

Ephesians
How to Pray for this Church (Part 4)
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Each of us can think back through our lives to particular moments in time that are etched upon our memories because in that moment, something gripped our heart. Something seized us, and we've never been able to shake loose from it. When I was in Seminary, one of those moments happened to me. On one particular day, one of my theology professors walked into class, and on this particular day he walked in without a word, set his books there on the desk, and without referencing us in any way, he walked over to the chalk board. And for the next few minutes as we all watched, he meticulously cleaned the chalkboard. And then when he was done, still not facing us at all, he picked up a little piece of chalk from the chalk tray there in front of him, and he took that little piece of chalk, and right in the center of that now perfectly clean chalkboard, he placed a tiny little period—just a little dot, hardly visible from the back of the room.

When he was done, he turned to us, and he said this. He said, men, I want you to imagine for a moment that this chalkboard that I have just cleaned is, in mathematical terms, an infinite plane. Imagine that that chalkboard extends infinitely in all four directions. It never stops. There is no end. That, he said to us, is what can be known about God. And then he walked over to the chalkboard, and he drew a little circle around that tiny little dot he'd put, and he said, gentlemen, I'm afraid this is what we know of our God.

I think that's true for many of us. Our vision of who God is incredibly small. Think about this for a moment. There was a time, if we can call it time at all, when there was no one but God. The three persons of the trinity enjoyed perfect eternal joy, and there was nothing else. There were no plants, no animals; there was no human being; there was no earth, no milky way galaxy; there was, in fact, no universe. There was absolutely nothing but God. Not even angels existed. This was true, not for a day; not for a week, not for a month, not even for a year or a decade, a century, or even a millennium, but this was true from eternity. From the far reaches of eternity, God was absolutely alone—self existent, independent, self-sufficient. God needed no one. He needed nothing to make Him complete. He could have still been perfectly God and have lived

uninterrupted in that state of joy by Himself forever, enjoying the fellowship with the trinity. He needed nothing.

But for reasons you and I will never fully understand, the eternal, self-sufficient, independent God decided to create. He decided to create you and me. And for those of us in Christ, or who will bow the knee to Jesus Christ, He chose to set His love upon us. He chose to make Himself known to us in Christ—to offer Christ as the perfect offering and sacrifice for our sins; and then He chose to make promises to us which obligate the eternal independent self-sufficient God forever.

Incredible, but that's what we're talking about when we're talking about the love of God. Because it was only that attribute of God that we call His love that moved Him to do all that He's done. Yet, His love is so great; it is so infinite that our puny little finite minds can't really begin to get it. Even as we try to think about it, we run out of steam. We just can't get there. Paul understood that. He understood that about himself. He understood that about the people to whom he ministered, and so when he prayed for the Ephesians—when he prayed for these people who had come to faith under his ministry, with whom he had lived for three years, and taught, and prayed for them and enjoyed life with them, and now he's been gone from them for probably close to six years, and he writes them this letter.

And when he writes back, he says, I want you to know what I pray for you. My prayer is that God will open your minds to get the love of Christ; to comprehend the love God showed us in Christ. And that's the part of Paul's magnificent prayer in the third chapter of Ephesians that we come to today.

I invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me again to Ephesians 3. Ephesians 3 and this wonderful prayer of Paul for the church there in Ephesus and the surrounding churches. In verse 14 he writes,

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the

riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

This was Paul’s prayer, and in this prayer, as he prays it for this church, we learn the foundational principles of effective prayer for this church; for ourselves individually and for the church as a whole. The principles that we’ve already discovered together, there are four of them. First of all, we learned that we must pray according to revelation; pray according to God’s revelation.

Secondly, we must pray with humility.

Thirdly, we must pray according to God’s character, as Paul does here in this prayer.

And the fourth foundational principle that we find ourselves in the middle of now is, pray for spiritual growth. Beginning in verse 16 and running down through verse 19, Paul prays three specific requests of God. And they’re all about the spiritual growth of these people he loved.

His first request for the Ephesians, we’ve looked at the last couple of weeks. The first request for spiritual growth is found in verse 16 and the first part of verse 17: that we would be strengthened in the inner man, strengthened in the inner man. We learned together that Paul wants us to pray that God would give us the gift of spiritual strength in our souls, as we are faithful to exercise our spiritual muscles—use the resources we’ve been given. And that God would give us this strength, not in a miserly way, but according to the riches of His glory, that is, in keeping with His greatness. And that He would accomplish this in us by the work of His Spirit, and the result of that would be—the result of that inner strengthening of the soul would be that we would have a greater sense of Jesus Christ being at home in our hearts. In other words, that our lives would increasingly bear a resemblance to the character of Jesus Christ.

