

Praying for Power and Love

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, this week we've had the excitement of a close encounter with Mars. And I don't know if many of you have been able to see Mars from the 8am service.

A number of you have been able to. I still haven't been able to. I don't know if we've got particularly a large amount of cloud cover over the top of our house, but somehow I haven't seen it.

I've been told you might have to stay up till midnight, and I haven't quite done that yet either. But there's still a week and a half or so more to go. Earth's been approaching Mars since August last year, apparently, and they came the closest they have been in 60,000 years on Wednesday night.

And in reading and thinking about this, I've been struck by just how fantastic our universe is, how fantastic and how vast the universe is. It's almost incomprehensible to think of the solar system as being a tiny bit of the Milky Way galaxy, and that there are millions of other galaxies out there, and that one light year is more than 9,000 billion kilometres, and some galaxies are over 10,000 million light years away.

There's a lot that we know about these things, a lot that scientists know, but there's also a lot they still don't know. In a way, God is a bit like that in this morning's passage in Ephesians.

[1 : 41] It comes from a letter generally accepted as being written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus, which was a wealthy town in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey.

The church was originally founded by Paul on one of his missionary journeys there, and it had both Jews and Gentiles who were converted. By the time this letter was written, many new believers, mostly Gentiles, had joined the church, and they came from a Hellenistic background, a background where there was mystery religions, magic, and astrology practised.

And being fairly new believers, they still held a fear of evil spirits and of the cosmos in general, cosmic powers, and they needed to be assured of just where Jesus Christ stood in relation to these forces.

So with this background, we come to the passage, which you can find on page 950 of your Bibles, if you want to follow along. It's a prayer that was originally started back in chapter 1, verse 15.

And then Paul got diverted, as I'm sure some of us here get diverted in our prayers, and then he returns to it now in chapter 3, verse 14.

[3 : 02] And Paul's prayer is different from a lot of intercessory prayer that we often hear and often express ourselves in churches. Whilst the Ephesians had many practical needs, I'm sure, these are not the things that Paul is praying for here in this passage.

Instead, he asks, I'll unpack these requests more fully as we look closer at the passage, but firstly, let's commit ourselves to God.

In Heavenly Father, thank you that you are a great God, vast beyond all measure. Lead us now by the power of your Holy Spirit as we read your word.

Give us understanding of this passage today so that we might have hearts and minds that know and love you more fully to live to bring glory to you. Amen.

Well, just before this passage starts, Paul wrote in verse 12 of a bold and confident access that believers have to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

[4 : 26] He now demonstrates this in prayer to them, for them. He bends his knees, adopting an attitude of deep respect, humility and reverence.

People usually stood to pray in those days, so we get a picture of Paul dropping to his knees in earnest, intense intercession. As he kneels before God, he begins by focusing on the one to whom he's addressing.

He calls him, in verse 14, the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. In the Greek, there's a word play here between the words the words father and family.

Family can be translated as fatherhood, meaning that every family grouping, both good and bad, obedient and rebellious, in heaven and on earth, all come from the one Father.

All have their existence in God the Father, the Creator and Lord of all the cosmos. As Creator God, he is Father of all.

[5 : 38] And for Christians coming from a diverse background, such as the Ephesians were, the Jews and Gentiles, this union under the one Heavenly Father is affirming the sovereignty of God over all principalities and all powers.

God is the Father of all. Nothing in all the universe is beyond his scope. And this is the one to whom Paul prays. In verse 16, he makes his first request that the readers may be strengthened in their inner beings with power through God's Spirit.

It's the power of the Holy Spirit that enables believers to live the life they're called to live. Jesus promised his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

And this, we know, happened on the day of Pentecost. Jesus himself performed his ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit whilst here on earth.

And now Paul prays that the believers at Ephesus would be strengthened with this same spirit. The life of faith needs spiritual enlightenment. To comprehend the ways of God is beyond ordinary human understanding.

[6 : 58] the power of the Spirit is given according to the riches of God's glory. God gives according to the infinite riches of his power, of his wisdom, and of his love.

His glory is unlimited, infinite, and he gives generously. Paul prays that the Spirit will strengthen the believer's inner being, that part of the person which is the new creation, united to Christ.

It's the centre of the person's being where the Spirit is doing his renovating and transforming work. It's the person's mind and heart that's being changed to live a life of faith.

And Paul prays that the Spirit will so strongly influence their lives that they will show it. The greater the experience of the Spirit's power means the greater the growth in the person's character, of Christian character.

