

STRENGTHENED BY THE SPIRIT
Ephesians 3:13-21

Intro: Personally I receive the most help for my own heart and life as a Christian from the old writers. In my estimation (which may not be worth much) there is not much being written today which is worth buying and taking home. But we can thank the Lord that within the lifetime of all of us who are present tonight there never has been a time when more of the old books have been available--the books of the Reformers, of the Puritans, and of men who ministered during the Great Awakening, men like Whitefield and Edwards. We can thank the Lord for men in the 19th century, too, men like Spurgeon and Ryle. There are, of course, men in every generation who are the exception, but it is impossible to beat the old writers.

One of them, a Puritan, said this about prayer; with special reference to learning how to pray:

It is good, before you address yourself to the duty, to read a portion of Holy Scripture, which will be of great use to furnish you both with the matter and words for prayer, especially David's Psalms and Paul's Epistles (quoted of Philip Henry in his biography, p. 264).

We might add that there is nothing that will incline you to pray like reading the Word of God first.

But I like those expressions, "the matter and words for prayer." "Matter" means what we should pray about; "words" means the very language we should use in approaching the Lord in prayer.

Of all that we read about in Paul's Epistles, nothing is more helpful for praying than his recorded prayers. Paul set a pattern for us in this: Not only should we pray for each other, but we ought to tell each other when we are praying for each other, AND EVEN WHAT WE ARE PRAYING ABOUT.

Our prayers reveal what we believe the true needs of the people of God are, and when we put our prayers along side of the prayers of the Apostle Paul, we are often ashamed to see how different our thinking is from what his was.

Two of Paul's prayers for the Ephesian church are contained in his Epistle to that Church: one in chapter 1; the other in chapter 3. From these we would determine that the Lord's people have two needs that are the greatest: the need for knowledge, and the need for strength. Other qualities are related to these, but it is difficult to find two needs that are greater or more basic in every Christian's life.

And we can see the reason for this. The reason that God has

given us His Word is because there are many things that He wants us to know. This is the reason that we encourage you to read the Word, and to memorize it. This is the reason that we are to teach and preach the Word of God when we gather at church. We ought always to learn something when we meet together as the people of God.

But Scripture knowledge has a peculiar quality that is not always a part of other knowledge.

Scripture knowledge is to influence, to change, our lives. We manifest that we really know the truth when we live the truth. If the truth does not affect our lives, there is something very wrong. But that which hinders us in applying the truth is the fact that we are weak. We need strength. We often start out well, but our good intentions do not last. You probably have already broken your new year's resolutions, if you made any, or perhaps you have failed so many times before that you did not bother to make any this year.

And so, as we look at this prayer of the Apostle Paul, the first thing that we need to recognize is that . . .

I. THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE WEAK.

This ought to be of great concern to all of us. We are weak--not strong. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels . . ."

When Paul was writing about our calling in 1 Corinthians 1 he touched on these two great needs of Christians: knowledge and power. This is what he wrote:

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world
to confound the wise;
and God hath chosen the weak things of the world
to confound the things which are mighty (v. 27).

We have been studying the life of the Apostle Peter on Sunday mornings, and we have seen that he wanted to do the right thing, but he was weak, and so he failed. He had plenty of physical strength, but he was lacking in spiritual strength. The Lord knew it, but Peter did not--until he learned it the hard way.

David said,

Like as a father pitieth his children,
so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.
For he knoweth our frame;
he remembereth that we are dust (Psa. 103:13, 14).

The history of the Church is marred with events brought on

by the weaknesses of the people of God.

Until we recognize this, we will not understand why Paul prayed as he did.

— Note a second point:

II. THIS IS A SUBJECT FOR PRAYER.

Notice what led Paul at this point in his letter to mention how he was praying for them. (See Eph. 3:13, 14.)

Paul was writing in prison. He was suffering for the Ephesians, that is, because of his work in preaching the Gospel to them, as well as preaching in other cities. But the people of God were so weak that there was the danger that they would faint because of what was happening to him. They might have been thinking, "If this is where living for the Lord takes you, we had better be careful." Some would be discouraged in their walk with the Lord thinking that, if the Lord did not keep trouble away from Paul, how could they expect that it would be any different for them.

— You can recognize the language of a Christian who is ready to faint, to give up, to quit. Spurgeon, speaking of what often happens along this line to pastors called them, fainting fit."

