

God's glory and our spiritual progress

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Ephesians

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Ephesians 3 and verse 16 to 17. Ephesians 3 and verse 16.

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; 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith;

We'll stop there. So it's verse 16 and the first half of verse 17 that we look at this evening and our theme is "God's glory and our spiritual progress." God's glory and our spiritual progress.

The apostle has given the cause of his prayer, you see in verse 14, "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." And the cause is the high calling of the church in verse 10, that God has determined to display the glory of his manifold wisdom to the principalities and powers by the church. And also the boldness of access that we have to the throne of grace through Christ in verse 12. And because this is so, because of the calling of the church to display the divine glory, and because of the access that the apostle and all Christians have to God through Christ, for this cause he bows his knees, he bends his knees in prayer to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And now this evening, we begin to consider what he actually prays for in verse 16, "That he would grant you." So now we are beginning to look at the actual content of his prayers on behalf of the Ephesian church.

The first thing we notice is he prays not merely for their visible needs. He prays not merely for their visible needs, and indeed in this particular place he does not refer to their physical needs or particular problems at all. That's not to say that he didn't pray about particular things, and yet especially where he was familiar with the circumstances of individuals in a particular church, no doubt he did pray for visible needs, for those who were sick, those who had particular problems and trials, but in this place he doesn't, and he prays prayers that can and ought to be prayed for, for every church on earth. Too often we only pray for other Christians when they are ill or have a specific problem. It's right that we should pray at such times, but not only then. We should pray for our and their

spiritual progress at all times, that God would be glorified in the advance of the kingdom of his grace in our hearts and in the hearts of his people. Isn't that what our Catechism teaches us on the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come," the advance of the kingdom of grace in ourselves and in others. And so therefore he prays concerning their inner man, that they would be strengthened with all might by his Spirit in the inner man. We'll look at that more closely in a moment. No doubt they had many practical problems as well, and no doubt he prayed about these as they were known to him but just as man does not live by bread alone, there is the inner man, and this should be part of the object of our constant prayers for the people of God. And whilst there is a spirituality that is spurious in that it ignores practical need in prayer, yet at the same time we should not be afraid of simply praying for the progress of the work of grace in the hearts of the people of God. We can sometimes forget the specific when we ought to remember it, but nevertheless we ought to have in our prayers a desire for the advance of holiness in the church of God.

But then secondly, the riches of God's glory in answering prayer. The riches of God's glory in answering prayer. Verse 16, "That he would grant you according to the riches of his glory." According to the riches of his glory. The riches of God's glory refer to his attributes, those attributes of God, those things that are true, those characteristics of God that mean that God is God, those things which constitute his glory. God's glory is simply the sum of all his attributes and when we pray, we pray to this God, who is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. And God can answer in accordance with the riches of these attributes and display his wisdom and power and holiness and justice and goodness and truth in the answer. He can answer with fearful works and he can answer in a manner that is fitting the glory that belongs to him.

And that's true of all prayer, that God is able to answer in a manner befitting the kind of God that he is so that his glory, his attributes are displayed in the manner in which he answers our prayers, and what is true in general is true of our prayers for progress in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. Our spiritual progress is consistent with all that God is. All the attributes of God, our progress and the progress of other Christians in the faith and in holiness, is consistent with all of those attributes. There is no conflict between the desire for God's glory and the desire for the advance of the people of God in faith and in love which is in Christ Jesus, of that holiness of life and that godliness which we should desire for ourselves and others.

Our growth in holiness is consistent with God's holiness. It is a holy work of God to make his people holy, therefore when we pray for the advance of the people of God in holiness, we are praying in a manner entirely compatible with the holiness of God. There would be no unholiness in God to work so as to increase holiness in his people. It is entirely compatible with the fact that the Lord is holy in all his works that we should pray for the increased holiness of his people. And it is compatible with the justice of God to pray that Christians will be more Christ-like, more godly, more holy. It is according to the glory of his justice. There is nothing unjust in Christians increasing in godliness. Christ has borne the punishment of sin and therefore the reversal of the bondage to sin to

which we were consigned under the judgment of God is entirely just. It is an entirely just thing for God to sanctify his people. It is just for him to forgive their sins and it is just for him to make them holy. "There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit. For what the law could not do, in it was weak through the flesh, God sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit." That is, that Christ bearing the guilt and condemnation of sin opens the way for the reversal of the tyranny and bondage of sin in his people.

So it is consistent with God's holiness, it is consistent with his justice for the people of God to advance in holiness. It is consistent with the glory, the riches of his glory in these attributes, and it is consistent with his truthfulness. He has promised that the work that he has begun in his people, he will perform until the day of Jesus Christ, and therefore to pray for the advance of the work of grace in the hearts of God's people is to pray consistently with the truthfulness of God. It is not desiring him to break his word but rather to hasten its fulfillment and therefore to manifest his truthfulness. It is consistent with his power, omnipotence, almighty-ness. God's almighty-ness is at hand to advance the work of grace in his people.