That was his first prayer, and an audacious request it was. But the second is so much greater. Today, we come to Paul's second request for the Ephesians, and to what should be a pre-occupation in our prayers for ourselves individually, and for our church as well. The second request: now, it's important to understand here that although there are three separate requests in this prayer, they don't stand alone. Instead, each of them builds on the other.

This prayer has been compared by some commentators to a ladder. And each of these three requests is a separate rung on the ladder. They are distinct, but like the rungs on a ladder, the three requests are progressive. You can't step on the third rung until you've stepped on the first rung and the second rung. Now, that shouldn't surprise us, because he's praying for their spiritual growth here. (clears throat) Excuse me, and spiritual growth is often compared in Scripture to physical growth. And as much as you and I would like to skip various stages of our physical growth (say adolescence for example), and just go directly from childhood to adulthood, it can't happen. There is a distinct physical process that each person must follow from physical birth to physical maturity.

In the same way, there is a distinct spiritual process that flows from our spiritual birth (that is our regeneration) to spiritual maturity. Some may mature spiritually more quickly than others, but you cannot skip steps in the process. You can't just skip forward (you know, hit the fast forward button) to spiritual maturity. It doesn't happen that way in our spiritual lives any more than it can happen that way in our physical lives.

The apostle John really brings our understanding of this to a newer level, and a higher level. Look at 1 John. Turn to 1 John 2. This is an incredibly insightful passage. First John 2, and I think it may change your whole perspective on your own Christian life and experience. There are a lot of bad teachings about spiritual growth that teach that if you can just find some secret; if you can have some second blessing (some experience), that in a moment's time you will be catapulted from a spiritual ninety-pound weakling to a great giant in a moment's time.

That is not at all how the Bible describes spiritual growth. It doesn't happen like that spiritually any more than it happens physically. And notice how John describes it here. First John 2:12,

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Now what's going on here? Well, maybe I can help you understand it by analogy. Written on the wall in our laundry room at home there are a series of pencil marks and dates and names that are very important to our family. They mark the physical growth of each of our children. Last year, I repainted that room, and my wife absolutely insisted that before I paint it, she first had to transfer all of those marks and all of those dates and names to paper. And then, after I had finished, she made all those marks again on my perfectly painted wall. Why? Because those little pencil marks and dates indicate the physical growth and development of our children. They mark the progress of our children's growth.

That's what the apostle John is doing here in 1 John 2. He's giving us marks, if you will, to indicate our spiritual growth. And the marks are three, three categories. He refers to little children, young men (those who are spiritual youths), and to fathers (those who are spiritual adults and mature). And elders, if you will, in the sense of spiritual elders.

Notice how he describes each category—how he marks each stage. Little children in verse 12 and at the end of verse 13. He says your sins are forgiven, and you know the Father. Isn't that how little children are? They don't know much, but they know who their father is. He says that's where you are. As a spiritual infant, you know your sins are forgiven. Your sins are forgiven (you have a sense of that), and you know who the Father is. You know you belong. But you don't know much more. and you shouldn't stay in that stage.

Then there is spiritual youth. Notice how he describes them in verse 13 and again in verse 14. He says you are strong. You have overcome the evil one because the word abides in you. Here, you have spiritual youth, and the way you get to spiritual youth is by understanding the Scripture (having a knowledge of the Scripture), so that you are no longer susceptible to all the things that children are susceptible to. Remember how Paul describes it in Ephesians? He says no longer do I want you to be children, tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine, but I want you to grow up so that that doesn't happen anymore. And here, we find that spiritual youth know the Scriptures and because of that, they are able to overcome the evil one in the sense of false doctrine and error that would lead them off the path. They are spiritually stable because of their knowledge of the truth. But spiritual growth doesn't stop there either.

Notice the third category is fathers. They're described at the beginning of verse 13 and the beginning of verse 14, and they're described both times as those who know Him who has been from the beginning. They don't just know that God is their father, like a child does. They have a deep full knowledge of the person of God. They have a relationship with God that transcends that of a child. Those are marks of spiritual growth and progress. Well, that's essentially what Paul is doing in Ephesians 3 in his prayer. Like John, he is providing markers for our spiritual growth and development.

