

An Old Prayer for a New Year

Ephesians 3:14-21

Well, I trust you had a good Christmas and good week since then. Today is, of course, the last Sunday of the year. In fact, it is the last day of the year which means we will be ringing in a new year in a matter of hours.

Next Sunday, we will return to our sermon series through Matthew and pick up where we left off before Advent, but today, we will look elsewhere and offer a simple encouragement as we wrap up another year and look forward to the new year.

The end of a year, for most people, is **marked by reflection and planning**. We reflect back on what we experienced, on our habits, and on our choices. But we are also planning ahead. Planning out goals, schedules, vacations, perhaps new habits and better choices.

And all of this is good and healthy. Both reflection and planning is an important part of growth, but these activities are always accompanied by emotions.

Sometimes, those emotions are positive; sometimes, they are negative.

You might be reflecting on this past year and be filled with gratefulness, awe, wonder, and joy; **or** you may experience grief, regret, pain, and shame.

The same is true with planning. You might be planning for the next year and be filled with hope, excitement, or zeal, **or** you might experience despair (in which you are hopeless about what is to come), apathy (indifference about what is to come), or fear (dreading what is to come).

If you are facing the end of this year with regret, grief, or fear, my goal is simply to point you to the place where you can find comfort for your wounded, weary heart from the past year and where you can find expectancy and confidence as you look to the new year.

And if you are facing the end of this year with feelings of accomplishment but with the never-ending pressure to prove yourself by accomplishing more, my goal is simply to point you to the place where peace and rest are offered for your pressure-driven heart as you face the new year voices to be better and do more.

And all of this comfort, expectancy, peace, and rest is found in the love of Christ in the gospel.

I want us to briefly look at a prayer of Paul for the church in Ephesus and encourage us to pray this same prayer for ourselves, our families, and the church as we look forward to another year. I want us to look at an old prayer for our new year.

It is a prayer found in Ephesians 3...

This is a letter written from the apostle Paul to a local church in the city of Ephesus. And in the letter, Paul explains, in two different places, how he prays for them. The first prayer is in chapter one, and the second, our text of this morning, at the end of chapter three.

Ephesians 3:14-21

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, **15** from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, **16** that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, **17** so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, **18** may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, **19** and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. **20** Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, **21** to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Again, I want to offer a very simple exposition of this prayer. First, notice he says that he bows his knees before the Father. In his other prayer in chapter one, he also describes God as Father. It is a sweet reminder that the Father invites the prayers of his children. We need not be afraid or timid to bring our requests to God. Just as a good earthly father wants to provide for his children, God our Father wants to provide for us even more.

So, Paul is once again praying to the Father for this church family. What does he pray for this time?

He prayed for 1) strength that leads to 2) understanding and 3) filling.

Prayer for Strength

He first prays for strength (v. 16). He wants them to be strengthened with power in their inner being. Their inner being likely referring to what we would consider our hearts, souls, and minds.

He prays that God will grant that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith. Which might sound strange, because Christ already dwells in them through faith. So, Paul is probably affirming by prayer what is already true of them. That they would continue to persevere in faith.

A major theme for Paul in his writings, and especially here in Ephesians, is a doctrine called union with Christ. That by faith we are united to Jesus. Most often, we are said to be “in Christ,” but there are a few occasions where it is spoken of in the reverse. Christ dwells in us. In other words, it is a mutual indwelling. Our union is so intimate, it is not a one-way relationship, in which we are Christ’s and that is it. Christ is also ours and he indwells us by the Spirit.

So, Paul prays that they would, by this indwelling of Christ, be strengthened, but the strength that Paul is praying for here has a specific purpose. We see this in verses 17-18...

Strength for Understanding

Ephesians 3:17-18

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, **18** may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

v. 17b - He describes them first as people who are rooted and grounded in love. He mixes metaphors here to emphasize how Christ’s love stabilizes us.

He uses an **organic** metaphor, saying they are rooted in the love of Jesus. He uses the same metaphor in Colossians 2:6-7.

Col. 2:6-7

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, **7** rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Trees are able to stand against the wind and rain when their roots are deep into the ground. Those strong roots also help the tree to grow.

He also uses a construction metaphor, saying they are grounded in Christ’s love. Or they are firmly established. For a building to be stable, it must have a sure foundation. Consider Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:24-27.

Matthew 7:24-27

24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. **25** And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. **26** And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. **27** And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Because of Christ’s love through the gospel, we are firmly established.

By picturing Christ’s love as the root system and sure foundation of the believer’s life, Paul explains the importance of Christ’s love for their security and future growth.

And their continual growth in understanding that love is what he prays for next in verse 18.

