

Ephesians 3:14-21

Eph. 3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Eph. 3:20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

A REASON TO PRAY

Why do you pray? What causes you to drop to your knees and fervently seek the Lord? Usually, I pray when I am troubled by something. Maybe I'm facing a crisis. Maybe I have a hard decision to make. Maybe I am uncertain and worried about the future.

That describes all of us at least some of the time, and all of the above applied to the Apostle Paul when he decided to insert a prayer into his letter to the Ephesians.

Paul was in prison. He didn't know what the future would hold for him, but no doubt he suspected that it was pretty grim. His date with the executioner would come sooner rather than later.

More than that, the Apostle also knew that many of the churches he had planted were in deep trouble. In Paul's letters to Timothy we learn that many close friends abandoned him when the going got rough. They were not only ashamed of the Apostle, they were also ashamed of the gospel. They had abandoned the faith. Nothing disturbs a pastor more than learning that one of his former parishioners has abandoned the faith.

And so this was the reason that Paul fell to his knees in prayer. He was deeply concerned about his own future and more importantly the future of the church.

I remember talking to a friend who lived in Miami back when Hurricane Andrew was bearing down on their city. She said that had never been one to pray, but when she saw that storm on the radar for the first time in her life she dropped to her knees and prayed. There's nothing like a hurricane to help people drop what they are doing and start some serious prayer.

Isn't that true for us as well? When the winds of destruction bear down on our life it is then (and sometimes only then) that we fall to our knees in prayer. It's true what they say. There are no atheists in foxholes.

Paul prayed for the same reason that we often pray. He was worried.

But, what do we pray when we are tested by life? What is the content of our prayers?

The first words out of our mouth are usually something like: “Lord, deliver me from this problem. Save me and make me whole again.” Many of the prayers in the Bible are like this. They are long, anguished pleas for deliverance. We can identify with the humanity and the struggle in those prayers. And often our prayers in a time of trouble also tend to be one long anguished plea for deliverance.

A DIFFERENT EMPHASIS

But, in Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians we see a different emphasis.

Whenever I teach a class on prayer I use a simple acronym to help people remember the parts of a balanced prayer. The word “acts” can help us remember that prayer consists of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. In other words, in a “balanced” prayer we spend time praising God and reflecting upon the grace and glory of God. We confess our sins. We give thanks for our many blessings. And finally, we ask for what we need.

But, notice that Paul’s prayer is not so balanced. Though Paul and the Christians at Ephesus are under tremendous pressure, Paul does not pray in a way that you might expect. His prayer is not one long, impassioned plea for deliverance. He mentions the problem that causes him to drop to his knees in prayer, but then he spends most of his time in adoration, reflecting upon the goodness and glory of God.

If you only remember one thing from this sermon, this is it. In a time of crisis, follow the example of the Apostle Paul. Spend more time reflecting upon the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and less time thinking and talking about the problem that precipitated your prayer. This is not easy to do. It takes forethought and study and discipline to change the nature of our prayers.

I think that’s why Paul wrote down this prayer in his letter. He wanted to teach the Ephesians how to pray. And, of course, not only did he teach the Ephesians how to pray he has given us a lesson as well.

So, what aspects of God’s grace and glory does Paul emphasize in this prayer?

GOD LOVES THE WORLD

First, Paul emphasizes a point that we made in last week’s lesson. God is a God who loves the world. The Creator did not make this marvelous universe and walk away. God is connected to

this world as a Father or Mother is connected to his or her family. Actually, this point is even clearer in the Greek. The word for Father, *πατέρα* and the word for family, *πατρία* are very similar and come from the same root word.

This reminds me of how we begin the Lord's prayer. We say "Our Father." And in this passage Paul spells out the breathtaking scope of that statement. Every family in heaven and on earth take their name from the Father. In other words the idea that we are all God's children is very biblical. Paul prays to the Father of the whole human family.

Paul and the Ephesians lived in a time of tremendous conflict and threat. In a time like that the tendency is throw up high walls for security. We know all about wanting to build high walls in our day and time when terrorism is such a worry.

But, remember what we talked about last week. God is not in the business of building walls. God is in the business of tearing down walls. God is in the business of overcoming hostility, and God has entrusted us with this ministry of reconciliation.

Jesus told us that we are God's peacemakers in a world filled with hostility. We have been given the job of reminding an angry world that all of us are God's children.

This is very challenging. It almost seems impossible. But, I have found that when I concentrate on this important point, when I look at a person and say to myself, "This is one of God's children. God loves this person."; it makes a big difference in my attitude. It always helps me through a difficult situation, and sometimes it makes a tense situation better.

