

A Prayer for a Lifetime

Our New Testament text for today is the second of Paul's two prayers in Ephesians. Paul seems to lay aside his writing, fall to his knees, and pray the following in **Ephesians 3:14-21**:

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.

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.

Today I'm filled with gratitude for the grace and peace of God, who has sustained and strengthened me in these recent days and weeks since Nancy's death and memorial service. After 48 years of pastoral ministry, I've witnessed the gamut of all the possible emotional and spiritual reactions to the death of a loved one, and realize that no two people grieve in the same way. The common denominator that seems to make grief bearable and the loss of a spouse, child, parent or friend endurable is the support given through the prayers of family, friends and church family. The prayers of you Dale Heights people are a key to my strength and encouragement, and will enable me to persevere in life and ministry.

Paul's prayer in our text serves as a great model for us as we continue to pray for one another in the days and years ahead. It's a prayer for a lifetime, one that will change and direct our lives in the Lord's will and way.

Traditionally the Jews prayed to God while standing, but here Paul falls to his knees, as was done in times and occasions of great urgency and distress, and when before a great authority and power (Ezra 9:5; Psalm 95:6; Daniel 6:10). Paul understood the urgency of the needs of the church and also was aware of the privilege of coming before his awesome God, who also is the loving heavenly Father.

Just as Jesus taught us to pray by addressing our dear Father in the heavens (Matthew 6:9), so Paul knelt before his "Abba," dearest Father, who is also the mighty, transcendent God of creation. Only because he invites us into his presence as his redeemed children, saved by his grace, can we come to him with such freedom and confidence (Hebrews 4:14-16). The basis of all our praying is our awareness that an almighty, loving God hears us when we cry out to him and even urges us to call upon him.

I confess to you, that even though I'm a long-time believer and a veteran pastor and preacher of God's word, I'm still puzzled by the mystery of prayer, and the promises Jesus gives about the certainty of answered prayer. As I look back over the past nearly eight years of Nancy's illness, I sometimes wonder, what, if anything, God was doing in response to my pleading for Nancy's deliverance from her disease. But in retrospect, I know God heard my prayers, my cries and even saw our tears. Even when I wasn't in the mood to pray, God heard my prayers. When Nancy could only groan and cry, I believe God was listening and answering and doing a work in her heart no one on earth could see.

Paul prays with confidence that God will supply every need of ours "out of his glorious riches" (16). Jesus taught us to depend on the heavenly Father for our daily bread (Matthew 6:11), and this "bread" is more than physical, but includes Jesus himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:35). Here Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as the source of our life and our strength. Here Paul seems to be thinking of believers who are experiencing trials and are in need of God's strength and grace to sustain them. I believe the risen Christ was forgiving me during my moments of anger toward him and was strengthening me even when I felt abandoned by him.

Paul interchanges the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and even speaks of the indwelling Spirit as "Christ in you" (Colossians 1:27). And in verse 17, Paul asks that Christ may make himself at home in our hearts, not as a temporary guest, but as the permanent resident. Jesus speaks of our relationship of absolute dependence on him as a branch abiding in the Vine, the source of our strength and of life itself (John 15:1-8).

What an amazing and encouraging thought, that the Christ of creation, the resurrection and who presides over the universe, is living in us through the Holy Spirit! And we certainly can face every situation and challenge through the one who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

Paul uses two images to describe our connection with Christ—one from agriculture (rooted) and another from architecture (grounded). We must be rooted in the deep soil of faith in Christ's love for us and also must build our lives on our confidence in his love for us and his presence within us. What a difference this makes in our lives, when we realize that the King of Glory lives in us, and that nothing can touch us apart from his permission, and that we have access to his resurrection power and infinite strength to endure whatever trial is before us!

Paul takes us even higher, it seems, as next prays that we might, "together with all the saints," grasp the full measure of God's great love for us and for one another (18). Paul mentions "all the saints." We're in this spiritual life as part of the body of Christ, and our spiritual riches are dependent upon our being connected, not just with Christ, but with one another.

What a great picture Paul's prayer gives us of God's love: its width, length, height and depth (18)! Paul knows that the greatest possession we can have is God's love, which is broad enough to encompass all humankind; long enough

to last for eternity; deep enough to reach the lowest sinner; and high enough to lift us to heaven. This is God's love for us and the love he gives us and requires us to have and to express to others. This love of Christ for us "surpasses knowledge" (19). Paul asks that we might "be filled to the measure of the fullness of God" (19). These requests for us are like an ascending staircase, going to even higher blessings, and now we are getting a bit short of breath and are becoming a bit "giddy" at the dizzying height of these amazing requests for us (Stott). Paul now asks that we might grow until we become like Christ himself.

Our goal is to continue, by being filled with the Spirit and under his control, to advance from one degree of glorious Christ-likeness to the next (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is the highest goal for any life. Scripture sees that as our supreme objective, to be so like God himself, as revealed to us in his Son Jesus, that our lives bring God greatest glory and we experience the deepest joy. This joy of being like Jesus and bringing glory to God is what outweighs all of life's sorrows and makes every experience "worth it all" (2 Corinthians 4:17; Romans 8:18).