And just as a piece of jewellery, a piece of gold or silver jewellery, will often have a hallmark indicating the standard of gold or silver in that particular piece, so too a Christian's character is taking shape in the person's life through the power of the Spirit working in them.

[8 : 18] The fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, these things will be evident in that person as they're growing in Christian character.

When the believers meet together, their fellowship should be noticeably changed. Gone should be the enmity, strife, jealousy, quarrelling, factions and so on that marked their previous meeting together.

This leads to Paul's request in verse 17 that Christ should dwell in their hearts. This isn't referring to the initial acceptance of Jesus but that believers should experience his constant presence in their lives as a reality.

With the Spirit strengthening, Christ indwells their hearts. Their thinking, feeling and actions will take on Christ's character.

Increasingly, the believers will be orientated towards Christ, becoming the distinguishing characteristic or hallmark of their lives. The verb dwell means literally to settle down and feel at home.

[9 : 31] Paul is praying for a deeper experience between Christ and his people. And where this is happening, the believer will become rooted and grounded in love.

Now during last Sunday's gusty weather, Peter and I were driving home from a friend's 50th birthday party in Sydney. And by the time we got to Wangaratta, our petrol tank was a bit low, so we pulled off the freeway into a service station just south of Wangaratta.

And unfortunately, the woman greeted us and said, no, there's no petrol here. They had a total blackout. And we were low. We were on sort of the reserve tank. And the whole of Wangaratta and all the surrounding towns were without power.

So we sort of chugged along to Benalla, which fortunately did still have petrol. I'm not sure what caused the blackout in Wangaratta, but it's often uprooted trees hitting power lines and pulling them down.

Trees such as our native gums with their shallow root system and those that have been diseased and damaged are often the causes of it. For a tree to have the stability to resist gale-force winds, they must have deep roots that have been well-nourished.

[10 : 49] Believers too need these deep roots in Christ and to be well-nourished in Scripture. If faith isn't well-rooted deep in the love of Christ and knowledge of Scripture, it gets tossed about and at times tossed aside during the stormy patches of life.

Similarly, with buildings, whilst in Sydney we had a ride on the monorail and passed, among other things, a building site. And I was surprised to see the depth of one of these building sites.

They must have been dug equivalent to about four or five stories almost down underneath and a lot of that was going to be foundations and it was very deep foundations. It was going to obviously be a very tall building.

Christians too need good and deep grounding in the love of God for growth in their faith. In verse 18 we come to the second major request of this prayer and it builds on the first.

Paul prays that the readers may have the power to comprehend. The necessary power comes from being strengthened in the Spirit, indwelt by Christ, and rooted and grounded in love.

[12 : 06] But what exactly is he wanting them to comprehend? What are the dimensions measuring in that verse? The breadth, length, height, depth of what?

Since there's no object in the sentence it's a bit hard to actually know and there's been many discussions about it. Some see it as a reference to the heavenly Jerusalem that's referred to in the book of Revelation and in Ezekiel.

Others see it as the space filled by the love of Christ and his church. I think it's best to see it as a combination of both the infinite wisdom of God and the love of Christ.

Even if you knew everything there was to know about the dimension of God's universe you still wouldn't know all there is to know about God. He is immeasurable.

The book Your God is Too Small was written a number of years ago and as the title indicates it's a good reminder of the image many people have of God.

[13 : 11] A God who is remote, disinterested, lacking in power, disconnected. A God who's more a reflection of themselves than of the God of the Bible.

An idol whom they make in their minds that nothing much can be really expected of. But as we come to know and experience the love of God as revealed in the Bible we come to glimpse the power of him and what he accomplished through Jesus Christ.

Knowledge and experience of God ought to be growing as the believer grows. A couple of months ago we had a French student come and stay with us a French exchange student it was her first trip outside of Europe the plane stopped over in Perth and then it flew to Melbourne.

This is a big country she said in her faltering English as she got off the plane. We left Perth four hours ago. The whole time we've been flying over this one country.

I had no idea how big Australia was she said. Lara thought she knew all about Australia. She'd studied it at school she'd been planning her trip for 12 months but her knowledge was limited.

[14 : 35] It wasn't until she was flying over the country hour after hour did she begin to comprehend just how big it is. Paul prays in verse 19 that his readers would know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

This seems contradictory an oxymoron to know the unknowable. What Paul wants here is not some secret Gnostic knowledge but shared insights gained from scripture within the body of Christ within Christians meeting together.

Christianity is always a corporate religion. Knowing the love of Christ who died on the cross so that we the guilty could go free. The love that saved us from a life of death and destruction and brought us into a glorious inheritance is the knowledge that we have through scripture.

