

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 3, 2010**

**PRAYER FOR A NEW YEAR**

**Ephesians 3:14-21**

Another year has come and gone. And what a year it was! In 2009 we saw the inauguration of the first African-American president of the United States, and in his first year in office, President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, even though wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continued to dominate the news and to occupy our thoughts and prayers.

In 2009 Bernie Madoff went to jail for investment fraud and Captain “Sully” Sullenberger successfully landed a plane on the Hudson River. 2009 was the year of ten percent unemployment, health care reform, the swine flu, a deadly rampage at Fort Hood, and scandal involving golfer Tiger Woods.

On a more positive note, 2009 was the year Lacey Mackey went to Togo with the Peace Corps.

Among those who died in 2009 were:

- Senator Ted Kennedy and his sister Eunice Kennedy Shriver
- Michael Jackson, the King of Pop
- Walter Cronkite, for many years the face of CBS News and considered “the most trusted man in America”
- Radio legend Paul Harvey
- Actress Farrah Fawcett, one of “Charlie’s Angels”
- Singer Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary
- Novelist John Updike
- Missions strategist Ralph Winter
- Millvina Dean, the last living survivor of the *Titanic*. She was two months old when the ship went down in the icy waters of the North Atlantic in 1912.

In our church family here at Faith, we said good-bye to both George and Edna Kolarik, as well as Dwight Borgstrand and Jeanette Morelli, all of whom went home to be with the Lord in 2009. Some of you said good-bye to loved ones in your family as well. Which is never an easy thing to do.

**ONE FOR THE BOOKS**

Several years ago Greg Asimaloupoupos wrote a poem called “One for the Books.” While it was not written with 2009 in mind, I think its message is timely for today. Here it is:

Another year’s been published  
It’s bound to be remembered  
Pages filled with happiness

Paragraphs of fear  
 Footnotes of regret  
 Endnotes of prayer  
 Chapters of contentment  
 Indexes of joy  
 Illustrations of amazing grace  
 In a most amazing year  
 But all that's ancient history  
 What's passed is in the past  
 It's time to write a sequel  
 Filled with memories that will last  
 Your tablet is unblemished  
 Just like the days ahead  
 So, filled with faith and confidence  
 Write on with ink not lead

For each of us, the year now past contained both blessing and hardship, disappointment and joy. This life is full of surprises, not all of them happy. When we arrive at the end of 2010 and look back – if in the providence of God we are permitted to live another year – I don't know what this year will look like in the rear-view mirror. I don't know what the defining moments of 2010 will be. I don't know how our lives will change or who will be taken from us. None of us knows.

But God knows. And, as Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:12, I know whom I have believed – I know the One in whom I have put my hope and my trust – and I am convinced that He is able, even more than able, to take care of everything I have entrusted to Him for this life and for eternity.

Can I get an “Amen”?

### **PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

Our Scripture reading today is a prayer Paul prayed for the followers of Christ in Ephesus and wherever his letter to the Ephesians was (or is) read. It is a prayer of intercession or petition for the people of God, which includes all of us who have put our trust in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we begin 2010, I encourage you to think of it as a prayer for a new year.

In *The New Living Translation* (NLT) of the Bible, Paul's prayer reads this way:

When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall on my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from His glorious, unlimited resources He will give you mighty inner strength through His Holy Spirit.

And I pray that Christ will be more and more in your hearts as you trust in Him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to

understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep His love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Now glory be to God! By His mighty power at work within us, He is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. May He be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen.

- Ephesians 3:14-21

Isn't that a magnificent prayer?

It is a prayer for the prospering of our souls (which is of far more eternal significance than the health of the economy) to the end that God will be more and more magnified and glorified in our lives. It is a prayer for the outpouring of the vast, unmeasured riches of God's grace and power in our lives, treasures with which nothing of this world can compare. It is my prayer for you in 2010 and for as long as God gives you breath.

"For this reason," Paul begins in verse 14 (NIV, ESV). It is because of the greatness of God's grace, because of the plan of redemption God has carried out in the saving work of His Son, "because of the wisdom and scope of God's plan" (NLT), that Paul was moved to fall to his knees and pray this prayer. You can pray in any posture, of course – standing, sitting, kneeling, walking, lying prostrate – but sometimes, if your knees can take it, it is good to kneel. Getting on our knees before God is a good reminder that He is Lord and we are not. It is a reminder of our submission to and dependence on God.

### **STAIRCASE PRAYER**

John Stott, one of the finest expositors of the Bible of the last one hundred years, describes this prayer in Ephesians 3 as a "staircase prayer" with each petition taking Paul higher, step-by-step, in his desire for God's glory and blessing in the lives of His people.

