

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Epistle to the Ephesians: Ephesians 3:14-21 - The Second Prayer

I like the story of the little girl who, when challenged "How big is your God?" replied, "He is so big that the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, and He is so small that He can come right down into my heart".

Paul's two prayers

Paul, it is believed, wrote this letter to the Ephesian Christians from his prison cell at Rome. There are two prayers in this letter. It is noteworthy that neither prayer is concerned with Paul's immediate needs. No, his concern is for the spiritual growth and blessing of these Ephesian Christians. No doubt, some of them had come to faith in Christ as a result of his own missionary service in that city some years earlier. It's always good to be able to put others' needs before our own!

The first prayer is in Ephesians 1:15-22 and was dealt with in an earlier broadcast. That prayer flowed out of Paul's burst of praise in Ephesians 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ". So in Ephesians 1:17, Paul prays "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him." That prayer is a prayer for **illumination**. Paul longs for the Ephesians to appreciate the greatness of their spiritual blessings in Christ.

His second prayer is addressed to the Father and is a prayer for **indwelling**. At the heart of that prayer lie the words: "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" (Ephesians 3:17). After this broadcast, take time, carefully and prayerfully to read it through. You will find it in Ephesians 3:14-21.

In the beginning of creation, we read, "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). In his first prayer, then, Paul asks that this same God would flood the understanding of the Ephesians with His spiritual light. The second prayer has to do with understanding within the Christian family and so is addressed to "the Father ... of whom every family in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14-15).

God in Eden

Let's focus in, then, on the heart of this second prayer, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" (Ephesians 3:17). It is interesting to look back at the dwelling places of God in Scripture. In Eden, Adam and Eve "heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8). It would seem that in those early days of man's innocence, God found His delight in being with Adam and Eve, there in the garden. It was not long before sin came in and spoilt that communion (Genesis 3:1-7). Adam and Eve were put out of the garden. God could no longer fellowship with them (Genesis 3:24). In the intervening years, God spoke, and sometimes appeared, to the patriarchs, Noah (Genesis 6:1-9:29), Abraham (Genesis 11:26-25:10) and Jacob (Genesis 25:26-50:14). But there was no dwelling place for Him on the earth.

God in the tabernacle and the temple

After the Israelites had been redeemed from Egypt, God spoke to Moses, "Speak unto the children of Israel ... let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:2, 8). In the Tabernacle, God dwelt among His people during their wilderness wanderings and their occupation of the Promised Land. Subsequently, King Solomon built a more permanent dwelling place for God, the Temple (1 Kings 5-8). Yet listen to his prayer at the dedication of that magnificent building: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?" (1 Kings 8:27)

In both the Tabernacle and the Temple, God was shut off from the people by a thick curtain, the veil. How wonderful, then, that when the Lord Jesus came, John can write, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). When Jesus died at Calvary, the veil of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38). None could doubt

that God had done it! Because of Jesus' sacrificial death for our sins, God could now come out to men in blessing. He would now dwell with them in a far closer relationship than had ever been known before - even in Eden!

God in the church and the individual

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul highlights two complementary aspects of that dwelling. First of all, the Church, collectively, is seen as the dwelling place of God. "Jesus Christ ... in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:20-22). Paul's focus, in his second prayer, is on the fact that Christ comes to indwell individually those who belong to Him. All Christians, together forming the Church, make up a collective dwelling place of God. But each individual Christian has the great privilege of being a dwelling place for the Son of God! Perhaps this Christmastime, you sang those lovely words from Phillip Brooks' carol:

*"How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him,
Still the dear Christ enters in."*

How often we are confronted by the message, "A dog is not just for Christmas". It's far more important, and far more wonderful, to stress that Christ is not just for Christmas. He wants to come and indwell each of our hearts, not only this Christmastime, but for 365 days a year! With Christ dwelling in our hearts, every day is Christmas!

Luke's words describing that first Christmas time are particularly moving: "And [Mary] brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Later on, there was still no room as Joseph was forced to take Mary and the infant Jesus and flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-21). John sums up man's attitude to the Lord Jesus: "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:11-12). May the indwelling Christ have room in, and fill, each of our hearts.

Control

I enjoy going to stay with family and friends. I would find it very strange if, on my arrival, I was greeted with the words, "Welcome! This is your room. Please stay in it. Don't come into any other room unless you are asked". That would be a funny sort of welcome! I would have to ask myself if I could really continue to stay there. Yet, sadly, some of us treat the Lord Jesus in just that way. Yes, we want Him to come into our lives as Saviour. We need our sins forgiven and we want to be assured of a place in heaven. But there are areas of our lives which we refuse to surrender to Him, areas which we want to keep firmly under our own control. It may be our business life, our friendships, our leisure time. But Jesus wants to come into our lives not only as Saviour, but as Lord. He wants to be in control of every area of our lives.

