

August 30, 2015

TEXT: Ephesians 3:7–21

TITLE: Praying for Abundance

When someone shares with us troubling news—news about a death in their family, a lost job, a bad medical diagnosis—a common response is for us to say, “You’re in my thoughts and prayers”; or more directly, “I’m praying for you.” Now, hopefully we will truly do what we say. We will find a quiet place to say to God, “Lord, be with my friend in her time of need.” A good prayer has two parts to it. First, it should be honest and name the concern that is on your heart. If there has been a death, it is right to pray that the family and loved ones are comforted in their time of loss. If a job has been lost, it is appropriate to pray for new and better employment. If cancer has been diagnosed, it is fine to pray for healing or a cure. If those are the things wanted, it doesn’t make any sense to be coy with God—to somehow pretend that even though I want the whole loaf of bread, I’ll only ask God for one slice of it because I’m not worthy or I don’t want to sound greedy. God knows what the desire of your heart is, so you might as well be honest in your prayers—and even if what you ask for feels impossible, feels like too much, prayer is your time to unburden yourself of the loads and worries you carry. It’s the sign of a trusting heart when you honestly, vulnerably pray exactly what you’re feeling to a God from whom you have nothing to hide.

The second part of good prayer is to ask for wisdom—the wisdom to see God’s hand and purpose in the events before you; the discernment to consider options other than what is apparent right now; the ability to be patient, to be strong amidst adversity, to have the capacity to walk by faith, not by sight. In essence, in a good prayer we pray for two things - strength and knowledge: strength to get through this time of trial and knowledge to understand that a loving God is near to us and will not leave or forsake us in our time of need.

The letter to the Ephesians was written either by the apostle Paul or someone very close to him and it was intended for the early Christian churches being formed in the cities around the Mediterranean Sea. Halfway through this letter, the writer stops and offers a prayer. Chapter 3, vs. 14—*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father [and] I pray two things:* (vs. 16) that you may be strengthened in your inner being and (vs. 18) that you may have the power to comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth of the love of Christ. Strength and knowledge. It’s a very good prayer and one worth looking at more closely.

Physical strength can be measured in many ways: by the number of push-ups you can do, the weights you can lift, the measurements of health recorded on your Fit-Bits. But the first part of this prayer talks about being strengthened in your inner being. All of us have an outer and an inner being—the physical and the emotional, the flesh and the spirit. They are intimately connected, but we are far too quick to forget how much our inner well-being affects our outer well-being.

Think about people you've known who are advanced in age but still young in their mind—the people who are curious and anxious to learn new things and off having adventures while many of their peers have slowed down, convinced that their lives are almost over. There's a verse from 2 Corinthians that I've read at countless funeral services that says, "*Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.*" No matter their outer, physical being, glimpses of a person's strong inner nature can be seen even up to shortly before his or her death. NPR reporter Scott Simon wrote about his mother's final hours and how both wisdom and humor were with her up to her end. When transitioning from life to death, it is an unavoidable fact that our bodies do not shut down easily. After one long period of restlessness, Simon tried to play some favorite music for his mother to ease her to sleep. At one point she said, "Maybe we should listen to opera. I always slept when I went there." During her last days, Simon's mother wanted to pass on memories and insights she'd gained during her long life, doing so with honesty and humor. She commented, "We've gone to bed every night since our 70s thinking, 'Maybe I won't wake up.' That's why it's hard to sleep. That's why we're cranky and impatient. But we go to sleep anyway because we've learned what's really important in life. That's why people should talk to us."¹ She had a strong inner being.

Paul prayed that the Ephesians be "strengthened in their inner being" so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith. To have Christ dwell within us is not just to have a visitor in our interior guest room. When visitors come to stay, we make space in an extra room; we show good manners and play good hosts for a limited period of time. But if someone moves in with us, we have to make changes in our life. We must re-arrange things to accommodate this new person. Our routines change. Our priorities readjust. Our responsibilities shift.² Christ dwelling within us to strengthen our inner being is an in-dwelling designed for true life, even to the end of our days. This Ephesians prayer asks that it be something rooted (like a plant) and grounded (like a building's foundation) in us and in love. If that happens, then half of this prayer—"to be strengthened in our inner being"—will be a good and life-transforming one.