His first prayer is that we would become spiritually strong. Many of the Christians to whom Paul wrote this letter had come to Christ on his first visit more than ten years before. Others had come to faith during his three years of ministry there. And still others, more recently, in the six years since he had left them. And he's writing back to them, and so, Paul prayed that those Christians would grow out of their spiritual infancy into spiritual youth. They would become spiritually strong young men and women, strong in their knowledge of the truth.

But that's not where the spiritual journey ends. There's more. And so, Paul prayed that they would continue to grow. What's the next marker? Well, notice the middle of verse 17. That you may comprehend, that you may be able to comprehend Christ's love. That you may be able to comprehend Christ's love. Here is another prayer for our spiritual comprehension. You

remember back in chapter 1:15 and following is a prayer of Paul's for the Ephesians. And there, he prayed similarly, for their understanding, for their insight. Verse 17,

[I pray] that God would give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, ... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what the hope of His calling is ... and so forth....

This is incredibly important. It's incredibly important that we know the truth—that we have a knowledge of the truth. Paul has spent the first three chapters of this letter trying to increase our knowledge of spiritual realities. But at the same time, Paul understood that no amount of revelation, no amount of teaching, no amount of instruction, will benefit the Ephesians if the Holy Spirit doesn't enable them to know and comprehend the truth revealed. And so, he prays for our spiritual comprehension; not generically, but very specifically. Notice, he wants us to be able to grasp the love of Christ; how wide it is; how long it is; how high, and how deep. The heart of this request is that you may be able, (that you may be strong enough), to comprehend and know the love of Christ. And we'll look at that request in great detail next week, or the next time we study together.

But before that can happen (before you and I can comprehend the love of Christ), Paul identifies something that has to happen first. There's a condition, a pre-requisite. And as we prepare our hearts to celebrate the Lord's table, I just want us to consider that pre-requisite together. The pre-requisite for comprehending Christ's love. Notice verse 17. He says I'm praying that "you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend ...". You, being rooted and grounded in love. There is the pre-requisite for being able to comprehend. In the original text, as well as in English, the words "being rooted" and "being grounded" are both participles.

Now, as one who studies the Scripture in both English and the original languages (as one who taught college English), I understand how important grammar is. It helps us understand the writer's meaning. And here, both of these are participles. They are adverbial participles. That is, they function as adverbs. They modify the main verb, which is "that you may be able". Now when participles modify main verbs, they answer important questions like when or how or why.

Here, these two participles are answering the important question, “on what condition”. On what condition we will be able to comprehend? Before you and I can have the ability to comprehend the love of Christ, we must first be rooted and grounded in love. They are the pre-requisites that must be met before we can move on to really grasp the depth of the love of Christ.

Just to give you a little comparable illustration in contemporary culture: when I was growing up and in college (and I think it’s probably very similar still to this day) there were different levels of subjects that you could take. And each of those was indicated by a number system. For example, there was English 101, and then there was English 201 and English 301 and English 401. And of course, there were other courses thrown in there as well. And it was structured like that to make sure that the students understood that you needed to take the first course before you took the second. The courses build on one another. If you want to take English 201, you have to take English 101 first. It’s the pre-requisite.

Well, Paul says it’s the same way in the Master’s Spiritual College. There are pre-requisites to being able to comprehend the love of Christ. Notice how he puts it. Let me read it for you literally, from the Greek text. Verse 17, He says, In love, having been rooted, and having been grounded. In love, having been rooted, and having been grounded. Now, what does that mean? Well, first of all, the verb tense makes it clear that whatever he’s describing here happened at some point in the past with continuing results. That’s why the NAS chose to translate it “being rooted and grounded”. Same idea, same difference.

Something has universally happened to all Christians in the past. Now Paul obviously means the moment of our salvation. Something happened at the moment of our salvation that continues to have ongoing results, and it is the condition for being able to comprehend the love of Christ. And to describe what this thing is (it’s really only one thing he’s trying to communicate), but he uses two different metaphors—two distinct metaphors. One is agricultural and the other is architectural. Paul purposely mixes his metaphors here because both of them contain something important to our understanding of this concept. So, he’s talking about one pre-requisite, and he uses two different metaphors—two different words.