### **THE FIRST STEP**

He prays first for his readers (including us) to be strengthened with the *dunamis* or power of the Holy Spirit by the indwelling of Christ in our hearts through faith (3:16-17). That is my prayer for each of you in 2010 and beyond: That Christ will be more and more at home in your heart as you trust in Him. That the Lord Jesus will live there not as a guest who has come for a visit, but as a permanent resident – even more, as the head of the house and the Lord of your life. That He will have the run of your house with no corner of your life marked "Off Limits" to Him. And, as He lives in you and you find your life in Him, that the power of the Holy Spirit will be unleashed in your life.

I fear that we underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit. I fear that we too often limit the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and church because we do not expect Him to do much.

Please do not minimize the power of the Holy Spirit. Invite the Holy Spirit to work in His grace and power in you and all around you. Allow the Holy Spirit to do His work in your life. Ask God to let loose His Spirit in this land and around the world to bring a great and lasting revival.

May *you* be strengthened with the power of the Holy Spirit day by day as the Lord Jesus lives and reigns in you.

### **THE SECOND STEP**

Second, Paul prays for the Ephesians (and us) to be rooted and grounded in love (3:17). To say it another way, he prays that we might have deep roots (like a tree whose roots go down deep into the ground) and a firm foundation (like a well-built house).

The unchanging, unending, unparalleled love of God is to be the soil in which our lives are rooted. It is the foundation on which our lives are to be built. It is God's love for us, His seeking, saving love, which moves us to love Him and enables us to love one another.

This is my prayer for you as we begin a new year: That you will be rooted and grounded in God's unchanging love for you, and that you will grow in your love for God, for each other in the family of believers, and for the world God loves so much that He sent His Son to die for it. May this love be the defining mark in our lives and relationships in 2010 and beyond.

### **THE THIRD STEP**

Third, Paul prays that our understanding and experience of the love of Christ will increase, though we will never be able to grasp it fully (3:18-19). *The Message* speaks of "the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love."

It is simply impossible to say how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is. Human language is inadequate to express it. It is a love, as Paul says, that "surpasses knowledge" (3:19). I think the more we understand it, the more we experience the love of Christ in a personal way, the more we realize how indescribable and incomprehensible it is. Limited as our understanding is, the truth of the gospel is that we are far worse than we think, and we are more deeply loved than we could ever imagine. That goes for me. And for you.

After Communion today we're going to sing these words:

O the deep, deep love of Jesus  
 Vast, unmeasured, boundless free  
 Rolling as a mighty ocean  
 In its fullness over me  
 O the deep, deep love of Jesus  
 Love of every love the best  
 'Tis an ocean vast of blessing  
 'Tis the source of peace and rest

Samuel Trevor Francis, who wrote these words in 1875, was right. In the coming of Jesus to save us, to give His life on the cross as the payment for our sins, we catch a glimpse of the height and depth and length and width of God's love for us.

Sometimes I just want to go up to people and say: "Do you have any idea how much Jesus loves you?" I don't do it because I'm too shy. At least that is my excuse. But I'll start with you today: Do you have any idea how much Jesus loves you? Do you? My prayer for you this year is that you will know to a greater degree than you have ever known before just how much Jesus loves you. May you know as well how much He loves His church, and how much He loves this world. And may you rest more and more securely in the embrace of His love that will never let you go.

### **THE FOURTH STEP**

The fourth step in Paul's staircase prayer is that we may be filled up – filled to the brim – with the fullness of God. Not that these jars of clay could ever contain the fullness of God. That could never happen. But we *can* be filled to the full measure of our capacity, with every detail and every duty and every delight in our lives devoted to God. Given over to Him for His purposes. So that our lives might reflect and bear witness to the attributes of His character.

My prayer for you – for all of us – is that the life and love and character of Christ Himself may be fully formed in us, to the glory of His name.

Paul's prayer concludes in verses 20 and 21 with a doxology, an expression of *doxa*, or glory, to God. All true theology both begins and ends with doxology. For if we understand who God is, what He is like, and what He has done, if we even begin to comprehend the greatness of His grace and power, we will be moved in our hearts to fall on our knees in worship and to proclaim His glory without ceasing. To Him be the glory forever.

As another year unfolds, whatever it may hold, may God's grace abound to you. May His love surround, protect, and inspire you. May His Spirit make you strong. And may God fill you full of Himself so that you find your life, your purpose and your joy in Him.

Lord, let it be so in 2010 and beyond. Amen.