

Prayer That Changes: Part 1
Ephesians 3:14-17a

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...

Introduction: There is mystery in prayer. At least there is mystery for those who engage in the practice but are not sure how it works or what is actually happening. How many times have you heard people equate prayer to good wishes – “Sending out thoughts and prayers for _____”? Or how many times have people prayed for something but did not engage with anyone in particular, simply sending words into the ether? How many times have you (or someone you know) said you’d pray for someone, yet never actually did, or how often have you actually prayed but didn’t believe God would truly answer? If you polled people who say they believe in God, the Bible, Jesus, etc, I would venture a guess that what you’d find is that God is more like a cosmic genie or Google than anything else. A genie is there to give the wishes of your mind and heart, and Google is there when you have a question about something, but not there to know or spend time with. This is why the Bible not only emphasizes prayer (“*pray without ceasing*” – 1 Thess. 5:17) but also gives us **examples** of prayer to understand *how and why we do it*. We cannot grow in maturity without it and we will not grow in fruitfulness by neglecting it.

So, prayer, in fact, is a great REVEALER. Much like the last 2 years of COVID, that brought to the surface our values, fears, and theology, prayer reveals what we truly believe about God and what He truly desires for us. **How often we pray** reveals our level of self-dependency vs. faith driven dependence. Little prayer means we trust ourselves and lean on our own understanding, until we can’t. Little prayer reveals that we are “me-focused” and that I am the center of my universe with God swirling around. **Who we pray to** reveals what we believe about our life in Christ, and when we seek God without acknowledging Christ, we actually think we can get to God on our own. **WHAT we pray for reveals what we believe about life, death, this world, and the world to come.** The overwhelming examples in the New Testament concerning prayer has to do with the spiritual makeup of a person, not the physical. There were times in the functioning of the Apostles that prayer would precede the miraculous healing of someone (see Acts 9:40), the predominate prayers given in the epistles were for the maturation of the church. Does this mean we do not pray for physical healing or the well-being of those that we love? By no means. But as one of my mentors used to say, “If I ever battled a mortal illness, do not pray that I’d get better, but pray that God would be glorified and use this in my life to accomplish all that He had for me.” If our prayer goes against what Christ has called us to, or diminishes our trust in Him, or causes us to cling to this world MORE, than those are not Biblical prayer. Does God heal? YES. Does He respond to the prayers of His people for healing? YES. But physical healing, just like physical well-being in this world is always a secondary issue, since our life is hidden with Christ (Col. 3:3) and our ultimate home is NOT here, since we are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). Prayer is asking God to accomplish His will in our lives to bring glory to Himself through Jesus Christ, and seeking God as our highest value and treasure.

So, we come this morning to the second monumental prayer of Paul in this short epistle (the first in 1:15-23) and while they share similarities, we will explore the distinctions. Paul's heart for the church, in the gospel of Jesus Christ, was that they would grow in maturity and glorify God as a result, and that desire comes out loud and clear in how he prays.

Before getting into the text itself, let's take a look at two things in **3:14-21**:

- 1) **How does this fit into the whole book?** – Ephesians starts with a focus on WHO we are, our identity as those chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and sealed by the Holy Spirit. It deals with our **positional** realities, that we have been raised and seated with Christ, brought near to the Father through the gospel and reconciled to other believers, whether Jew or Gentile. Starting in chapter 4, or the second half of the book, he focuses on our function or **practice**, the action steps we take to live out these inner realities. This is ALWAYS the Biblical order of things: Change happens in us, resulting in a change in our external actions. When we try to reverse that order, we easily step into **moralism and legalism**, trying to effect heart change from external conformity, which will never work. This prayer is a transition, an important request from Paul for **power and strength** for the church. Notice that these words dominate – “Power – v. 16, 20” and “strength – v. 16, 18) – this prayer, much like it did in chapter 1. It is predominantly a prayer that seeks to have the church live and DO according to what God has done in and through them. This is a prayer that we should pray for our church, and all churches, that we would live out the work of God rather than try to do things on our own or come up with our own vision and missions. Now Paul comes back to what he started in 3:1, and picks up his desire that the church would be united in its purpose in seeking to glorify God in all things.

