

**Sermon File # 1307**

**Scripture Text: Ephesians 3:14-21**

**Sermon Title: *A Prayer for a Lifetime***

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## ***A Prayer for a Lifetime***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 3:14-21, as we continue our series of sermons on Paul's letter setting forth our new life in Christ and in God's New Society, his church. Two Sundays ago (This past Sunday the series was interrupted by my illness) we looked at the first 13 verses of this third chapter, wherein Paul describes the church in the purpose of God, making known the mystery of God's saving message in Christ. This mystery includes bringing together into the church both religious Jewish insiders and pagan Gentile outsiders. The first part of this 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter is actually a parenthetical statement Paul gives, interrupting his own train of thought, explaining his particular calling and role in making Christ known to the Gentile outsiders.

Verse 14 begins with a restatement of verse 1, with Paul resuming his thought, which was to offer a prayer for the Ephesians, indeed for the churches throughout Asia Minor. Our text for today is the second of Paul's two prayers in Ephesians, the first one being in 1:15-23, which we studied five weeks ago, which is Paul's prayer for the church to have insight into the glorious life we have in Christ. It seems as though Paul, when writing about the glorious life we have in Christ, is moved to fall to his knees in prayer, and continues to write to the churches, not just admonitions but prayers in their behalf. As one writer

has noted, these prayers are not just parenthetical footnotes, but are possibly even the very heart of Paul's letter (White, 127).

This second prayer, which is our text, is a lofty passage, a spiritually high summit, not unlike Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17. As one great preacher of old put it, this prayer "soars to the very Throne of God" (Maclaren, 171).

Follow as I read **Ephesians 3:14-21**.

Two Sundays ago I shared an experience as a young pastor that was influential in my life. I'll have to beg your pardon for my taking you once again "down memory lane" (Is this tendency what happens to aging preachers?), this time even further back in time. When I was a recent college graduate, preparing for two giant steps, marriage and the beginning of my seminary training, I was privileged to have a private audience with a well-known preacher. This highly esteemed preacher was the guest of my father, who had engaged him to address a pastor's conference in my home state in the US.

While in this man's hotel room, I asked him if he had any advice for me as a beginning seminarian and soon to accept my first ministry assignment. He graciously invited me to sit down and he opened the Scripture to what I suppose he had been reading that day, Psalm 84. He read the 11<sup>th</sup> verse, which says that,

"The Lord God is a sun and a shield;  
the Lord bestows favor and honor;  
no good thing does he withhold  
from those whose walk is blameless."

I've remembered those words and the prayer blessing received from this man of God to this day, over four decades ago.

Suppose you had the opportunity to have an audience with a godly spiritual leader, past or present, whose life and ministry God has used in a mighty way, such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles H Spurgeon or Mother Teresa. And then that man or woman of God were to offer you a blessing or prayer for your life. Wouldn't you be moved to remember and even to seek to live in such a way as to answer that prayer for you?

This is essentially what we have in our text for today. This is Paul's prayer for us, which is a prayer for a lifetime, one that can shape you and determine the future direction of your life. It is a prayer that was given by the great missionary and apostle to the Gentiles and writer of much of our New Testament. But also, it's a prayer expressed and written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and thus is God's authoritative and trustworthy word to us. Because it's a divinely inspired prayer, it also comes to us as a prayer of the Triune God, even of the risen Lord Jesus, who continues to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). This past year we studied the Lord's Prayer, which we call the Disciple's and the Model Prayer in Matthew's Gospel (6:9-13). What Paul prays for us in

our text is based on the way Jesus taught us to pray for ourselves and for one another.

This passage is about “A Prayer for a Lifetime,” one that will change and direct our lives in the Lord’s will and way. Note with me that the first thing included is...

### **The address (verses 14-15)**

Paul addressed his prayer...

