

Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians

EPHESIANS 3

Baxter T. Exum (#1280)
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Do any of you here this morning ever get distracted while trying to go to God in prayer? I obviously do not know what your prayer life is like, but I know from my own personal experience that I will often set out to approach God for some reason – perhaps giving thanks, perhaps asking for forgiveness, perhaps to ask for help with something – and right as I seem to be getting in the right frame of mind, I see the proverbial squirrel. And the way my office is laid out with a window right here in front of me, many times the squirrel is not proverbial – it is an actual squirrel! But whatever it is, something catches my attention, my mind wanders, I deal with that distraction, and eventually I get back to what I wanted to talk to God about in the first place. Has that ever happened to you? I know it happens to me all the time, and it apparently also happened to the apostle Paul. In fact, we see it a number of times in the book of Ephesians, especially in Ephesians 3.

We are here today to study the word of God; so, I would invite you to turn with me to Ephesians 3 and to keep your Bibles open to this passage as we study. We will use most of our time together to focus in on the last few verses, and we will get to that in just a moment, but once we all make it to Ephesians 3, I would invite you to at least get some kind of an overview here at the beginning. Normally, I would never put this much text on a screen. There is so much wrong with this slide – tons of fine print that you can hardly read, there are straight lines everywhere (which is also really bad), design-wise, this image is wrong in just about every way possible. But, I do this to give us just a brief overview of what happens in this chapter. Notice, please, in Ephesians 3:1, how Paul starts out, ***“For this reason,”*** and the ***“reason”*** he is talking about here is the amazing grace of God that allows us to be ***“in Christ,”*** as we have already seen over the past few weeks from Chapters 1-2. So he says, ***“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...,”*** and then in the New American Standard Bible, at least, we have a hyphen, we have a dash. Now, I would emphasize that the dash is not inspired. As far as we know, Paul did not put a dash there. But in English, at least, the dash gives us a heads-up that Paul at this point is about to get distracted a little bit. Whatever Paul had just said makes him think of something else. And so Paul starts out introducing the prayer that will come later (in verse 14), but as he refers to himself as the ***“prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles,”*** that statement causes Paul to think. He starts thinking about the fact that he is in prison for the Gentiles – I am here for you! And so maybe he thinks back to his own conversion. Maybe he thinks about those false accusations of bringing a Gentile into the temple, the accusations that had led him down the path into prison in the first place. Maybe he thinks about all of the beatings and persecutions on his missionary journeys through Asia Minor and eventually Greece. All of this was for the Gentiles. Paul, though, doesn't want them to feel bad about this, he

doesn't want them to feel guilty about this, and so he goes off into this explanation of how the gospel was always intended to be for the Gentiles, how the gospel was always intended for them, and what an honor it is to be a part of God's eternal plan to preach the gospel to the whole world.

The way I see it, then, we almost have a huge set of parentheses around verses 2-13, as Paul explains how amazing it is that the Gentiles are now included in God's plan. In fact, he says that all of this is the **"mystery"** that has now been revealed. He uses the word **"mystery"** three times in these opening verses. Usually, when we hear the word **"mystery,"** what do we think of? I don't know about you, but when I hear the word **"mystery,"** I think of the Hardy Boys. I grew up checking those books out of the library each summer. This week especially, maybe we think of a show like NCIS – coming back to CBS this Tuesday night at 7 o'clock – Gibbs, and Dinozo, and Abby, and Ducky! We love watching these guys solve a mystery! But the point is: Many times, when we hear the word **"mystery,"** we think of a crime that needs to be solved. In Bible times, though, the word **"mystery"** often referred to the inner workings of a religion that were only known to those on the inside. Here in Madison, maybe we could think of those rituals in the various fraternities and sororities on campus. They have rituals that are only revealed to those who are initiated. That seems to be the original meaning of the word that Paul uses here. And we are about to find that the mystery of the gospel has now been revealed. It is not that God has been hiding something and that despite God's best efforts to hide the truth, somebody has finally figured it out (that's not what we're talking about here); instead, God has announced it. What was once only known by God behind the scenes has now been announced publicly. The mystery has now been made known by God, and the mystery is: All people, including Gentiles, now have full access to the gospel, and because of the gospel, all of us are now made one in the church. All people are now welcome in God's family. And that is Paul's purpose in life, to make that mystery known to the whole world, to preach God's eternal purpose to the Gentiles.

