

Praying for All Y'all!

A Call to Prayer from Ephesians 3:14-21

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Who is that person in your life you know prays you through?

Prayer is always a conversation. At its most basic, we talk and listen to God who also listens and talks to us. This is prayer. And while this one-on-one dialog with God is prayer at its most basic, it is not prayer at its most effective. Nor is it a conversation. Prayer at its most effective is when we pray for each other, when we join the family conversation of care with our Father who loves us all.

Why this is I honestly do not know. But that it is true I have no doubt.

Experience has taught the Church over again is true that prayer at its most effective is when we pray for each other. We experience this in our local church as we share our joys and concerns, interceding for each other with God over our varied struggles and joys. We have seen our prayers for life's struggles answered in many ways. Many of us have a person in our lives who prays us through our toughest times. Can you name that person in your life right now? Who would name you as the person they know prays for them?

We can pray even better for each other. Not just for healing, or patience, or whatever. Paul gives us the example of how to pray better for each other in his description of his prayer for the church. Studying his writing this week, I am convinced that back then Paul was even praying for us now when he was in prison and writing directly to the church he had once pastored.

There are four different things Paul asked God for the church in today's Scripture reading. If we use the American Southern English dialect's "y'all" rather than standard American English's "you" for the diverse church Paul knew he was writing, his examples of how we can best pray for each other become so much clearer. So, please hear my attempt at putting Paul's thoughts into American Southern.

“I ask that the Father strengthen all y’all in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit.”

Paul did not take God our Father’s care for us for granted. Like a child saying please and thank you at the family dinner table, Paul asked our Father that we all be strengthened by the Spirit. Paul knows that our Father has abundant resources and desires the outpouring of those resources in our lives. But Paul does not take our Father and his riches for granted. Instead he asks specifically for our strength.

Who do you know that prays for your spiritual strength the way Paul prayed for us all? Who are you praying for that God will strengthen them with the loving care of a father sharing all his riches with his child?

“I ask that Christ live in all y’all’s hearts through faith.”

Other translators of this verse use other English words rather than “live.” The New Revised Standard Version chose “dwell.” Or in American Southern English, “I ask that Christ dwells in all y’all’s hearts through faith.” What is different for you about living somewhere or dwelling somewhere?

According to my desk top dictionary, to dwell somewhere is to make one’s home. To live somewhere is to have a life or to endure. And yet if we could read the Koinonia Greek Paul wrote, we could know his single word included all those ideas. To be a Christian is to open your heart by faith for Christ to make a home where life is fully lived, including enduring all the struggles that zig zag through our being in the world.

Paul’s prayer for the Church was our faith make our inner most being and our deepest thoughts be a place where Christ dwells and has life. What an amazing idea! How do you hear this, that St. Paul himself prayed that you can know Christ dwelling in your heart?

Does Paul pray alone for Christ to dwell with you? Who can you name that prays for Christ to be present in your life? Who are you willing to pray for that he or she may know Christ as a member of our Father’s family?

“I ask that all y’all grasp love’s width and length, height and depth, together with all believers.”

Knowing Christ must go beyond a belief in life with God after death. Such a belief is a cheap grace that empowers the misbelief that we Christians are better than anyone else.

Friends, eternal life with Christ does not begin with our last breath. Eternal life began long before God drew the breath that spoke our creation into existence. Just because we came

crashing into God's eternity presence at a moment in time does not make our last breath, or even our first, the beginning of eternal life. Eternal life and the great love of God it holds has a width and length, a height and depth almost beyond our grasp. Almost.

But fortunately for us all, not quite. During moments of grace in our mortal life we grasp glimpses of eternity. We may grasp a glimpse of eternity by gazing at a clear July night sky, or by looking at a grandchild's eyes that are exactly the same color as your grandpa's eyes. Or we may ponder the length of God's love as we ponder the many coincidences that led to us being here at all. I'm not joking here. For me it happens whenever I take time to ponder the coincidences that made my life as a member of a very large family even possible. First, my maternal great-grandparents had a chance meeting as young immigrants on a boat from Norway to England. Then my grandmother was widowed way to young so she able to marry my grandfather. My mother met my father accidentally because she was dodging another young man her parents wanted her to marry. Finally, I was conceived as a honeymoon baby only 10½ months later than their first meeting all because my parents moved their wedding day forward 8 months since my paternal grandmother was leaving to live in occupied Japan for three years. It is a wonder I crashed into eternal life when I did. In pondering eternal life, I cannot believe my being is simply a coincidence. How about you and your story of being?

Eternal life does not begin when we first realize God's extraordinary love exists. Eternal life is eternal, even if we only grasp it in moments. We are blessed to know we are caught in a beloved part of a love "so high we can't get over it, so low we can't get under it, and so wide we can't get around it," as we grasp that we are part of a great adventure in God's love or all. As John Wesley said, God's fullness is "a perfection far beyond a bare freedom from sin."ⁱⁱ

Are we not blessed that Paul prayed for us all to have this understanding of eternal life? Are we not privileged to join Paul in praying that it goes on to the generations we live with and that will follow?

"I ask that all y'all know the love of Christ that is beyond all book learning so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God."

In his studies of Hebrew scripture, Paul concluded that grace always preceded the law. God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:3, 15:6, & 18:18) was made many generations before God gave the Law to Moses (Ex. 20). Paul firmly believed that grace always precedes law not just in history but in our mortal lives as well. Just as we live and especially learn in a sequence of mortal life, Paul's rabbinic reading of the Torah is caught in the sequence of human existence. Just as no one dies first and is then born, there is a sequence in creation that we all

live within. Reading Scripture as God's story whose arc bends through human life, we find the story always begins and ends with grace.

To know the love of God, the grace of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit opens Scripture to us as a love letter and makes the Law an expression of God's love for us apparent in how we love each other. To do it in the other order, to know Scripture without glimpsing the great love of God we find ourselves caught in a religion of legalism, one in which no one can ever perfectly measure up. But, as Paul found and tried to explain, if we begin with love we find the Law—to love God with all we are and to love our neighbor the way we hope to be loved by them—is a way by which we can live fully in love with God.

It is wonder-full that we don't need a great deal of study to be in love with God.

We are truly blessed that Paul began a conversation of prayer where we pray the Trinity's blessings on each other. Because it is not as though Paul prayed, then almost 2000 years passed, and here we are to join Paul in prayer. When we join the Father's family conversation, praying for each other to know the fullness of God's love, we join a miracle of grace.

And we bring the fullness of God's love to a world that deeply needs it.

Friends, Paul prayed for us. Generations of people who dwelled in grace between Paul's death and our birth have prayed that we know the fullness of God's love. We are a church that believes in prayer and who prays for each other's burdens. Let us also be a church that prays together that we may both know and share the love of God as we dwell in faith with Christ.

Let us pray together:

O let the Son of God enfold you with his Spirit and his love.

Let him fill you heart and satisfy your soul.

O let him have the things that hold you,

and his Spirit like a dove will descent upon your life and make you whole.

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs.

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs.

O come and sing this song with gladness as your hearts are filled with joy.

Lift your hands in sweet surrender to his name.

O give him all your tears and sadness; give him all your years of pain,

and you'll enter into life in Jesus' name.

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs.

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ *Webster's New Dictionary and Thesaurus*. Wiley Publishing, Inc., Cleveland Ohio, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Originally found in *John Wesley's Notes on the Bible* (http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/notes/index.htm). Cited here from the note for Ephesians 3:19 of the *The Wesley Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*; Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Spirit Song," #347 *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989.