Strengthening

Perhaps that's why Paul prefaces his prayer with the words, "I bow my knees unto the Father ... that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man" (Ephesians 3:14-16). Here is a prayer for **strengthening**. Why all this emphasis upon strengthening for what seems such a simple matter as Christ dwelling in the heart? We need such strengthening simply because the Devil will use all his wiles (see Ephesians 6:11), and bring all his power to bear, to stop us surrendering ourselves completely to the indwelling Christ, to His Lordship over every area of our lives.

The Lord Jesus could say of the Devil, "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me" - or, hath no inch of territory in my life (John 14:30). At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the Devil had tempted Him, but was totally unable to find a place in Jesus' life (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13). The Lord Jesus, having gone about for three years doing good, and now with Calvary before Him, can still declare that Satan has no inch of territory in His life. Why? Because Jesus' heart was set on doing His Father's will. "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work", He could say (John 4:34). Just as the Father filled His heart, so now the Lord Jesus wants to fill our hearts, to be Lord of every area of our lives. We need the strengthening of the Holy Spirit for that.

Learning

But there are some important consequences which flow from Christ dwelling in the heart. Paul goes on to pray: “that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:17-19). Here is a prayer for **learning**.

Rooted and Grounded in love

Notice first the conditions for this learning: “rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17). “Rooted” suggests the idea of a tree, whose roots lie deep under the ground. In that way, the tree is able to withstand gale force winds. “Grounded” suggests a building anchored on a sure foundation. Jesus reminds us of this in his parable of the wise man and the foolish man: “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the wind blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock” (Matthew 7:24-25). All this is “in love” - love for Christ, love for His people. When Christ indwells the heart, “...the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (Romans 5:5).

With all the saints

In this atmosphere of love, then, we are “to comprehend with all saints” (Ephesians 3:18). Daily personal Bible study and prayer, walking with the Lord, learning of Him, are vital parts of the life of every individual believer. But this verse suggests that there are things which God wants us to learn in fellowship with other believers. We are the poorer if we fail to meet with fellow believers. God wants His people to be together. But make sure that when you come together with fellow believers, part of the time is spent in reading God’s word, so learning together from it. The early Christians knew the blessing of this: “They continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine [that is, teaching] and fellowship...” (Acts 2:42).

Four Dimensional

What is “...the breadth, and length, and depth, and height...” (Ephesians 3:188) It is, perhaps, better to regard this statement as an unfinished sentence. So often in his epistles, as the wonder of the things Paul is writing about flood into his soul, he is forced to pause and think about them. Very often, the pause is followed by an outburst of praise to God (see Romans 11:32-36). In Ephesians 3, Paul has been writing about God’s eternal purpose (see Ephesians 3:11). It seems likely, then, that these four dimensions - breadth, length, depth, and height - are related to that purpose. Here, certainly, is a theme which transcends our conventional three-dimensional world!

Passing Knowledge

The Apostle continues, “And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19). Knowledge of the Lord Jesus was never a static thing with Paul. On the road to Damascus, Paul first emerged from his spiritual darkness and death into the light and life which are Christ’s. His first question, “Who art thou, Lord?” (Acts 9:5) marks his first, faltering steps on a spiritual journey which would last a lifetime. From that day on, his whole life would be spent in an ever-deepening knowledge of his Master, and service for that Master. And almost at the end of that journey, from a prison cell in Rome, he would still pray, “... Christ - that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings” (Philippians 3:9-10).

The fulness of God

To know something “which passeth knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19) may seem paradoxical to the man in the street. There are, perhaps, subjects which we learned at school about which we can claim, “I know all there is to be known about that”. But that claim can never be made about the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ and His wonderful love. Here is a theme which, quite properly, will occupy the Christian for a lifetime. Here is a subject to be learned, not from books, but from day-by-day personal acquaintance with the Lord Jesus. Those who, like Paul, have discovered that “... the Son of God ... loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20) will gladly confess that here is a theme, indeed, “which passeth knowledge”.

But notice, now, the consequence of this acquaintance with the love of Christ: “that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). Here is another mind-boggling part of Paul’s prayer. Yet he prays for it as a practical reality to be worked out in the lives of these Ephesian Christians, and in our lives, too. Paul could write to the Colossians, “for in him [that is, the Lord Jesus] all the fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19, JN Darby Translation). To look at Jesus, His love for people, His teachings, His miracles, His glory which could not be hidden at times, is to see that fullness of the Godhead.

The consequence, then, of Christ dwelling in the heart must necessarily open up the possibility of being filled with that same fullness of God - however poorly, in practice, we may realise it. We come back to the question which we raised earlier. I may have invited Christ into my heart as my Saviour, but have I opened up every part of my life to His Lordship? Only as I am emptied of self, can I begin to be filled with this fullness of God! Just as God was in Christ, so Christ would be in each one of us. As His love reached out to others when He was here, so His love can be ministered through us to others today. He brings with Him all the resources of divine grace and strength we may need.

Faced with the wonder of all these things, Paul brings his prayer to an end with another of his moving doxologies. We cannot do better, as we come to the end of this talk, than make his words, in verses 20-21, our prayer, too: "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

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