

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 8, 2012**

PRAYER FOR A NEW YEAR

Ephesians 3:14-21

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

The Bible is a book of many prayers. It contains a wealth of prayers expressing the cry of the human heart for just about any situation or circumstance you and I will ever encounter in life. Some of these prayers are intensely personal. Others are more pastoral in focus. I want you to look with me today at one of the Bible's many prayers, a pastoral prayer Paul prayed for the church – for all the believers, all the Christians, all the followers of Christ – at Ephesus. Turn in your Bible or in the pew Bible to Ephesians 3:14-21. With prayerful, believing hearts, let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

A PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH

Before the new year gets old, while there is still a feeling of newness about it, I want you to think of Paul's prayer here in Ephesians 3 as a prayer for a new year. Actually, of course, it is a prayer for any season of the year, or any season in your life. Just as there is never a time when it is not time to pray, there is never a time when this prayer is out of season. It is a prayer for all of God's people, for all of us, and for everyone everywhere who belongs to God's family through faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. While this new year is still new, I claim this prayer as a prayer for a new year, a prayer for 2012, a prayer for each one of us and for all of us who make up the body of Christ here at Faith.

Listen to Paul's prayer again, based on the New Living translation (NLT) of the Bible:

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

And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home 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.

A PRAYER TO THE FATHER

There are several things in this prayer I want you to notice and take to heart. Notice first that Paul's prayer is addressed to "the Father" (3:14). No doubt Paul knew of the instruction Jesus gave His disciples, in their praying, to address God as "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). Jesus spoke often of His special relationship with God the Father, and he invites us through faith in Him to enter into this grace-filled, love-lavished relationship as adopted children of our heavenly Father (1 John 3:1; John 1:12-13).

Paul understood that God is not merely a divine but distant father-figure to whom we bring our requests and petitions in prayer. God is, in effect, the Father of all fathers. He is the all-wise, all-loving, all-gracious, all-powerful, all-holy Father of a worldwide family consisting of everyone who believes in Him, all who acknowledge Him as Lord and live under His sovereign and gracious rule, all who know their need of a savior from sin and trust in Jesus Christ and Him alone for salvation. He is a loving Father to the fatherless, a Father to those who have no earthly father, and a Father for those of us who carry in our hearts what John Eldridge calls a "father wound." If you have been wounded by your father in some way, you have a Father in heaven who is able to heal your wound. The Father's love for you is unconditional and everlasting. There is nothing you have to do – nothing you *can* do – to earn it. It is given freely. And God wants you to feel the warm, secure embrace of His love for you.

The Father to whom Paul prays is your Father in heaven, if you trust in the Son and what He has done for you and your salvation.

A STAIRCASE PRAYER

Now, moving on to the prayer itself, you can see that it is a prayer of petition or intercession, as Paul spells out His requests and longings for the church in Ephesus and all of its members individually. John Stott described it as a "staircase prayer" – James Boice referred to it as a "prayer ladder" – with each petition and request taking Paul higher, step-by-step, in expressing his desire for the fullness of Christ's love and power to be experienced and expressed in the lives of God's people.

I trust you know that Paul was not a proponent of the "prosperity gospel" – that is, the false gospel, the distortion of the true gospel, the idea that God wants all of us, all of His children, to prosper financially, to be rich in material possessions, to have, in effect, *everything* our hearts desire. The "prosperity gospel" perverts the message of Jesus and the message of the Bible as a whole. Paul saw the irreconcilable differences between the "prosperity gospel" and the true gospel of grace. In the spirit of the true gospel, though, he prayed for the prospering of the Ephesians' souls, to the end that God would be more and more magnified and glorified in their lives. He prayed that they would be made rich with the spiritual riches of God's power and love. Which is my prayer for you in this new year.

Paul prayed first, in verses 16 and 17, for the Ephesians to be strengthened with the *dunamis* or power of the Holy Spirit by the indwelling of Christ in their hearts. This is my prayer for

you, for each of us and all of us: *That Christ will be more and more at home in your heart as you trust in Him. That He will dwell in your heart not as a temporary guest but as a permanent resident – even more – as the Head of your house and the Lord of your life. And that, as you dwell in Him and He in you, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit will be unleashed in you, to the glory of God.*

What Paul says may be just a little bit confusing unless you understand that to have Christ dwelling in you, making your heart His home, and to have the Holy Spirit living in you are the same thing. In fact, it is by the Holy Spirit that Christ dwells in our hearts. And when the Spirit lives in us, He gives us strength. The strength we need. The spiritual strength that enables us to do anything and everything that God wants us to do (Philippians 4:13). Because He is able. And we are able in Him. We are able in His power.