By the way, some in the religious world may try to use these verses to make us think that God's will is too mysterious and too complicated for us as normal people to ever really understand on our own, that we need a "priest," a "father," an "expert" to explain the Bible to us. Not so! In just a moment, we will notice in verse 4 that we can understand the mystery simply by reading Paul's words! **"When you read you can understand."** Notice the emphasis on the word of God. When we read, therefore, we know what the mystery is. So, in summary, when Paul then says, **"For this reason,"** he is referring back to the amazing blessing of being **"in Christ Jesus."** Even Gentiles can be **"in Christ."** So **"for this reason,"** Paul prays for the Christians in the city of Ephesus. With all of this as background, I want us to look at all 21 verses of Ephesians 3. We will notice the explanation in verses 1-13 (this section we have just summarized), but our focus (our emphasis this morning), will be on Paul's prayer at the end. Please look with me at Ephesians 3, starting in verse 1,

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through

the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able 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, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Looking back over this chapter (and especially at the last several verses), what can we learn from Paul's prayer? What does Paul pray for? He prays for the church! He prays for the Christians in the city of Ephesus! **"For this reason,"** in light of God's eternal purpose being made known to the whole world through the church, Paul prays for the church. Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus. He prays for the congregation as a whole. And so, for the rest of our time together this morning, I want us to study Paul's prayer. What did the apostle Paul want God to do for this congregation? What was Paul praying? And by way of application, what do we need to be praying for today?

- I. **First of all, as we find in verses 16-17, Paul wants these people to be STRENGTHENED WITH POWER THROUGH HIS SPIRIT IN THE INNER MAN.**

Right away, then, we are reminded that there is a difference between the inner man and the outer man. We are, of course, very familiar with this distinction, because we normally take care of the outer man very carefully. We clothe it, we feed it, we comb it, we wash it, we dry it, we exercise it, we take it to the doctor – we always seem to be so concerned with the outer man.

And yet at the same time, we also know that there is an inner man. It seems to me that Paul is referring to the soul, to the part of us that will live on long after the outer man is gone. We remember what Paul wrote earlier in 2 Corinthians 4:16, ***"Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day."*** And so there is a part of us that grows stronger, even though our physical bodies seem to get tired and fall apart over the years. Several years before he died, I got a postcard from my grandfather. He was an expert at sending postcards. Postcards are cheaper. They are cheaper to purchase (no frivolous envelope), and they are also cheaper to mail. And by using his old IBM Selectric typewriter, he could fit more on a postcard than most people could ever fit in a letter. My grandfather, by the way, would have been very proud of that first slide. Most of his postcards looked like that slide! But in one of those short notes on one of those postcards, my grandfather just happened to mention that he would probably never walk again. He said, "Baxter, the strangest thing about this process is that I don't feel old at all" [paraphrased]. And yet his body was failing. You see, our outer man decays. Our outer man falls apart. But thankfully, we also have an inner man. There is a part of us that has the ability to grow stronger every day. There is a part of us that has the ability to grow closer to God, even as the outer shell falls to pieces.

Unfortunately, though, it is very easy for us to focus more on the outer shell. We think about the way that we pray. Often, we pray for physical needs. But how often do we pray for those with spiritual needs? Hopefully we are, but if not, Paul would encourage us to shift our focus a little bit. I remember seeing a cartoon where the preacher is writing all of the prayer requests up on the whiteboard. There are only two mature Christian women in the audience, and in frustration, after writing down a great number of items, the preacher finally stops, and he says, “Does anyone have a non-biological prayer request?” We need to think very carefully, then, about the prayers that we offer. I know here at the Four Lakes congregation in Madison, we have prayed for peoples’ kidneys. We have prayed for hearts, and spleens. We have prayed for eyes, and knees, and hips. We have prayed for feet, and brains, and arms, and biceps, and stomachs, and intestines. Living here in Madison, I will often go to UW Hospital to pray with strangers, to pray with Christians from all around the nation who have come to our city for various surgeries, they come to see world famous surgeons and experts, and by those bedsides I have prayed for parts of the body I had no idea even existed...but how often do we pray about a person’s soul? And how much more important is a soul than an appendix?

