

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 31 August 2014

No. T0848

Speaker: Dr. Yannick Ford

Bible Prayers: Paul's prayers for the church

Some years ago I was introduced to an excellent book about prayer. Some of you may know the book - it is written by DA Carson, and the title of the book is *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (ISBN: 9781844745524). I can certainly recommend it - it helped me to understand prayer much better. Prayer is hard work - I am sure many of you will agree with me on that! I am fairly sure that most of us find prayer difficult at times, and we feel that we should pray more frequently and more fervently. I certainly do. As we start this new series about Bible prayers here on *Truth for Today*, I thought we would look at some of the prayers that are recorded for us in the Bible, and see what we can learn from them. The idea for this series was prompted by DA Carson's book, which opened my eyes to the need to pray more in line with Scripture.

Today we are going to look at two of the Apostle Paul's prayers that are written down for us in his letter to the Ephesians. These are in Ephesians 1:15-23, and in Ephesians 3:14-21. Let's read Ephesians 1:15-23 first of all.

"Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

Really, to understand this prayer properly, we need to read the whole of the letter to the Ephesians so that we have the proper context, but of course we don't have time to read it all aloud now! However, I would encourage you to study the epistle to the Ephesians later on as you consider these prayers.

Right at the start of his letter, Paul praises God who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings. In Ephesians 1:3 he writes, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."* It's a striking thought, well worth considering slowly and prayerfully, that God has blessed us with **every** spiritual blessing. Do I know what these blessings are? Am I taking hold of them and thanking God for them? Do they direct my choices, my goals and my aspirations? In many ways, Paul's prayer that we have just read is that the Ephesian Christians will truly know and enjoy these spiritual blessings from God. Paul starts off by saying that since he heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love to fellow Christians, he was praying that they would be given understanding so that they could know God better and so that they could grasp the extent of His blessings.

This is quite striking. When I pray, whether I'm praying for myself or for others, I often pray for their needs and their problems here on earth - their temporal needs, we might say. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this. The Apostle Paul who is praying for the Ephesians also instructed the Philippian Christians, and for them he said, *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:6-7). It is right to tell God about our problems and our needs. Peter agrees with Paul and he encourages us to cast all our care on God, because God cares for us, as Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 5:7. But this shouldn't be the whole extent of our prayers. It shouldn't be the only thing that we pray for. We need wisdom, understanding and strength to be able to get hold of the spiritual blessings that God has for us, and this is what Paul's prayer is about.

How do you feel when you read the Bible? How do you feel when you read a wonderful chapter like Ephesians 1? If you're like me, sometimes you feel really encouraged and uplifted, but other times it can all feel a bit dead - you know that what you are reading is tremendous and important, and yet the words just don't seem to enter in. We need God's help when we read His Word. We know from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that we need the Holy Spirit to enable us to understand the things of God. When you have time, have a look at 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 where Paul

explains this. Isn't it a wonderful privilege that we have the patient, gracious Holy Spirit dwelling in us, who can explain the things of God to us in ways that we can understand!

Paul really wanted the Ephesian Christians to properly understand what he had written to them, so he prays that God the Father will give them *"the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him"* (Ephesians 1:17) He wants their understanding to be enlightened, and he wants them to realise the tremendous power of God, who will truly bring about all the wonderful things that He has promised. When we read the Bible and we consider God's blessings and God's promises, we need the same things - we need God to help us understand, we need our understanding to be enlightened, and we need to know, believe and trust in God's great power. We need to know God better.

Now, a question we should ask ourselves is, Do I want to know God better? Is this the focus of my prayers? I suppose that because we live in such a performance-oriented world, we are very apt to think of God as someone who rewards performance, and someone who expects this and that from us. Of course, service for God is an important part of Christian life, and indeed in Ephesians 2:10, we read that God has prepared some good works for each one of us, that He wants us to walk in. But God wants us to **know** Him. He wants us to enjoy our relationship with Him. God the Father gave His only Son for that. Our Lord Jesus gave His life for that. The Holy Spirit has been patiently working in this sinful world for over two thousand years for that. So that should be our aim too!

If you look at Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23, it's about 200 words in the English translation of the New King James Version, which was the one I read earlier. It doesn't take long to read out, yet what an amazing content there is in it! Just while we're on this subject, none of the prayers written down in the Bible take very long to read, even the longest ones! I remember when I was a boy we used to spend holidays with my grandparents in Switzerland over the summer, as that is where my mother came from. The church there had a prayer meeting on a weekday evening, and it used to seem like a long time to me! If I had been concentrating more I expect it would have seemed like a shorter time! But prayers don't need to be long. Paul's prayer here is quite short, but it is a wonderful prayer. Prayers don't need to be long, as I have just said, but it is good if they are frequent. Paul says at the start that he does not cease to give thanks for the Ephesian Christians (Ephesians 1:16). It's good to pray regularly.

I said that the prayer is about 200 words when written in our English translation. About half of those words are about God's mighty power in which He raised Christ from the dead and exalted Him to glory. Don Carson makes a very uplifting point in his book - he suggests that this example of God's power is chosen because it is perhaps the most glorious display of His power. As Don Carson says, since God is all powerful, we can't really think in terms of easy or difficult things for God to do. But the truth of Christ's resurrection and exaltation is used to illustrate God's power in its most glorious aspect, and this is the power of God that is working for us!

Let's now look at the second prayer in Ephesians, the one in Ephesians 3:14-21. I will read it out, again from the New King James Version.

