

OUR PRAYERS ARE TOO SMALL

Ephesians 3:14-21

Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/our-prayers-are-too-small/>

Some of you were out late last night or didn't sleep well, so I'm going to help you out. The next three sentences are the Cliff Notes of the sermon: 1) Pray big. 2) Most of our prayers are too small. 3) Pray big. That's it. You can go to sleep! Most of our praying is, "Bless momma and me and baby makes three." Way too small. Paul wants us to pray big. Last week we learned we ALL have access to God, so Paul says use it! Then Paul models it. Here's how. And Paul prays like someone who's had some practice!

Now since, in the Greek, vv. 14-19 are one, run-on sentence, Bible scholar Bonnie Thurston has helped me crack this passage open. She says there is a simple, three-part outline [*Reading Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 117]. 1) Invocation/adoration—vv. 14-15; 2) Petition—vv. 16-19; 3) Doxology—vv. 20-21. Now look at that closely. That's the outline of the Lord's Prayer!

As the Lord's Prayer reminds us, prayer should begin with God—God's greatness, mystery and power. This prayer is Trinitarian. All three Persons are working. And while most Jews of Paul's day stood to pray, Paul says that he bows his knees. So prayer assumes God's greatness and our humility.

In the petition part of the prayer, Paul first asks that they might be strengthened in their inner beings (v. 16); rooted and grounded (v. 17, using both agricultural and architectural terms). *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has written that we will never understand human behavior if we don't believe that people have souls, as if we are only the sum of evolutionary pressures. Prayer recognizes that God's work is inside-out (*The Message*: "not brute strength...God does it not by pushing us around..."). By the way, you should try praying this for people you love. You will be blessed, praying more than you understand!

Paul next prays for us to comprehend the vast dimensions of Christ's love for us (v. 19) and to somehow be filled with the fullness of God (v. 19). Whew! C.S. Lewis once wrote that through prayer, we continue to spiral "further in and further up..." [quoted in *The God of Intimacy and Action*, Campolo and Darling, p. 113].

But guess what. We don't get into that deep relationship with God by flying solo. "...that you may be able to comprehend with all the saints..." (v. 18). The "you" in this passage is a plural you (you all). There is no private grasp of the deep things of God. It's together. One believer was talking about her season of depression. She felt immobilized. So she says she strapped herself to the prayers of Israel and relied on others to get her through!" [*Being Well When We're Ill*, Marva Dawn, p. 221].

I was visiting one of our faithful members, struggling with illness, bound in a body that won't do what she wants it to. As we prayed before her surgery, she told me, "I wrap myself in the church family's prayers. The prayers of the people tuck me in each night."

Paul's doxology (vv. 20-21) reminds us that one of the reasons we pray is to celebrate God's boundless generosity. This is a rare New Testament adverb, "exceedingly abundantly...infinitely more." These are God's spillover blessings, beyond what we ask or imagine. Martin Luther said we ask God for silver and God gives gold. How many times, as a boy growing up, did I hear our little congregation, Maple Grove Baptist Church, sing, "Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear; all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

I want to say a word here to those of you who do not yet follow Christ. I want to apologize for the way we believers have made the Christian life so bland and dull. I want you to know that you are missing so many rich, rich blessings. Strength, peace, power for living, purpose. What Jesus offers is a life that is warm, steady and beautiful. And as this prayer reminds us, knowing Christ is not mental; it is experiential, personal and real.

And I want to say a word to believers. Why do we live paupers when so much of Christ's riches are available through prayer? Our prayers are too small. Pray big.