#### *Bowing before the heavenly Father*

Traditionally the Jews prayed to God while standing, but here Paul falls to his knees, as was done in times and occasions of great urgency and distress (Guthrie, 1114), and when before a great authority and power (Ezra 9:5; Psalm 95:6; Daniel 6:10. See Hoehner, 473). Paul understood the urgency of the spiritual need of the church and also was aware of the privilege of coming before his awesome God, who also is the loving heavenly Father.

Just as Jesus taught us to pray by addressing our dear Father in the heavens (Matthew 6:9), so Paul knelt before his “Abba,” dearest Father, who is also the mighty, transcendent God of creation (Guthrie, 1115). The great prayers of the Old Testament (e.g. Nehemiah 9:5ff; Daniel 9:4ff) and the New (e.g. Acts 4:24ff) begin with an affirmation of faith in the sovereign, Almighty God who hears and answers the prayers of his people who cry to him. Only because he invites us into his presence as his redeemed children, saved by his grace, can we come to him with such freedom and confidence (Hebrews 4:14-16). The basis of all our praying is our awareness that an almighty, loving God hears us when we cry out to him and even urges us to call upon him.

In his prayer for us, Paul prayed also...

#### *Realizing we’re in his family*

In the 15<sup>th</sup> verse, Paul refers again to this amazing mystery he expounds in Chapter 2, of how Jews and Gentiles, those formerly hostile to one another, are part of the same family, with God as our Father. We all have new significance now with the same Father, which puts us all in the same family.

We cannot expect the blessings of answered prayer, either that which Paul and Jesus prayed for us or for the prayers we pray for ourselves, if we are not connected to God through faith in Christ Jesus as our heavenly Father and also to one another in reconciled relationship with each other. Jesus made this very clear in his words after the Lord’s Prayer:

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14f).

And again, contemplating Jesus' amazing promise that he will give us whatever we ask for in faith-filled praying, I read this condition:

“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins” (Mark 11:25).

This Prayer for a Lifetime assumes that we are in fellowship with God through Christ and also are in fellowship with all of God's other children. If we close our hearts against others, we've necessarily shut ourselves off from God. Paul prays for God's forgiven and forgiving people, living in fellowship with the body of Christ, the church.

And the heart of this prayer is...

### **The asking (verses 16-19)**

I think Paul is an example to us about how our prayers should come out of and be shaped and directed by Scripture, and not by the list of what we think we need. Just as Paul's prayer was directed by his divinely inspired thoughts, so should we look to God's word to find the words and thoughts we should pray for ourselves and for others. We have no authority to pray for anything outside of God's will, “which is why prayer and Bible reading should go together” (Stott, 132).

And as Paul is thinking and writing the thoughts of Scripture he asks for our...

#### *Gaining spiritual strength through the indwelling Christ (16-17)*

Paul prays with confidence that God will supply every need of ours “out of his glorious riches” (16). Jesus taught us to depend on the heavenly Father for our daily bread (Matthew 6:11), and this “bread” is more than physical, but includes Jesus himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:35). Here Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as the source of our life and our strength. Here Paul seems to be thinking of believers who are experiencing trials and are in need of God's strength and grace to sustain them (as in Philippians 4:13; See Guthrie, 1114).

Paul interchanges the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and even speaks of the indwelling Spirit as “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27). And in verse 17, Paul asks that Christ may make himself at home in our hearts, not as a temporary guest, but as the permanent Resident (Stott, 135). Jesus speaks of our relationship of absolute dependence on him as a branch remaining/abiding in the Vine, the source of our strength and of life itself (John 15:1-8).

What an amazing and encouraging thought, that the Christ of creation, the resurrection and who presides over the universe, is living in us through the Holy Spirit! And we certainly can face every situation and challenge through the one who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

As we pray for the persecuted church, we need to remember that Christ is the one who will sustain our brothers and sisters and enable them to stand firm in their faith. We must join Paul in praying that they will know Christ himself is with them and within them. We need to be rooted and established in his love (17).

