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A Prayer for Power Ephesians 3.14-21**Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

When you're driving and you see orange cones and barrels, caution signs, bright colored vests, and people with hard helmets, what do they suggest? Something's going on, maybe there's construction, there might be some element of risk that means you need to especially have your eyes and ears open and pay attention. Lanes may shift or narrow, fines are doubled, watch out. If you've ever taken a subway underground, you're probably aware of what the third rail is – the rail that carries enough power that you don't want to touch it. There are always signs warning you about the danger of the power that is very close by and powerful enough to run a train.

I thought about all that as I've been reading Ephesians because Paul talks so frequently about God's power and who God is. Maybe we should pass out hard hats and have caution tape by the door to the sanctuary and install seatbelts in the pews to communicate, *"Hey when you come in here, look out, hold on, and pay attention, because there is power present that can have a great impact if you're touched by it or if it gets into you."*

One of the ways we access and are touched by the power of God is through prayer, yet many Christians struggle with or feel inadequate about praying. Have you seen any of the ads for the app to help people to pray each day during Lent called, *Hallow* with Jonathan Roumie who plays Jesus in *The Chosen* and actor Mark Wahlburg? It's amazing all the tools that are available to learn how to or practice prayer. Pastor David Pranga shared one in his sermon last month, *The Power of Prayer*. Today I want to share with you about *A Prayer for Power*.

If we were asked, some of us would say, *"I'm confident and comfortable with my prayer life. Prayer is part of the rhythm of my life, I feel attentive and present to God and my prayers seem to be impactful and effective."* I suspect more of us might say we still have room to grow in our practice of prayer and others of us aren't yet comfortable or confident praying out loud in front of other people. The Apostle Paul knew about prayer, and he was more than happy to offer prayers that other people could hear and learn from. In Ephesians chapter 3 beginning at verse 14 we're invited to overhear a prayer. Let's listen. Ephesians 3:14-21,

14 For this reason **I bow my knees before the Father**, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his **glory**, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with **power** through his Spirit, 17 **and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.** 18 I pray that you may have the **power** to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the **breadth** and **length** and **height** and **depth**, 19 and **to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.**

20 Now to him who by the **power** at work within us is able to accomplish **abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine**, 21 to him be **glory** in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

We learn a lot about prayer from this prayer. Prayer begins with an **attitude of humility**. The first seven words of this passage -- "*I bow my knees before the Father*" -- make it clear that we're overhearing a prayer and prayer requires you to acknowledge that you're not God – God is. Given our egos and the human desire for power, control, and getting our own way, such a confession can be difficult for some people. In this passage the riches and power are God's. In prayer, we're the recipients of grace, not the donors. Paul's kneeling posture in prayer recalls the words of **Psalm 95:6-7**, "*O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.*" Even Indiana Jones in the movie *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* knows a penitent man is humble before God and should kneel. In the movie, that humble posture saves his life. Praying with humility is a way of acknowledging our desire to be in relationship with a God who is greater than us and whose love, power, and wisdom bless our lives.

H.A. Ironside, who was a pastor and Bible teacher in the middle of the 20th century, shared the story of a godly man named Andrew Fraser who went to Southern California to recover from a serious illness. Though this old Irishman was quite weak, he opened his worn Bible and began expounding the truth of God's word in a way that Ironside had never heard before. Ironside was so moved by Fraser's words that he asked, "*Where did you learn these things?*"

The sickly Fraser replied, *“My dear young man, I learned these things on my knees on the mud floor of a little sod cottage in the north of Ireland. There with my open Bible before me, I used to kneel for hours at a time and ask the Spirit of God to reveal Christ to my soul and to open the Word in my heart. He taught me more on my knees on that mud floor than I ever could have learned in all the seminaries or colleges in the world.”*¹ While I’m an advocate for higher education, it’s wise to pair it with “lower” education in humble prayer, in terms of our posture and our attitude. Like Paul on his knees in prison or Andrew Fraser on his knees in his cottage, God can teach and share a great deal with us when we approach God in humility.

