

“World Class” Praying: Learning To Enlarge Your Prayer Life



Ephesians 3:14-21

Introduction

I want you to use your imagination with me for the next few minutes. Let's begin by turning back the calendar a few weeks to late August, 2005. You live in a modest sized town near the Gulf Coast. You hear reports that a hurricane may be on its way to your region. You are concerned. You are not close enough to the ocean to be threatened by flooding—but you know based on previous experience that your community will likely lose power for several days. Which means that people will be without refrigeration to preserve food or air conditioning to protect them from the maddening heat and humidity. Furthermore, the water company has told you to leave because there is a likelihood that the water purification system will go down and there will be no drinkable water for several days. You contemplate simply securing your home and leaving for a few days until the crisis is over. But then you remember. A few days earlier, your incredibly rich uncle offered to give you a power generator. But this is not your average generator. It is a massive, industrial sized generator. In fact, it is so powerful that it has the capacity to temporarily provide enough power for 500 homes and several local businesses. Did I also mention that he offered to lease 3 fuel trucks that have enough capacity to provide fuel for up to two weeks?

You decide to take him up on the offer and sure enough the generator and the trucks arrive—just 36 hours before the hurricane arrives. And true to form, the hurricane hammers your community and there is a wide spread blackout. *Nothing* in your house works because you and all your neighbors are without power. So is the hospital just a block down the street. As fast as you can, you make your way outside to the generator. You follow the operating instructions and begin to activate the massive generator, making sure its power is online with your own electrical system. Bu there is a problem. While you believe it will be useful, you really don't understand how much power this thing is capable of cranking out. You simply size up what you need and cautiously begin to switch on a couple of lights along with a sump pump—and finally the refrigerator. Later, you get up enough courage to even turn on the air conditioner. Once the chaos settles down and things start returning to normal, the kids complain of boredom—so you let them turn on the TV and play with a couple of their X-Box games.

So how much capacity are you using so far? Not even 1/10th of 1 percent! And that is so tragic because many of your neighbors could really use that excess power. There are patients in ICU that will desperately need that power when the emergency back-up power that feeds their ventilators finally runs out. I could elaborate even more—but you get the picture! What a waste of power! What a small way to use such enormous capacity!

That is exactly what Paul is thinking about the power of the Gospel as it backs up our prayers. It is a power so great that it “surpasses knowledge.” That is, it is *beyond* human comprehension! And yet when it comes to our prayers, typically we are content to take this infinite capacity and use it to run a few spiritual appliances in order to make our lives a little more comfortable in a sin-cursed world. So we pray for our own health. Or the health of those closest to us—in our families or at church. Or to make that important presentation at work. Or to do well on an exam. Or to get along better with a neighbor or one of your teachers at school. Now please here me out. *I am not suggesting* that you shouldn’t pray for any of these concerns. You should! What *I am* trying to say is that there is far more juice in the generator than what you may be asking for.

This passage calls us to pray far beyond what most of us are accustomed to praying. Paul’s own prayer in this text is not only a prayer for his audience—then and now. Like the so-called “Lords Prayer,” it is a model for us to follow in our prayers. It dares us prevail upon the infinite capacity of the Gospel to do great things in desperate times. Things so far beyond our normal expectation that to otherwise suggest them would run the risk of appearing to sound cynical. **Example:** Consider the recent headline news here in Detroit regarding ongoing racial strife between the city and the suburbs. We need to cry out: “God, what would your power look like if it began to invade that situation? What would it look like if your Church took up that challenge more significantly? How would “your power at work in us” *re-write* this article? (Joint services? Joint efforts? Planting multi-racial churches in Detroit?)

I want us to read this prayer again. As you do, make it your prayer right now. And begin to make it more and more the substance of your praying this week. So let’s rise and read it together aloud. Ephesians 3:14-21:

14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

[PRAY—Lord, even as the disciples once asked you, we through this text *tonight* ask you: ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’ We ask you to teach us because we don’t begin to understand your power. We struggle to get our arms around the scope of your wonderful redemptive purposes. Lord, apart from your revealing more of your Person and plan to us—we run the serious risk of under-using your power. So even as we learn how to pray by examining this prayer more closely—Lord, be pleased to accomplish in us what this prayer begs you to do. God open our eyes to your breath-taking plan. Expand our vision of your power. And Lord—as you do this—may it become most apparent in the way you enlarge our prayer lives. Amen!]