Ephesians 3:17-18

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, **18** may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

His prayer uses beautiful language here. He wants them to grasp how wide, long, high, and deep is the love of Christ: Paul uses spatial dimension to provoke the believers to consider the greatness of Christ’s love. We can see the use of spatial dimensions in other places as well.

Psalms 103:11-12

11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; **12** as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Obviously, this is a poetic way of describing the vastness of Christ’s love for us. But one author I read offers a pastoral way to think about these dimensions of Christ’s love:¹

“**Breadth**” or “width” illustrates his **accepting** love. Earlier in the letter, Paul has already celebrated how the love of Christ embraces Jews and Gentiles and anyone from any background who comes to him for mercy (**2:17**).

¹ Richard Coekin, *Ephesians For You*.

We might be tempted to feel we are beyond the reach of his love - that our background is too immoral, too dark, too dysfunctional, too rebellious for us to be genuinely loved by Jesus.

You might reflect back just on this last year and acknowledge the many ways that you fell short of the glory of God. The times you chose sin over Christ. The times you believed temptation's lies that sin would satisfy the cravings of your flesh. The times you doubted God, his goodness, his faithfulness, his Word, and the importance of his Church. And you might feel like, after the year I've had, the wandering I've done, surely Christ loves me less in December than he did in January.

You need God's help to grant you the strength to grasp how wide the love of Christ is. If you are trusting in Christ, there is nothing you have done or could ever do that would put you outside his embrace. His is a wide and accepting love. And his love for you is no less sure on the last day of the calendar year than it is on the first - which leads us to the second dimension of Christ's love highlighted by Paul...

“Length” illustrates his **lasting** love. Paul has already in this letter celebrated the eternity of God's love for us...

Ephesians 1:4-5

4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,

In other words, God's love for you, his child, is from before the foundation of the world to the eternal future.

Maybe some of us have been abandoned in the past by someone who promised to love us. Maybe a father, a husband, or a girlfriend. Perhaps that was something you experienced just this last year. The world is full of people who use the words “I love you” but fail to live by them.

Or maybe you are worried that God will give up on you because you're not changing enough. Maybe you feel guilty because you think you didn't grow in spiritual maturity enough this last year. Maybe you fear that he will get tired of your failures.

You need strength to grasp that his love for you is permanent. However badly and however often you fail him, he will never let you go. If you have put your faith in Christ, He has committed himself to love you from eternity and will never, ever give up on you.

His is a long and lasting love, not dependent on anything in you or done by you. It was and always will be due to his good will and pleasure to love you.

“**Height**” illustrates his **exalting** love. Paul has also celebrated how the love of God in Christ has not only saved us from hell, but lifts us high into heaven...

Ephesians 2:4-7

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, **5** even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— **6** and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, **7** so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps you are reeling from a year of disappointments. You were hoping for something that did not occur. You were working towards something that did not come to fruition. You were praying for something that has not happened yet. And it has left you discouraged because you lack something God has withheld from you - and maybe it has caused you to question God's goodness.

Perhaps you sometimes wonder whether it is really worth being a Christian, whether Christ really has much to offer you, or whether the benefits will ever outweigh the high costs.

You need the strength to grasp how high the love of Christ is, how much he has in store for you in eternity, and how exalted and privileged you will be forever in the new creation. And how even now, God has raised you and seated you with Christ in the heavenly places. Christ's love has lifted you from the gutter to his palace, from hell to heaven. His is a high and exalting love.

“**Depth**” illustrates his **sacrificial** love. Paul has also celebrated the self-sacrifice of Christ for our sins on the cross. (**1:7-8**). Have you ever really considered the agony of Christ in suffering the physical torture of beatings and crucifixion? Or the public humiliation of being treated as a criminal to be mocked and abused? Have you stopped recently to realize that he accepted such depths of agony out of love for you?

Perhaps you doubt that God has anything good in store for you in the coming year. That maybe you are the forgotten sheep in his fold. He's overlooked you, and his work in you and for you is something he might get around to if he remembers or has nothing else better to do.

You need the strength to grasp how deep the love of Christ is for you. That Jesus is so committed to uniting himself with you for all eternity that he shed his blood to make it happen, and therefore, you have no need to worry he will forget about you or fail to finish the good work he's started in you. His is an incredibly deep, sacrificial love.

So, again, Paul says, I want you to grow in your grasp of the greatness of Christ's love. And he goes on in verse 19...

Ephesians 3:19

and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

It might seem like he is saying you should know something that can't actually be known. But it is better to read Paul's prayer as saying that Christ's love can be known, though we will never grasp the extent of it. It is similar to our knowledge of God. We can know truly know God, though we will not know him exhaustively.