Paul uses two images to describe our connection with Christ—one from agriculture (rooted) and another from architecture (grounded). We must be rooted in the deep soil of faith in Christ's love for us and also must build our lives on our confidence in his love for us and his presence within us (Lincoln, 219). What a difference this makes in our lives, when we realize that the King of Glory lives in us, and that nothing can touch us apart from his permission, and that we have access to his resurrection power and infinite strength to endure whatever trial is before us!

Paul asks also for our...

*Grasping the full measure of God and his love (18-19)*

Paul takes us even higher, it seems, as next prays that we might, "together with all the saints," grasp the full measure of God's great love for us and for one another (18). I think it's significant that Paul mentions "all the saints." We're in this spiritual life as part of the body of Christ, and our spiritual riches are dependent upon our being connected, not just with Christ, but with one another. We cut ourselves off from the riches of Christ if we dissociate with people from other social, economic, cultural or political groupings (Hoehner, 486). Favoritism stands under God's judgment and has no place in the body of Christ (James 2:1-13).

What a great picture Paul's prayer gives us of God's love: its width, length, height and depth (18)! Paul knows that the greatest possession we can have is God's love, which is broad enough to encompass all humankind; long enough to last for eternity; deep enough to reach the lowest sinner; and high enough to lift us to heaven (Stott, 137). This is God's love for us and the love he gives us and requires us to have and to express to others.

Church Father Gregory of Nyssa (c 335 – after 394) says that this verse portrays for us the four-directional "figure of the Cross" of Christ, representing the power of the Crucified Christ. His love reaches to what is above, and down to the depths of the underworld, and its length and breadth stretches outward to "the intermediate domain which is under the control of his all-governing power" (155).

Truly, as Paul says, this love of Christ for us "surpasses knowledge" (19). We've lost something of God's grace in our lives if we can ever lose the wonder that God could love us, while we were still rebellious sinners and even his enemies (Romans 5:6-11).

And Paul asks that we might "be filled to the measure of the fullness of God" (19). John Stott is right in saying these requests for us are like an ascending

staircase, going to even higher blessings, and now we are getting a bit short of breath and are becoming a bit “giddy” at the dizzying height of these amazing requests for us (139). Paul now asks that we might grow until we become like Christ himself, that we reach this perfection that Jesus points us toward in Matthew 5:48:

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Our goal is to continue, by being filled with the Spirit and under his control, to advance from one degree of glorious Christ-likeness to the next (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is the highest goal for any life. Scripture sees that as our supreme objective, to be so like God himself, as revealed to us in his Son Jesus, that our lives bring God greatest glory and we experience the deepest joy. This joy of being like Jesus and bringing glory to God is what outweighs all of life’s sorrows and makes every experience “worth it all” (2 Corinthians 4:17; Romans 8:18).

The measure of our life is becoming like Jesus. Too often we compare ourselves with others and feel inferior if we don’t reach their attainments and expectations. And also, “We like to measure ourselves by the weakest Christians that we know, and then boast, ‘Well, I’m better off than they are.’ Paul tells us that the measure is Christ, and that we cannot boast about anything (nor should we)” (Wiersbe, 88f).

Christ accepts us as we are and calls us to follow in his steps. The life he calls us to lead is the cruciform life of service in the weak power of the cross, and a “downwardly mobile” life, which is counter to this culture of “upwardly mobile” success and expectations (Nouwen, 17ff). We are called to a life of servant love, which is the only way to know and to experience the fullness of God in Christ.

I’m learning that God allows trials in our lives to redirect our focus on the way of true blessing, joy and experience with the full measure of God’s love. Sometimes we have to be reduced to God alone to realize that he’s all we truly need and that, in fact, he is enough for us to have the fullness of joy. He’s love itself, and when we have him we have all the love we need. No human relationship and no amount of friends can ever replace the deepest longing in our hearts, which is for God himself and his love, which alone fills the deepest crevices of our hearts, and reaches out to those furthest from God and us, and lifts us to the heights of his heavenly fellowship and joyous presence.