- 2) **What is the flow of the passage?** The primary request is ordered by **three purpose clauses**. This is important because this is a long, wordy sentence that we can lose the point with so many descriptive words. I draw your attention to verse 16, 17, and 19 to start. The English word “that” is seen 4 times (2 x's in v. 17), but only three of these uses use the word “*iva*” or “*hina*” clause, denoting purpose or result. Paul is praying for three main purposes (with one result in verse 17), so that the church would be in position that God could DO in them through the power at work in them, even more so than they could actually pray for. The first purpose is for strengthening in the inner being with the result that Christ would dwell. The second is that they would have strength to comprehend and know the love of Christ, and the third to be filled with the fullness of God. This morning we'll focus on the first purpose and result, and next week on the second and third.

REVERENT APPROACH TO THE OBJECT OF OUR PRAYER (14-15)

“For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named...”

If you ever get an opportunity to travel to Israel, you should (if fact we hope to do a study trip again when the world settles down a bit). One of the things that stands out in Jerusalem is the Temple Mount, which is still an immense feature even if it pales from its time as a pinnacle destination. The steps heading up to the Temple itself are spaced awkwardly, one and a half steps apart so that your strides are not consistent and making it impossible to run or rush up them. The idea that going up to worship the God of the universe should be done slowly, intentionally, and reverently.

Today, we often move to the complete opposite extreme, losing the sense of awe and wonder at entering the presence of God and making our requests known. There is a balance or tension that must be struck to truly understand how we approach God in prayer.

In the Old Testament, God is addressed 1448 times, and He is only identified as “Father” 15 times. In the New Testament the title “Father” is used frequently (245 times out of 413 occurrences), including a primary way in Ephesians (1:2, 3, 17; 2:18; 3:14; 4:6; 5:20, 6:23). This is good news for us. We do not approach God as some distant, unfeeling, wind-up-the-universe-and-take-his-hands-off type of divinity, but an intimate, knowledgeable, and caring Father. A father, especially in the NT culture, not only had the responsibility but also the authority to make things happen. So, Paul approaches God as Father, a family term since Christ had made him part of God’s household. But embedded in the term and concept of Fatherhood is **reverence**, thus Paul’s use of “*I bow my knees*”. This is more about the nature of his heart rather than the position of his body. We pray to a God that can condemn to hell, but also who through Christ receives us with joy! We make requests to a Father who knows us, has unlimited resources, and cares deeply for us.

We also pray to a God who is sovereign over all things and all people. Paul uses a play on words in verse 15, where the Father (‘patera’) names all the families (‘patria’) of the earth. There are two main possibilities of who is being talked about, but the point is the same. Paul is either pointing out that God is the Father of all believers in heaven and earth, which would fit the context, or that He is sovereign over every family on the earth, regardless of spiritual standing, which would fit the language and syntax. The point is taken either way: God is the source of all people, having the authority to name every family in heaven and on earth. Fatherhood stresses authority, and we pray to the ONE who has all authority in heaven and on earth to answer what we ask.

FERVENT APPEAL FOR STRENGTHENING THROUGH PRAYER (16-17a)

“...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...”

Request for Inner Strengthening

Source: “*According to the riches of His glory*”

The effectiveness of our prayer is only as good as the source and object of our prayer. You’ll remember when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and put their gods to the test, a contest

of prayer, as to which could light an offering with fire. After praying for half the day, cutting themselves and raving, nothing happened with the offering. Elijah mocked them saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” (1 Kings 18:27). Elijah had the offering drenched with water and prayed simply that God would be known and recognized by those who turned their backs on Him, and He devoured the sacrifice, wood, stones and dust, so that all the people fell on their face saying “The LORD He is God, the LORD, He is God” (1 Kings 18:39). God answered a prayer of faith displaying His glory, not the musings of man-centered false prophets.