What do the people of God need? They need strength.

And God has ordained that one way that need can be met in the lives of believers is for others to pray for them. God imparts strength to His people in answer to prayer. In the model prayer one of the requests is, "And deliver us from evil," or from the Evil One. Does the Lord keep the Devil away? Did He keep him away from Peter? No. Sometimes He may keep the Devil away, but not always. How then can we hope to stand up against the Enemy. BY THE STRENGTH WHICH GOD GIVES IN ANSWER TO PRAYER. Paul told the Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil 4:13).

So, regardless of who that Christian is for whom you pray, you can be sure that this is a request that they need.

— Our young people need it. Young Christians need it. But so do older Christians. In reading about the kings in the OT I have noticed how many of them failed the Lord in their later years. They were weak when they needed to be strong.

Let us not minimize the importance of praying for each other. In the providence of God you may be praying for

someone no one else is praying for! Our prayers help, or you would never find these prayers in the Bible.

Everyone of us here tonight is going to need divine strength this week--and need it daily, not just once a day, but over and over again each day. Situations will arise where we will dishonor the Lord and displease the Lord unless our strength is in Him. How we need to pray--pray for ourselves, and pray for each other. Don't just pray if you have time, but take time to pray before you do anything else.

But notice a third thing:

III. THE STRENGTH WE NEED COMES FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Paul prayed that the Ephesian believers would be "strengthened with might by his Spirit," the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," the One to whom Paul's prayer was addressed.

Lit. it means to make powerful with power. This means that the power by which the saints are made powerful is not a power that is inherent in them, but a power that is imparted to them. This is power that can strengthen the weakest of believers, and make them strong.

Again, since we have been studying the life of Peter, look at Peter in the courtyard, intimidated by some young women when he denied that he even knew the Lord, and then look at him in the early chapters of Acts when he was bold as a lion. What had happened? Read Acts 1:8. Also Luke 24:49. They were to be "endued with power from on high"! To be "endued" means to be clothed as with a garment. My garments are not a part of me. Neither are yours. They are what we have put on. The power the child of God needs is to be given by the Holy Spirit. It is the HOLY SPIRIT. It is enabling power. It is quickening power. It is transforming power. It is effective power. Oh, pray for the power of the Holy Spirit upon our lives, not only to preach, but just to be able to live for the glory of God.

One more thing:

IV. WHERE AND HOW IS THIS POWER BESTOWED?

It is put on us from the outside, but it is placed within us--"in the inner man."

This means it is in our hearts. It is not a physical power, but a spiritual power. It is placed at the source of all of the issues of our lives. Cf. Prov. 4:23.

But how is it bestowed?

Do you remember what I said about knowledge at the beginning of my message? Look at the prayer in chapter 1, beginning with v. 15, and look where it leads to in v. 19.

Spiritual power is imparted to us as believers by the Holy Spirit as we give ourselves to know the Word of God. Cf. Heb. 4:12. See also Psa. 119:11, and Col. 3:16, 17.

You will never find a strong Christian who is weak in his understanding of the Word of God. The Holy Spirit has been given to guide us into the truth of God's Word. That is what the Lord said in John 16:13.

But let me conclude by saying this (and it can be seen in Eph. 3:17, as well as in the passages in John 14, 15, and 16 which speak of this subject).

WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT TEACHES US THE WORD, WHAT WILL HE ALWAYS DO? He shows us Christ. He teaches of us Him. He glorifies Christ. We begin to find that the truth of the indwelling Christ becomes more than a doctrine to us; it becomes a glorious reality. And this is where the power comes from. Remember Paul's words in Phil. 4:13.

Concl: That is as far as I want to go in Paul's prayer tonight. Perhaps we can finish it at another time.

But let me ask you: What are you going to do with what you have heard tonight? Are you going to say, "Well, that is all very interesting," and then proceed to forget all about it until you happen to read Eph. 3 the next time. Or are you going to say, "Lord, let me know this power in my life so that I will be able to please and to glorify you, and let my heart be burdened for other Christians, who are as weak as I am, that they may know the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit in their lives?"

Our weakness shows us in our inconsistency in prayer, doesn't it? Oh, may the Lord touch our hearts with this great truth that we may remember what we need, and where to get it, and that this may be the great burden upon our hearts as we pray for each other.