The penultimate of Christian knowledge can never be fully known. Christ's love is so deep it can never be fully measured.

It's so vast it can never be encompassed by the human mind. It is surprising and overwhelming the ultimate mystery.

[16 : 07] For Christian growth and maturity seeking to know the love of Christ is essential. To know his love means accepting Jesus' death on the cross as payment for our sins.

It's knowing his love that enables us to not only love him but to love each other and to spend our lives in service of each other and others.

Knowing the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge is deliberately paradoxical. However much we experience the love of Christ in our lives there's always more to know.

And so Paul prays his third request in verse 19 that the readers may be filled with all fullness of God as believers are strengthened through the spirit in the inner person as they allow Christ to dwell in their hearts through faith and as they know more and more the love of Christ so too are they being filled to the fullness of God.

It's a bit like a balloon as it's being inflated it grows more and more. Unlike the balloon the Christian life doesn't reach a limit and then suddenly pop and explodes in your face it continues to grow more and more to the fullness as we experience the work of the spirit in our lives.

[17 : 40] Nothing can exceed this divine fullness. It's the goal of the prayer. It's what Paul himself was willing to sacrifice all he had as he says in Philippians yet whatever gains I had these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. It was in knowing the fullness of God that Paul was spurred on to work tirelessly for the sake of the gospel.

All believers are called to have this same response to offer up their lives totally to God to work to his praise and glory. It's the climax of Paul's prayer.

Asking to be filled with the fullness of God is a bold response. It's bold asking for such a prayer. It's bold asking for the power and love of God.

But as this prayer indicates we can and we are invited to do so. Now you may be wondering if a prayer such as this would make a difference to your life, to the life of our church, to our friends and families.

[19 : 04] A number of years ago as a fairly new Christian I prayed this prayer myself and actually I'd forgotten about it until I was preparing this sermon that Paul had asked me to preach on this passage.

And I also then as I was coming to the end of it and thinking of this section remembered that it was a prayer that I prayed in intercessions for the church that I was in at that time, our home parish.

And at that time our church was going through a period of steady decline. We had very few young families, very, very few teenagers. Our young adults, small group, consisted of two people.

Many of our faithful elderly were becoming sick and frail. A number of changes had to be made and decisions taken. But I believe that God is answering those prayers.

In fact, I rang a friend who's a parishioner there the other day and she confirmed this. She said that now there are many new young families coming along to the services and she sees growth not only in numbers but in spiritual and Christian maturity.

[20 : 18] She said the young adult small group now has over 20 members and two more are about to begin. There's much to praise God for. Praying this prayer leads naturally to praise and worship.

It's concerned more with God than with individual needs. The doxology, words of praise and glory in verses 20 and 21, invite us to meditate on God, the one who is much more powerful than we could possibly imagine.

It's not a call to think up of lists or tasks for God to do, situations for him to fix. Instead, it's an invitation to accept the great power available to bring about a change in our lives in keeping with the power already at work in us so that the church together with Jesus Christ can glorify God.

We need to be aware of our need for the Spirit and to ask for his strengthening as Paul did. The Holy Spirit doesn't come to us without our willingness to accept him, nor are we changed overnight.

Just as a tree takes time to grow from a seed to a sapling to maturity, so too does the Christian life. It needs nurturing in love and truth.

[21 : 49] Older Christians need to encourage younger ones, and younger ones need to be teachable. As a community, we need each other to grow in strength and maturity.

And we also need to have time to take space for our relationship with God to develop. I think the demands on our time are one of the biggest threats to our growth as Christians.

We need time to develop that personal relationship with God, to know his love and care for us. In the midst of his very busy ministry, Jesus took time out to be alone to pray with God.

How much more do we need such time? I was amused when a person came to our last quiet day. He'd not been to one before, and he said that he came along expecting to see a room full of dewy-eyed mystics, and he was really surprised to discover instead of that, there was a room full of busy, active people.

The busier we are, the more we need to put aside time for prayer and reflection. It gives us the fuel for the journey. Finally, Paul knew that nothing could restrain God's ability to act.

[23 : 10] Just as we are stretched to comprehend the galaxies in outer space, so Paul's language is stretched as he attempts to express his vision.

One writer summed it up this way, God is able to do what believers ask in prayer. He is able to do what they might fail to ask, but what they think.

He is able to do all they ask and think. He is able to do above all they ask and think. He is able to do abundantly all they ask and think.

He is able to do infinitely more abundantly above all they ask and think. And what's more, this inexpressible power is at work in us.

Amen. Amen. Amen.