In other words, we pray to a God with limitless resources, one who gives “According to” rather than “out of” His riches. Again, as in chapter 1, we see the clear and profound difference. One who gives out of wealth or riches actually willingly depletes his nest egg, lowering what he is able to give to others. We live in a world of limited resources, a finite amount that can be given out. But God gives **according to** His riches, which means He can give and give and give and never exhaust the treasure trove, since His riches are founded on **His glory, which is the essence of His being, the summation of all His attributes**. God always answers our prayer, and if the answer for whatever is “no”, it is NOT because He is unable, but instead that He does not believe it best! He will not give us something prayed for that would distract or hinder our faith, so when we get the “no” answer, we know it is for our absolute best.

Goal: *“he may grant you to be strengthened with power in your inner being”*

The goal of this part of the prayer is instructive, since he targets the **inner being, the inner man of the church**. He layers synonymous words “strengthened with power”, showing that this is much needed from an outside source since our inner man is weak. But what is meant by “INNER BEING”?

Our inner man is who we truly are, and is what makes up our heart and mind. It is what is washed clean in regeneration (Titus 3:5) and what is transformed by the Word of God (Rom. 12:2). This is what differentiates God and the gospel from all others. God is not looking for mere external conformity from people, since external conformity is possible through external means. A good drill instructor can get soldiers to march in line, fire straight, clean their bunks, shine their shoes, and perhaps even die for their brother next to them. But he cannot change a heart. A good coach can get a group of athletes to move in unison, to run a play, and cheer for their teammate. Both will use discipline, threat, challenge, and motivation of a common goal to get results, but cannot change the overall desires, motives, and loves of their team or soldiers. God wants the people that worship Him to DESIRE Him, rather than merely conform. That is why He has us function by faith rather than sight, because we are forced to trust Him without seeing Him, to move toward Him out of healthy fear rather than bow to a tyrant. He wants us to love Him with ALL OF OUR HEART, SOUL, STRENGTH, AND MIND (Matt. 22:36-38), not simply out of fear of reprisal. He wants all of us. Yes, obedience is important and a must. But mere obedience is not enough. That is what the Pharisee’s tried to offer, and Jesus demanded repentance from them (Matt. 3:7). He wants our MOTIVES behind our actions, our DELIGHTS behind our pursuits, our PASSIONS behind our routines.

This is what Paul mentioned in **Romans 7:22:**

For I delight in the law of God in my inner being

Paul understood there was a war raging in his flesh and body, a war that went on internally at the level of his desires. He knew that our battle with sin is truly a battle of the INNER MAN, not what is OUTSIDE of us. We are tempted first and foremost internally, making idols in the factory of our hearts, and lusting after things we should not have in our minds. The delights for God's Word and obedience to God's law are fought on the battlefield of our inner man, not just on screens or homes or workplaces.

Paul also used this same terminology in **2 Corinthians 4:16-17**:

*“So, we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our **inner self** is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”*

As a culture we spend so much time, effort, and resource on the OUTER MAN – working out, supplements, eating clean, shutting out sugar, etc, which the Bible would say is of SOME/LITTLE gain (1 Tim. 4:8), but godliness is of eternal value. In other words, our outer bodies are wasting away. They are getting worse. No amount of oils, organic produce and paleo eating will stop that. But what God IS INTERESTED IN is to prepare your INNER BEING everyday for something glorious that is coming. He wants to renew, change, and transform you **from the inside out**, to mature you, to train your desires to delight in Him more than anything else. This is why our focus as a church is training your mind and heart, not simply focusing on external ventures. When our hearts and minds are conformed to Christ and His Word, obedience flows like a torrential downpour, since our hearts delight in Him. But how do we do this?

