *selflessly*.^{iv} Petition is prayer for oneself, which is certainly needed. Intercession is prayer for others, which is also needed. Paul writes, “*I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*”

This phrase in Paul’s language is very difficult to translate, so as you compare versions you’ll see differences of opinion as to what Paul is saying.^v I personally lean towards the translation of the NASB “...*from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*” There are two ideas here. One is *sovereignty*. The other is *diversity*. To derive one’s name from God is to, in the language of the Bible, owe one’s existence to God.^{vi}

That emphasizes God's sovereignty. And as a sovereign God he is well able to respond to Paul's prayer for these believers.

But there is also *diversity*. Paul prays to the God of "every family in heaven and on earth." The expression emphasizes the inherent diversity that makes up the Body of Christ, this "mystery," where all peoples, all ethnicities, all cultures, can find reconciliation and an equal footing before God.

But there is more. It also serves as an introduction to the *selflessness* of Paul's prayer. This is not petition, for himself. This is intercession, for others...for the whole Body of Christ. And when we move from petition to intercession, amazing things happen both in others *and in ourselves*.

Testimony: Marilyn Soule

Several weeks ago, I promised you an email about my response to serving on the CB prayer team during the service. I have just cornered a few minutes to do so.

First, I was honored to be asked and found it gave me quite a different perspective of the service. Here are a few of my impressions.

Marilyn, some months ago you were asked to serve on the Sunday morning prayer team during our worship service. How did that go at first?

At the beginning it was a little frustrating. I was trying to pray before the service for all those who would be there and for hearts to be open. However, folks would come by and talk to me. (Bummer, right?) I thought perhaps I should have wandered up to the balcony or stayed in the back. I'm not totally convinced if that would have been the best approach.

What proved to be the turning point in your experience?

Then I began to pray for some of the different aspects of the service suggested on the card. I found I began to move away from "me", really think about, and pray for the different aspects of the worship service.

Finally, I have often struggled during the service with suddenly being hit with oppression; sometimes as fear, other times as some bizarre ugly thought. It happened that day as well. But for the first time it occurred to me

that I just might not be the only one feeling this oppression. I took the offensive and began to pray earnestly for whomever else was under Satan's direct attack at that moment. The oppression lifted almost immediately.

How has that experience affected how you approach the time of worship since then?

Since then during worship when oppression has begun to settle, I have again prayed for all who are under attack and have sensed the enemy's retreat. I just pray that retreat included others.

Could I get an extra card to keep in my Bible? I'd love to have it to remind me to be praying for all parts of the service. Thank you for the invitation. Believe me, it was MY pleasure!

III. WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER? (verses 16-19)

But all this leaves us with the question: *What* should we be praying for one another? Paul answers that question in verses 16-19. Paul's requests are like a staircase by which he climbs higher and higher in his aspirations for those for whom he's praying.^{vii} The three steps of the staircase are (1) inner strength, (2) love and (3) fullness.

Inner Strength

Paul prays in verse 16: "*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.*" This expression "to be strengthened" is used only four times in the New Testament, of which twice it refers to Jesus who, as a child, grew strong in spirit.^{viii} That is what Paul is praying for you and me and what we should be praying for one another.

This strengthening takes place *through the Spirit*, or by means of the Spirit of God, in the *inner man*. Elsewhere, Paul contrasts the "inner man" to the "outer man."^{ix} "*That is why we do not lose courage (Paul writes). And if our outward man is perishing, our inner man is being renewed day by day*" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

All of us need strengthening in the inner person as we face the difficulties and pressures of life. Paul had just encouraged these believers not to be

discouraged (verse 13). Now he intercedes for them so they can stand up under the pressure of adversity.

There are basically two ways of handling pressure. One is illustrated by a bathysphere, that miniature submarine used to explore the depths of the ocean. There the water pressure would crush a conventional submarine like an aluminum can. Bathyspheres compensate with plate steel several inches thick, which keeps the water out but also makes them heavy and hard to maneuver.

When these craft descend to the ocean floor, however, they find they're not alone. When their lights are turned on and you look through the tiny, thick plate glass windows, what do you see? Fish! These fish cope with extreme pressure in an entirely different way. They don't build thick skins: they remain supple and free. They compensate for the outside pressure through equal and opposite pressure inside themselves.^x

The same is true for you and me. I prefer to be like a fish rather than like a bathysphere. In adversity, we don't have to be hard and thick skinned – as long as we are strengthened in the inner man to equal the pressure without.

