11-18-18

Ephesians 3:14-21 (3)

Once more, we consider this beautiful prayer that Paul offers for the Ephesian Christians. It is made even more wonderful by the fact that we can offer this same prayer for others or for ourselves. It is a prayer to come closer to God; it is a prayer to become more like Jesus Christ; it is a prayer to begin experiencing here on earth what we will someday experience in heaven. It is also a prayer for Christian maturity. Our relationship with Christ is meant to grow stronger and deeper. In order for that to happen, we need power from the Holy Spirit.

The power we pray for is power from the Holy Spirit. This power comes from, and results in, dependence and weakness; quite the opposite of the worldly, carnal view of power. The Christian’s power comes from depending on the Holy Spirit. By acknowledging our weakness, the strength of God can work through us. By this, we understand that it is the unsurpassed power of God that works through us instead of our own strength; because it is God’s power, no evil can stand against us. Because it is God’s power, we can withstand His blessings.

By the Holy Spirit, our inner man is strengthened; this is our mind and heart and will. By this strengthening, we can resist the flesh, the world, and the devil. By this strengthening, we can come closer to our Saviour, and receive more of His blessings. Our evil frames cannot withstand His glory; the Holy Spirit must first shore us up.

Paul prays that the Christians may have Christ dwell in their hearts. Now, the moment we accept Jesus as Saviour, He lives within us and we are His. But, how much do we allow Him to reign? Is He simply staying in our lives as a guest, who really doesn’t have much say in our lives? Or do we give Him all the rights of ownership that He may truly dwell in our hearts; that we become His home? We need to pray, that we are strengthened to give Jesus full rights to our lives, to direct us and guide us, to the glory of the Father. While this is the lifelong process of sanctification, our carnal desires often hinder our progress. This is a prayer for us to remove those hinderances and experience the love God has for us in a much fuller way.

Paul mentions that Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. Faith is an aspect of our Christianity that we can’t do without. Faith is not a feeling, it is not some vain hope that things might work out the way we want. Ultimately, faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit. We can read the Bible; we can hear the Gospel; but without the gift of faith from God, we cannot believe it. If you are a Christian today, thank God, because it is only by His grace that you are one. Faith works throughout our Christian lives; it isn’t something that happens once at salvation and then disappears. In Hebrews 11:6 we read.

And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God. While our good works do not earn us salvation, our good works are pleasing to God; But only if they are done in faith. This is why good works don’t save us. Good works done by human-beings in their own strength are not pleasing to God. As we are told in Isaiah 64:6; “all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment”. Any good work we do is tainted by our sin; in our own power, we cannot separate the work from our sin. But when done in faith, when we believe in Christ and do our works in order to please Him, then they become acceptable because they are done in Christ’s righteousness.

And, of course, there is love. Love is what Christianity is to be rooted in. Love is to be upholding the foundation of the Church. The Bible is very clear on the importance of love. We are to love God with everything we are. We are to love other people, always having forgiveness at hand. If we are given many gifts and talents by the Holy Spirit but they are not exercised in love, what we do is worthless. Without faith, it is impossible to please God, but when we stand before Him, faith will no longer be needed; love, however, will remain.

1 Corinthians 13:13

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

This brings us to verse 18 where Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians “may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height”. To comprehend something means to have a very firm grasp of something. It indicates understanding in addition to knowledge. In this case, the comprehension has to do with God. This is quite a prayer. This is one of several things Paul asks for that we cannot obtain; how can we comprehend the infinite. However, although total comprehension may be out of the question, there is really no limit to how much we can comprehend.

Again, because we are dealing with the infinite God, we cannot reach the end of Him. But we can always learn more about Him, we can continuously comprehend Him, as much as the Holy Spirit blesses us with. Paul offering up this prayer, shows us that Christians often don’t understand this. So often we accept Christ as Saviour and stop there. But there is so much more and it can be ours by the Holy Spirit.

It is important that Paul says “with all the saints”. First off, in the language of the New Testament, if you are a believer in Jesus, you are a saint. That title is not reserved for someone who stands out in some special way by works or gifts. The newest Christian is a saint, he is a new creation in Christ. We often think of these great blessings Paul is praying for as being reserved for special Christians; but this is not the case. These blessing are for anyone who is in Christ. God wants all His children to come closer to Him and He wants to shower blessing on them all. Remember that God is no respecter of persons, He hears the babe in Christ as well as the mature Christian.

It is very interesting in this verse how Paul mentions “the breadth and length and height and depth”, but leaves them there on their own. He doesn’t tell us specifically “the breadth and length and height and depth” of what. What we have here, first off, is a description of the infiniteness of God.

I recently read a description regarding God’s infiniteness from one of the puritan writers. Basically, we often think of the entire created universe, and, in turn, that God fills it. While this is true, it doesn’t go nearly far enough. Consider taking a bucket far out into the ocean, and there submerging it hundreds of feet down. At that point, the ocean completely fills the bucket, but the bucket doesn’t contain the ocean. The immensity of the ocean is still outside the bucket. The universe is the bucket, God is the ocean. God fills the universe, but the universe certainly doesn’t contain God.

