

PAUL AT PRAYER

Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul returns to his line of thought broken off in 3:1 by his digression into the nature of his ministry (2-13). He returns to his earlier words, “For this reason...” (14) He is referring back to his comments on the salvation and privileges described in chapter 2 and in many ways the prayer recorded in these verses is an expansion and continuation of his prayer in 1:15ff, and picks up on many of the themes touched on there, and in the opening section of the letter. (See, for example, the focus on love (1:4), glory (1:6, 12, 14) and the Spirit (1:13f).) This prayer (3:16-19) and its accompanying doxology (20f) are thoroughly God centred and strongly Trinitarian. Note how Paul prays for the power of the Spirit (16), the love of Christ (17) and the fullness of God (19). Real prayer, that is effective, world-changing, heart-warming prayer rises out of good theology as well as a personal gratitude for what God has done.

This passage is in three parts. The first (14f) gives the reason and basis for Paul’s prayer. The second part, the prayer itself, falls into two petitions (16-17a; 17b-19). The final part (20f) is a song of praise that naturally flows out of the prayer.

Paul explains that his prayer is to ‘the Father’ (14). Addressing God as ‘Father’ was unusual in New Testament times. It was something that Jesus taught, but was not common practice. But Paul makes a further point, for just as in Roman society at that time the father was the head of the family, and gave his name to it, so God is the head of his family and gives his name to all. A small technical point here – the Greek wording in the first part of 15 is odd. In classical terms it is bad grammar and this has made it difficult to agree a correct translation. You will see in your NIV, assuming you are using the old 1984 version, that it speaks of ‘the whole family’. Most other translations, and the revised 2011 NIV, refer to “every family”. I want to stick with “the whole family”, not because I’m an expert in New Testament or classical Greek, but because it best fits Paul’s overall thinking in this letter. When he speaks of the whole family he is reminding us that the walls that once divided

us have been broken down, so that we are now one family. And as one family, whether here on earth or praising him in heaven, we share a special unity. The difference is, I know, a matter of emphasis rather than substance, but an important one, nevertheless.

Paul makes two requests of God. Both begin simply, “I pray that...” (16, 17). Both requests have a common aim, that the Ephesians will gain a deeper intimacy with Christ, of his presence, his power and, above all, his love. All else, and Paul has much of a practical nature to remark on in the second half of this letter, which is about to begin, will fall into place. Two key words that recur throughout this prayer are ‘power’ and ‘love’. Both may be thought of as action words. They are not the only words that can be used to summarise our faith (others include grace, truth, faith, hope, peace) but here Paul emphasises the need for outward action rather than inner confidence. That is not to say one is more important than the other, only that this is what the Ephesians needed to hear at that time.

The song of praise (20f) brings to a conclusion not only Paul’s prayer, but the first half of the letter. It grows straight out of the preceding prayer. Paul’s prayer is that they may be strengthened, his praise is that God is powerfully at work in them. He prays that God will meet their needs out of the riches of his glory, his praise is that God is able to accomplish abundantly more than we can ask or imagine. He prays that the Ephesians will know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that they may be filled with the fullness of God, his praise is that the church shows the glory of Christ Jesus in all generations. In short, Paul praises God that he has already answered his prayer. How can he be so certain that his prayers will be answered? Although he doesn’t use the expression, all of Paul’s prayer is “in Jesus name”. That is, he is praying just as Jesus prayer, and he knows that Jesus himself has promised that, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” (John 14:13f)

So in these few verses we have a master class on prayer. Prayer grows out of both good theology and personal experience. These two are foundational. Without good theology it is difficult, if not impossible, to pray “in Jesus name”. By good theology I do not mean complete theology. It is not necessary to know all the answers before we can pray effectively, but dubious theology easily results in dubious, and subsequently unanswered,

prayer. But nor does knowledge alone guarantee effective prayer (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 13). Alongside knowledge *about* Jesus we have to know him. Again, Paul makes it clear that he does not mean we can't pray with confidence until we know all there is to know, for he surpasses that sort of knowledge. But we can make a start.

Christ centred prayer results in Christ centred praise. Paul has declared the mystery – the glory of God, fully revealed in Jesus, to be appropriated by the whole church, and to be lived out in the life of every believer so that the whole of creation may be brought into the harmonious orbit of Christ's love. He has prayed that God will bestow blessings that transcend our knowledge, and he is confident that these blessings will be granted. How can he not then praise God?

Amen.

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