Do you want to learn how to enlarge your prayer life? Do you want to be a “World Class” pray-**er**? Then consider two very important truths from Paul’s prayer in this text. The first truth is...

I. Remember The *One* To Whom You Are Praying (3:14-16a).

There are three things about the One to whom you are praying that you should seek to keep in front of you whenever you pray:

A. Remember His unfailing purposes: “*For this reason...*”

God’s unfailing purpose always involves His kingdom, His rule here on earth. That began when he created Adam and Eve and placed them in Eden to rule in His place it and to expand its borders all over the world. And for a while, this world was a marvelous place to live with God in heaven and people ruling the world according to His directions. But then Adam and Eve rejected God’s rule by trying to run their own lives. The result was a terrible mess. Order turned into chaos. People were in a perpetual state of war with God and each other. God could have just left things as they were and simply judged mankind for his disobedience. But instead, he sent His Son, the second Adam into the world to die as a substitute in the place of sinners like us. And God raised His Son from the dead to be the ruler of the world and to eventually undo what sin had done. Ephesians 1:10 summarizes it this way:

9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

The Lord Jesus is doing what no person or organization has been able to do in the history of the Church. He is reconciling lost people to Himself and each other. These reconciled people today are known as The Church. And it is through them—or rather through US that God is demonstrating His power and wisdom to the watching angels (good and bad). He has been doing this and will continue to do so until He comes again. What the Church is doing now is only a taste of the full and complete restoration to come. Bu that is His purpose—a purpose that needs to be continually kept in mind as we pray! But He not only has good purposes, He has the infinite power to carry them out. That is why we need to...

B. Remember His infinite sovereignty: “*...I kneel before the Father from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name...*”

When you pray, you are not praying to a frustrated ruler who is pacing heaven, wringing his hands and gasping at all the current calamity and chaos in the world. He is *sitting*. And He can sit because He is in charge. He is not like a fireman, rushing to the brushfires of this world and doing his best to do damage control. He is in *complete* control! As Father of the Universe, He is the source of all life and He remains the Sustainer of all things. You need to remember that when you pray!

Illustration: My Palm and Laptop. He did not need for me to remind Him of what was at stake. I needed to know Him as He is so I could be free to see what this good Father was doing in the life of His child (Deuteronomy 8:3).

You need to remember His purposes and remember His sovereignty. But you also need to...

- C. Remember His unlimited resources: “*I pray that out of His glorious riches...*”

God is so gracious. There are many times that He does not expose us—at least all at once to the eventual extent of a trial or challenge. I Cor. 10:13 says He won’t give us more than we can handle—or we might lose hope and give up. But there are times where he definitely want to stretch our understanding of His power and our overwhelming need for the power. Not to make us into people like the 10 spies in Numbers who threw up their hands and simply gave up on God’s promises. No, he wants the challenge to force us to know the glorious riches of His power in ways that we might not otherwise ever have seen it.

We say that we believe that God has infinite power. We need to get praying beyond that to which we typically limit ourselves. If you think the idea of racial reconciliation in a city like Detroit is a *pipe dream*—then I would encourage you to look more closely at Ephesians 2:11-22 and the goal God had in mind with the Jews and Gentiles of Paul’s day—and any similar situation throughout Church History. This is the stuff that the Gospel was designed to deal with. Broken marriages. Estranged relationships. Racial hostilities. Do they seem impossible to fix? Then its time to plug into that 5 story generator sitting in our back yard—called the Gospel. Which brings us to the second directive in this text. You need to not only Remember The **One** To Whom You Are Praying, but you need to...

- II. Line up *your* praying with *His* purposes (3:16-21).

Illustration: Time I needed to use my generator—but it didn’t work. Actually, I neglected to flip a switch in the basement that was supposed to direct electricity from my generator to my power box. The generator was generating, but my power box was not online with the generator. God’s power is always sufficient. But it is sufficient to accomplish the purposes for which God designed it.

Example: I experienced this when I prayed for God to miraculously heal my laptop. And when he didn't my initial response was to question Him. God—where is your power when I really need it? It was there. But I was looking for the wrong power. I was looking for a power that God had not decided to provide—and missing the power that He knew I needed—which he had provided! Power to trust Him. Power to grow in my dependency on Him!