So, dear friends, I pray that *you* will be strengthened with His power day by day as Christ lives and reigns in you.

Second, in verse 17, Paul prayed for the church in Ephesus and every member of it to be *rooted and grounded in love*. In God's love. Said another way, Paul prayed that they would have deep roots (like a strong, healthy tree) and a good, firm foundation (like a well-built house).

This is not a complicated idea. What is the soil in which we are to give our lives roots? What is the foundation upon which we are to build our lives as followers of Christ? The answer is love for God and one another. The assurance of God's love for us moves us to love Him and prompts us to love each other. Which is possible in the fullest sense only by the power of the Holy Spirit, as the Lord Jesus lives and reigns in us.

I pray that you will be rooted and grounded in the love of God – in His love for you, in your love for Him, in your love for one another as members of His family, and for a world God loves so much that He sent His Son to die for it. Friends, may this love and its twin sister, grace, be the distinguishing marks in our lives and relationships in the coming year.

Taking the third step up the staircase, in verses 18 and 19, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would see and understand and grasp more fully the “extravagant dimensions” (*The Message*) of the love of Christ for us. I don't know who said it first, but the truth of the gospel is that we are far worse than we think, and more deeply loved than we could ever imagine. That goes for me. It goes for you, too. Do you understand that?

In the coming of Jesus to save us, in His incarnation and life, suffering and death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, we catch at least a glimpse of the breadth and length and heights and depths of the love with which Jesus loves you and me. What else but love – *agape* love, self-giving and self-sacrificing love – can explain what Jesus did for us? *He did it for you. Because He loves you.* Even though it is way beyond my ability to explain the “why” of it, I know it is true. I know it is real. And nothing will ever change the fact of His love for us.

My prayer for you in the coming year is that you will grasp more and more how much Jesus loves you, how much He loves His church, how much He loves this world, and that you will rest more and more securely in the embrace of His love that will never let you go.

Finally, in verse 19, Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus to be filled up with the fullness of God. Not that any of us could ever contain the fullness of God. That could never happen. Only Jesus, because He is God in the flesh could have the fullness of God dwelling in Him (Colossians 1:19; 2:9). But we *can* be filled to the measure of our capacity, with every detail, every desire, every responsibility, and every relationship in our lives given over to God. Given over so that His purposes may be fulfilled in us. So that His character may be formed and revealed in us. So that others may see what God is like by looking at our lives, and give Him the glory and praise He deserves.

This is my prayer for you, for each of you, and for all of us as a church in the coming year: *That we may all grow up to full spiritual maturity in Christ and be filled to the full measure of our capacity with the fullness of God, offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1) for God to use as He desires.*

If we give ourselves to God in this way – if you give yourself to God in this way – God can use us to make a world of difference in this world.

DOXOLOGY

Before I close, I must call your attention to the doxology at the end of Paul’s prayer. A doxology, as you may know, is an expression of glory and praise to God (from *doxa*, the Greek word for “glory”).

Someone has observed that all true theology begins and ends with doxology. I say Amen to that. If the truth of who God is and what He has done for us grips our souls, if we have even an inkling of the greatness of His power and love, we will be moved in our hearts to bow down to worship, to stand in amazement at the wonder of His glory and grace, and to proclaim the greatness of His glory without ceasing. It is the only reasonable thing to do.

Truly God is able, more than able, in any and every situation, to bring us through it and to do more than we could ever imagine, according to His power at work in us. Because He is able, because He is faithful, we can trust Him. And so, even when we face a hard decision or find ourselves in a hard place, we can say, with Paul:

Glory be to God!
 Glory to God in the church!
 Glory to God in Jesus the Messiah!
 Glory to God from before the beginning of time
 to the end of history and beyond,
 from everlasting to everlasting!

In the coming year, glory to God in your life and mine. Lord, let it be so. Amen.