

EPHESIANS #49 3:14-17 8-12-12

Strong In the Spirit

(Ephesians 3) Throughout my three decades of pastoral ministry I have had the opportunity to spend time in prayer with many other pastors from a variety of different backgrounds. For me, it has been highly educational, as I have gotten to see how different brothers from different Christian traditions prayed, what they prayed for, and how they expressed themselves. For instance, you could get the impression from some, that the louder you pray, the better. Others use a certain prayer lingo distinctive to their particular group. And a lot of the differences between us are probably just matters of taste. It has made me wonder again though, just what it would be like to be in a prayer meeting with the apostle Paul. What were the prayer meetings of the early church like? Were they more like charismatic meetings or more like Presbyterian meetings? I'm interested to find out just how the original Christians prayed. There is much the New Testament doesn't tell us, but it most definitely gives us insight into what the apostle Paul saw as the most critical subjects for prayer. Several times the apostle tells us what it is that he prayed for his Christian friends. You can find those prayers in Colossians 1, Philippians 1, Ephesians 1 and in our text for this morning. Read it with me, as we take a peek into the prayer closet of the great apostle. **14-19** *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.*

Now, lest we miss the forest for the trees, I begin our study with this question: in general, what did Paul ask God to do for His believing friends? What did He pray for? Our answer to that is that he prayed for spiritual blessings. He prayed for their growth and maturity as followers of Christ. And I think that is highly informative. There were times, I'm sure, when Paul prayed for physical healing and physical protection and financial prosperity, but the primary emphasis of his prayers, here and elsewhere, is for spiritual riches. This is the prayer of a man who has learned that everything else is like dung compared to knowing Christ. He is a man who learned that the things of the spirit are eternal, and the things of this world are temporary. And the logical conclusion then is that we ought to pray primarily, not exclusively, but primarily for matters spiritual. Is that what

we tend to do? I don't think so. We pray for health and prosperity and safety, which are all fine, but are not of utmost importance. When people tell me that they are praying for my bad back or my sore throat and whatnot, I sincerely appreciate that. No one is more interested in my health than I am, but if I must have one or the other, I would have you pray for my soul, that I would be humble and zealous, strong in faith and love and hope. That is the emphasis of New Testament praying. Paul, in his prayers, demonstrates the heart of a pastor. He wants to see the children of God go beyond the graces of justification, and so he prays that we would grow up. His longing was to see us advance to spiritual maturity. You see, when you accept the gospel and receive eternal life, that is an enormous step of eternal consequence but it is not the end of something so much as the beginning. When you repent and believe you haven't arrived; you've only just begun. So, Paul prays in this passage that our Father would increase in us two things. Two things: the one is strength, that you would be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. The other thing is love. There is too much to cover in just one week, so we will look today at the first and save the latter for next Sunday.

Before we look at the petition for strength let's cover some miscellaneous teaching points along the way. Paul begins by saying, "For this reason." For what reason? What does that phrase connect us back to? Most likely it connects us back to chapter 2. This is how the third chapter of Ephesians began 3:**1a** *For this reason I, Paul* and then he digresses into a 13 verse parenthesis before coming back to his main flow of thought. So, this phrase in 3:14 stretches back to chapter two verse 22 where it says that God is building the parts of His church together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. This is the greatest thing happening in the world today? Did you know that? God is building His church. When Beth and I had the chance some years back to meet with a dozen members of the Faith Presbyterian Church in Warsaw, Poland, we asked them what they thought was the greatest thing God was doing in Poland. And do you know what the first answer was? The Faith Presbyterian Church in Warsaw. They saw correctly that this was the greatest project there is and that it was God's project. Paul said then, "For this reason?" For what reason? Because we know what God is doing. We know something, not the details, but the generalities of His purposes on the earth. And that knowledge is critical if we are to pray well. To pray effectively we need to know where things are headed and pray according to God's will. Paul said that God is building us into a holy temple and for this reason he prayed.

Actually though, it doesn't actually say he prayed; what does it say? *I bow my knees*. Paul substitutes for prayer, the posture for prayer. The Bible teaches that when we pray we ought to be in what posture? A posture of spiritual humility and faith, but the outward, physical posture is of no great consequence. The gospels don't record it but you can just imagine the Lord teaching his disciples that external posture isn't the issue. The internal is what counts. But, but the internal is often expressed in the external. That is why this (head on hands) is not likely appropriate. We bow our heads in reverence and humility. We lift our head and hands in reverence and hope. We stand in honor, we kneel in humility. I said before that the external posture is not of great consequence but I wouldn't say it's of no consequence. Our standing or bowing or falling on our face does communicate something to God and to our own souls. I know from personal experience that bowing my knees in prayer serves to focus my soul and condition my heart. You may want to try it in private or in public and see if it doesn't assist you as well.