At the same time, we also know that it is not wrong to be concerned about the outer man. In fact, we realize that we are supposed to be at least somewhat concerned about the outer man – we are supposed to take care of it. This body is the temple of God’s Holy Spirit; our bodies belong to the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). But at the same time, let us keep our priorities in order. As we woke up this morning and got ourselves ready to come together for worship, how much time did we spend preparing our inner selves? We shower and shave (well, some of you shaved)...but the point is, we get up in the morning and eat a good breakfast, we drive safely, we buckle up, we wear helmets, we brush and floss, we prepare and protect the outer man, but should we not also prepare and protect the inner man? If our outer shell were to be removed (and it will be removed someday) – when our outer shell is removed, what will be left? And so for this reason, Paul prays that the *“inner man”* would be *“strengthened with power.”*

At the beginning of verse 17, Paul drives home the importance of the inner man by praying, *“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”* As I understand it, the word *“dwell”* refers to somebody making himself at home, it is the idea of settling down and getting comfortable. Sometimes we tell our guests, “Make yourselves at home.” What do we mean by that? We mean that we want our guests to feel comfortable with us. We want them to treat our house just like they would treat their house. In the same way, then, Paul is praying that the Lord Jesus might be able to settle down and make himself at home in our hearts. The Lord wants to be more than just an acquaintance; he wants to move in. We remember what Jesus said in John 14:23, when he said, *“If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.”* That is a powerful verse! Jesus and the Father will make themselves at home in our hearts, if we keep the Lord’s word, if we obey the word of God. And so when Paul prays that we might gain strength in our inner man so that Christ will dwell in our hearts, in context, isn’t he ultimately telling us to study and obey the word of God? If we keep his word, God will make his home in our hearts. Let us, then, keep his word!

Paul, then, prays that the Ephesians would be strengthened with power, and it seems that Paul is encouraging them to shift their focus from the temporary and trivial things in life to those things that are eternal and important – obeying the word of God so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. When we pray for a brother or sister in a challenging situation, then, let us not just pray for hearts and lungs and all of that, but let us pray that we may be strengthened spiritually. Let us pray that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. Let us pray that we may be strengthened with God’s power through His Spirit in the inner man.

II. **As we look back at our passage in Ephesians, we find a second aspect of Paul’s prayer in the last part of verse 17 through the first part of verse 19, as Paul prays that these people would be able to UNDERSTAND THE LOVE OF CHRIST.**

So that we can start to have some small clue concerning what the love of Christ is really like, Paul starts out in the last part of verse 17 by praying that the Christians in Ephesus would be **“rooted and grounded in love.”** These are two very closely related ideas, starting with the idea of being **“rooted”** in love. We can look at the tree up here, and we have a great example of what it means NOT to be rooted. What we have here is basically a tree trunk jammed down into a pot full of Styrofoam. There is nothing there. There are no roots. This tree is not **“rooted,”** so it falls over very easily.

Paul, though, prays that the Christians in Ephesus would be **“rooted...in love.”** I remember learning many years ago that the roots on the average healthy tree are pretty much the same size underground as the branches and leaves are above the ground – pretty much a mirror image. So, if we see a huge beautiful tree, there is probably (very roughly) the same amount of material under ground as there is above ground. And so, with that picture in mind, we think of what King David said concerning the righteous man in Psalm 1:3, **“He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.”** The righteous man is **“firmly planted.”** In a similar way, we as Christians are to be **“rooted...in love.”** Love is to be the firm anchor of everything we do.

Paul also says that we are to be **“grounded in love.”** The word he uses here refers to the foundation of a building. The idea is that we are to be firmly established in love. We think of what the Lord said at the end of Matthew 7 about the wise man who built his house on the rock. The foolish man’s house was built on sand, and it collapsed, but the wise man’s house was built on a solid foundation, and when the rains came, it stood firm. And again, Jesus compared the wise man to someone who listens to the word of God. In a similar way, we are to be rooted and grounded in God’s love. His love is the foundation of everything we do.