When we humbly seek the Lord in prayer, we discover the range of God’s love and concern is vaster than our own. The next thing Paul shares in his prayer is the Father to whom we pray is the one *“from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.”* Paul asserts that every person; the people of every family, tribe, ethnicity, and nation belong to God whether they realize it or not. This prayer is an expansive one in which Paul is trying to help the Ephesians and all of us to understand how vast and great the range of God’s love and grace are – they extend well beyond the limited and often tribal reach of too many people. As one moves through the pages of the Bible, we discover the dawning awareness of the wideness of God’s mercy that extends far beyond one small group of people in the Middle East. Eugene Peterson wrote, *“Prayer is the way we work our way out of the comfortable but cramped world of self and into the spacious world of God.”* Our Creator is always trying to stretch us out into God’s larger world.

When we humbly seek the Lord in prayer, we discover the range of God’s love and concern is vaster than our own, then Paul shows that **prayer is a source of power.** Paul prays that the church will be **strengthened with power** through God’s Spirit (verse 16). God’s Spirit renews, strengthens, and gives us power for living. That power is available to everyone in the church. Paul is lifting the whole community to God in prayer and wants all of them filled with the power of God. **Experiencing fellowship with God is connected to being bound to each other.** Christians are blessed with each other -- and stuck with each other – whether we like it or not. As Snoopy, Charlie Brown's

¹ H.B. London, *Refresh, Renew, Revive*, page 44.

philosophical beagle in the Charles Schulz comic strip, "Peanuts," said: "I love humanity; it's *people* I can't stand." Our lives as Christians depend on community with each other, in all its messiness, which isn't easy at times. Prayer is a source of power that helps us stay connected to God and each other and to live as Jesus desires.

Paul prays the church will have **the power** to do something very specific, to comprehend **the love of Christ** that's beyond knowledge. As Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 8:1**, knowledge "**puffs up**," it can make us think more highly of ourselves or our opinions than we should, **but love builds up**. Praying enables us to be "**rooted and grounded in love**" (3:17). Rooted in God's love for us, prayer is an expression of our love for God. Just as the root systems of trees intertwine and reinforce one another in times of storms and stress, so in the church our love and prayers for one another help us have the power to hold fast when we might otherwise crack and fall.

Being rooted and grounded in love is necessary because Christians can be as territorial, opinionated, and critical as anyone else if not more so in some cases. Paul's prayer suggests that progress will be slow -- a root growing into a crop inching toward fruitfulness, a building grounded on a good foundation rising brick by brick, both anchored in a love that can do what knowledge cannot (verse 19). Prayer is the language of love and how do we, how should we, communicate with someone we love? Hopefully we speak lovingly, openly, specifically, and honestly. We also take time to listen to the other person's needs and concerns. **We guard our speech and ask if what we're saying is kind, truthful, and necessary. If not, maybe we shouldn't say it.** In the same way in prayer, we speak with God openly and honestly and we take time to listen for God's voice as well.

Because prayer is the language of love, **prayer is multidimensional**; it takes on **the "breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of Christ** which is always broader than our limited human love. Is our prayer life wide enough to encompass others who look, believe or think differently than we do? Is it long enough to patiently persist, is it high enough to praise God, is it deep enough to deal with profound or overwhelming need? God invites us in prayer to share the real needs and concerns of our hearts, but there are many dimensions to prayer beyond our asking for things including as Pastor David shared in January, confession, silence, and listening. If

anyone of us got to meet someone we admire greatly in a field we really enjoy whether an artist, musician, business or spiritual leader, actor, or athlete; if we were given the gift of having one hour of time with them – how much of that hour would you want to spend speaking? Probably not much, we'd rather hear from the life, wisdom, and experience of the one we admire. Yet, what do we do when we come into God's presence in prayer – how much time do we spend speaking and how much time do we spend listening? Saint Benedict wrote, ***"It is fitting for the Master to speak and to teach, but the disciple should be silent and listen."***

Paul prays in verse 17 ***"that Christ may dwell in your hearts."*** The life of Jesus was marked by loving, serving, giving, sharing, mentoring, and reaching out to others. Has praying helped you in any way to become more like Jesus? Thomas a Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*, ***"Be thou humble and peaceable, and Jesus will be with thee. Be thou quiet and devout, and Jesus will stay with thee."*** Jesus longs to dwell within us and with us always.