A big danger for all of us is the tendency to become fixated on our problems and the people that have wronged us in some way. Paul's prayer suggests that we focus our attention on the bigger picture. God loves the people of this world. The people of this world are intimately connected to their creator. Every human being has the imprint of the Creator on his or her life.

Remember that Paul had ample reason to complain about his life and the suffering that he endured. We know that he had some sort of chronic physical problem that troubled him all his life. He was often beaten and imprisoned unjustly. People in the churches that he founded led a whispering campaign against him.

But, now as the Apostle comes to the end of his life how does he look at the people of this world? They are the people that God loves. Paul doesn't focus upon his problems. He focuses upon the glory of God. In verse 16 we learn that focusing upon the riches of God's glory bring an inner spiritual peace.

FOCUS ON THE GLORY

I asked the folks at our Bible studies this past week what came into their mind when they heard that phrase, the glory of God. Most everyone remembered some natural wonder like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time or that overwhelming feeling of love that comes when you bring home your baby home for the first time.

Actually, I think that every day offers a glimpse of God's glory, but quite often we have our heads down. We are not attuned to the wonders of God's grace and glory. Let me give you an example.

A youth group was hiking one summer ... gradually working their way up to the top of a steep mountain where they planned to spend the night. The kids were complaining, wanting to rest every few feet, making jokes with one another, shouting back and forth ... in other words acting like a typical youth group.

The path they took was thickly covered with trees, and they were so busy trudging up the trail that they didn't realize that the afternoon sun was setting behind them. Suddenly the trail came to a clearing. To their left lay a great expanse of the valley. The setting sun had inflamed the hills across from the group with red and orange.

Suddenly the whole group fell silent. Everyone stopped and stared at the wondrous spectacle that was unfolding before them. No one said a word until one of the youth counselors said quietly, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills from where will my help come. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth."

I think that many of us are like that youth group. We live much of our lives dedicated to trudging up the narrow path. We can't see the forest for the trees. We are blinded from seeing the big picture because our eyes are focused on the mundane.

But, sometimes by the grace of God we come to a clearing. We are suddenly given a glimpse of the bigger picture, and that changes us profoundly. When we contemplate the glory of God it renews our Spirit. It strengthens our inner being and connects our spirit with the Spirit of God.

This is the point of prayer. In prayer we want God to take us to a clearing where we can see God's glory. We want God to help us look up instead of about.

Is your life filled with trouble? Look up instead of about. Contemplate the glory of God, and you will find strength for the journey.

There are many ways to contemplate the glory of God. We've mentioned being aware of the glories of nature and attuned to the wonder of everyday events. But, let's face it. We can only go to the retreat center for a few days each year. And the moments of insight come to us only on rare occasions.

We need more glory than just the beauty of an occasional sunset. How can we train ourselves to look up instead of about on a daily basis?

ROOTED AND GROUNDED IN LOVE

Paul answers that question in his next petition. He prays that the Ephesians may have Christ “dwell in their hearts” so that they can be “rooted and grounded in love.” The essence of God’s glory is found in the love of Christ. As we’ve put it so many times, “If you want to know what God is like, God is revealed in his Son, Jesus.

The love of God as revealed in Jesus forms the roots or the foundation of our faith. The roots of a well developed tree keep it healthy in spite of hurricane or persistent drought. If a building has a strong foundation that reaches down to the bedrock, it is not endangered by the ravages of wind , rain and flood.

This word translated “foundation” is the same word that Jesus used when he told the parable of the wise and foolish builders. The wise builder built his house on the rock and it was able to withstand the ravages of the storm, and the “rock” in this parable represents hearing and putting into practice the words of Jesus.

And that’s what the word means in this prayer as well. If you want to see the glory of God, if you want to be rooted and grounded in love, you have to do more than just read about Jesus or talk about Jesus. Your love has to go beyond head knowledge. It has to become heart knowledge. It has to become a daily practice.

There are many areas of life where this is true.

For example, I like to read magazines and books about woodworking. When you read about how to make molding on a table saw or cut a dovetail joint by hand it sounds so easy. But, unless you have actually tried to build something using those techniques, you really don’t understand woodworking. You might have knowledge but your knowledge is incomplete. More than that, you haven’t experienced the satisfaction of building something with your own hands.