As Paul says in verse 18, God’s love is something that we are to **“comprehend.”** The idea here is that God’s love is something we are to grab onto, something we are to lay hold of, something that we are to reach out and grab. There is some effort involved. There is some struggle, there is some thought involved.

In verse 18, Paul wants us to comprehend, **“...the breadth and length and height and depth...”** of this love. In doing the research for today’s lesson, I ran across dozens of sermons and articles where the entire lesson was based completely on these four directions – God’s love is wide (it reaches to all people), God’s love is long (it stretches into the future and into the past), God’s love is high (it gets us to heaven), God’s love is deep (it reaches the lowest of sinners) – and I am sure that all of these statements are true, but I don’t know if all of these are lessons that Paul originally intended. One author noted that the love of Christ (illustrated with the cross), points up to heaven, down to earth, and like the Lord on the cross, is stretched out in all directions. Again, a nice visual, but probably not what Paul originally intended. Instead, the main idea seems to be that God’s love is huge! When we go to measure something, we want to know its height, and depth, and length, and width. And the same is true with God’s love – when we try to measure it, we find that it is unbelievably huge in all directions. Sometimes we sing, **“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.”** God’s love, therefore, is beyond our ability to fully understand.

And this is how Paul leads into the first part of verse 19 as he makes a challenging statement. He prays that the saints in Ephesus might “...**know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge.**” Paul wants us to know the unknowable. The love of Christ “**surpasses all knowledge.**” Paul uses a word that means, “to throw beyond.” We think about playing catch, and somebody throws a ball to us that is out of reach. God’s love is like that. It is beyond our ability to understand. It almost seems like a contradiction, but Paul puts it this way to emphasize how large and how amazing the love of Christ really is. He wants us to know what can never be fully known.

I want us to go back and notice a phrase we skipped earlier – notice in the first part of verse 18 that Paul wants us to comprehend the love of Christ “**with all the saints.**” The only way to really understand the love of God is to go looking for it together. This is why we come together for worship, and fellowship, and study – all the saints together – Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, the educated and the not-so-educated, from all backgrounds, as John observed in Revelation 5:9, those “...**from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.**” We discover God’s love together, with “**all the saints.**”

While we are on this idea of understanding God’s love, will you dream with me for just a moment? Can you imagine what it would be like to be a part of a congregation where every member is rooted and grounded in the love of Christ? Can you imagine being part of a congregation where every member truly understands the love of God? How would that affect the Four Lakes congregation? How would that affect our time together? How would that affect how we treat each other? Years ago, I served at a congregation where a paper cutter went missing out of the teachers’ resource room. And for several weeks, announcements were made about the disappearance of the paper cutter. Where could it have gone? Where is the paper cutter? And I know, when you need a paper cutter you need a paper cutter. Right? Everybody wanted to know what happened to the paper cutter! But where were the announcements about those in the congregation who were weak and spiritually struggling? Should a missing paper cutter really be the one thing we all talk about every time we get together? When we truly understand what God has done for us, when we truly understand the love of Christ, it changes how we interact. It changes how we use our resources. It changes how we treat each other. When we start to understand the love of Christ, it has a way of rearranging our priorities. The love of Christ compels us to love others just as he loves us. Paul, then, prays that the Ephesians would be able to comprehend the love of Christ.

III. As we look back at Ephesians 3, I want us to notice a final request in this prayer (right at the end of verse 19), as Paul prays that the Christians in Ephesus would be FILLED UP TO ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD.