Then in verse 19 Paul speaks of the ***"fullness of God" which is Jesus***. If we're going to be filled with the fullness of God, we need to empty our heart and spirit of things that would crowd Jesus out. We need to make space for God in our life. Much of the *"filling," "dwelling,"* and *"glory"* language of Ephesians connects to traditions in the Hebrew Bible of **the glory of God filling the worship spaces of the tabernacle and temple. In Exodus**, the wilderness tabernacle, once completed, filled with the cloud of the divine presence (Exodus 40:34-38). In **1 Kings**, at the completion of Solomon's temple the glory of God comes down to fill the *"holy of holies"* (1 Kings 8:10-11). The prophet **Ezekiel's** vision of the new temple of a purified Israel leads to the same scene: the glory of God fills the new temple of a future restoration (Ezekiel 43:2-5). In **Ephesians**, it's the church that's envisioned as a *"dwelling place" for God.*" The apostle prays for God to *"fill"* this new *"dwelling place"* that is the people who make up the church. Paul prays **for a church filled in every dimension by God, with God, and for the glory of God.**

Prayer, as Paul models it, enlarges our vision and goes beyond our expectations. When we pray, we may be surprised by God answering in ways *"far more than all we can ask or imagine."* I suspect all of us know what's like to pray for

something and to feel that our prayer was not answered the way we hoped. I also hope though, that there have been a few times when God has blessed us beyond what we asked or imagined was possible.

Finally, prayer is for everyone in all generations. The conclusion of Paul's prayer refers to "*all generations.*" All generations can pray. Words and language may change through the generations and in our lives as we grow, but the reality of the power of prayer remains. Think about your own prayer life through the years of your life whatever your age: as a small child, as a teenager, as a young adult, as someone in middle age, or as a senior adult. Hopefully we've learned things about prayer as we've matured. While some prayers we learn as children can be used meaningfully throughout our lives, such as the Lord's Prayer, we also need to grow in our life of prayer.

Praying is not something we do only in one place in one way at one time. We can pray at home, at church, at work, at school, in the car, at the beach, wherever we are, at any time. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians to "*pray without ceasing*" or to "*pray continually*" he teaches that **true prayer is not separate from our daily life, it's a way of being.** Henri Nouwen wrote in his book *Spiritual Direction*, "**There's a difference between *reciting prayers* and *prayerfulness.***" When we come to the place of discovering that prayer is more an attitude and attentiveness toward God, and a life rather than an obligation, duty, or a badge of our spirituality, we'll discover that God is truly with us, right now and forever.

We pray with an attitude of humility. Prayer is a source of power and the language of love. Prayer is multidimensional expressing itself in a variety of ways, postures, forms, times, and places. As we pray God's Spirit helps us to become more like Jesus, enlarging our vision and acting in ways that exceed our imagination. Prayer is something we all can do no matter how young or old we may be. God only knows the impact of the prayers that brought us to faith, protected us, and empowered us to love, serve, and give. Who knows what lives will be shaped by our prayers in the generations to come?

Blessing: Ephesians 3:20-21 *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why is humility an important component of prayer?
2. What does Paul say in Ephesians 3:14-21 about prayer as a source of power?
3. What do these verses suggest is the relationship between prayer and love?
4. Has praying helped you in any way to become more like Jesus?
5. In what ways can prayer enlarge our vision and go beyond our expectations?
6. What is your response to this quote by Eugene Peterson, "*Prayer is the way we work our way out of the comfortable but cramped world of self and into the spacious world of God.*"
7. What is a step you can take regarding prayer this coming week?

Ephesians 3:1-13

3 This is the reason that I Paul am **a prisoner for Christ Jesus** for the sake of you Gentiles— 2 for surely you have already heard of **God's grace** that was given me for you, 3 and how **the mystery** was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of **the mystery of Christ**. 5 In former generations **this mystery** was not made known to humankind, as it has **now been revealed** to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of **God's grace** that was given me by the working of his **power**. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this **grace** was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of **the boundless riches of Christ**, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of **the mystery** hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities **in the heavenly places**. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. 13 I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.