

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

---

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

**Broadcast Date:** 30 October 2005

**No.** T0390

**Speaker:** Mr. Ian Britton

---

## **Prayer for Spiritual Growth - Ephesians 3:14-21**

The most powerful people I have ever met in my life are little old ladies! Not all little old ladies, just a particular kind. They are often widows, sometimes housebound, but always genuine Christians. In my experience they are more influential than schools full of teachers, make more impact than sports stars and wield more real power than any number of politicians. They have one secret weapon that makes them such unlikely shapers of the world ... prayer.

Perhaps it is because they are physically unable to do the things that keep most of us so busy, or perhaps they have more time to spare. More likely, it is because they have discovered, over a lifetime, what it is that really changes things. Whatever the reason, some of the world's great 'prayer warriors' are little old ladies. The ranks of the 'prayer warriors' are not all filled with elderly females though. Today we are going to consider another of the Apostle Paul's prison prayers. This one is found in Ephesians 3.

Paul had more responsibilities and duties than we are ever likely to have but he seems to have found a remarkable amount of time for prayer. He prayed both for churches and for individual believers on a regular basis. You may have wondered, as I sometimes do, how a busy man like Paul could find time to pray for all those people. He travelled the world as a missionary and teacher when travelling was a truly difficult and dangerous task. He wrote many books of the New Testament, narrowly escaped angry mobs and defended himself in various legal cases! When I wonder how Paul found time for so much prayer in the middle of all this activity, it proves that I have got my priorities mixed up once again!

I doubt Paul ever thought, "I am too busy finishing this letter to the Church at Ephesus to spend much time praying today". No doubt his reasoning was, "How can I possibly hope to do something this important if I don't talk to God about it at length?" Paul had learnt to say in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me". He knew that working harder and harder in his own strength was self-defeating. The first words of Paul that are actually recorded are in Acts 9:5 when, blinded by the light on the road to Damascus, he is asked by the Lord Jesus why he is persecuting Him. He replies "Who are You, Lord?" He might not have recognised it as such, but it was his first prayer! Having begun his Christian life in prayer, as we all do when we ask the Lord into our hearts as Saviour, Paul carried on the rest of his life in the same way.

What makes prayer so special, and so powerful, is that we get to work with the Creator of everything and the Lord of all. However if we think that prayer allows us to influence God according to our interests, or use Him to achieve our purposes, we are still looking at prayer from the wrong perspective.

What things do we request when we pray for ourselves: better health, a difficulty removed, problems to go away? These aren't the sorts of things little old ladies pray for, and they don't feature much in the prayers of Paul either. Paul prayed predominantly for spiritual rather than practical needs. Not because he didn't recognise the practical needs. He knew enough of practical, physical problems himself to be able to appreciate the difficulties of others. He risked a great deal to bring a gift of money to the Jewish Christians from their Gentile brothers and sisters, but his chief goal wasn't the relief of their poverty but their spiritual blessing. You can read about this journey in the end of Romans 15 and in Acts 21.

In Ephesians 3 the main request in Paul's prayer is for the Spiritual Growth of the Christians he was writing to, and that includes you and me. The prayer is found in 3:14-21. We will look at it in five sections:

1. verses 14 and 15. Here we find out to whom the prayer is addressed.
2. verse 16. A prayer for strengthening of our inner man.
3. verse 17. A prayer for Christ to dwell in us richly.
4. verses 18 and 19. A prayer for us to be able to grasp some great Christian truths.
5. verses 20 and 21. A prayer of praise.

### To whom the prayer is addressed

I will read verses 14 and 15: "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named". To whom Paul is praying? It is always important when we are speaking to remember who we are speaking to! Most of us will have been told by our parents or teachers when we were younger to, "remember who you are talking to". It is good advice. It is wise when we are praying to remember who it is we are speaking to. The first thing to note is Paul's attitude: he bows his knees. He may or may not have literally knelt down to pray; the main point is that he recognised he was coming into the presence of One much greater than himself. His attitude was one of respect and reverence. We are brought wonderfully close to God by what Jesus Christ has done at the cross. We are even brought inside God's family, but it is always right to remember that God is God, and we are His creation. Confidence and boldness are right when approaching God, even frankness. Verse 12 of our chapter tells us "we have boldness and access with confidence"; but disrespect and familiarity are out of place.

