

What to Pray for (When You Don't Know What to Pray for)

Ephesians 3:14-21

Sunday, August 25, 2024

Has this ever happened to you? You're with a group of Christians, say in a Life Group, a Bible study, or with ministry team. As the meeting wraps up, it's time to close in prayer. Inevitably, someone asks, "Does anyone have a prayer request?"

You sit back and listen as others share a variety of needs. One shares about an aging parent struggling with major health concerns. Another person requests prayer for wisdom about a potential career change. The person sitting next to you begins to weep as they share about their prodigal child. Each request seems heavier than the last.

Eventually the group leader asks, "Anyone else?" You've not shared a prayer request at this point because (a) nothing urgent comes to mind, and (b) your problems seem to pale in comparison with all that's been shared.

Or perhaps you resonate with this scenario. You sit down for your daily devotions. After your allotted time of reading the Bible it's time to pray. You've resolved to pray for your family, your church, and that friend of yours that doesn't know Jesus. After a minute or two your prayer feels repetitive. Every time you pray you feel like you pray the same words about the same things. It just feels like you're repeating yourself.

What do you pray for when you don't know what to pray for?

For a while now, I've been on a quest to answer this question. After nearly nineteen years of pastoral ministry and thirty-five years of faith in Christ, I'm still not content with my prayer life. I've been on a journey to become a man of prayer. I've seen significant growth over the years, yet I know this will be a life-long pursuit.

I've read more books, listened to more podcasts, and attended more conference breakout sessions on prayer than I can count. I've highlighted and underlined many verses in my Bible that speak about prayer. I've tried prayer lists, prayer journals, and prayer apps to encourage greater prayerfulness.

So when Pastor Jerry told me a number of weeks ago that I could preach on any topic I wanted, I knew right away what I would choose. Prayer.

As we get into God's Word this morning, I want you to understand that I'm approaching the Scriptures not as a prayer-warrior but as a fellow disciple learning to pray. It seems appropriate then that before we get too ahead of ourselves that we turn our hearts to the Lord in prayer.

Heavenly Father,

In the pages of Scripture you have spoken through men like Luke and like the Apostle Paul. We hear their voices, but ultimately it is your word that we are

reading. As we consider today what your word says to us about prayer, we pray that you would teach us. And so, as I preach, I pray along with David the Psalmist who said,

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Psa. 19:14, ESV).

We’re going to explore two passages of Scripture today, one very briefly and the other more comprehensively. We’ll start with the passage that was read for us a few minutes ago from Luke’s Gospel.

You may be more familiar with the parallel passage found in Matthew’s Gospel, the section of Scripture we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke 11:1–13, Jesus’s teaching on prayer is similar to the Sermon on the Mount, but Matthew and Luke were likely describing two different occasions where the Lord was instructing his disciples. The text deserves its own sermon, but I’m only going to make two quick observations, one from the beginning and one from the end of this passage.

First, on one occasion when Jesus’s disciples found him praying in certain place, they asked their teacher, “Lord, teach us to pray” (11:1). What follows is Luke’s version of what we call *The Lord’s Prayer*. We won’t take the time to examine the prayer itself. Instead, let’s consider the request. “Lord, teach us to pray” (11:1).

Some of you know I’m a bit of a bibliophile—a book lover. Naturally, in my own pursuit of maturing as a prayerful disciple, I’ve often turned to books. I’ve often turned to the writings of godly men and women to learn about prayer.

J. I. Packer, teach me to pray!

Jen Wilken, teach me to pray!

Tim Keller, Beth Moore, D. A. Carson, teach me to pray!

As helpful as these resources have been in forming a theology of prayer and modeling a healthy spiritual discipline, the best of them keep pointing me in the same direction. They point me back to Jesus. And I’m learning to ask, “Lord, teach me to pray.”

One of the things we can pray for when we don’t know what to pray for is for God to make us men and women of prayer. When was the last time you prayed about your prayer life? When you don’t know what to pray for, ask God to deepen your devotion to Jesus through prayer. When you don’t know what to pray for, you can pray the Lord’s Prayer, but you can also pray, “Lord, teach me to pray!”