Paul says, I bow my knees before the Father. The Father. I've made this point a bunch and I must do it again here. New Testament prayer is almost exclusively addressed to God the Father. The simplest explanation of prayer is given by our Lord. It is a child speaking to Daddy. Galatians 4:6 says God has put His Spirit within us crying, *Abba, Father*. When we see prayer as conversation between father and child it keeps us from being either too familiar or too formal in our expression. So, when Christ taught us to pray He taught us to say, *Our Father*. Verse 15 *from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name*. This verse is of some mild controversy. There are various interpretations but the one I'll offer you is the one consistent with the NIV translation. That word translated *every* could mean, "the entire" or the whole. NIV says 15 *from whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name*. You see the difference there? It really makes it fit much more clearly with the line of Paul's thought. He has been speaking of our unity in the Lord. And so verse 15 reminds us that we are one family, and that we share equally in the name and therefore the authority of our great Father. And that one family includes people in heaven and on earth doesn't it? That's a great thought! The Fatherhood of God extends beyond the grave and encompasses those believers who have passed on into glory. There is one family. When we say in the Apostles Creed that we believe in the communion of saints we affirm our oneness not only with living believers but with the spirits of just men made perfect. God is the Father of us all. We all get our name from him. When you adopt someone into your family part of what you do is to share your name, and with that name goes the family riches and the authority of the father. The adopted child

shares equally with the begotten child. I appreciated this story I heard recently of two brothers who entered the first grade together. When the teacher asked their birthdays one said, “January 10, 2005 and the other said, “April 10, 2005.” Their teacher paused for a moment and said, “Wait a second, that’s impossible.” “No” the one brother said, “one of us is adopted.” The teacher asked him, “Which one?” And the little boy said, “I don’t know. One day I asked my dad and he kissed us both and said, “I forgot.” Oh, the rich privilege of calling God our Father, and knowing his love that invites us to approach him in prayer!

Now, we’re ready to get to the main point of our study today. Verse 16 and the petition for spiritual strength 16-17a *that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.* Quickly now let’s look at the need for strength, the source of strength, the building of strength, and the result of strength. First of all - the need for strength. Why is this such a major concern of the apostle? Why pray for strength? That’s easy. We ask for strength because we are weak and the enemy is tough. ® Are you aware of all the militant language in the Scriptures? The Bible compares our spiritual lives with combat - frequently. It says that we are engaged in a war. Most of us don’t seem to know that! Our lifestyles don’t reflect anything like the intensity called for by war. I Corinthians 16:**13** *Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.* You look at that verse. We are called to be on the alert - why? Because there is a vicious enemy about. There is one seeking to take your head off. I Peter 5 says **8** *Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.* You had better be ready. I shared two months back of how when I was 18 God sensitized me to the battle that rages around us. For years I had been a sleepy Christian in a sleepy church that was committed to maintaining a “good-ole-boy” religion. The model of Christianity that I saw as a child didn’t require any alertness, any fight, any passion. But thru a man named Jimmy Young, and a book by JC Ryle, the whole realm of spiritual warfare was opened up to me and I saw it and began to live in it. I Corinthians 16:13 then says to stand firm in the faith because somebody is going to try to knock you off your foundation. Then he says, “Act like men.” ® That is not just something football coaches and drill sergeants say. God says that because the Christian life, rightly understood requires courage. It requires guts, whether you live it here or in a jungle tribe. There is courage to stand up against the assaults of the world. There is courage to do and say what is unpopular. There is courage to do what is right but risky and there is courage to muzzle the whimperings of your own

flesh and discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. Courage is needed because, again, we are in a war and the enemy is tough. The final admonition of I Corinthians 16:13 is to be strong. ® Do you know what provokes most of us to want to become strong? It's getting beat up. Yea. From thence cometh the motivation to get Schwarzeneggered. In the same way, the believers who feel their need for strength are typically the ones who are in the battle. They haven't remained on the sideline. They have ventured into the game and found the enemy is tough. Bruised and battered they decide to bulk up. Many of you don't feel the need for spiritual strength because you aren't in the battle. You're a spectator who will know no victories or defeat. You get in the battle and you'll discover your need. I find that defeat does make us teachable. The parent that most acutely feels the need for instruction is the one who has tried it on his own. The pastor who most wants training is the one who went out without it and felt his inadequacy. Listen, you cannot beat the devil without supernatural strength. On your own, what do you have? You're a sitting duck for the forces of darkness. Paul prays for strength in the inner man because all we have by nature is weakness. We are spiritual wimps. I mean, why do we fall so easily to temptation? Why are we dominated by lust and by fear and by anger? It's because in ourselves we are easy prey for the enemy. Those of you familiar with 12 step programs - whether its to overcome alcohol or food addiction, whether its to overcome anger or lust - what is the first step toward recovery? Step one is to admit that I, on my own, am powerless to overcome my addiction. And the great thing about getting to step one, admitting your weakness, is that it gets you to where Paul is - crying out to God for strength in the inner man. What do you need strength for today? If we are honest, everyone of us will recognize that we are facing something either this coming week or every day that is too big to handle on our own. We need something beyond ourselves that will equip us for the struggle.

