

Ephesians 3:14-21

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

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Church Begins in Prayer

I learned something of extreme value in seminary. Truly. We had to take various levels of courses on worship, and those worship and preaching courses revolved around how to actually do this thing of crafting and leading worship, so the course was supplemented by smaller groups lead by teaching assistants. The TA that I had was really practical, and gave really practical wisdom. The purpose of the small groups were to help us learn and develop our preaching styles. In one of our first group sessions, Jim told us that we needed to preach in either 7, 14, or 21 minute increments. Why? Because those are the time increments that your average 30 minute television show is divided into between commercial breaks. As a result, our attentions spans can only

maintain information in seven minute increments. At some point, if this sermon is more than just seven minutes, you'll tune out, but I do hope you tune back in.

The end of chapter three offers us a commercial break from some of the heavy theological language and concepts before we transition to *how* we participate in God's work and in church.

Eugene Peterson asserts that the church begins in prayer, stays centered in prayer, and ends up praying. Lately, we have had many opportunities to talk about prayer. We've looked at how to pray, what to pray, and seen examples of both Jesus and Paul's prayers. So it might seem a little bit odd to ask you this question: What *is* prayer? Seems like it would have a simple answer, right? The author of P.O.E.T.S. of Prayer, which is the reading plan we are working through with our Wednesday prayer and devotional group, defines prayer as "our direct access to communication with God and receiving his power." Then, each of the devotions offer up a word that describes prayer:

Persistence

Open

Expectancy

Thankful

Scriptures

Take the first letter of each word, and it spells out POETS. If we are going to be poets of prayer, if we are going to be persistent, open, expectant, thankful, and rooted in Scripture, it stands to reason that we as church should begin in prayer.

Now, I mentioned that these verses serve as a sort of commercial break, but consider it more of a public service announcement kind of commercial break, rather than a used car salesman commercial break. It's an important, intimate pause. It presents a moment of tenderness, in which Paul speaks directly to his readers about his care for them. He speaks of his prayer for his readers, which he does on bended knee. Verse 14 begins this PSA on prayer with "for this reason," which we know from taking this journey through Ephesians what this reason is: This new, entirely Gentile church now has access to God. This new, formerly "other" group of Christians now have a place at the table. These young Christians who are learning to practice resurrection, learning to grow up in Christ, are brought into the light, into the hope, into the very existence of our Lord Jesus Christ. For *this* reason, Paul takes a humble posture and gets on his knees in prayer.

Let's take a look at what Paul actually prays for. He prays for his readers (and us) to have:

- inner spiritual strength
- the indwelling of Christ in their hearts
- the ability to comprehend all the dimensions of spiritual realities
- knowledge of the love of Christ

As always when reading Scripture in English, something gets lost in translation. And what gets lost here is that Paul is addressing not just his readers as individuals, but as a collective church. Throughout most of this section, the plural form of you is being used in the Greek, which broadens our understanding of these four concepts. While

each of these things Paul prays for would definitely benefit us as individuals, when we think about beginning in prayer, the church will certainly experience a spiritual awakening with these four concepts.

In these four intercessions, Paul is praying us into the presence of and participation of God, the God who is previous to who we are and what we are doing, the God who is previous to what has gone wrong in our lives. These four intercessions remind us that our problems don't define us; God does. Our problems are not the first or the last word of who we are; God is. The church begins in prayer. We begin in prayer.

The first two intercessions of Paul on our behalf, in my opinion, go hand in hand. Paul prays for inner spiritual strength and for an indwelling of Christ in our hearts. This idea of Christ dwelling within us keeps us aware of how intimately we are knit together with Christ. It protects us from divinizing our inner lives apart from Jesus. Rather, we are so intimately entwined with Christ that nothing, as Paul tells the Romans, can separate us from Christ or Christ's love. This indwelling of Christ has an objective though: that we will be rooted and grounded in love.

As we asked the question what is prayer, it's fitting to ask the question here "what is love?" We're not talking here about the question posed by Haddaway in the early 90s, where we beg for our sweethearts not to hurt us. That song is really weird to me, by the way.

We're asking what is this love that we should be rooted and grounded in? It's that *agape* love, unconditional love,

love without boundaries, borders, or condition. Paul's prayer is not just that we experience this love, but that we are *rooted* and *grounded* in this love. If we are rooted and grounded in this agape love, our entire perspective and worldview can shift.

This concept of being rooted and grounded in love is not just a message for the Ephesians. I think, perhaps more than any other letter, Ephesians gives us a foundation for understanding Paul's theology. We understand the primacy and presence of God in everything, and we see just how important learning this agape love is to Paul. In Romans 13, Paul writes "owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law."

It really is that simple, friends. We can try to confuse this concept of loving one another by throwing conditions on it, but clearly, Paul says there are no conditions to this love. It's love like God loves. It's love that is an obligation. It's love that Paul prays will ground us, so that we then begin to recognize Christ in others.

I had the opportunity to have lunch with a pastor friend of mine last week, the pastor of Mt. Zion Presbyterian over in Anderson. Our conversation ranged from the various things going on in the world today, and pondering over how to engage and reach folks in the midst of such unrest. And what I think we kept coming back to is this Gospel mandate to love. If we are really going to grow up in Christ, we have to understand that the Gospel turns our world, our perspectives, and our expectations upside down. If it does not, then we just aren't doing this Christian life thing right, friends. If we are to be rooted

and grounded in love, that agape-love, then our worlds should be turned upside down, because all of our preconceived notions go out the window. If we are to be rooted and grounded in agape-love, then we will begin to understand that God's primacy and presence is in everything created, and all of God's creation is of sacred worth. And when we can get there, then we will be an answer to Paul's prayer.

When we can know and experience the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, we'll have grown up.

It starts in prayer. Being persistent, open, expectant, thankful, and grounded in Scripture makes us *poets* of prayer, but it also connects us with the indwelling of Christ on such a deeper level. Paul doesn't want us to wade in the shallow ends of Christian life, friends. He wants us to take a deep dive into practicing resurrection and coming up full of agape-love. So let's dive deep. Amen.