Means: *“through His Spirit”*

Notice again the work of the Trinity in our salvation and daily lives! Our inner selves are trained daily through the renewing of our minds (Eph. 4:23), and in yielding to the leading of the Spirit. We are to be **filled with the Spirit** (Eph. 5:18) and **walk by the Spirit**, so that we will not **gratify the DESIRES of our flesh** (Gal. 5:16), since it is at the level of desires where the battle rages. The Spirit PRODUCES in us the stuff of a transformed life – called the “fruit of the Spirit”. That means that each day, we are renewed in our minds by the Word of God, and as we yield to the leading of the Spirit decision by decision, He produces in us new desires, new loves, and new delights. Is this an easy fight? Again, by no means, which is why Paul prays for the strengthening of power that can only come from a supremely rich God. What result can we expect when God answers this prayer?

Result of Christ's Possessing

When God opens our eyes and grants us faith to believe for salvation, we come to grips with the fact that Jesus is both **Savior and Lord, both the One who saves and the One who rules our lives**. Salvation is a transfer of destinies and masters, from objects of wrath to children of God, from those under the rule of satanic influence to slaves of Christ. We are no longer our own,

but are bought with a price, joyful servants of the King. Though this happens at the time of our justification, the rest of life is a battle to die to sin, conform to Christ, deny self, and follow Him. It means that EVERYDAY we are engaged in a battle of masters, whether we are going to believe the promises of God or the presumptions of sin.

So, Paul prays that the RESULT of our inner self being strengthened would be that **Christ would dwell IN OUR HEARTS, the center of our inner being, through faith.** What does that mean? He is NOT referring to the starting point of salvation, but rather Christ becoming the controlling factor in our lives, form our attitudes, desires, and conduct. It means Christ being at home in us (John 14:23). It is yielding every nook and cranny of our heart to Him, to be willingly yielded to Him without anything held back.

On the way home from New Hampshire God graciously disallowed any of my entertainment devices on the plane to work, so I instead listened to 4 sermons on this passage. One from 1978 by John MacArthur reminded a little booklet written by a Presbyterian pastor in 1951 called "**My heart, Christ's home**"¹, to illustrate this passage as an actual home where Christ would come to dwell, which today would be something like "My Apps, Christ's download" or something like that.

The story goes like this: a man brings Jesus into his home and visits different rooms: the Library, where mental intake was evaluated, the Dining room where appetites and desires were examined, the Living room where relationships with Christ were kindled or ignored, the workroom where talents and skills were used, and the Rec room where activities and amusements were revealed. In each room, the man knew that things needed to change so that Christ would be the center of the activities in those rooms. Then Jesus smelled a peculiar odor coming from the upstairs closet, a smell like something had died (if you have teenage boys, you know the smell). At this, the man was angry, since he had already given access to all the other rooms, but was trying to keep the closet locked. This was where the hidden things were kept: the lustful thoughts, the internet history, the sins that he wanted to hold onto but hoped no one would find out about.

"I was angry. That's the only way I can put it. I had given access to every other room, and now He was asking me about a little two-by-four closet. I said to myself, 'That is too much. I am not going to give Him the key.'"

"We'll", He said, reading my thoughts, "if you think I'm going to stay up here on the second floor with this odor, you are mistaken. I will take my bed out on the back porch. I'm certainly not going to put up with that." Then I saw Him start down the stairs.

*When you have come to know and love Christ, the worst thing that can happen is to sense His fellowship retreating from you. **I had to surrender. "I'll give you the key,"** I said sadly, "but You'll have to open the closet and clean it out. I haven't the strength to do it."*

"I know," He said. "I know you haven't. Just give me the key. Just authorize me to take care of that closet and I will." So, with trembling fingers, I passed the key to Him. He took it from my

¹ https://www.usna.edu/Navigators/_files/documents/MHCH.pdf

hand, and walked over to the door, opened it, entered it, took out all the putrefying stuff that was rotting there, and threw it away. Then He cleaned the closet and painted it, fixed it up, doing it all in a moments time. Oh, what victory and release to have that death thing out of my life!”

This is the essence of Paul’s prayer for the church and for us, and it should be the prayer for ourselves and others in this church, that Christ would be the center, the ruler, the dweller of our hearts, that He’d be our greatest delight and treasure, and that He would cleanse us from the inside out. May Christ rule and dwell in our hearts through faith. This is why we pray. This is what we pray. This is how prayer changes us.