

Reverend Tim Haughton Sermon July 24, 2022

Paul's pray for the church at Ephesus and for you

Today I'll pray the prayer Paul prays as much for us as for the Ephesian church.

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

We are standing on Holy Ground

Moving Paul to drop to his knees in awe and wonder.

Here we are being permitted to look through parted curtains into the holiest place of the Christian life. (Moule)

Many moments preparing this sermon – eyes glistening with tears – I fought the urge not to preach for fear of diminishing the glory – the beauty – the grandeur

Just what drops Paul to his knees? Just what does he want us with him to behold?

Paul was a faithful Jew – so throughout his life - three times a year - he would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the temple – the temple - the center piece of Jewish worship – where heaven and earth met – where the Shekinah glory of God descended – but when one approached - every sign and symbol would cry out – no access – no entry - tremble in fear – trespassers will be prosecuted.

Upon his approach - Paul would walk through the court of the gentiles – outside the temple walls – surrounded by a 4 ½ foot barricade – the dividing wall - at regular intervals – signage posted - “no foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”

As a Jew Paul could pass through – mount the fourteen steps – through the gate in the wall – to enter the woman’s court – yes a Jewish woman could get closer than a gentile – but no further – Paul - a man -could come closer still – into the men’s court – but that was as close as he could get – further access was barred – beyond - was the court of the priests – and then right in the center - the holy of holies – where the presence of God – the Shekinah glory dwelt - only the high priest had access – one day a year – day of atonement – bells on his robes – a rope around his waist – so that if he didn’t offer the sacrifice for sin in the right manner – with the right heart – and the holiness of God consumed him – and the bells stopped jingling - they could bring his body out by the rope – every sign and symbol cried out – no access – no entry - tremble in fear – trespassers will be prosecuted – everywhere you looked divisions were cemented – given spiritual significance – division between priest / commoner - man / woman – Jew / Gentile.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians – with this picture in the background – Paul has been revelling – glorying – worshipping in light of what Jesus has done – in Jesus you have access – in Jesus the God who burns with holy fire is the God you can call Abba Father – In Jesus the dividing walls have been brought down – all welcomed in – Jew / Gentile – man / woman – slave / free – priest / commoner – in Jesus we have been ushered into the very presence of the living God – into the holy of holies – and if that were not glorious enough - in Jesus the living God takes up residence in you – you are the temple of the living God.

That’s the truth the brings Paul to his knees – that is the holy ground on which we tread – this is what sparks Paul to pray – as much a prayer for us as for the Ephesian church.

And just what is he praying for? And just how will such a prayer be answered? And just where do we go from here? What – How – Where

So first what is he praying for?

In some ways the prayer is a bit odd because he is praying for things like – that Christ would dwell in our hearts – that we would be filled with the fullness of God – things that he says are already true of us in Jesus – it would be like us praying for a sunny day on a sunny day – why would you pray for something that is already true? – because Paul wants us to experience what is true – to feel it – to taste it – to be flooded with it – why would he need to pray for this? Because experiencing these truths is not a forgone conclusion – an experience of this is something that must be pursued in prayer.

Now I want us to notice how trinitarian the prayer is – Paul names Father – Son – Spirit – trinity - he is opening us up to the nature of the experience he is praying for.

Christians have a very unique perspective on the nature of God – arising from the scriptures – followers of Jesus believe that at the center of the universe is a relationship – that God is one being who exists eternally as three persons – father son Spirit – the trinity means that God is in essence relational.

What does that relationship look like? well Jesus in his prayer in our gospel reading gives us a window into that – the son glorifies the father – the father glorifies the son – What does that mean? well to glorify means to praise - to enjoy - to delight in.

In his book - the reason for God – Tim Keller – says the inner life of the trinity is characterized by mutual self-giving love – as each person of the trinity moves around the other two – orbits around the others – pouring love – delight – adoration – into the other – the early church had a word for this – perichoresis – within it is our word choreography – they were picturing a beautiful dance of love – adoration - enjoyment - delight within the relationship that is at the center of the universe.

This is the only way we can say that eternally God is love – right – because if God did not exist as a relationship - we could only say that God is love after he creates something to love – no - for as Augustine put it – God is at once lover – beloved - and love itself – God is the one that loves – that one that is loved – and the one who is love.