That leads me to my second observation. After Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer, the Lord continued to teach about prayer using two parables. I'll let you go back and take a closer look at these parables later. For now, take note of the key word in this passage—*Father*.

In both his prayer and his parables, Jesus showed his disciples that our loving Heavenly Father loves to hear and answer our prayers. Though he is the sovereign and holy God of the universe, his children can boldly approach their Heavenly Father with any request at any time.

It reminds me of the stories historians tell about when Abraham Lincoln's children would barge into their father's office in the White House. They ran to their father without any concern if they were disturbing his work. Though his cabinet members found it rude, the president never refused his boys an audience with their dad.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (11:11-13).

Here's what stands out to me most about Luke's version of Jesus's teaching on prayer. Our Heavenly Father loves to give his children good gifts. But what does the Father want us to for ask for more of? The Holy Spirit! It's good to ask our Father in heaven for the things we need. But do we recognize how much we need the Holy Spirit?

Does this mean that God wants us to tone down our prayers for physical needs? No way! Why else would Jesus teach us to pray “Give us each day our daily bread” if the Father did not want us to ask for daily provisions? If the Father didn't care about our bodies, then why did so much of Jesus's earthly ministry focus on healing?

We err when we pit spiritual need against physical need and assume one is a more godly prayer request than the other. In Scripture, the contrast is not so much between physical and spiritual as it is between earthly and heavenly matters.

If Pastor Jerry would let me preach for 45 minutes instead of 30, I would take us to a passage like Colossians 3 where Paul contrasts earthly and heavenly matters. But seeing that my time is half gone and I haven't got to my second passage, it's time to move on. Turn with me, if you would to Ephesians 3:14-21.

I mentioned earlier my love of books. No book has had a greater impact on my prayer life than *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by D. A. Carson. As the title suggests, the book examines the various prayers of Paul found in the New Testament. Though Carson shares in the first chapter a bit of his own wisdom from lessons

learned along the way, the remaining eleven chapters examine Paul's prayers found in his New Testament letters.

Paul's prayers are so profound, so unlike anything I can come up with that it might seem like he used A.I. to generate them. Of course, it wasn't A.I. that Paul used; it was D.I.—Divine Intelligence that produced these prayers. Since Paul was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this means that every prayer in Scripture is a prayer that conforms to God's will. It's a prayer God loves to answer.

That said, we must not adopt a name-it-and-claim-it posture when it comes to biblical prayers. The prayers we find in Scripture are not magical incantations we can recite in order to get the genie to grant all of our wishes. Rather, like the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, these prayers give us more than words to repeat; they provide us with a framework that reveals the Father's heart.

Speaking of genies. Do you remember what the genie—voiced by Robin Williams—in the 1992 Disney film *Aladdin* said was part and parcel of the whole genie gig?

“Phenomenal cosmic power! Itty bitty living space.”

Who doesn't want more power? To keep the 90s cultural references going, isn't that what Tim Allen's character always wanted on the show *Home Improvement*?

“More power!”

If the key word in Luke 11:1-13 was *Father*, the key word in Ephesians 3:14-21 is *power*. Let me start by reading the first paragraph where Paul says,

“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with **power** through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have **power**, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:14-19).

But power in the wrong hands is a dangerous thing. Skipping back a decade, right before the big reveal at the end of the 1980 film *The Empire Strikes Back*, Darth Vader clenching his fist exclaimed to Luke (Skywalker, not the Gospel writer),

“If you only knew the power of the dark side!”

On a more serious note, our increasingly politically polarized culture is telling us that in order to avoid disaster, our preferred party must seize power, not just to defeat the other side in an election but to destroy the enemy on the other side of the aisle.

Why then would Paul repeatedly pray for the Ephesians that they might have *power*? Let's take a closer look at the text. Staring again in verse 14,

“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (3:14-17a).

This is a prayer for *transformation* power. Paul prays for these believers that God the Father would “strengthen [them] with power... in [their] inner being” (v. 16).