Paul moves on in his prayer in verse 17 to describe the result of being strengthened in this way in the inner person: “...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Here Paul is *not* praying that they might possess Christ. Those for whom he is praying are already believers.^{xi} He is rather praying that Christ might possess them.^{xii} Paul uses a word here that means “to settle down and to be at home.”^{xiii} That's the idea here...Jesus wants to “be at home” in our lives, not a mere passerby. It's like the difference between staying overnight in a Best Western or settling down in my own house.

For some of you, Jesus is a mere passerby. You might invite him into this experience or that experience in your life. Maybe in coming to church today, you sense a closeness of fellowship with him. But then you walk out and things are different. Your life is compartmentalized into the “sacred” and the “secular.” Paul's prayer for you and me is that Jesus would be at home in our lives, every day and in every way.

Love

Paul, in the latter part of verse 17, takes one step up in this ascending staircase. He moves from praying for inner strengthening to the topic of love...God's love for us and our love for one another.^{xiv} Notice what he says:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established^{xv} in love, 18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp^{xvi} how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge...

The result of being strengthened inwardly is that we will be able to understand and express God's love to others. What a contrast to the world of the Ephesians where power and strength had the purpose of gaining ascendancy over people: winning a chariot race, attracting a lover, or even winning at dice. This is not much different from our society. Power and strength spells control. But here, inner strengthening is for the purpose of better loving others.^{xvii}

Paul makes it clear that the love of God is too large to be confined by any geometrical measurements. It is not three dimensional, but four dimensional! It has height, length, breadth, and width. It is "wide" enough to reach the whole world and beyond (1:9-10, 20). It is "long" enough to stretch from eternity to eternity (1:4-6, 18; 3:9). It is "high" enough to raise all who believe in Christ to heavenly places (1:13; 2:6). It is "deep" enough to rescue people from sin's depravity and even from the grip of Satan himself (2:1-5; 6:11-12). Christ's love is as unknowable (v. 19) as His riches are unfathomable (v. 8).

Ancient writers often used the illustration of the cross that, while reaching up to heaven also went deep into the earth and on the crossbar the arms of Jesus were outspread in love to the east and west (show picture). When the Christ who died on that cross "settles down at home in our hearts," it is only natural that His multi-dimensional love would be manifested in our lives.

Jesus himself prayed the same thing for you and me. He prays in John 17 – "...that your love for me may be in them" (John 17:26). And this is what you and I should be praying for each other.

Christ-likeness

Finally, in verse 19, Paul ascends that last step in prayer: “*that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*” Only as the first two requests are fulfilled – the experience of strengthening and love – can one be “filled” up to all the fullness of God.

Just what does Paul mean by that? The idea of “fullness” is used four other times in Ephesians and once in Colossians.^{xviii} The Colossians passage is particularly helpful in understanding what Paul is saying here: “*For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him... [i.e. Christ]*” (Col. 1:19). The “fullness of God” dwelt^{xix} in Christ in the sense that all the divine attributes and perfections of the Father were in the Son. In the same way, we are filled up to the fullness of God to the degree that we reflect the character of Christ. Because Christ is the fullness of God, we are filled with God when filled with Christ and with His Spirit. When we receive Christ, we possess Him...but now, He desires to possess us. He can do this only as our lives are fully submitted to Him.

Inner strengthening, love, Christ-likeness...how does this measure up with the kind of requests we pray for one another? I find that more often than not my prayers are focused on material needs, financial needs, health needs rather than the needs of the inner man. How about you?

Benediction

Paul has ascended three steps in his prayer – inner *strengthening* resulting in *love* which in turn results in *Christ likeness* – and now he comes to what we might call the “landing” of the staircase.

