

July 28, 2024 – Ephesians 3:14-21

I've often said that when the Bible tells us to pray, we need to take notice. When Jesus hands us a prayer and says, "Pray like this," we obey. We pray the Lord's Prayer. When God tells his people, "Pray for these things," we obey. We pray that there would be workers in the harvest fields. We pray for those in authority. We pray for the Lord Jesus to come quickly.

Today, Paul does this very thing. And yet, we may miss it because of the language he uses. Paul doesn't use the word "prayer," but that clearly what he is talking about. Instead, Paul opens this passage with this phrase, "*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father...*" That's a prayer. Paul is telling the Ephesians, "I kneel in prayer for this reason. And you should to." He's telling them to pray. He's telling us to pray.

But why do they need to pray? What's the context here? Well, Paul deals with a couple topics in his letter to the Ephesians. The main reason why he wrote to them seems to be that there is division between the Jewish converts to Christianity and the Gentile converts. And Paul spends a great deal of time in Ephesians discussing our unity in Christ, the centrality of our baptismal identity, and the importance of faith over works.

But in this particular section, he's been dealing with a different topic: his imprisonment. Paul spent 3 years with ministering to them in Ephesus. These people know him and care about him. And they are devastated to find out that he is in prison. It has shaken their faith to find out that their spiritual father, their hero and beloved pastor, is locked up in chains for the sake of the Gospel.

It has made them face the harsh reality that they too will be persecuted for their faith. Because if it can happen to Paul, it can happen to anyone. They feel very uncertain about the future. They are very worried, very scared, about what is to come.

And in that, we can sympathize. I don't know about you, but I don't see a very bright future for Christians in the Western world. Certainly not after what we saw at the Olympic opening ceremonies. I'm not saying the church is dying. The church cannot die. The church is Jesus Christ. And Jesus lives forevermore. And we see that all over the world. The Christian church is growing by leaps and bounds in Africa, Asia, and South America. The future of Christianity worldwide is as bright as it has ever been.

The church isn't dying. But the church in America is not thriving. We are struggling. We are struggling with our faith. We are struggling to stay rooted in God's Word. And we are struggling against a very, very hostile culture. It's worrying. It's scary. It shakes our faith. We're not that much different from the Ephesians. And so Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is a prayer for us. And it is a prayer that we should remember and share anytime we see someone else whose faith has been shaken.

When someone is going through a difficult circumstance, what do you normally say to them? Maybe, "I've been thinking about you." Maybe, "I hope you're feeling better." Maybe, just maybe, we'll say, "I'm praying for you," and leave it at that. Now, there's nothing wrong with these sentiments. Especially that we're praying for them.

But now compare that to what Paul says to the Ephesians. Because Paul doesn't just say that he's thinking about them or hoping that they feel better. And he doesn't just give them a generic, vague promise that he's praying for them. No, he prays very specifically, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith... that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

That is a substantial prayer. But what does it even mean? What does it mean for Christ to dwell in your heart. What does it mean to be filled with the fullness of God?

Well, the two are basically the same thing, which is why he bookends this prayer with these two statements. To pray that someone would be filled with the fullness of God is to ask that Jesus Christ dwell in their heart. And since, faith is the only means by which Christ dwells in anyone's heart, Paul is really praying that their faith would remain strong, despite his imprisonment. And the only way that faith remains strong is by God empowering it through the Spirit. And the only way that the Spirit empowers our hearts is through the Gospel, whether it be read, heard, or received in the Lord's Supper.

And so praying that Christ would dwell in the Ephesians and that they would be filled with the fullness of God is really a prayer that they would... go to church. That they would not become isolated and empty, but go to the place where they know they can be filled with Christ. Filled with his Word. Filled with his Sacrament. Filled with his Spirit. Filled with his grace. Filled with God.

And that's something we need to pray for ourselves and each other as well. Because when we're worried or scared or our faith is shaken, often we go to the worst possible place: away from the church. We isolate ourselves. We withdraw from the place where Christ is found. And we end up empty.

And so, if you see that happening, if you see fellow members isolating themselves, you can offer more than, "I'll be thinking about you." Say, "I'll be praying that God will fill you with all the fullness of Christ!" Or, if that's a little awkward, maybe something like, "I'll be praying that God would fill your heart at church on Sunday." Remind them that there is a place where God will fill them up and relieve their worry, their fear, and their doubt. And then pray that they would seek that place out.

But that's not all that Paul prays. In between those bookends, Paul's prayer goes further. He also asks that his hearers may have the power to grasp the magnitude of Christ's love for them. *"That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth."*

This points out another sinful human tendency when we are worried, scared, or feel our faith shaken. We ask the question, "Why did God let this happen to me? Why did God let this happen to my children or my grandchildren? Why did God let this happen to my country?" And that question "why" is really a question of motive. What motivates God? Well, his love motivates him. But if this bad thing happened, does that mean that God doesn't love me very much? Does it mean he doesn't love me at all?

It's easy to lose heart. The devil loves nothing more than to isolate us, to make us believe we are insignificant, that God has better things to do, that he has better people to look after. He wants each of us to think, "Who am I among the billions of people of this earth, that God should love me?" He wants us to believe we are nothing more than meaningless specks of star dust, like Carl Sagan once said and which Disney recently quoted in a kids movie. He wants us to believe that we are not loved.

And this is where the Gospel is so very important. Because it was for fallen humanity that God sent his Son to set things right between himself, us, and all creation. The fate of all human history reached its climax when Jesus died in that insignificant little patch of land called Israel. But the enormity of God's love doesn't stop with Jesus' death and resurrection. He sent apostles and missionaries throughout the world to reach out with that Word of Life. He saw to it that faithful parents, grandparents, and friends spoke that love to generations of people.

Telling someone, "You're in my thoughts," is nice and all. But how about telling someone, "You're in God's thoughts." How about telling them, "I'm praying that God will help you see the enormous scope of his love for you. And that there is no limited to the way that he can and will help you."

And then, having prayed these huge, bold prayers for the Ephesians, and having told the Ephesians about his prayers for them, Paul makes sure they understand one more thing. Lest they think that Paul's prayers have been too bold. That he has asked too much of God. That there is some limit to what we can ask God to do for someone. Paul tells them this: *“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.”*

No, there is no limit to what we can ask God in prayer. When you tell someone, “I'm praying for you,” you are making a powerful statement. Because God can and will do so much more than we ask. So much more than we can even think. The power that created the world and raised the dead is at work in me and you and all who are in Christ Jesus.

Don't just think about a person. Pray for them. Tell them you are praying for them. And most of all, tell them about the God who answers prayer. About the God who loves us, who died for us, and who meets with us in Word and Sacrament whenever we need him. Invite them to bow their knees before the Father who has made them part of his family, that they may know that the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge will answer their prayer too. Amen.