I think the same is true when we talk about the love of Christ. We can know about the love of Christ. We can know that Jesus said, for instance, that we should love our enemies. But, you can never understand what he meant unless you actually try to love an actual enemy. There is a difference between talking about the golden rule and putting it into practice. There is a spiritual satisfaction that only comes from the practice of holiness.

Paul tells us that if you want to know the fullness of God’s glory, your life must be rooted and grounded in love. The Bible and the words of Christ are not just a novel to be read and enjoyed. They are an instruction manual to be practiced.

When love for others takes control of our lives we are enabled to sense the reality of the love of God in Christ Jesus more clearly. And if our lives are filled with hatred and resentment, those things form a kind of spiritual fog that can even obscure the love of God in Christ.

C. Leslie Mitton in his commentary on Ephesians put it this way, “Christ awakens in us love toward others, and in turn that love enables us to grasp the love behind the universe. To be reconciled to our brother [or sister] enables us to be reconciled to God.”

There is great power in the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And each of us have been given the opportunity to wield that power.

A FINAL GOOD WORD

Paul’s prayer ends with what we might call a benediction. A benediction is a blessing. It is a final “good word” to the congregation.

What good word can Paul give the Ephesians? Remember Paul is in prison, many of the churches he has founded find themselves in a state of turmoil, and the Ephesians will probably soon face tough times as well. What kind of blessing, what kind of good word can a preacher give in a situation like that?

Paul prays, “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

When I write sermons there is one question that I always keep in mind. What good word can I give the congregation through this text? What do we learn in this passage that can encourage people who are being tested? What benediction can I give my people?

Today my job is easier. It’s spelled out in Paul’s benediction to the Ephesians.

Do you feel like you are on a treadmill going nowhere? Do you feel like your life is insignificant? Do you feel like you have accomplished very little? Hear this good news. God can do a whole lot more with you than you think He can.

The power of God is at work in our world and in our lives. We may not be able to see it today. We may never be able to see it. But, rest assured that you are significant to God and the work of God’s kingdom. You are an important part of the “communion of saints” who bear witness in all generations to the power and glory of God.

I think this benediction, this good word is especially important to us in a time of discouragement, when we have failed in some significant way. Paul reminds us that we don’t know the whole story. There is more to our story, and there’s more to God’s story than meets the eye.

I was telling the Bible study groups that very occasionally someone will say to me, “You know what you said in that sermon made a big difference in my life. I have never forgotten it.” And of course I never even remembered saying it. But, it is sort of a confirmation of what this passage is saying. God can do a lot more with us and through us than we can ever imagine.

Teachers often get the same insight. A student will come back years later and say, “Your class changed my life.” Often, the teacher doesn’t even remember the student, but he or she gets a chill when those words are spoken. This is what a teacher lives for ... the thought that what he or she did made a difference.

Paul tells us that all of us can and do make a difference. We usually won’t see it, but it’s true. I guess that’s why many of us love Jimmy Stewart in that film, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Even the most mundane life is important to many people.

Our job is to avoid getting discouraged when the importance of our life is hidden from us. Like Paul we must remember that our current “prison” is not our final destination. Our lives are part of a greater plan and purpose. Our lives, as small and imperfect as they might seem are made to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

And we are happiest when we focus not upon the problems of the moment but upon the glory of God. The glory that is with us now and for all eternity.

CLIMBING HIGHER

Soon after the beginning of the Civil War it was a time of great discouragement. At one particular meeting every speaker talked of gloom and doom. The army of the North had been defeated at Bull Run. It looked like the country might be destroyed.

But, then an old man got up and said, “Young men, though it is dark here, remember it is light somewhere else. You need to have faith.”

And then he told a story. It was about a man who was hiking up a high mountain in order to see the sun rise. While they were climbing this mountain a storm came up before they reached the top. The man and his company were frightened by the storm and asked their guide to take them back to the base camp.

But, the guide just smiled and replied, “I think we will get above the storm soon.” Sure enough it was not long before the party reached a place where it was as calm as any summer evening. Down in the valley the terrible storm raged. They could hear the thunder rolling and see the lightning flash. But, all was serene on the mountain top.

And the old man concluded, “My young friends though all is dark around you, come a little higher and the darkness will flee.”

I think that story is a good summary of our passage. When the storm rages, it is not the time to flee in panic or give up hope. It is time to climb a little higher. It is time to think about the power of God’s love and grace as revealed in Jesus. It is time to contemplate the glory of of a Creator who is above us and yet who loves us very much.

This is my prayer for us today. I want us to climb a little higher and rise above the storm. I want us to look up instead of about.

Amen.