Have you ever climbed a staircase and you’re moving up from one step to the next and then finally you come to a landing where you can breathe a sigh of relief and rest? That’s how I picture these last two verses of Paul’s prayer. Here we reach the “landing” of Paul’s prayer. Here we can breathe a sigh of relief because we know that we can’t produce all of this in ourselves. Only God can do it. And he will do it as we trust him.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Eph 3:20-21

Notice the seven stages which reveal the Father's ability to answer prayer:

- (1) He is able to do *all*
- (2) He is able to do all *we ask*
- (3) He is able to do all we ask *or think*
- (4) He is able to do *beyond* all that we ask or think
- (5) He is able to do *abundantly* beyond all that we ask or think
- (6) He is able to do *more* abundantly beyond all that we ask or think
- (7) He is able to do *far* more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think

God's capacity to meet your needs and the needs of others far exceeds anything you can either request in prayer or conceive of by way of your imagination. Isn't it a wonder that we don't spend more time asking?

ⁱ Compare the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18.

ⁱⁱ Compare Ps. 95:6; 2 Chronicles 6:13; Daniel 6:10.

ⁱⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*.

^{iv} There are other points that could be made about *how* Paul prays that we don't have time to address here. For example, Paul prays *confidently* as he approaches the Father with assurance (cf. 2:18 and 3:12). We are not mere earthlings petitioning an angry landlord, but supernatural sons of God who have been granted unceasing access to the Father's throne room. More than that, Paul prays *biblically*. Both of his prayers in this epistle are Trinitarian in emphasis. Here he refers to the Spirit (v. 16), the Son (vv. 17-18) and God the Father (v. 19). The former two persons (i.e. the Spirit and the Son) are never separated in Paul's writings. To have the Spirit in one's heart is to have the Son in one's heart. Furthermore, we see here a biblical pattern of prayer that is addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Rom 8:9,10 "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells (*oikei*) in you...If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness."

^v "... from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (NIV); "...pray to the Father of all the great family of God-some of them already in heaven and some down here on earth." (TLB); "...from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name." (NASU); "the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth." (NLT).

^{vi} Compare Ephesians 1:21 where Christ is seated far above every "name that is named." To "name" something is to exercise power over what is named.

^{vii} John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society*, 134.

^{viii} Luke 1:80; 2:40. Compare 1 Corinthians 16:13.

^{ix} The "inner man" requires renewal day by day (Eph 4:24; Col 3:9ff) and is not the same as the "new man". Rather, the "inner man" is strengthened so as to approximate the "new man" more closely.

^x Illustration from Jay Kesler in *Campus Life. Leadership*, Vol. 5, no. 2.

^{xi} Every believer is already indwelt by Christ: 1 Cor. 6:19 "Do you not know that..."

^{xii} In this sense, verse 17 is not simply the result of verse 16; it is an explanation of verse 16. To be strengthened in the "inner man" is to have Christ settle down and take up residence in our hearts.

^{xiii} We've already seen the word "stranger" (*paroikeo*) in 2:19. But here Paul uses a different prefix, *kata* + *oikeo*, meaning "to settle down somewhere."

^{xiv} One can't help but notice the emphasis on "love" in this letter. It is referred to no less than 19 times. In chapters 1-3 there are no commands to love, only an explanation of the love of the Father for the Son and for believers. But this culminates in Paul's prayer which prepares us for chapters 4-6 where we have a series of exhortations to love (4:2, 15, 16; 5:2,25, 28, 33; 6:24). The key verse in this second section of the epistle is 5:2 "Walk in love just as Christ loved us."

^{xv} Paul uses both a botanical and architectural image: One is of a tree with deep roots in the soil of love (Col 2:7); the other is of a building with strong foundations laid on the rock of love (Col 1:23; 1Pe 5:10). “Rooted,” taken from the figure of a tree that draws its life from the earth, carries the idea of security. “Grounded,” taken from the figure of a building that requires a solid foundation, carries the idea of strength.

^{xvi} The word “comprehend” belongs to the vocabulary used to describe a fight against a strong opponent in the acropolis. The term is chosen to emphasize the difficulty of comprehending the full-orbed vastness of Christ’s love.

^{xvii} This is also seen in 1 Corinthians 16:13 “*Act like men, be strong.*” But the very next verse tells *why*: “*Let all you do be done in love.*”

^{xviii} (1) Ephesians 1:23 “Which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (2) Ephesians 4:10 “that he might fill all things.” (3) Ephesians 4:13 “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” (4) Ephesians 5:18 “be filled with the Spirit.” Cf. Col. 1:19 “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him...”

^{xix} Here we have the same word used to describe Christ “dwelling” (i.e. settling down and being at home) in the believer (verse 17).