

Main Idea: As we examine Paul’s second prayer for the Ephesians in Ephesians 3:14-21 we learn that gospel-shaped praying involves three ingredients: posture, petition, and praise.

- I. Gospel-shaped praying involves posture (14-15).
 - A. When praying, we must remember who God is.
 1. He is great.
 2. He is Father, Son, and Spirit.
 - B. When praying, we must remember who we are.
 1. We are in Christ.
 2. We are a family.
- II. Gospel-shaped praying involves petition (16-19).
 - A. May the Father strengthen your inner being (16).
 - B. May Christ dwell in your hearts (17).
 - C. May you comprehend the love of Christ (18).
 - D. May you be filled to the fullness of God (19).
 1. God is the standard.
 2. God offers us His fullness through His Son.
- III. Gospel-shaped praying involves praise (20-21).
 - A. God can do more than we can fathom (20).
 - B. God deserves glory (21).
 1. He receives glory in the church.
 2. He receives glory in Christ Jesus.

Make It Personal: Three practical implications...

1. Make sure you believe the gospel.
2. Make sure you affirm the gospel as you begin and end your day.
3. Make sure you pray for your loved ones in light of the gospel.

How do you pray for people God has placed in your life? Your children. Your grandchildren. The little ones in your Sunday School class. Your closest friends at school.

This fall we’re going to the school of prayer. Specifically, we want to learn how to pray more effectively for people we love. We’ve invited the apostle Paul to tutor us, examining three prayer texts in Ephesians.

For Paul, the gospel shaped everything. Including how he prayed. Yes, we know the gospel is essential to take a person to heaven, but Paul makes it clear that the gospel is also vital for shaping our conversations with our God until He takes us there.

This week, we turn our attention to Paul’s second prayer for the believers in Ephesus, the one recorded at the end of Ephesians 3. Last time we looked at his prayer in Ephesians 1, in which he basically asked for two related things. Help them know You better, and help them know Your gifts better.

In Ephesians 3 he shares a second prayer request. In short, it’s a prayer for the *fullness of God*.

Knowing God—that’s chapter one. And experiencing God in His fullness—that’s chapter three.

This is what the people we love need most in life. Not things. Not even good things, like successful kids and good health. This is what they need, to know God (or know Him

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the series on the Prayers of Paul at WBC in 2008.

better), and to experience His fullness in practical, life-transforming ways. And for this, Paul prayed. And so ought we to pray.

So let's look carefully. As we examine Paul's second prayer for his brothers and sisters in Ephesus, which is found in Ephesians 3:14-21, we see a gospel-shaped prayer that involves three ingredients: posture, petition, and praise.

I. Gospel-shaped praying involves posture (14-15).

Notice Paul's introductory words in verse 14-15, "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name."

Please keep in mind that Paul penned these words while in chains (see 6:20). He'd been arrested for preaching Christ and was waiting for his trial date before Caesar in Rome. He wrote this letter to a church in Ephesus that was dear to him, for he had invested some three years of his life there (he also wrote Colossians at about the same time, A.D. 60).

What posture did Paul utilize in this prayer? "For this reason I *kneel*," he says. Granted, the Bible doesn't mandate a set posture for praying. Abraham stood before the Lord when he prayed for Sodom (Gen. 18:22). Solomon stood when he prayed to dedicate the temple (1 Kings 8:22). David sat before the Lord (1 Chr. 17:16). Joshua fell prostrate upon the earth (Josh. 7:6). In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus fell on His face (Matt. 26:39).

So based on Scripture, we can pray standing, kneeling, sitting, walking, and even lying down. That means posture doesn't matter, right? Not so. The issue is this. When praying, use a posture that's appropriate for the content of your prayer.

For this prayer Paul says he *kneeled*. That's interesting, for while a variety of postures are permissible, the more typical posture for a Jew in prayer was standing. For instance, in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18, both men stood to pray. Paul *knelt*. The posture of kneeling expressed an exceptional degree of earnestness and intensity, indicating this was no casual conversation with God.

I see a couple of lessons here for us.

A. When praying, we must remember who God is. In this prayer Paul affirmed two things about God. First...

1. *He is great.* How great? Paul mentions "heaven and on earth" in verse 14. This God is the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. That's ample incentive to kneel in His presence. He is *great*.

Yet Paul recognized something else about God.

2. *He is Father, Son, and Spirit.* We commented when we looked at Paul's prayer in chapter one he recognized the triune nature of God. He does the same here as well.

*I kneel before the **Father**.* Then in verse 16, *I pray that he may strengthen you through the **Spirit**.* Then verse 17, *so that **Christ** may dwell in your hearts.* God is one eternal being, yet He exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From Paul's example in Ephesians 1:17 we learned that in prayer we address the Father, plead the merit of His Son, and request the help of the Holy Spirit.

That is who God is. I have no right to think of Him in any other way than how He has revealed Himself in His Word. When I pray, I must remember that He is great, so He's in a class all by Himself and worthy of reverence. But He's also personal and

interpersonal, indeed, He's our Father if we have come to know His Son by the work of His Spirit.

B. When praying, we must remember who we are. And who are we? There's a phrase that Paul loves to use in his letters that sums up our identity. He begins this letter with it in 1:1, "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful *in Christ Jesus*." That's who you are, Paul tells his readers. You entered the world *in Adam*, and *in Adam* all die. But *in Christ* you've been made alive. You've been blessed with every spiritual blessing *in Christ*, he tells them in 1:3. God the Father chose you *in Christ* before the creation of the world, he continues in 1:4. *In Him* we have redemption and forgiveness, he explains in 1:7.

Beloved, this is who we are. This is our identity...

1. *We are in Christ.* That's what makes prayer possible. If you are *in Christ* you can approach the throne of God, in prayer right now, and forever once you leave this world. But there's another facet of our identity that Paul expresses in this prayer.

2. *We are a family.* "I kneel before *the Father*," says Paul. That's family language because prayer is family talk. If we are in Christ we are God's children, and when we pray we're talking to the Person who gave us life and brought us into His family.

But did you notice that when Paul prayed he didn't act like he was an only child? He recognized that the One he called Father has a family in heaven and on earth. Who's in this family, and how did they get there? That's what Paul has just explained in chapters 1-2. In chapter one he explained that God in eternity past chose to form a people in Christ for the glory of His name. "In him *we* also were chosen," Paul declares in 1:11. "And *you* also were included in Christ," he continues in 1:13, "when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." In chapter two Paul declares that though we were dead in our sins, this gospel made us right with God. But not only with God, with *each other*, too. Even Gentiles, those formerly excluded from citizenship in Israel and without hope in the world (2:11), if they are *in Christ* are brought near through the blood of Christ (2:13). "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one (2:14)." "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two (2:15)." "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (2:18)."

"For this reason," Paul prefaces his prayer in 3:14. For what reason? Because of what God has done to reconcile sinners to Himself, but not just to Himself but to each too, Jew and Gentile alike, that's the reason Paul prayed this prayer. In fact, if you'll look back at 3:1 you'll see the same connecting phrase, "*For this reason* I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." Apparently, Paul intended to record his prayer at the beginning of chapter three, but as soon as he mentioned what Christ had done for the sake of his *Gentile* readers, he felt compelled to say more about "the mystery," as he calls it, explaining in verse 6, "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

When Paul prayed, he kept the big picture in mind, and so should we. We're a family, beloved, and when we pray it's not just *me* but *we* that matters. Prayer with the whole family in mind.

So first of all, gospel-shaped praying involves posture. A second ingredient...

II. Gospel-shaped praying involves petition (16-19).

Yes, God graciously invites us to ask Him for things, and Paul did. What kind of things? What did Paul ask God to give to the Ephesians? Good health? Better jobs? Peaceful relationships.

Nothing wrong with asking for those things. But no. Paul didn't ask for those things, not here. Instead, he says he brought four petitions to God, each highlighted in the text by the word "that." He begins in verse 16, "I pray *that*..." Yet this first request wasn't an end but a means to something else, hence a second request in verse 17, "so *that*..." Followed in the same verse by another request, "And I pray *that*." And still another request in verse 19, the climax, "*that* you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." The four requests are like a staircase with four steps, each one leading to the next, taking us upward. Here's the first...

A. May the Father strengthen your inner being (16). "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being..." Notice the prepositional phrases carefully...

"I pray that *out of his glorious riches* he may strengthen you." We need what God possesses, and what God possesses, His glorious riches, He offers to His children.

What specifically does Paul request? "That he may strengthen you *with power*." Simply put, this first request is for God the Father to demonstrate His *power*. And how would this power be demonstrated? *Through* His Spirit. And where would this power be demonstrated? *In* your inner being.

That raises an important question. Why do we need God's *power* in our inner being? The answer is we need it because there's work to be done there, and the work that needs to occur requires resources that exceed our natural ability.

The plain and simple truth is this. We may be able to fool people by dressing up the outer man, but we cannot change the inner man. Sure, we can carry a Bible to church, but we cannot create a heart that loves the Bible. We can mimic prayers to God, but we cannot create a heart that loves to pray. The undeniable fact is that we lack the ability to change the inner man. Only God can supply that kind of power, and He does. He offers His children power to transform their thinking, power to break the lusts that enslave them, and power to produce the kind of resolve necessary to follow Christ.

Which brings us to three implications.

1. *We must receive what God alone can give.* Only the Father can supply the kind of power you and I need to change inside out.

2. *We must cooperate with God's Spirit.* The Father sent His Son to rescue sinners by means of His death and resurrection. Then after returning to heaven, the Son sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His people, and the Spirit is the source of the power that now brings about the necessary changes in us.

3. *We must give attention to our inner man.* The NIV calls it our "inner being." The inner man is the unseen part of you, the hidden part, the spiritual dimension to your being. Our inner man is born dead in sin (2:1), yet the inner man becomes alive when we receive Jesus Christ (2:5). Our outer man is wearing down and dying (that's why our bones creak in the mornings!), but if we're in Christ our inner man has the capacity to be transformed. Paul makes that point in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."

I appreciate D. A. Carson's book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. Carson explains, "The inner man is what is left when the outer man has wasted completely away."²

Then Carson illustrates, "Sometimes we can see in the elderly folks something of the process that Paul has in mind. We all know senior saints who, as their physical strength is reduced, nevertheless become more and more steadfast and radiant. Their memories may be fading; their arthritis may be nearly unbearable; their ventures beyond their small rooms or apartments may be severely curtailed. But somehow they live as if they already have one foot in heaven. As their outer being weakens, their inner being runs from strength to strength."³

I think of our sister, Lacy Litteral, who's now in heaven. But when she was in her 90s and bedfast, her radiant smile revealed that God was doing something amazing in her inner man. Seldom did I see her but that she was singing about her Savior, delighting to hear about His good work in the lives of others, and rejoicing at yet another opportunity to call on Him in prayer.

Yet don't misunderstand. It's not merely because Lacy was in her 90s that her inner man was strong. Growing older isn't enough.

Listen again to Carson, "Conversely, we know elderly folk who, so far as we can tell, are not suffering from any serious organic decay, yet as old age weighs down on them they nevertheless become more and more bitter, caustic, demanding, spiteful, and introverted. It is almost as if the civilizing restraints imposed on them by cultural expectations are no longer adequate. In their youth, they had sufficient physical stamina to keep their inner being somewhat capped. Now, with reserves of energy diminishing, what they really are in their inner being is coming out."⁴

So how important to you is the development of your inner man? What you are in the inner man will come out. We're so prone to make time for the outer man—we eat, exercise, rest, and take vacations. We spend money on the outer man. We ask people to pray for us concerning the needs of the outer man, and so we should.

But what about the *inner man*? Are you nourishing your inner man through a consistent diet in God's Word? And how about your kids? It grieves me to see parents who make sure their kids play sports (and I love sports!), but then say they don't have time for family Bible reading and prayer and church life.

God wants to strengthen your inner man, and Paul prayed to that end for those he loved, and so should we. But why? Why should it matter? It's not an end, but a means to something. That brings us to Paul's second request.

Verse 17—"So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."

B. May Christ dwell in your hearts (17). In Colossians 1:19 we're told that God was pleased to have His fullness "dwell" in Christ. In our text Paul uses the same word to depict his desire for Christ to "dwell" in the hearts of the Christians in Ephesus. The verb "dwell" means "to settle down" somewhere, or as Kenneth Wuest puts it, "to settle down and feel at home."

Your *heart* (and with that term Paul is once again talking about the part of you that cannot be seen; your "control center") is like a home. What happens when you're at

² D. A. Carson, p. 184.

³ Carson, p. 184.

⁴ Carson, p. 184.

home? You kick off your shoes. You drop your guard. The outward façade, if you've put on one in public, disappears, and the real you comes out.

We might put Paul's request in these terms, "I'm praying that Christ will feel at home in every room and in every corner of your heart and life." That happens, as he says, "through faith," since we can't see Christ. He's the invisible guest, and as Peter put it in 1 Peter 1:8, "Whom having not seen you love."

Now ponder again the first words of verse 17, "so that." Those words indicate that Paul's first request (in verse 16) must occur before the second request can (in verse 17).

Which raises the question, "Why? Why do we need a strengthened inner man *before* Christ can dwell in our hearts?" The answer is that before Christ can dwell (feel at home) in our hearts, there's some renovating work that needs to take place there to make that dwelling place suitable for Him!

Let me illustrate. The summer before I entered the eighth grade my family moved into an old farmhouse. It was built in the early 1900's, and consequently was in need of some renovation. My parents bought the property, not because of what it *was*, but because of what they knew it could *become*. They hauled out trash, and cleaned the place from top to bottom. Old and ugly wall paper had to go. Walls were painted, floors recarpeted, an additional bathroom built, a family room with fireplace added, the exterior covered with aluminum siding, and so on. Technically, that old house became the property of our family on the day the auctioneer said, "Sold!" But it took time and work for that house to become our *home*.

The day we came to know Christ as Savior, He came and took up residence in our lives by His Spirit. But guess what He found the day He moved in? He found the equivalent of horrid looking wall-paper and musty carpet that had to go. He found trash that needed removed. And so He began the renovation process so that He might turn His residence into a place appropriate for Him, into a real home where He is comfortable and welcome.⁵

"Make no mistake," writes D. A. Carson, "When Christ first moves into our lives, he finds us in very bad repair. It takes a great deal of power to change us; and that is why Paul prays for power. He asks that God may so strengthen us by his power in our inner being that Christ may genuinely take up residence within us, transforming us into a house that pervasively reflects his own character."⁶

So let me ask you a couple of questions...

1. *Does Christ feel at home in your life?* Does he find you doing the things He would do if He lived there? For instance, does He like the television programs you're watching, and the music you're listening to?

Take it a step further. What does Christ find in your heart? Is there love, joy, peace, longsuffering, or, is there bitterness there, or an unwillingness to forgive a brother? Are there lusts that you're feeding there?

Now turn the question around. What *would* make Christ feel at home in our hearts? If He found things that please Him, right? Is His Word hidden in your heart? That pleases Him. Is there a grateful spirit in your heart? Is there affection for the needy, compassion for the lost? That too pleases Him.

⁵ I'd indebted to D. A. Carson's similar illustration, p. 186-7.

⁶ Carson, p. 187.

2. *Is there any room where Christ is not welcome?* How about in your office, where you get on your computer? Is Christ welcome when you surf the net? How about at your kitchen table? Does He feel comfortable there with you? Does He hear gratefulness being expressed to Him for the food He has provided, and does He hear words of encouragement being expressed to the family members He's given you?

Paul's not done traveling his prayer staircase. Petition #1—May the Father strengthen your inner being. So that, petition #2—May Christ dwell in your hearts. Paul's third request actually begins in the middle of verse 17 and runs through the middle of verse 19, "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge." Petition #3...

C. May you comprehend the love of Christ (18). The fact that Paul prayed this request reveals his assumption that even Christians do not appreciate the love of Christ as fully as we ought. And did you see his request for "power" again? Paul once more asks God to give the Ephesians *power*, this time so they can grasp the love of Christ. That sounds strange, doesn't it? You don't need *power* to appreciate Christ's love, do you? Yes, we do, and here's why.

Once again I'm indebted to an insight by Carson: "It takes nothing less than the power of God to enable us to grasp the love of Christ. Part of our deep 'me-ism' is manifested in such independence that we do not really want to get so close to God that we feel dependent upon him, swamped by his love. Just as in a marriage a spouse may flee relationships that are too intimate, judging them to be a kind of invasion of privacy when in reality such a reaction is of intense immaturity and selfishness, so also in the spiritual arena: when we are drawn a little closer to the living God, many of us want to back off and stake out our own turf. We want to experience power so that we can be in control; Paul prays for power so that we will be controlled by God himself. Our deep and pathetic self-centeredness is precisely why it takes the power of God to transform us, if we are to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and grow to the maturity the Scriptures hold out before us."⁷

May you comprehend the love of Christ. That was Paul's third request, and it leads us to consider three implications.

1. *We ought to be growing in our understanding of His love.* No status quo. But how do we do it? For starters, according to verse 17, we must be "rooted and established in love." And if we are true Christians, that's what we are, *rooted* and *established* in God's love.⁸ "In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ (1:4-5)."

Yet Paul's request takes it further. He's asking the Father to enable the Ephesians to *grasp*, to *comprehend* something they've already experienced, namely the love of His Son. He wants them to know the width and length and height and depth of Christ's love. As John Stott explains, "The love of Christ is 'broad' enough to encompass all mankind (especially Jew and Gentiles, the theme of these chapters), 'long' enough to last for eternity, 'deep' enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and 'high' enough to exalt him to heaven."⁹

⁷ Carson, p. 197.

⁸ "Rooted" and "established" are perfective passive participles.

⁹ John Stott, p. 137.

It's actually a paradox. Paul's praying that his friends will comprehend the incomprehensible! As Wesley put it, *Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me?*

How can we become more aware of Christ's love? Paul himself gives us a helpful piece of counsel in verse 18 when he says, "May have power, *together with all the saints*, to grasp..." That indicates that when it comes to growing in our understanding of His love...

2. *We ought to do so together.* John Stott put it this way, "It needs the whole people of God to understand the whole love of God."¹⁰ And what specifically should we be doing individually and together if we want to know Christ's love better? I'm indebted again to this piece of counsel from Professor Carson, "A genuine and deep perception of the love of Christ rarely comes to the person who is not spending much time in the Scriptures."¹¹ So to grasp His love, we need to spend time in the Scriptures, and together. Yet all the while we ponder His love...

3. *We ought to do so knowing we'll never grasp it fully.* I read that R. A. Torrey earnestly sought the face of God, until one day when as he was reading the Scriptures and praying, he became so overwhelmed with an awareness of God's love for him that he began to weep uncontrollably. Eventually, he asked God to show him no more, for he could not bear it.¹²

I had a similar experience recently. I was in the midst of a migraine, and called out to the Lord. And I sensed His amazing love for me in ways that brought me to tears...

Do you realize how much Jesus Christ loves you? Ponder it carefully. He left heaven for you. He took hell for you. He's preparing a place for you. It's no wonder that the love of Christ can melt the hardest of hearts. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:29)."

And now we come to the top of the staircase, to Paul's final petition...

D. May you be filled to the fullness of God (19). "And to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." What exactly is Paul asking? D. A Carson explains, "To be 'filled to the measure of all the fullness of God' is simply a Pauline way of saying 'to be all that God wants you to be,' or 'to be spiritually mature.'"¹³ You see...

1. *God is the standard.* "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect," said Jesus in Matthew 5:48. But we're sinners. We can't attain to God's standard, to God's fullness. But His Son did. As the God-man, Jesus lived a perfect life, fulfilling everything that God expected of us that we missed. And now...

2. *God offers us His fullness through His Son.* Christ was everything God wanted us to be, and through faith in Christ we can become all that God wants us to be.

Watch how these requests work together. Do you desire to experience the fullness of God, that is, to be all that He intends you to be, to be spiritually mature in the likeness of His Son? If so, then you need His power. You need His power to be working in your inner man, strengthening you, transforming you, taking out the garbage, renovating the house. And then, by faith, you need to invite the Living Christ to take up residence in

¹⁰ John Stott, *Ephesians*, p. 137.

¹¹ Carson, p. 194.

¹² Told by Carson, pp. 193-4.

¹³ Carson, p. 195.

your heart, opening every room to His presence and purposes. And once He's abiding in your heart, then you need more power, power to equip your mind to comprehend the subject that goes beyond all comprehension, the subject of His love for you. And then, as the knowledge of His love increasingly captures your gaze, you become more and more like Him, and in so doing you become filled with the fullness of God.

And that brings us to the third and final ingredient: posture, petition, then *praise*.

III. Gospel-shaped praying involves praise (20-21).

Who in their right mind would be so bold as to ask God to manifest His fullness to undeserving sinners? Only someone who knew what Paul knew about God, namely...

A. God can do more than we can fathom (20). "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us." There's another mention of *power*. This time Paul indicates that God's power is *at work within us*.

How so? What are some ways God's power is at work in us? Study this letter and you'll see. God's power is at work transforming us (1:4), keeping us secure (1:14), accomplishing ministries through us (4:12), maturing us (4:13), producing thanksgiving in us (5:20) and proper relationships among us (5:21ff), and protecting us from the deadly attacks of the devil (6:10-12). And because of this (and a million other reasons)...

B. God deserves glory (21). "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." By the way, where does Paul say God receives the glory He desires and deserves?

1. *He receives glory in the church.* Yet also...

2. *He receives glory in Christ Jesus.* In a sense, these two are one and the same, for the church of Jesus Christ *is* the body of Jesus Christ, the God-ordained, God-designed instrument through which God is manifesting His fullness and thereby bringing glory to Himself both now and forever. Praise Him for His church. Be a part of His church. Love His church. Serve in His church. Protect His church.

"Amen." That's the word Paul uses to conclude this prayer. So be it. It's true.

What causes a person to pray like this for those he loves? The gospel does. If we truly believe the gospel, the good news regarding Jesus Christ and what He has done for undeserving sinners, it affects our posture in prayer, the petitions we bring to God in prayer, and it results in praise to God in prayer.

Make It Personal: Three practical implications...

1. *Make sure you believe the gospel.* Do you? Have you put your faith in the One God sent into the world to save sinners, Jesus the Christ? He will save you today if you will *believe* in Him.

But don't stop there.

2. *Make sure you affirm the gospel as you begin and end your day.* We need the gospel every day. It's not just a message that takes us to heaven, but is the basis for how God wants us to live day by day. Affirming the gospel.

A practical suggestion, read *The Gospel Primer*.

3. *Make sure you pray for your loved ones in light of the gospel.* Our sinful bent leads us to pray short-sighted prayers. But when the gospel shapes our gaze, we will pray for our loved ones as Paul did in Ephesians 3.