Let's consider them both carefully. First of all, having been rooted. Having been rooted. That is an agricultural term. It occurs a couple of times in the Old Testament in the Septuagint, but it occurs only one other time in the New Testament. Turn over to Colossians 2. Colossians 2:7. Notice verse 6. He says,

“... you have received Jesus Christ ... [as] Lord, *so* [I want you to] walk in Him, ... [You have been firmly rooted] there's our expression. [He equates it with receiving Christ as Lord, or receiving Jesus as Lord; being saved is the equivalent of being firmly rooted.]

Now, let me give you a little explanation of the metaphor. This metaphor (listen carefully), pictures the spiritual life of each individual Christian as a seed. A seed that has been planted in soil (planted by God in soil). That's who you are if you're a Christian. And the soil in which God has planted you is love. Now, you have to understand a little about roots to appreciate what Paul is saying here. In botany, the root is the underground organ of a plant, and it is absolutely crucial. It grows downward in response to gravity, and it serves two purposes--two purposes that are absolutely essential for the life of a plant.

First of all, it anchors the plant. If you've seen a large tree that's been blown over by a hurricane or a tornado, you see all that massive root system underneath it that's pulled up with that occurrence, you realize that it—it was the roots that was keeping that tree stable, that was anchoring it day in and day out.

The second thing that roots do—not only do they anchor the tree or the plant, but secondly, they absorb water and minerals and nutrients from the ground and transport them to the rest of the plant so that it can survive. Now, take those two functions of a root to Paul's metaphor here. Paul is saying that the life of a Christian is anchored in love. It's secured in love, and that our spiritual life is sustained by the love that's soaked up, as it were, by the roots into our lives. So, we are anchored in love, and our spiritual life is sustained by love. We're rooted in love.

Now, the second metaphor that Paul uses is “having been grounded” This is an architectural term. It means literally, to lay a foundation. This metaphor pictures the individual Christian life as a building that has been carefully begun on the right foundation. This word is used elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, you remember the story at the end of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells the parable of the two houses—the one built on the sand, the other built on the rock. He ends that parable by saying the house that was built on the rock withstood the storm of judgment because it was founded (there’s our word), founded upon a rock.

In Colossians 1—turn over to Colossians 1. Paul uses it in the parallel epistle. Verse 23, go back to verse 21. [He says] ... you were formerly alienated ... [you were] ... hostile in mind’ [to God] *engaged* in evil deeds. [Now you’ve been reconciled to God through the death of Jesus.] Verse 23, if indeed [here’s how you’ll evidence that you really have been reconciled to God,] if ... you continue in the faith firmly [founded, firmly planted, firmly] established ... and not moved away from the hope of the gospel....

In a building, a foundation is the primary support of the weight of the building. The force of gravity would cause that building, if it’s a tall building, to topple one way or the other, much as when you try to stack a stack of things high, and gravity pulls them over—pushes them over. The same thing would happen to a building without a proper foundation. It also is the support for the weight of the building itself, in the sense that it doesn’t just crush into the ground because it supports it. What Paul is saying is the Christian life (your life if you’re in Christ—you have been built—your life) is being built on a foundation of love. That’s what supports you. That’s what supports the weight of the Christian life and growth, is love; rooted in love, having been grounded in love. Paul was saying that God has built our lives upon the foundation of love.

Now, in the Greek text here, the order is a little different. Greek changes the order of the sentence to stress certain things, and here, the stress is on “in love”. So, it literally says, “in love, you have been rooted”. And “in love you have been founded”. If you are a Christian, you have been planted in the soil of love, and you have been—you are growing on, or being built upon, I should say, the foundation of love. Love is the foundation on which your life is constructed.

But the question is, whose love? Is this talking about my love for God and others? Or is this talking about God's love for me? In what way am I rooted and grounded? Is it in the knowledge of God's love for me, or is it in my own love for God and others? Well, the answer in the context of Ephesians is, both. Let me show you this.

In context, Paul clearly means that we have been rooted and grounded in the knowledge of God's love for us in Christ. Go back to chapter 2 of Ephesians 2:4. As he's describing our individual salvation, he says, but God, because of His great love with which He loved us, made us alive. He gave us spiritual life. It was the love of God that served as the foundation of our spiritual life at all. We're rooted in love. When we were saved, we experienced that love. We came to know God's love.