Now that I’m a grandfather once and about to become a grandfather twice (Our grandson’s second birthday is today in Chicago and our granddaughter is expected to be born in about four weeks in the Twin Cities, MN, US), something Larry Crabb wrote has especial significance to me. He related about holding his newborn grandson on his lap, looking into his eyes and realizing that little Jake’s greatest desire is for the gratification of his lesser desires, such as his physical hunger. Baby Jake doesn’t yet know a greater need and deeper passion in his life will be the filling of his hungry soul with God. And sadly, writes Crabb, many people go through life without ever

discovering the “food that could fill their souls,” trying to fill that void with temporal pleasures.

Larry Crabb says that he hopes that his little grandson grows up staying healthy, does well in school, has lots of friends, meets and marries a nice girl, “fathers beautiful kids, and leads his family into meaningful involvement in as local church. “But those are all second-order hopes. My first-order hope for Jake, “confesses Crabb, “is that he encounter God.” And that means to encounter him “no matter the cost” (173-176). If I am praying in the spirit of this Prayer for a Lifetime, I too must pray that my grandson and granddaughter will grow to want to be filled with the fullness of God, to want to know him in the fullest measure of love and joy, even at the cost of suffering trials and the shattering of their fondest dreams.

This Prayer for a Lifetime includes...

### **The assurance (verse 20)**

Verses 20 and 21 are the doxology to the first half of the epistle, which marks the end of the theological section, with the second half of the letter being the ethical and practical application. In this doxology, Paul says...

*God is able*

Paul makes it very clear that these blessings for which he prays are not simply ideals that may or may not be attainable. But in fact, this prayer is for things God himself desires for us and is more than able to give to us. God is able and willing to give us all these blessings that Paul has just described, not all the things we wish for ourselves (Guthrie, 1114), but only what he aspires for our joy and our everlasting good.

Again we are reminded of our access to the power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him on his throne as sovereign over the universe (1:19-21). This same power is available to us to give us the fullness of God’s love and joy and also to enable us to become more like Jesus. We must never settle for less than what Christ has in mind for us as we walk in step with the Spirit and allow him to produce the fruit of the Spirit in us (Galatians 5:16-25).

God is able to fill us with the fullness of his Spirit and give us the full measure of the fruit of the Spirit even when we think we are at the very end of all our human resources.

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;  
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.  
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;  
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,*

*When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

*His love has no limit; His grace has no measure;  
His pow'r has no boundary known unto men.  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!*

Annie Johnson Flint

God is not only able, but also...

*God is at work*

He is working according to his power, which means God always does his work perfectly and always finishes what he starts (Philippians 1:6). God is at work in our lives. In fact, God is at work in all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). This is a truth that at times we have to simply believe in hope "against all hope" (Romans 4:18). There are seasons in our lives when we may be spiritually dry and it seems God's presence is far away or even a lost illusion. Yet Jesus has promised to never leave us and be with us always (Matthew 28:20), and he never stops working on us and even guiding us in times when our faith is weak and our obedience is in suspension.

God is at work in our lives and also in our church. This is why we need to be linked to the body of Christ, that we might see God at work in the lives of others even when his work and presence seem dormant in our own lives. And God is always working purposefully. So, this Prayer for a Lifetime includes...

### **The aim (21)**

God's purpose is to give us his life and fullness of love and joy and this is to the end that he might be glorified. God, who has created all things and who through Christ has redeemed us and by his Spirit is renewing us and preparing us for glory, is worthy to be honored, praised and glorified. Paul's benediction reminds us that the aim of his prayer and of our lives is...