Christ accepts us as we are and calls us to follow in his steps. The life he calls us to lead is the cruciform life of service in the weak power of the cross, and a "downwardly mobile" life, which is counter to this culture of "upwardly mobile" success and expectations (Nouwen). We are called to a life of servant love, which is the only way to know and to experience the fullness of God in Christ.

I'm learning that God allows trials in our lives to redirect our focus on the way of true blessing, joy and experience with the full measure of God's love. Sometimes we have to be reduced to God alone to realize that he's all we truly need and that, in fact, he is enough for us to have the fullness of joy. He's love itself, and when we have him we have all the love we need. No human relationship and no amount of friends can ever replace the deepest longing in our hearts, which is for God himself and his love, which alone fills the deepest crevices of our hearts, and reaches out to those furthest from God and us, and lifts us to the heights of his heavenly fellowship and joyous presence.

Some of us are blessed to be grandparents. Larry Crabb tells about holding his newborn grandson on his lap, looking into his eyes and realizing that little Jake's greatest desire is for the gratification of his lesser desires, such as his physical hunger. Baby Jake doesn't yet know a greater need and deeper passion in his life will be the filling of his hungry soul with God. And sadly, writes Crabb, many people go through life without ever discovering the "food that could fill their souls," trying to fill that void with temporal pleasures. Crabb says that he hopes that his little grandson grows up staying healthy, does well in school, has lots of friends, meets and marries a nice girl, "fathers beautiful kids, and leads his family into meaningful involvement in as local church. "But those are all second-order hopes. My first-order hope for Jake, "confesses Crabb, "is that he encounter God." And that means to encounter him "no matter the cost." If I am praying in the spirit of this prayer for a lifetime, I too must pray that my grandsons and granddaughter will grow to want to be filled with the fullness of God, to want to know him in the fullest measure of love

and joy, even at the cost of suffering trials and the shattering of their fondest dreams.

Paul makes it very clear that these blessings for which he prays are not simply ideals that may or may not be attainable. But in fact, this prayer is for things God himself desires for us and is more than able to give to us. God is able and willing to give us all these blessings that Paul has just described, not all the things we wish for ourselves, but only what he aspires for our joy and our everlasting good. God is able to fill us with the fullness of life and joy even when we think we are at the very end of all our human resources.

It seems that the Holy Spirit prayed in and through Nancy during the last weeks of her life on earth. Although she seemed no longer aware of and responsive to me, she at times would begin to sing softly and sweetly to herself, and at times began to pray. Her words were not coherent to us, but were perhaps the "groaning too deep for words" that Paul refers to (Romans 8:26), inspired by the Spirit; and possibly her sweet singing was inspired by heavenly music she had already begun to hear. At those moments I sensed the palpable presence of God.

God is at work in our lives. In fact, God is at work in all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). This is a truth that at times we have to simply believe in hope "against all hope" (Romans 4:18). There are seasons in our lives when we may be spiritually dry and it seems God's presence is far away or even a lost illusion. Yet Jesus has promised to never leave us and be with us always (Matthew 28:20), and he never stops working on us and even guiding us in times when our faith is weak and our obedience is in suspension.

Through our praying, God is at work through one another, the church, to bring the world to rights, to make a difference in society and in the lives of the poor and suffering. We are to seek for his righteous kingdom to come to earth and his will be done here as it's being done perfectly in heaven (Matthew 6:10). I know I need to see and lay hold of this truth in my own life. I need grace for faith to see beyond present trials to see God's eternal design for my life. God is at work designing our lives and shaping our character in such a way that we will give maximum glory to him and pleasure to him throughout eternity. I need to submit myself to being an answer to this prayer.

This amazing prayer can become yours as well as mine, and one we can pray for each other. Anything less and we'll sell ourselves short of the potential and blessings that God wants to give us. This must be the kind of prayer Jesus promised he would answer, because it's a prayer his word gave to us (Mark 11:24).

I've had a list of missionaries and other fellow ministers on my prayer list for a number of years, and continue to receive their emailed prayer requests regarding specific needs. One asked her prayer team to pray for one of her cats, and I did, even though I don't particularly like cats. But I always try to pray Scriptural ideas and prayers, which verbalize their (and my) greatest

needs. So, maybe you and I could write today's Scripture in our Bibles to remind ourselves to pray this prayer for a lifetime for each other.

I need you to pray this prayer will be true in my life. That means I'm willing to meet the conditions for God to fill me with his love and with himself. To have such a blessed, God-glorifying life means that more of my self-centered self has to die. It may also mean that I will be disciplined and tested with further trials and given greater burdens. So, this prayer could be a costly prayer. But then, I must trust that he gives more grace and will see me through to glory.

We don't have to remember this entire prayer. Let's just pray for each other the heart if it: "Jesus, fill _____ with your yourself and your love today!"