The second part of Paul's prayer is that we might have the power to comprehend the abundance of Christ's love. He waxes poetic trying to describe this love. He stretches out his arms and talks about it as something with spacious breadth and length and height and depth as if it were a huge sphere totally surrounding us. He then turns philosophical and prays that we might know the love of Christ, even though in its essence, it surpasses knowledge itself. He prays that we might know something unknowable. Now, it's true that we can grasp something without fully understanding it. How many of you drive a car yet don't fully understand how it works? How many of you breathe in oxygen without totally understanding how that same air moves through our body and keeps us alive? How often do we gaze with wonder at the moon and stars and yet have no clue as to the true nature of the universe's infinite space?

Paul prays that we might be given some knowledge of this fulsome, generous, amazing love of Christ that will always surpass our human knowledge capacity. Why? So that we will trust in the power of God which is at work to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. Abundance is a word defined differently by God than by the world. How does the world think of abundance? Usually through amounts and quantities of things. Yet that is a false abundance. Years ago I read about a silly accident involving a very wealthy casino owner named Steve Wynn. He owned a valuable painting by Picasso and had just agreed to sell it for \$139 million dollars. So of course this master of abundance had to give a farewell party for his expensive work of art. Steve Wynn is not a subtle man; he's someone prone to broad gestures. Evidently while talking in front of the painting, he whacked the masterpiece with his elbow, leaving a silver dollar sized hole in the canvas. When he saw what he had done, Wynn said something like, "Thank God it was me."³

Here is a billionaire who damages a multi-million dollar painting. Amidst all that visible abundance, everything came down to little things—an elbow-sized hole in the canvas, and a self-centered response to clumsiness, "At least it was me." Everyone's focus at that moment was on small things—the painting's damage, the money lost from a ruined sale. Paul turns that restricted, worldly definition of abundance on its head. Abundance isn't about things. It's not about how much of something you have or how many zeros are printed on a price tag. Abundance is about height and depth—How high can you see and dream and hope? How deeply are you rooted and grounded in this life, in your inner being, in your trust in God who can accomplish far more than all you can ask or imagine?

The apostle Paul constantly said, "I am a servant, a slave, to the abundant, liberating gospel of Jesus Christ." His Greco-Roman world was full of false gods—deities whose whims caused human suffering and pain, fates who blindly unspooled the threads of life until they one day arbitrarily cut the cord, emperors on thrones of gold assassinated and replaced by others jealous to wear those worldly crowns. Paul denounced all these idols and told of a God, who came to earth in a Son and Savior, whose grace is made perfect in weakness, whose love and care is truly abundant. A God who frees us from fatalism and fear, and instead offers us purposeful, hopeful, grace-full life. If that message needed to be preached in Paul's day, how much more is it needed today? In our world with flawed definitions of abundance, overly reliant on oil-wealth and stock-markets—a world defending borders with walls and weapons instead of caring for those in need where they currently live—a nation like ours with its democracy damaged by politics spoiled by money and scarred by anti-immigrant, anti-science, militaristic rhetoric—don't we need Paul's gospel even more than our predecessors from 2000 years ago? Don't we need Paul's prayer today? I would say "yes." Yes, we need a good prayer—one that humbly, gratefully comes before God asking for strength for our inner being and knowledge of the things that truly matter in this life: the abundant, all-surpassing love of Christ.

Today let us offer precisely that prayer for ourselves, for one another, and for the world. Let us pray:

Of all the words we've spoken so far today, Lord, hear our prayer now. For your gospel of grace that sets us free from the slavery of fear and worldly distractions, we thank you. Now grant that our inner beings may be strengthened with your Spirit's indwelling power—rooting and grounding us in your truth. And may we gain enough knowledge to ever know your goodness and love that surpasses all earthly knowledge. And with the church eternal, may the doxology of praise be ever on our lips—to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

¹ Scott Simon, "Tweeting Mom's Goodbye," *New York Times*, March 29, 2015, p. SR 2.

² Feasting on the Word, Ephesians 3:14-21, *Pastoral Perspective*, Karen Chakoian, p. 280.

³ NPR, "A Clumsy, Costly Moment with a Picasso", October 21, 2006; also in NY Times Book review by Gail Collins, December 8, 2013.