This is what Paul means in Romans 5 when he says that the Holy Spirit has poured out the love of God into our hearts. At the moment of salvation, you and I were given an assurance of God's love for us by a work of the Spirit. That's what Paul means in Romans 8 when he says that we've been given the spirit of adoption. And what happens? Because we've been adopted by God, because we have the Spirit within us, what do we cry out automatically? Abba, Father! We have the assurance of God's love for us. So, we are rooted and grounded at the moment of salvation in a basic knowledge of God's love for us.

But not only is that true, but we also are rooted and grounded in our own love for God and others as a reflection of God's love in us. In the same letter, Paul shows us that the believer who has truly experienced God's love for him will love others and love God. Look at Ephesians 5:1. There are other passages, but let me just show you this one because it sort of stands out. Ephesians 5:1,

Therefore be imitators of God, ... [as the children He loves.] and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, as an offering and a sacrifice to God....

In other words, there is an immediate tie between our understanding God's love for us and our loving others. If we get it; if we have that understanding of God's love, then we will love others in return. In chapter 5 he goes on very specifically to talk about husbands loving their wives, verse 25—just as Christ ... loved the church and gave Himself up for her.... Again, in verse 28. Again, in verse 33. But look over at the end of the book—Ephesians 6:24. Not only because we know God's love for us, do we love other people, but notice, who else we love. Verse 24, "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love." You see what Paul is saying? Listen carefully. We are rooted and grounded in love in the sense that we are rooted and grounded in the knowledge of God's love for us--at the moment of salvation, and beyond.

But we're also rooted and grounded in love in the sense that we begin to express that love of God to others and back to God. We love, as well as God loving us. Isn't this what Jesus taught His disciples. You remember, the Last Supper in John 13, He said "... here's this new commandment, which really wasn't a new commandment, but His presence, or His example was what was new about it." He says, I want you to love one another as I have loved you.

Turn over to 1 John because here, we read this so clearly. First John 4. We see how the two work together—both God's love for us and our love for God and others. John—1 John 4:11.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time, if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

There is a connection between being loved by God and loving God and others. Go down to verse 19.

We love, [why?] because He first loved us. [Christians love by nature because they have been loved.] Verse 20, If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen

cannot [it's impossible] love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

So, do you see the connection? We are rooted and grounded in love in the sense that we are rooted and grounded in the knowledge of God's love for us, but that immediately produces love in us for others and for God. So, in a very real sense then, we are rooted and grounded both in the knowledge of God's love for us, and in God's —or excuse me—in our love for others and for God. So, let me just ask you. Have you met the prerequisite? Are you like a seed that has been planted in the knowledge of God's love for you; and therefore, in all of your relationships with God and with the people around you, you exude genuine love? Has your life been built on the foundation of God's love in such a way that you are characterized by a pattern of love? Would the people who live in your house say you are a person characterized by love? Is love the foundation of your Christian life?

What Paul is saying is that it is impossible to fully grasp the love of Christ in its width and length and height and depth if you've never experienced it. If you're a Christian, you have experienced it. You have come to some understanding of the love of God for you in Christ, and you have naturally begun to express that love back to God and to others. And that qualifies you to grow in your understanding of Christ's love.

Now this is a perfect passage for the Lord's table. Because on the one hand, it calls us to self-examination. Listen carefully. Do you claim to be a Christian this morning? If I asked for a show of hands, would you say, I belong to Jesus Christ? If you don't love the people around you, you don't love God, John says. And if you don't love God, then you're not a Christian. You're a liar, John says. So, it calls for serious self-examination.

At the same time, it's a great encouragement, because, if you look at your life, and as imperfect as your love may be, you see that you really do love God. There is a love for God that longs to obey Him and to please Him. There's a love for others—the people of this church, the people in your life. However imperfect it may be, there's a desire to meet their real spiritual needs, to care for them in various ways. Then you've been rooted and grounded in love, and there's no greater

celebration of the love of God to us in Christ than the Lord's table. Because His death was the supreme illustration of His love. And this is a reminder of it.

Our Father, we thank You for the blood of Christ. We thank You for the reminder in it of His violent death as a sacrifice. He, the perfect One, the only sinless (blank) as the innocent, for us the guilty. Oh, Father, we thank You that in Your great eternal sovereign plan, You found a way to redeem sinners and still be just, by punishing the only innocent one who ever lived in the place of all who would believe. Father, we thank You and praise You.

And I pray that this week, You would help us to evidence the love we've experienced by loving You and loving Christ and loving others. Help us to begin to grasp the breadth and height and length and depth of the love of Christ.

In whose name we pray. Amen.