Paul speaks to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know from John 20:17 that Jesus' Father is now our Father. This prayer then is a family matter. It is a prayer for those who are the Father's children and the request is that the Father will give good things to His children for the sake of His Only Begotten Son. Unlike a human father, God will never be too busy to bother, or not really listen to what we say. When we approach the Father, in the name of the Son, to pray for His children and their spiritual growth, we are guaranteed complete attention. The Father is not just associated with believers alive today though. Verse 15 says literally "of whom **every** family in heaven and earth is named". God associates His name with all believers, past, present and future including those who lived before Christ came into the world.

At the start of this prayer then the focus is on a great God who works on a grand scale. If we are named after Him, as the Father of the family, then this suggests at least four things:

- we obtain our life from Him
- we can come in confidence to Him
- He will lead us
- we carry His name and must be careful not to dishonour it.

### A prayer for strengthening of our inner man

I will read verse 16. "That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man". The first thing to notice is that God grants "according to the riches of His glory", not according to our need, or our estimate of what is required. The riches of God's glory cannot be measured. The illustration is often given of an extremely wealthy man meeting a poor boy and giving him money for clothes, food and shelter. This would be generous, and would be giving according to the need of the child. However, if the man was so moved by this child's plight, and that of others like him, that he gave millions of pounds to set up services and funds to ensure that no child in that country was ever poor again, that would be giving according to his riches. This is the way that God gives, "good measure, pressed down and shaken together, and running over" as Luke 6:38 says.

Paul wanted the Ephesians to grow. Not to be always helpless little babies but to mature into strong, full grown adults. Physically our strength follows a curve. We start as babies with almost no strength and needing somebody to do almost everything for us. As we grow we become stronger and more independent and often have others depending on us. Later, as we age, our strength starts to diminish and we may become dependent on others once more. Our Christian lives should only follow the first two stages. We should grow and become stronger continuously. We will never arrive at full strength and knowledge until we reach heaven. This strength, of course, is not physical or even psychological. It is the "inner man" that is growing. The inner man is not the same as my personality or intellect; it is the *new* me that came into being when I trusted Christ as my Saviour and was "born again". This inner man needs feeding and caring in order to be strengthened. This is done by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes His home in all those who trust Christ as Saviour and one of His tasks is to "strengthen us with might". Although this might sound like a mysterious, spiritual process, it is achieved in simple, practical ways. The Spirit increases our knowledge when we read God's word. He increases our faith when we exercise simple trust in Christ. He makes us like Christ when we try, in small ways, to live for Him. In other words, the Spirit works with us to make possible, things that we cannot do in our own strength. For example, I cannot understand the Bible by my own intellect, no matter how clever I may be. When I read God's word, the Spirit will open my understanding. However He will not open my understanding if I do not open the Bible and read it!

To get some exercise I like to get out on my bike occasionally. It is quite hilly where I live and my legs and lungs are soon feeling the strain. I usually arrive home tired and wondering if it is worth it, but I do gradually find that my legs and lungs are strengthened by this process. My inner man is strengthened in a similar way. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, but exercise will be needed on my part too. The more I am strengthened, the more I can do, and so the stronger I become. This is the growth Paul wanted for all his readers.

### **A prayer for Christ to dwell in us richly**

I will read verse 17. "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love." The question immediately arises "Doesn't Christ already dwell in the hearts of those who are saved?" The answer is obviously, yes. Verses like Colossians 1:27 which talks about "Christ in you", make it clear that this is the case. What Paul is praying for is that we might experience this as a reality in our day to day lives, and show evidence of the fact that Christ lives in us.