That leads to point #2- the source of strength. Paul doesn't cry for just any kind of help. He knows precisely who can offer the help that is needed. He prays that we would be strengthened with power through or by God's Spirit. You've heard of the Holy Spirit. We talk about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Did you know that the Spirit is given to every believer for the purpose of supplying him or her with strength for spiritual life? Romans 8 says that we put to death the sinful flesh by the Spirit. Galatians 5 says we overcome the flesh by the Spirit. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit our *Helper*. The King James Version calls him there, *the Comforter*. But that word, "comfort" has sort of changed meanings over the years. Centuries ago it was more closely linked with its Latin roots. You see, the word, "comfort" comes from two Latin words: "cum" which means "with." And

“forte” which means strength. When Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would come as a comforter He did not mean that He would be along after the battle to soothe your wounded spirits. He meant that He would come to you in the battle to give you strength to fight it and win. He would come “cum-forte” with strength! This is the Holy Spirit’s role in our lives. We can’t do it without Him.

Ephesians 6:**10** *Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.* We can’t be victors without Him. But listen, with Him we certainly can be. Through the strength of the Spirit we can turn away from temptation, we can walk in holiness. That means, by the way, that you can’t use weakness as an excuse. Not if you’re a Christian. You can’t appeal to weakness to excuse your sinful choices. I’ve known a lot of folks who won’t deny their sin, who won’t reject the Lord to pursue their sin, but if you confront them they pull out the weakness card. “Here, this explains why I’m allowed to be get drunk, and visit prostitutes and be undisciplined and explode in anger. It’s a weakness.” It is a weakness. But when sufficient strength is accessible that weakness is a blamable weakness. God says the Spirit is there to be called on, so excuses are gone. These texts we read say, “Be strong” and the basis of the exhortation is that strength is available. In II Corinthians 3 Paul says **5** *Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.* Therefore, let the weak say, “I am strong.” Let the poor say, “I am rich” because of what the Lord has done and can do for us. The source of our strength is the Holy Spirit of God who lives in us and greater is he (say it with me) “greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world.”

So then, let’s look, as our third point at how we may be built up in the strength of God’s Spirit. How do we grow strong in the inner man? What does the Bible say? It says we grow strong as we spend time in the word of God. Psalm 119:**9a** *How can a young man keep his way pure? How can he have the strength of a spiritual warrior to say “no” to the powerful lusts of youth? 9b* *By keeping it according to Your word. 11* *Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You.* The word of God, in the heart of man, strengthens him against temptation. When Jesus encountered the devil in the wilderness he fought him off - how? By quoting the Bible. You quote it for the devil, sure, but mostly you quote it for yourself. And you build yourself up, by daily feedings from the sweet word of God. I Peter 2:**2** *like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.* The word of God is critical. Neglect it and you can expect defeat. But there’s something more. In a way it should be obvious. Our text is Ephesians 3:16 where Paul is doing what? Praying. Strength by the Spirit comes by the word and

by prayer. Paul here is praying down supernatural strength for his friends. We read frequently of the men of God praying for spiritual strength. It was David's private prayers that made him a public champion. It was our Lord's seasons of prayer that sustained His strength for spiritual combat. Just before Judas led his Jewish enemies to him in the garden of Gethsemane what did Jesus do? How did He prepare for the greatest trial any man has ever faced? He went alone, knelt down and prayed. And you know what he told his disciples to do during that time? Luke 22:**40** *When He arrived at the place, He said to them, " Pray that you may not enter into temptation."* That word "enter" means to embrace it, to step into it. Jesus is telling them to pray for strength to resist it. **45** *When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow.* They didn't quite see the need. They weren't alert spiritually. So Jesus says again **46** *Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation.* This is how you prepare for spiritual battle. Prayer expresses dependence on God, and it is by prayer that we link our impotence with His omnipotence. It is prayer and praise that puts us on line with the Holy Spirit. That's why we will never be any stronger than our prayer lives. As individuals and as a church, we will never grow beyond our prayers.

The application there is obvious. Let's look fourthly and finally at the result of this God-given strength which we lay hold of by prayer. Our text again says **16-17a** *that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.* If you are like me you will wonder how this could be. Doesn't Christ live in us, by His Spirit, from the very time that we are born again? How can He present this as the result of some new spiritual attainment? Well, I think the key is found in the two Greek words for "dwell." The word "paroikeo" means simply to inhabit, or stay in a place, like you would a motel. But the word used here, "katoikeo" means to establish as your permanent home. It brings with it the sense of ownership and mastery. In a sense Paul is praying that Christ would be the King living in the Castle of your heart. And although His presence is absolute, His mastery over us (let's admit it) is relative. Our hearts are more or less given over to His rule. Paul therefore prays, for our good and God's glory, that by the strength of the Holy Spirit we would crush all opposing forces in our hearts and establish Christ there as the unrivalled Lord. One has written, "Lord Jesus I long to be perfectly whole, I want you forever to live in my soul, Break down every idol, cast out every foe, now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow." That is the process of the Spirit's work. Breaking down idols, casting out spiritual enemies and competing

loves He makes our hearts more and more fit as the home of Christ Himself. By the Spirit then, the Lord who is resident becomes our President and with ever increasing glory He rules and reigns in our hearts and in our lives.

Is that a good prayer? That is great stuff. Pray it for yourself. Pray it for me. And then let's see what the Father will do by His Spirit and for the glory of His Son. Let's pray.