Herman Bavinck described this kind of knowledge as something we can't "comprehend" but we can "apprehend." Again, we can't fully comprehend God, but we can apprehend what he has revealed to us. The same is true for the love of Christ. We can't fully comprehend his love, but we can apprehend it.

ILLUS. Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean. It is the deepest part of anywhere in the ocean. This trench reaches almost 36,000 feet deep. The depth is greater than the height of Mount Everest. Some explorers have reached the bottom, but only a few and very recently. However, probably no one here, including me, will ever go to those depths.

However, even though we won't ever reach the ultimate depths of the ocean, we still enjoy swimming in it. We don't just stand on the beach. Even though we will not experience every cubic square inch of all the water that covers the face of the earth, we still enjoy what little part of it we can. Paul prays that they will continue to grow in understanding Christ's love for them, even though it is impossible to fully grasp. He wants them to swim in the bottomless ocean of Christ's love.

And in so doing, we will be "filled with the fullness of God" (19b). In one sense, we already are filled with the fullness of God because of our union with Christ. But this could be describing what believers can experience through a growing understanding of Christ's love for them.

I once read someone explain that it is similar to how a newly married wife may know, intellectually, that her husband loves her. But it is only after years of experience being loved by him in a thousand little ways, that gradually his life fills hers.

It's a prayer that you might be filled with the fullness of God by comprehending what you can of the vast love of Christ for you.

v. 20-21 - Doxology

Ephesians 3:20-21

20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, **21** to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Paul reminds them that God is able to go above and beyond we could even ask or imagine. Grasping this will only inspire prayer, because we know the the is able to grant our requests.

And I think this is important for us to grasp if we are going to pray that we might know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. How can we progress in having the mind of Christ? How can we grow in spiritual maturity? Has Paul asked for too much in these prayers of his? Not when we realize the power of God.

So often we are tempted to think that God means well and wants the best for us, but can't really change things. He can't change our hearts or someone else's heart. So, we feel reluctant to even ask for those things. We need to remember who we are talking to. God is willing and able to do immeasurably more than we could even imagine.

So, a good question for us is, do we pray with this kind of belief? If you really believed what Paul is saying here, how would it change the way you prayed? What would you be praying for in the coming year? Who would you be praying for this year?

CONCLUSION

But as we finish this year and step into a new one, we do so with a mixture of grief and joy, hope and despair, fear and confidence. And so we need strength. Strength to comprehend the love of Christ for us in the gospel.

Because, it's the love of Christ in the gospel that is the answer for all our sin of last year, and it is the love of Christ that is the answer for our all of our sin in the coming year.

It's the love of Christ that covers our shame of the last year, and it is the love of Christ that lifts our chin as we walk into the coming year.

It's the love of Christ that comforts our hearts from the disappointments of the last year, and it is the love of Christ that strengthens our hearts with expectancy for God's good work in us in the coming year.

It's the love of Christ that squashes our pride in our accomplishments, knowing that we need the grace of God for anything good in our lives.

So, if you are the goal-setting type, make this a regular prayer of yours. Pray, Lord give me the strength—in the midst of both disappointments and victories, in the midst of both grief and joy—to comprehend the love of Christ for me.

And when you don't feel like you have the strength to cling to this knowledge any longer, pray, Lord, give me the strength I need to believe.

COMMUNION

We are blessed with a tangible reminder of the accepting, lasting, exalting, and sacrificial love of Christ for us when we take communion. We are reminded of Christ's condescension, taking the form of a servant, taking a human nature, and becoming the sacrifice we desperately needed.

So, if you are a follower of Jesus, you have turned away from your sin and self-righteousness, you are invited to take communion anytime during our last two songs.

CONFESSION

But we always want to take a moment of silent prayer and confession.

Confess sin, Pray this prayer for yourself, your family, and for us as a church...to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge...

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Romans 8:38-39

38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, **39** nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

VERSES

Ephesians 3:14-21

Ephesians 3:17-18

Colossians 2:6-7

Matthew 7:24-27

Ephesians 3:17-18

Psalms 103:11-12

Ephesians 1:4-5

Ephesians 2:4-7

Ephesians 3:19

Ephesians 3:20-21

Romans 8:38-39

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotions does the new year evoke in you?
2. Why might we need strength to comprehend Christ's love?
3. Reflect on the four spatial dimensions that Paul outlines about Christ's love: how has Christ shown the width, length, height, and depth of his love for you?
4. Reflect on Paul's doxology at the end of chapter 3. How might believing this change your prayer life?