In some ways, this is a rather strange statement, but Paul wants them to be full of God. Most of us understand what it means to be full. I can remember back when we were first married, as we were paying for Keola to finish her degree at UW-Whitewater. Finances were extremely tight, and I remember one stretch where we went a little more than two months without doing any grocery shopping. Have you been there? I know some of you have been in that position – two months with no groceries. We did have a Kwik Trip card (that was our first charge card together), so we would get an occasional bag of milk and an occasional bag of OJ at the Kwik Trip down the road (hopefully some of you know about the bags of milk at Kwik Trip). But beyond this, we started that two-month stretch with a 50-pound bag of flour, a gallon of generic maple syrup, a gallon of vegetable oil, and a huge bag of sugar. This is what we lived on for two months. I was amazed at what we could make with some of those very simple ingredients. This is when I went to the library and found a recipe for tortillas. Today, I would speak to my phone, and Google would find me a recipe. But this was before the Internet! This was in those days when you had to actually go to the library. I went to the library and

researched tortillas. I am now the tortilla master. This is when I perfected my pancake recipe. This is when I learned the difference between teaspoons and tablespoons of salt in the waffle recipe. So, it was a time of learning. However, after several weeks of nothing but tortillas and pancakes and waffles, we were getting sick of it, so we saved up our money, and one night when Keola got home from school, we went out to the local Ponderosa. For two kids who just got out college who had been eating nothing but flour and water for a month, it was almost as if we had died and gone to heaven! We went in that place, and we ate like there was no tomorrow! I still remember going out to the car after that meal – we actually sat there in the dark for a few minutes, because I was actually too full to drive! Have you ever been too full to drive? I have never been as full since then as I was that evening. We just sat there in the parking lot at Ponderosa, and just sat there and laughed about how full we were!

Now, I don't know whether we can really compare Ponderosa to God, but I can say that Paul was praying for these Christians in Ephesus to be ***"filled up to all the fullness of God."*** That is full! With this in mind, I would ask: What is it that fills us up today? So many times it is so easy to get filled up with distractions. We get filled up with the chore of simply existing and surviving in the world. We get full of work, and school, and so many things, even to the point where God can get pushed out very slowly. Sometimes God is even squeezed out by the good things. As a preacher, this is something that has surprised me over the past 20+ years: Even preachers can get too busy to pray. Even preachers need to constantly fight the tendency to keep God from getting crowded out by activities that are not necessarily bad. We remember the parable Jesus told about the man who was giving a big dinner (Luke 14:16-24). The man invited many people, but the people kept coming up with various excuses. The first man said, ***"I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused."*** The second man said, ***"I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused."*** Another man said, ***"I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come."*** There is nothing wrong with buying property, or upgrading our mode of transportation; there is nothing wrong with getting married, but as we learn from that parable, sometimes even those good things can slowly push God out of our lives. Paul, then, prays that we may be ***"filled up to all the fullness of God."*** Paul would certainly encourage us to have David's attitude in the opening words of Psalm 42 (as we sometimes sing), ***"As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you!"*** He wants us to be ***"filled up to all the fullness of God."*** This morning, if your spiritual tank is only partway full, the apostle Paul has a prayer for you. He wants us to be full of God. He wants us to be ***"filled up to all the fullness of God."***

Conclusion:

As we think about Paul's prayer and as we come to the end of this passage, we close with this statement of praise, and we find that God ***"...is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us."*** God doesn't just give us flour and water, but he gives us Ponderosa.

And so with all of this power and potential, we have Paul praying for the church. As we close, then, I would encourage all of us to pray this prayer on a regular basis. We can pray this for ourselves and for this congregation. Let us pray what Paul prayed:

- We can pray that we personally would be strengthened with power in the inner man. We can pray that this congregation would be strengthened with God's power. We can pray that we might pay more attention to spiritual things.
- We can pray that we personally would be able to truly understand the love of Jesus. We can pray that everybody at this congregation would be able to truly understand the love of Jesus. We can pray that we might know God's love through our deep involvement with God's family here.

- We can pray that we personally might be filled up with all the fullness of God. We can pray that everybody at this congregation might be filled up with all the fullness of God. We can pray that all of us here might be able to constantly put God first in our lives.

Let us continue praying for kidneys, and spleens, and bones, and eyes, but let us pray for spiritual health and strength as well. Let us pray for the health and strength of this church, because truly, as Paul says, ***“...to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”*** At this time, we would like to invite those of you who are not in Christ to make the decision to obey the gospel of Christ. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he was raised up on the third day. We obey the gospel by turning away from sin, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. If you have any questions, let us know. If we can pray on your behalf, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: furlakeschurch@gmail.com