Now when you read the scriptures – you will find these commands of God – inviting us to love him – delight in him – glorify him – worship him – orbit our lives around him - and some people reflect back – how selfish – how self-centered of God – that he would want that of us – that he would need that of us – but he doesn't need that – for all eternity within himself – the members of the trinity have been loving – adoring – delighting – glorifying – orbiting - worshipping.

He commands those things of us – not for his sake – but for our sake – that we would know joy – that we would know love – that we would know delight – that we would know Him.

Here then is the good news of Jesus – writes Darryl Johnson - the God who is love draws near to me – a sinful – mere mortal – to draw me near to himself – in order to draw me within the circle of lover – beloved – and love itself - to become a co-lover with God. This is the very reason for my existence - and for yours – and for every other person who lives or has ever lived on this planet.

Do you know that that is the very purpose of our worship – the very reason we gather – to participate in the life of the trinity – to be caught up into the adoring – delighting – glorifying - loving relationship that is God – as James Torrance put it - worship is participating through the Spirit in the son’s relationship with the father.

And Paul prays that we would experience that – taste that – feel that – encounter that love out of which we were made – for which we were made – and to which Jesus has rescued us.

Paul’s prayer was answered in the life of Blaise Pascal – the French mathematician and philosopher - when he died they found something sown into his jacket lining – it was a journal entry – where he wrote of a spiritual experience – it read – in the year of grace 1654 – Monday 23 November – from about half past ten in the evening until about half an hour after midnight – FIRE – FIRE - god of Abraham – God of Issac and Jacob - not of the philosophers and of the learned – certainty – joy – certainty – emotion – sight – joy joy joy – tears of joy – my God never leave me – let me not be separated from you.

Paul’s prayer was answered in the life of Dwight Moody – minister from Chicago in the late nineteenth century – came to NY – he said – one day – in the city of NY York – O what a day – I cannot describe it – I seldom refer to it – it is almost too sacred an experience to name – I can only say that God revealed Himself to me – I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay his hand – his love was so overwhelming I had to ask him to stop.

Paul’s prayer was answered in the life of Teresa of Avila – she talks about it in a similar way – she was praying – all of a sudden the consolation – the sweetness – the light – she said - this prayer was a glorious foolishness – a heavenly madness – I was bewildered and inebriated in his love – my soul desired to cry out and was beside itself – It could not bear so much joy.

Paul prayed for them – he prays for you and for me – that we would be drawn up into the life of the trinity – that we would experience – feel – taste – Paul prays that we would have ever deepening experience of that love.

That is what Paul prays for – but how does he envision such a prayer being answered? Power – the power that raised Jesus from the dead – power in accordance to the riches of God’s glory – power through his Spirit – power to be strengthened in your inner being – power so that Christ would dwell in your hearts

Now we often think of heart as the seed of our emotions – but when Paul uses that word it is synonymous with your inner being – heart is the root of your personality – the drive shaft of our very existence – the operating system of the way we navigate the world – it is the mixture of your feelings – intellect – will.

Paul is praying that the power of the Spirit be released into your life such that everything that makes you you would be flooded with the love of God.

It is to say if the love of God has emotionally lifted you up but hasn't yet effected the way you live – it hasn't yet touched your heart – it is to say if you get excited about his love intellectually but doesn't impact the way you live or feel - then it hasn't yet touched your heart – if Christianity is something you do because it's meant to be done – but it doesn't hit your mind or flood your emotions – it hasn't yet hit your heart.

Once it hits your heart – Paul prays that you would mine it's depths – that you would know the breadth of his love – wide enough to cover all people – yes even that person - that you would know the depth of his love – deep enough to reach into the deepest darkest recesses of the human heart – no one and nothing beyond his love – that you would know the length of his love – that you will be in Jesus caught up in his love for eternity – that you would know the height of his love – high enough to exalt you to the heavens.

Frank Lehman was a California businessman who at the beginning of the last century lost everything – went to packing oranges and lemons to make ends meet – one night he went to a church service and was so moved by the love of God that he couldn't sleep – the next day he began to ponder lyrics to a hymn revelling in God's love – when he wrote them down he had only two stanzas and any song worth it's weight needed three – he remembered a post card he once received – of a poem that had been discovered written on the wall of a prison some 200 years before – he rummaged through his old correspondence and found it – the poem miraculously fit perfectly with the meter and melody of his hymn – the poem read...

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

Even in Lehman's loss and poverty – even in the anonymous prisoner's lot – the love of God held a richness - a freedom that lifted hearts to the heavens.