"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Here again we have a short but wonderful prayer, and once again, Paul is praying for the Ephesians' spiritual development. Like I said earlier, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't pray for temporal, physical things. Remember that Paul instructs the Philippians to bring everything to God in prayer. But our spiritual development is very important, because it links us with what is true, and what is eternal. I like to think of the balance we see in the Apostle John's prayer request in 3 John 2, *"Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers."* John knows that Gaius, to whom he is writing, is doing well spiritually - his soul is prospering. John prays that he will do well physically, too - he is praying that Gaius will be in good health.

Going back to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul is praying that God the Father will strengthen the Ephesian Christians in their inner man through the Holy Spirit, with the aim that Christ will dwell in their hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17). The Bible teaches us that the Holy Spirit **dwells** in us - we have that same word used in James 4:5. It is one of God's wonderful gifts, that we have the Holy Spirit if we trust in Christ's work, as Ephesians 1:13 tells us.

Here in Paul's prayer, Paul is asking that God the Father will strengthen us by the Spirit so that **Christ** can dwell in our hearts (Ephesians 3:17). This is in fact one of the aims of the Holy Spirit - He wants to attract and attach our hearts to Christ. In John 16, the Lord Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit and taught His disciples about Him. In John 16:14 He said, *"He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you."* If I can put it this way, the Holy Spirit is

incredibly unselfish. He dwells in our hearts, not really to draw attention to Himself, but rather to tell us about Christ. Indeed, it has struck me how there is what you might call a loving "others-centredness" within the Trinity. The Father loves the Son, and the Father's plans are for His Son's glory. The Son loves the Father, and He loves His people. Jesus said of Himself that He always did that which pleased the Father. And as I have mentioned, the Holy Spirit unselfishly seeks to attract our hearts to Christ.

Paul also prays that the Ephesians will be "*rooted and grounded in love*" (Ephesians 3:17). He is using two kinds of illustration here, one about roots from the world of plants, and one about being grounded like a house on its foundations. Some years ago I needed to remove a small bush from our garden as I wanted to prepare a base for a shed. The bush was well rooted and it was pretty difficult to remove! I had to do fair amount of digging around to remove it fully.

A few weeks ago I spoke about God's work in us and for us on *Truth for Today*, and I mentioned that I had once heard a preacher who had said that he had really moved on in his Christian life when he stopped worrying about his love for God, and started to think about God's love for him. Of course we should be concerned about our response to God, but it is true that as we focus on His incredible love for us, we will become well rooted and grounded in love. The first three chapters of Ephesians are full of the wonderful things that God has done for us, and carefully considering these will help us to become "*rooted and grounded*", as Paul prays.

Paul prays that, together with all believers, the Ephesian Christians will be able to understand the width and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge (Ephesians 3:18-19). The width and length and depth and height of what? Many take it to mean the width and length and depth and height of Christ's love, although some think it refers to all of God's wonderful plans outlined in Ephesians 1-3, which of course includes Christ's love. Either way, Paul wanted the Christians to grasp hold of the extent of God's love, and he uses the metaphor of measuring it up. This illustration of measuring is seen elsewhere in the Bible, too. For example, if you look at the description of the heavenly city in Revelation 21, there is an angel with a golden measuring rod who measures the city (Revelation 21:15-17). There is a similar thought in Ezekiel 40, where the new temple of the millennium is measured up. You could also think about Psalm 48:12-13: "*Walk about Zion, and go all around her. Count her towers; mark well her bulwarks; consider her palaces; that you may tell it to the generation following.*" In all of these illustrations there is the idea of carefully and properly considering something, so that we become very well acquainted with it.

We would normally think about width and length and height as the three dimensions of measurement, but Paul mentions width and length and depth and height. No doubt this is intended to convey the tremendous extent of God's love:

- the **lengths** to which God has gone in His loving plans,
- the **width** of His love that is available for all men and women throughout all ages,
- the **depth** of sorrows to which Christ went so that we could enjoy the forgiveness and love of God, and
- the **height** to which we have been raised because of Christ's work.

Paul closes his prayer with these words: "*Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen*" (Ephesians 3:20-21). Paul has asked for some great things in his prayer, but he knows a great God with great power who can certainly answer! The choice of words here is calculated to give us confidence - God is **able**, He is able to do **exceedingly abundantly above**, and it is exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask, and indeed more than that - even above all that we think!

Let's briefly recap what we have learnt from these two prayers in Ephesians. Both prayers relate to spiritual development, and both prayers ask for help to fully understand the great blessings that God has for us. Both prayers also confidently expect an answer through the great power of God! In the first prayer, Paul prays for the eyes of the understanding being enlightened (Ephesians 1:18), and in the second prayer, that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17). There is the need to be enlightened, to understand the wonderful truths of the gospel, and then there is the result that we should be attracted to, and attached to our Lord Jesus. These are great subjects to pray about. Is that the scope of my prayers? We can learn a good deal from the way the Apostle Paul prayed.

Let's finish off with a thought from the Gospels. In Luke 11:1, we read, "*Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.'*" The disciples had seen the Lord Jesus at prayer, and they wanted Him to teach them how they should pray. As we can see if we keep reading in Luke 11, the Lord did teach them about prayer. We could say that He, through the Holy Spirit, continues to teach us to pray through the words of Scripture. Thus, these prayers in Paul's letter to the Ephesians teach us to pray. If we go back to Luke 11, we'll see that the Lord Jesus says in Luke 11:10-11, "*So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to*

you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." God wants to answer prayer. We have been given good examples of prayer in the Bible, so let's be encouraged to pray along the lines that we see in Paul's prayers in Ephesians. God is able to answer us, as we have seen, and He is willing to do so. It would be great to pray for these things for each other and for ourselves, and to see the blessing of God in answer to these things! *"Lord, teach us to pray."*

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.