James 4:3 talks about this dilemma.

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Example: Think about the wife who prays for her husband to grow. And the husband who is praying for God to straighten out his wife. Did it ever occur to either that God could be using their spouse's weaknesses to expose areas in their lives that He wants to change? Not wrong to pray for the other—but there is something more fundamental we need to grasp. In this text, Paul calls us to...

- A. Pray for His **power to strengthen your inner man**: *“I pray that...he may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith....”*

This verse is God's power switch for spiritual power. You want God's power for a difficult situation? Then get online with His power by lining up with His clearly revealed purposes. It is not that you can't ask God for anything else. It's that you don't want to miss the thing you need most—which is strength in your inner man!

Illustration: What might this look like at a prayer meeting?

We tend to reduce prayer requests to: health concerns; monetary concerns; evangelistic concerns; decision-making concerns; ministry or work responsibilities. All these are fine. And it is appropriate to talk to God about them. But here is the problem. They are only dealing with the situation. But they are not relating to God's purposes with the person *in the situation*. They have not tapped into God's sanctification agenda. But if you follow Paul's prayer model in this text, it begins to transform the prayer request.

Example: A student going home for thanksgiving.

1. Unsaved family; difficult environment; all watching TV. Would you pray for my family that they would come to know the Lord. Good, but only addressing the situation—not God's goal for the student. Compare this with:
2. Same scenario—but different request. Yes—pray for my family that God would move in their hearts. But pray also for me that I would stay in God's Word. That I would not “veg” back into a

teenage mode and lapse into sluggardly teenage habits. Pray that I would not get hooked by TV or “veg” out on magazines. Pray that God’s Word gets an anchor in my life while I am home. Pray that I would not indulge in all the food—and just graze on all the candy lying around. But that everything that goes into my mouth would be put there with gratitude. Pray that I would enjoy the T-giving feast. But not spend the day as a glutton. And I plan to watch a football game with the family. But if nothing is happening relationally, pray that I will get up off the couch and look for someone to do something with. Pray that I would have a chance to love her and wash dishes with her.

3. ***Question: Is there sufficient power for this kind of prayer? But notice how wider the agenda is.*** The result: This kind of praying gets answers to prayer every week—not just every 5 years when a relative gets saved! Imagine what happens to prayer meetings when this kind of requests are offered! By the way—the best way to do that is in a small group that you meet with on a regular basis and in which there is a context of relationships going.

But along with praying for God’s power, we need to pray for a deeper understanding of something that provides an endless source of this power. You need to...

B. Pray for the ***power to grasp his great love***. This involves...

1. *A shared understanding of His love for His Church: “I pray that you...may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge....”*

We are talking about a fresh understanding of the Gospel. The more we mature, the more we understand sin. The more we understand sin, the more we can appreciate His great love. We already talked about this last week—so I won’t elaborate much more except to point out one more thing. This love is best learned and experienced *together*. It is best *appreciated* together. It is a love that grows exponentially when like burning coals we meet together and remind each other in our worship and fellowship.

Again I ask you to imagine what this would look like if we prayed like this together in our times of prayer. Talk about empowerment! But this love is not meant to be celebrated alone. It is a love that goes somewhere. It is active and powerful and stimulating. Notice...

2. The *mutual outworking* of His love *through* His Church: “*that you may be filled with the measure of the fullness of God.*”

Remember that prayer request by the student? Let’s say he came back the next week and gave a good report. He did ok on self-control. But there was more. Hew played with his nieces and nephews during the second game—and became more human to a cool unsaved sister who thought that Christians were hard and indifferent. He also got to help his mom do dishes—and in so doing he was able to present the human side of Christian life. Now the power is flowing. Not only with the student—but in the lives of those he impacted. And in the lives of those who prayed for Him and are moved by their own answer to prayer! This kind of praying can be transforming. Which brings us to the last and ultimately most important point...

- C. Pray for an *all-consuming passion for His glory*: “*To Him be glory in the church....*”

That is what Christ’s church is ultimately all about!

How big is your praying? How much are you asking for? If your praying is a bit small—here is a model that will enlarge your prayer life—and make you a vital part of God’s power pulsing through this church. Make it your prayer this week!