The inner being or inner self that Paul speaks of is the part of us that controls who we are. Though we often think about our brains as our internal computer, more often we speak of our hearts as the domain of our inner self.

We also know that our inner self needs a lot of work. Our sinful hearts need to undergo a work of radical transformation. Centuries ago, God promised through the prophet Ezekiel that he would one day bring about this transforming work among his people through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezk. 36:25-27).

Paul says something similar in his prayer for the Ephesians. “I pray that out of [the Father's] glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph. 3:16).

Paul prays to the Father on behalf of these believers that God may strengthen them with power through the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit might do his transforming work in their inner being so that, according to verse 17,

“Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (3:17).

Six years ago this month, my family moved from Southeastern Iowa to Bemidji. That summer before we moved, we drove up to look at a handful of houses for one that might be our future home. As our realtor showed us each house, we snapped a number of pictures so that we could remember what each one looked like when we returned

home. I still have those pictures of what it looked like before we moved in. We've not done any major renovations, but we've done a little work in every room in the house so that those photos from 2018 no longer represent what things look like. Some of the changes are cosmetic, but over those six years we've had plumbers, electricians, and others come and repair or replace things that needed significant attention.

In verse 17, Paul says that the purpose of the Holy Spirit's transforming power at work is

“so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (3:17).

If you're a Christian, whether Christ came to live in your heart five months ago, at age 15, or in your late fifties, we know that our inner being wasn't move-in ready.

That's why Paul prays the way he does for these believers. He asks the Father to strengthen them with power through the Holy Spirit so that more and more they would be transformed become more like Christ.

When you don't know what to pray for, pray along with Paul that the Father would do a work in you through the Holy Spirit to make your heart Christ's home. Pray that our triune God would open every door so that Christ could rule in every room of our hearts.

And don't just pray that for yourselves. As Paul prays for the Ephesians, so should we pray for one another asking our Heavenly Father for his transformation power to strengthen every one of us.

But there's more to Paul's prayer. There's another prayer for power found in verses 17-19. It's a prayer for *comprehension power*. Continuing in verse 17 Paul says,

“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God”(3:17b-19).

The key word in this section is still power, but Paul now brings in another key word: *love*.

Back in the first part of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul celebrated the fact that

“In love [God the Father] predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (1:4-6).

Having been rooted and established in love, Paul know prays for these believers that they may have power to grasp the greatness of Christ's love. The fact that Paul again prays for power suggests that it is humanly impossible for us to fully grasp the love of Christ on our own. We need God to do a supernatural work so that our finite minds can comprehend what is incomprehensible.

Paul's prayer is that the Father would empower our ability to, as he says in verse 19

“know this love that surpasses knowledge” (3:19).

The love of Christ is so immeasurably vast that Paul asks God to enable the church to

“grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (3:18).

But there is a purpose that lies behind this mind-bending contemplation of a love that is beyond comprehension.

Paul's prayer is that believers

“know this love that surpasses knowledge—that [they] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (3:19).

The more God's people grasp the immeasurable greatness of Christ's love, the more they grow in maturity as Jesus's disciples. You see, a greater grasp of Christ's love for us goes beyond an increased awareness of his affection for us. Contemplating the width and length and height and depth of Christ's love leads us to a greater grasp of the width and length and height and depth of the gospel.

When you don't know what to pray for, ask God for power to grasp the love of Christ on display in the truth of the gospel. The more we grasp it, the more we grow.

As we wrap up, I want you to see how Paul ends his prayer. I don't just mean that Paul ends his prayer with an “amen.” Paul ends this prayer praising God for his power. He says in verses 20-21,

“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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (3:20-21).

I don't know about you, but I'm not the man of prayer I hope to be someday. I still working on it, but with the Lord's help I hope to grow in the discipline of prayer.

Aren't you glad that God is not limited by how often, how faithful, or how knowledgeable we are in prayer?

“[Our Father] is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (v. 20).

There’s that word again—power.

“[God] is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” because it’s “his power that is at work within us” (v. 20).

When you don’t know what to pray for, praise God that he

“is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (v. 20).

“[To God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (3:21).

Let’s pray.