If somebody comes to stay at our house we get the guest room ready. Papers are tidied away, the bed settee is pulled out and towels are got ready. When our guests arrive we do not confine them to the one room; they have the run of the house. We will probably make an extra effort with the housework and cooking for our guests as well. Christ should dwell in our hearts in this way. No parts of our lives should be "off limits" to Him. Our lives should be kept clean from sin and orderly and tidy. We should give the best of everything we have and are to Him.

This is all the work of faith and will result in our being "rooted and grounded in love". The love in question here is God's love, not our own. Our love comes and goes, and is not a solid basis for anything. God's love is always solid and sure. "Rooted" suggests good soil to grow in, with all the necessary water and nutrients provided. It is the roots of a plant that provide strength and anchorage when the wind blows. God's love provides the food, water and anchorage for our inner man that will allow it to grow. It is also implied that a well rooted plant should bear fruit. "Grounded" suggests a solid foundation that we can build on. A stable rock to raise a great building on. This mixed metaphor of a building and yet something organic and alive is often used by Paul in his epistles to speak about the growth of individual believers and the church as a whole. For example 1 Corinthians 3:9 says, "You are God's cultivated field, you are God's building".

### **A prayer for us to be able to grasp some great Christian truths**

I will read verses 18 and 19. "May be able to comprehend, with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height and to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge, that you might be filled with all the fullness of God." This section tells about the things that Paul wants us to understand. He wants us to grow and be strengthened so that we can take these things in. They are also things that will strengthen us further in a kind of virtuous circle. Paul is about to wean his readers from milk to strong meat (see Hebrews 5:12 to 14).

Paul wants us to know the breadth, length, depth and height of all the truths that he has already laid out in this book and no doubt those in all the rest of the Bible too. In the widest of requests, Paul wants us to take in all that God has provided through Jesus Christ - what he calls the "unsearchable riches of Christ" in verse 8 of this chapter. They are unsearchable, not in the sense that we cannot search into them - we are meant to do exactly that - but in the sense that we can never come to the end of them. We should want to grow spiritually as believers so that we can comprehend more and more of who Christ is and of what He has done. This cannot be done without study and application but it does not need college courses or academic skills. It is what God has provided for all His children and He has given us both the appetite and the digestive system to cope with them. It is for all saints because it is available for every single believer. It is also for all saints because we need to enjoy fellowship with other believers, and the help and encouragement that this gives, in order to be able to enjoy it properly.

Knowledge alone must never be our aim. It is to be completely tied up with the love of Christ. Again this love passes knowledge because its extent is way beyond what we can know, but we are explicitly told that we should know it. If we know something of the dimensions of the unsearchable riches of Christ, and the love of Christ which passes knowledge, we will be filled with all the fullness of God. You might say that no human being can hold all the fullness of God, and I would agree. But a human heart that has had the fullness of God poured into it will certainly be full. If we continue to grow, then our ability to contain what God offers will enlarge and we will be blessed even more.

### **A prayer of praise**

I will read verses 20 and 21. "Now unto Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen". Like all good prayers, this one is a mixture of requests and praise. Our prayers should not become shopping lists of things that we ask for. We must also remember to give thanks for what we have received. If our prayers are real, and we truly find ourselves in the presence of God, we are bound to turn in praise to Him. We are reminded again at the end of this prayer that God provides according to His riches and not our need. We need not be afraid of asking too much, since God is able to supply more than we ask, or even think possible. God has no shortage of supply and He is pleased when our appreciation of Him leads us to ask more and more of Him. Again we are reminded that the supply route is by "the power that works in us", that is the Holy Spirit. There *will* be glory to God

forever and ever; this is inevitable. How wonderful that glory will be brought to God by the church. Despite all our failings, Christ has made sure that, for all eternity, we will display His glory and greatness to the Father's honour.

My prayer is that we will be encouraged to grow in our spiritual lives, and that this growth will result in increasingly active prayer lives. If we have appreciated the prayers of others for us, then we should learn to become 'little old ladies' ourselves, as it were, and pray for the spiritual growth of others and of ourselves. Then Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 will have been answered once again.

---

**Please Note:**

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.