Paul is praying for you - that the power of the Spirit be released into your life such that everything that makes you you would be flooded with the fullness the richness of God's love

This prayer is the turning point of the letter – where Paul moves from theology to praxis – as if to say - to the degree that the love of God rests upon your heart will be the degree to which you live in keeping with the new creation that God is bringing in Jesus – the more you taste the love of God for the world – the more you will love the world that God has made – the more you rest in the love that crossed infinite barriers to meet you – you will cross barriers to meet and love the other - William Barclay puts it this way - we need power to know this love – so that we can bear with people that their unpleasantness and maliciousness will never drives us to despair, that their folly will never drive us to irritation and that their unloveliness will never altar our love.

Paul uses two images to describe this way of being in the world – rooted and grounded in love - one image agricultural – rooted in love – the other architectural – grounded in love – as you are rooted in the love of God for you – the more you draw on his love - the more the fruit of your life will resemble his love.

Not only rooted in his love – but grounded in it – our sure foundation built upon it – that no matter what life brings our way – no matter what losses we face – sorrows we encounter – pains we bear – our confidence in his love will never waver – never be shaken.

Bring it on Lord – come into our lives with power that we might know your love – be rooted and grounded in it – that your love would flood every molecule of our being. Bring it on Lord – come in power.

But now Lastly – Where do we go from here?

While it would be quite fair to end the sermon here – trusting that this is the power of the Spirit at work in you – but that does not mean we cannot participate in that work - there are I think three quick movements Paul invites us to.

First – pray – yearn for such a taste of his love – having tasted it – yearn for more – join Paul in his prayer.

Second – wrestle it down – pin his love to the mat

When Paul prays that we would comprehend or grasp his love – he uses a word that means wrestle – to jump on somebody – overpower them – and pin them to the ground.

He's saying the Spirit is giving you power to wrestle down God's love – pin his love to the mat.

The psalms give us plenty of examples of this – where the psalmists are wrestling with the deep currents and movements of their hearts – and in the midst of it they take a hold of God's steadfast love take it in their arms – pin it down – press it in.

Some of you may now be dealing with guilt – you've done something for which you wouldn't want anyone else to know – that guilt keeps you from fully accepting the love of God for you – keeps you from going where he calls you – for you feel unworthy – wrestle his love down into that guilt – pin it to the mat - his love is deeper still.

Some you right now are dealing with bitterness – anger – resentment – wrestle his love down into that place in your heart – his love is broad enough to include even that person – ask for his love of them to be recreated in you – so that your bitterness – anger - resentment don't end up consuming you.

Some of you right now are dealing with anxiety – despair – hopelessness – wrestle his love down into that place in your heart – his love is long enough to reach into eternity – his love has powerful purpose to make everything new in you and through you – wrestle it down – pin his love to the mat.

Third – we need community - Paul prays that we would grasp with all the saints – we don't often share with one another what we are sensing from God – that's private we think – the other might wonder why God is not doing this for them – we think – but God gives us such tastes – such encounters with his love – not just for our sake – but for the sake of all of us – may we grasp his love together.

Where do we go from here? Pray – yearn for a taste of his love – wrestle his love down – pin it to the mat – share it with others – that we would grasp together.

Here we stand on holy ground.

Moving Paul to drop to his knees in awe and wonder.

Here we are being permitted to look through parted curtains into the holiest place of the Christian life.

At the beginning of Jesus' prayer from John 17 – the son says to his Father – the hour has come – glorify your son - that the son may glorify you.

The hour has come - we are about to witness the glory of the triune God – and what is that glory? The cross – for every time that Jesus in John speaks of the hour – he is referring to his death – a death upon a cross – audacious no? – to say there – there at the cross – that grotesque Roman tool of torture, death and shame - we see the glory – the glory of Jesus – the glory of the Father – the glory of the triune God – how can we say such a thing?

Well - what do we see at the cross – we see the triune God centering his being on you – focussing all of his love on you – orbiting around you – finding his joy in you - for at the cross every barrier is removed – at the very moment of his death the temple curtain to the holy of holies – 60 ft tall – 30 feet wide – a foot thick - was torn in two from top to bottom – there at the cross you and I are invited in – into the very life of the trinity – to participate in the eternal relationship of God – delighting – enjoying – worshiping – loving – and Paul is praying that we would taste – experience – feel - that glorious reality.

And as glorious as that prayer is – Paul is moved further still - to doxology.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or imagine – more even than this – according to the power at work within us – to him - to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen? Amen.