*His present glory in the church*

God is to be glorified in the church, which praises him, not only for all that he has done for us, but also for who he is. God is worthy to be praised simply because he is the perfectly holy and always loving God. The church is a reflection of his love and grace because we are a company of the redeemed, of those who, like Paul, were most unworthy of God's love, forgiveness and grace (3:8; 1 Timothy 1:12-17).

God is glorified in the church because he alone could make sinners into a holy priesthood and religious Jews and pagan Gentiles into one new person (1

Peter 2:9; Ephesians 2:15; 3:6. Such a diverse body, being so united, brings glory to God as people see something that only he can do (Mohrlang, 2003).

God is also at work through the church to bring the world to rights, to make a difference in society and in the lives of the poor and suffering. We are to seek for his righteous kingdom to come to earth and his will be done here as it's being done perfectly in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

This prayer is for God to be glorified in the church now but is also a prayer for...

*His eternal glory in Christ Jesus*

This is a Prayer for a Lifetime but is also one that has everlasting consequences. Paul wants the believers in these Asia Minor churches to bring glory to Christ now but also for all eternity. Jesus also prays for us to share his everlasting glory (John 17:24).

Paul prays that Christ will work in the believers' lives in such a way that their lives will give maximum glory to him in heaven, for all eternity. If we could only see that our present afflictions, though certainly unwelcome and unpleasant, are working for and in us an eternal weight of glory, we would be more patient during our trials (2 Corinthians 4:17).

I know I need to see and lay hold of this truth in my own life. I need grace for faith to see beyond present trials to see God's eternal design for my life. God is at work designing our lives and shaping our character in such a way that we will give maximum glory to him and pleasure to him throughout eternity. I need to submit myself to being an answer to this prayer. As David Dockery says, "Happiness is the promise of heaven...holiness is the priority here in this world" (quoted by Devine, 82).

**Conclusion:**

Maybe if I had my ministerial life to live all over again I would have asked the esteemed preacher in that hotel room to pray this prayer for me. But I didn't need for him to do so. Paul already prayed it. No, Jesus himself inspired it and Jesus is making intercession for me even now (Hebrews 7:25).

This amazing Prayer for a Lifetime can become your prayer as well as mine. Anything less and we'll sell ourselves short of the potential and blessings that God wants to give us. This must be the kind of prayer Jesus promised he would answer, because it's a prayer he gave to us (Mark 11:24).

We can pray it for ourselves and for our fellow believers. It's the kind of prayer that should be posted in our room where we have our daily quiet time of listening prayer and intercession for others. And we become answers to this prayer when we live in obedience to God's word and will and live/walk in step with the Holy Spirit, seeking to be continually filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

Let's make this Prayer for a Lifetime our own, for ourselves and for one another. I need you to pray it will be true in my life. That means I'm willing to meet the conditions for God to fill me with his love and with himself. That may require that more of me and more that I cling to must lose its grip and has to be left behind. To have such a blessed, God-glorifying life means that more of my self-centered self has to die. It may also mean that I will be disciplined and tested with further trials and given greater burdens. So, this prayer could be a costly prayer. Likely it will be costly. But then, I must trust that he gives more grace. And also, he will get more glory, forever.

**Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. If you could ask a great spiritual leader to pray for you, what requests for you would you want him to make?
2. Understanding that this prayer is "yours for the asking," i.e. is available for you to pray for yourself, how would it potentially change your life?
3. How would answering this prayer change your priorities in life? How would it alter your spiritual disciplines, such as Scripture reading, worship and prayer?
4. How has the study of this prayer changed (or how should it change) the way you involve Scripture reading in your praying?
5. What does this prayer say about the importance of our love for God and one another in experiencing the full blessings of God?
6. What do you think Paul had in mind when he spoke of the width, length, height and depth of God's love?
7. What do you think this prayer could mean to those experiencing trials and even persecution for their faith?
8. Reflect upon your willingness and readiness to experience whatever is necessary for this prayer to be answered in your life.

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