Consider these four dimensions and how they relate to ourselves and God. Our constant battle throughout life is with sin. Whether the temptation comes from our flesh, the world, or from satan; we are fallen human-beings and sometimes we fail in our efforts to resist. Sometimes, it may happen that a Christian allows himself to be captured by sin and be dominated by it for a time. This is certainly a place we never want to find ourselves. Our relationship with our Father will be damaged and we may suffer lifelong consequences or even some loss of eternal reward. But our Father is above all things.

When we think about breadth, we think about how wide something is or how far it has spread. Think about sin and how it has spread. From one act of rebellion in the Garden of Eden, we can now look at the world and see what it has become. Sin has spread, it is as broad as the whole world. Even in our own lives, we are sometimes guilty of letting some sin in. It may start small, but it will spread and it can consume our lives. But here is the breadth of God. Sin cannot stretch out too far for Him. In spite of its spread in the world, He overcame it by His Son, Jesus Christ. Sin was too wide for us but God is wider and able to contain the damage of sin. Even if a Christian has allowed sin to spread in his life, it cannot spread too far for God to reel it in and redeem His child.

The length refers to how far God can reach. The Bible is clear that there is nowhere that is beyond Him and that is something we must cling to with all our hearts. Suppose we have strayed far from God, or perhaps a loved one has done this. They were given the knowledge of God and believed in Him, but have been led astray by the world. Can anyone wonder too far to be retrieved by God?

Isaiah 59:1

Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short  
That it cannot save;  
Nor is His ear so dull  
That it cannot hear.

Pray for the one who has wondered off, whether it is yourself or someone you know. He will hear you; He delights to save; no one is beyond His reach.

The Bible sometimes mentions being cast into a pit, into a depth; sometimes physical, sometimes spiritual. There are times in our lives because of some sin or just from the weight of life, that we feel like we are in a deep hole and there is no way out. David expresses this in Psalm 69:2.

I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me.

God’s mercy is certainly deeper than any depth to which we sink; just consider Jonah. This too, is a comfort to us. However low we go in despair, God’s mercy is still beneath us, holding us up. Even if we remain in that pit throughout our lives, it is not because God cannot save; He will lift us out in the end.

Finally, Paul mentions height. We are faced with things in this life that are too high for us. We come up against walls that we can’t get over. We face giants; problems that are too much for us, too big for us to deal with. God has allowed, according to His plan, for evil powers and principalities to be over us. But we read in John 3:31 “He who comes from above is above all”. Our God is higher and above all His creation, all the things we face in this life.

The prayer for us to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height is a prayer for us to comprehend the power of God and how we may peacefully rest in Him. When He actually dwells in our hearts, when He strengthens the inner man, the power of the Holy Spirit works through us.

Paul’s final request is in verse 19, “and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” The love of Christ here is the love which Christ Himself has for us, not our love for Him.

The love that Jesus has for us surpasses knowledge, it is beyond what we can comprehend. But we can know it. We can be given an impression of the immensity of Christ’s love for us. Just that impression is enough to overwhelm us; it is enough to expand our love for Him. And Paul wants us to know this love so that we can be filled up to all the fullness of God. This is God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit dwelling in us; this is our life constantly receiving the spiritual blessings God has for us, which are inexhaustible.

We are each able to have the experience of God that Paul here prays for. But how do we get it? First, we must understand that it is a gift. It is nothing we earn by works or deserve by our time as a Christian. It is given according to the will of God by the Holy Spirit.

John 3:8

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

The most important thing called for then is prayer. We can ask for what God has for us according to the riches of His glory. Paul demonstrates this with his prayer. Certainly, this is not to be our only prayer, but it is a good one to persist in because the Father delights in giving good things to His children; especially when we earnestly desire them.

Next is providing good ground to receive these blessings. This good ground comes from reading our Bibles. In reading, we have demonstrated our desire to know about God, and so, have displayed our desire for His gifts.

Next is the desire to please Him. We do this by acting according to His will. We obey the commands that we were given by Jesus. Our desire to please must come by faith and be genuine. It will not do to simply obey Christ to get something in return. If we obey Christ simply to bring Him glory, we show ourselves ready to receive more. This is because that desire to obey also comes from the strengthening by the Holy Spirit.

Lastly is to practice being aware of God’s presence. So often, it’s very easy to miss, but this is where practice comes in. Consciously be aware that God could bless you with His presence at any time, especially if you are praying for it. Have you ever been reading and felt the urge to pray? Perhaps reading the Bible or a devotional book or something of the sort. All at once, there is this thought to pray. That is the presence of God. The thing to do is to stop reading immediately and pray. Don’t make the mistake I have and think, “I’ll pray as soon as I have finished this paragraph or chapter.” By the time I have finished, the presence is gone. Pray immediately, even if only for a short time, and you begin to experience His presence.

Verses 20 and 21 are a doxology. But in it we see that even with what is asked of God, it is not too much, because He “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think”. Notice, too, the desire for glory to God through the church as well as through Jesus Christ. But we the church, are the body of Christ, so, it is for us to bring Him glory.

Prayer

Thank You, LORD God, for Your word; for this letter written by Your apostle Paul, in which he prays for Christians under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By this we are taught how to pray according to Your will. We learn what great abundance is available to us according to the riches of Your glory.

And so, LORD, we do pray for a strengthening by the Holy Spirit. We desire to be closer to You, to experience Your love for us. Bring us into Christian maturity that we may bring You glory.

We pray together as Your church, that You would use us, that You would be glorified. We offer ourselves to You, hoping that You will dwell among us and reign over us as our rightful King.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen