

*Reliant on God through Prayer*  
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Ephesians 3:14-21

In his book "Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God", Pastor Tim Keller states, "[Prayer] is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life. We must learn to pray. We have to." Elsewhere Keller says: "To pray is to accept that we are, and always will be, wholly dependent on God for everything."

Both of these statements by Tim Keller expand, to some degree, LEFC's value statement: We are reliant on God through prayer. However, if you're like me you a statement like this probably leads to some questions. What does this look like in real life? Does this apply to all things or just the "big" things? Does this affect us all the time or just on Sundays, at meals and when the in-laws visit?

But, perhaps your questions go a little deeper. How should I approach an all-knowing, all-powerful, perfectly holy God? Can my prayers really be effective if God is truly sovereign over all things and knows the end from the beginning? Does God really care about my small time needs when there are so many bigger issues around the world (and even in this congregation)? The questions go on and on.

As you can probably sense, these are just a few of the prayer related questions I have wrestled with over the past 24 years. And, I have to admit that I'm still wrestling. I'm still learning and growing especially in regard to prayer. It seems every book I read on prayer or sermon I heard about prayer, while they may answer one question, the usually raise 2 or 3 more. But, what I've come to realize and rest upon, is that there is a foundation for prayer presented in Scripture that we can rely upon despite our questions. This is the beginning. This is where we need to start. So, my singular goal for today to describe this foundation to you.

The text God has for us this morning is Eph 3:14-21. While there may be a few other passages that help lay the scriptural foundation of prayer, I was drawn to Paul's prayer in Ephesians for a couple of reasons. First of all, Ephesians is a fairly concise book. Paul has 3 chapters of theology followed by 3 chapters of application. This prayer sits at the hinge point between the theology and the application. Because of this, Paul is fairly clear that both our doctrine and our practice are dependent on prayer. That theme plays out in the prayer itself.

On top of this, and perhaps more importantly, is the nature of Paul's prayer here in Ephesians 3. He doesn't dance around. He doesn't even worry about specific issues. He goes right to the bedrock reality of our true spiritual need. So I want to help us lay a foundation for prayer based Paul's approach here in Ephesians 3.

As we dive into the text this morning, I think it will be helpful if we break it down into 4 basic elements. While each of these aspects may not be present with each and every prayer we pray, upon reflection we should be able at least identify how their presence could improve our prayer lives. The four facets of prayer that flow out of this passage are 1) the reason for our prayers, 2) the one to whom we are submitting our prayers 3) the nature of our prayers and 4) the anticipated result of our prayers.

The first aspect of any prayer is the reason it is offered. We can see this clearly in verse 14. Paul is not offering this prayer in a vacuum. He is looking back at what he has just described in verses 7- 13. Consider for a moment what Paul has on his plate. He is called to preach to the Gentiles. He is called to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. He is called to proclaim the now revealed plan of God. He is called to help the church display the manifold, multifaceted wisdom of God. Just one of these assignments would probably drive any of us to despair, but all four? Are any of us surprised that Paul is focused on prayer?

However I don't believe the lesson here is to say "Oh look how profound Paul's ministry was, no wonder he needed to be reliant on God through prayer" Rather it should be "Look how profound our ministry could be, if we were reliant on God through prayer" And, perhaps more importantly, "In God's hands all ministry is profound, therefore we must be reliant on God through prayer"

Paul's reason for praying is also intimately tied what makes our prayers possible in the first place. Our access to God and our confidence that our prayers are heard and responded to are grounded in Christ. Think of Isa 6. How could Isaiah stand before a holy God? Because his sins were atoned for. And the same is true of us.

And yet, the reason we pray can easily slip from our grasp. I won't ask for a show of hands, but I want you to consider whether you fall into a similar trap to the one I can fall into. God calls me to do something out of my comfort zone, perhaps even out of my real skill set. Because this is out of my zone, I pray. I seriously, fervently, relentlessly pray. God blesses both the obedience and the prayer. Because of this blessing, I'm asked to continue in the ministry, but now I have experience and knowledge. My prayer wanes. And slowly my fruitfulness does as well. Finally I put the ministry "on the shelf", because I feel that I am no longer called or gifted.

Does this sound familiar? What's happened? Did my calling or gifting change? No. What changed was my reliance on God through prayer, because the reason I was praying changed. I started praying because I was desperate. But once I gained some self-confidence, I prayed because I wanted God's blessing and perhaps this even devolved into simply praying because that's what good Christians do. But what I've found, and perhaps you've found as well, is that Jm 4:3 is true. We ask and don't receive because we ask with wrong motives.

So, the first aspect of building a good foundation for prayer is getting our motives right, that we're desperate and dependent on Christ. But Paul doesn't stop there. He moves

on in verses 14-16 to identify the one to whom he is praying. Consider these descriptors: God as Father, God as the originator of every human family and God as the one who has the riches of glory. These three descriptions are not meant to be an exhaustive portrait of God. But each one has a key element in solidifying our prayers.

The whole image of God as Father is especially powerful and helpful in how we approach God in our prayers. You see, we are not bartering with God when we pray. And we are not badgering God when we are in prayer. Rather we are coming to our loving, compassionate Father who wants what is best for us and for all his children. Add to this reality that God is not just our Father in a relational sense. He is also our Father in the creational sense. You see, Christians we have all been adopted into God's family. But that's not all. We've also been created and designed to be in God's family. That means we were meant to be here. Because of this, all that our Father has is ours.

And, the stunning thing about our praying to God is that his riches proceed from his glory. God's riches aren't something he possesses, like you or me. I own a car. If I give that car away to some one, it is no longer mine. My riches have been depleted. God is different. His riches are part of who he is. As such, he can give super abundantly and never dent his reserves. He is as rich today as he ever was or ever will be.

There is one final item related to this aspect of prayer that I think is important to draw out. Tim Keller points this out in the book I referenced earlier. It is the fact that we are praying to an actual person. We need to be careful, I need to be careful, to not slide into the trap of thinking of God as the Force, or that because he is spirit that somehow he is not a relational person. No, we are praying to a real person, a person who knows us and loves us and enjoys (yes enjoys) spending time conversing with us.

What we've seen so far from Paul is the importance of our reasons for praying that we are desperate and dependent on Christ and the significance of knowing that we are praying to a loving Father whose riches never end. He moves from laying these planks in the floorboards of our prayers to the third plank which is the prayer request itself. Paul's prayer request has multiple layers, each of which depend upon and feed off one another.

The initial prayer request is for strength in verse 16. This is not a prayer for physical strength but rather spiritual strength. In fact, this is strength that only the Holy Spirit can provide. Specifically he is praying on behalf of the Ephesians that they would have the spiritual strength so that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith (verse 17). We'll come back to this in a minute, but notice how the next layer flows from this one. Paul almost presupposes the answer to the first aspect of his request as he makes the second. Since the Ephesians are rooted and grounded in love, presumably because Jesus is dwelling in their hearts through faith, Paul now asks for more spiritual strength. This time the use spiritual strength is two fold. First is to be able to grasp the length and the breadth and the depth and the height (verse 18). The second is to know the unknowable love of Christ (verse 19).

At this point you're probably asking "what was Paul actually praying for?" or "how in the world could Paul's prayers ever correlate to my prayers?" Well, I'm glad you asked since those are the sorts of questions we should be asking every time we read or study our Bibles.

First, we need to remember that the Ephesians were already believers. The first two chapters make this abundantly clear. Thus, Paul is not praying for their salvation in the first part of verse 17. But, if not salvation, then what? Paul is asking for the strength for us to continue on in our Christian walk. You see Paul knows what we sometimes forget. Salvation is not just a point in time event.

For those of us who are Christians, there was a moment when the Holy Spirit broke into our lives, our need for Christ became suddenly real to us and we cried out in desperate need. But that was just the beginning. From that moment on, God the Holy Spirit has been working with us and working on us to be more and more conformed to the image of Christ. Call this sanctification, if you'd like. And even though the Spirit is doing all the heavy lifting, our growth in Christ doesn't happen without our cooperation. This requires faith and this requires strength.

But, how does this help us in our own prayers? I would submit there are at least three ways Paul's prayer requests can positively influence our own. The first would be via simple imitation. How do we learn to talk? We imitate the sound we hear around us. How do we learn walk? We imitate the people we see around us? How did my kids learn to love dogs and swimming? They saw Sally and me enjoying these things and imitated us.

How do we learn to pray? We imitate that prayers we read in Scripture. Additionally, I think Paul is continuing his theme of our incredible dependence on God to accomplish anything of kingdom value. It is possible that our prayers need to reflect less asking of God and more leaning on God. And that is what Paul is doing here.

One other lesson for us is one of priorities. As important as our present moment needs may be, Paul reminds us there are other, more pressing priorities, spiritual priorities, kingdom priorities. Perhaps the foundation of our prayers can be strengthened as we consider, remember and imitate not only Paul's style, but also his requests.

Interestingly however, as Paul moves into a second part of his prayer for spiritual strength, He basically assumes God's favorable answer from his prior request. Based on this, the next portion of his prayer is to ask for strength for the Ephesians to comprehend the length, the height, the breadth (verse 18). Now if you're reading the ESV, the NASB or the NKJV you will notice that these translations don't have an object to the four dimensions. The simple reason why is because there is no object recorded in the best manuscripts.

So what do we do? To what is Paul referring? The NIV takes the tact of most commentators and inserts the love of Christ. This is certainly a legitimate assumption to make since the 2nd part of this request also has to do with the love of Christ. However,

I personally like the ambiguity and here's why. Is the love of Christ multi-dimensional? Absolutely. And we need spiritual strength to even begin to grasp it. But what about the grace of Christ? Isn't it equally boundless? Don't we need the same quantity of spiritual strength to plunge all of its dimensions? And then there is the mercy of Christ and the compassion of Christ and faithfulness of Christ. We need spiritual strength to simply begin to comprehend each of these attributes of Jesus.

Notice also that Paul inserts the reality that we cannot fully comprehend much of anything about Christ or the gospel in isolation. Paul prays for the Ephesians that they would come to this comprehension together with all the saints. And not just the saints in Ephesus, but with the saints in Jerusalem and in Rome as well.

How are we doing in this regard, La Crescent? I'm not asking about corporate prayer or our willingness to share our prayer needs at a bible study or small group, as important as those are. I'm wondering how often do we allow our prayers to grow beyond ourselves? Beyond our families? Beyond our close friends? Beyond our church? Beyond our gender, race, political party and tax bracket? I don't know about you, I still have a long way to go.

And then there's Paul's prayer request that the Ephesians would know the unknowable love of Christ. How do we process such a request? Is this even possible? According to Phil 3 the answer would be yes. It's there that Paul states that he wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. In one sense then, this is Paul offering a supreme prayer request for the Ephesians. You see, if we know the multi-dimensional, boundless love of Christ and by this knowledge are filled with all the fullness of God, what else is left? And yet, in another sense, Paul continues to demonstrate our complete and utter need to be reliant on God through prayer.

Thus far we have seen how the bedrock of our prayer needs to be formed by a right motive (our desperate need and complete dependence on Christ), a true sense to whom we are praying (our loving Father who has boundless riches) and the biblical nature of the requests themselves (we need spiritual strength to really know the unknowable love of Christ). That brings us to the result.

What is the biblical model for waiting on God? We could go elsewhere in Scripture and find different authors who approached this aspect of prayer somewhat differently. The most notable of these are David, Job and Jeremiah. But all things considered, verses 20 and 21 are a stellar example of how our hearts are to be tuned toward an expectant answer from God.

Let me read these verses slowly again and allow the words and the thoughts to soak into your hearts and minds.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Consider with me what Paul is stating in these verses:

First: Not only can God answer our prayers, not only can he answer all prayers, not only can he answer all prayers that are simply unexpressable groans, he can do so beyond our ability to ask or even ponder. You see Paul's theology of a sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient God didn't thwart his prayers; his view of God energized his prayers.

Next: The answer to our prayers will primarily come through the Holy Spirit working in the midst of the people of God. Think about that brothers and sisters. We are the instrument, via the power of the Holy Spirit, by which God provides answers to most of our prayers. Shouldn't this affect how we pray? Shouldn't this affect why we pray? Shouldn't this affect for what we pray?

Finally: Perhaps it goes without saying, but I always seem to need the reminder, that the end goal of prayer actually isn't us. Even though we are the recipients of the answers and we are blessed as the pray-ers, God's glory is the end goal. But notice how Paul frames this statement of God's glory. It is his glory both in Christ and in the church. As we pray, and as we offer our requests, let's keep this end goal in mind. If we have a need or a burden, Scripture is clear, we are to lay them before the throne of grace. But let's do so with a heart attitude that wants not just the answer, but the glory of the God who graciously gives the answer.

----- I want to close with a prayer of Charles Spurgeon because we can all learn from those who are ahead of us in the school of prayer:

"O Lord, that we would cling to you more firmly than ever we have done. We trust that we can say we love you Lord, but Oh that we would love you more! Let this blessed flame feed on the very marrow of our bones. May the zeal of your house consume us; may we feel that we love you Lord with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, with all our strength, and hence may there be about our life a special consecration, an immovable dedication unto you O Lord alone...

"O Lord Jesus, deepen in us our knowledge of you. We would that the Word of God were more sweet to us, more intensely precious, that we had a deeper hunger and thirst after it. Oh that our knowledge of the truth were more clear and our grip of it more steadfast. Teach us, O Lord, to know the reason for the hope that is in us, and to be able to defend the faith against all comers. Plough deep in us, great Lord, and let the roots of your grace strike into the roots of our being, until it shall be no longer we who live, but 'Christ who lives in us' "