So chapter 1, verse 19, 1, "And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places." God's power was displayed when he raised Christ from the dead and exalted him to his right hand and it is the same working of his mighty power, the exceeding greatness of his power, which works in the people of God. Therefore it is compatible with the power of God to pray for the advance of the work of grace in the hearts of God's people. It is compatible with his mercy and grace, of course it is. His progressing the work in us further demonstrates the riches of his mercy already shown. Ephesians 2:4, "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

The mercy of God was displayed when he quickened us and his mercy is further displayed in the advance of the work of grace in us, and so the progress of the work of grace in our hearts is compatible with and displays the riches of God's glory and displays all his attributes, especially his power and his mercy and grace, which are no doubt particularly in the apostle's mind in this prayer. So then, we can pray without fear and without hesitation that God would be glorified in the advance of the work of his own hands, the work of his grace in the hearts of his people, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might in the inner man by his Spirit.

Thirdly, it is God who alone can perform this. It is God who alone can perform this, "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 Christian cannot progress one inch in holiness independently of the power and grace of God. He can no more progress in the faith independently of God than he could have become a Christian independently of God. God

begins the work, God performs it and carries it on, kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed at the last time. Philippians 2:12 reminds us of this, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." This is sometimes forgotten, and it's forgotten and overlooked by those who are ardently concerned to defend God's sovereignty in election and effectual calling. That one is earnestly contending as to man's helplessness to cause himself to be willing to come to Christ, which is true of course, there is a neglect of the fact that it is that grace which begins the work is the grace which continues it.

Sometimes you hear Calvinists debating Revelation 3 and verse 20, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." Now that verse does seem to refer to the church, even though many worthy men of the past have applied it evangelistically, but sometimes you hear people contending over the verse as if to concede as if it is necessary to prove that it refers to the church, which I believe it does, but as if that is necessary somehow to defend man's inability and dependence upon God. But it isn't. However you take that verse, it is saying that those addressed must open the door, someone is being addressed and being told to open the door, but that phrase cannot mean, cannot be construed as teaching man's independent ability to embrace and respond rightly to the truth of God since this is denied in scripture, both in the non-Christian in coming to faith and in the Christian in progressing in the faith. We are as dependent upon the power of God to progress in the faith as we are in the beginning in becoming Christians. So whatever the debate about that verse, it is not relevant to the question of human independence because man is not independent in becoming a Christian and he is not independent in persevering and increasing in the faith either, and the verse does not teach man's independence, it teaches his responsibility. Whoever is referred to and being addressed, that is the case; though as we say, we favor the view that it refers to the church.

But man is dependent irrespective and so the apostle prays, that's why he prays. Why does he pray? Because only God can progress the work in these Ephesian Christians, and he prays that they will be strengthened with might. With might. That word "might" is the word "power." It's the same word as we referred earlier to Ephesians 1:19, "What is the exceeding greatness of his power or might?" It's the same word, the word from which we have our English word "dynamic" or "dynamite" or "dynamo." It's the same word. So it's God's power. It is his power that quickens us and brings us to faith and it is his power, the strengthening, the power of his might that works in us and keeps us through faith unto salvation to be revealed.

Fourthly, the need is in the inner man. The need is in the inner man, "That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man." Now, what does it mean by the inner man? Complex theories of the nature of man and the construction of man have sometimes been put forward. What is known as semi-Pelagianism, didn't worry about the term, semi-Pelagianism is a forerunner of Roman Catholic theology and of Arminianism, the idea of man having an independent free will, which both Roman Catholicism and Arminianism believe over against the scriptural teaching that man is dependent upon God, that he is by nature dead

in trespasses and in sins. Semi-Pelagianism was the forerunner of both the Roman Catholic theology and Arminianism. This view divides the unseen part of man into the rational moral ego and the soul, and the latter is where sin exerts itself and therefore the former needs to be strengthened so as not to be overcome by the latter. In other words, partial depravity.

You generally find that views of man which entail the idea of him having an independent will and able in some measure to turn himself towards God, that these views are normally connected with a rather complex view of the nature of man so as to divide which part is depraved and which part isn't and to construct a doctrine of partial depravity. But the biblical teaching as held by our Reformers is that man is body and soul whilst the different terms soul and spirit and so on describe different aspects, they are not different parts of man. There is body and soul. He is two parts, body and soul. And as far as his soul is concerned, he is totally depraved, that is, in all his parts he is depraved and corrupt. There is no good part that simply needs some help to express itself.

No, the biblical teaching is that man is totally depraved in his nature, and when the apostle speaks of the inner man, he is not talking about some particular part of a structure of the invisible part of man of which only part is depraved. He is really speaking simply of the inward as opposed to the outward. 2 Corinthians 4:16, "for though the outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day." And so what is meant here is the Spirit of God working in the heart of man.

So verse 17, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." The word "heart" as applied to man, it is not something completely different to the soul or the spirit, but the word "heart" doesn't mean just the feelings, but it means the whole soul of man, including the intellect as well as the affections. That's why scripture speaks of an understanding heart, and it talks about the thoughts and the intents of the heart, and the counsels of the heart, so that when the apostle speaks of the inner man and of the heart, he is speaking about the soul of man in its entirety and his desire is that the Spirit of God would strengthen them with might in their inner man, in their inner being, in their souls, in their hearts.

And fifthly, the Spirit dwelling is Christ dwelling. The Spirit dwelling is Christ dwelling. Verse 17, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." He said that they would be strengthened by his Spirit in the inner man, and then that Christ may dwell in your hearts because the Holy Spirit dwelling is Christ dwelling. One of the most instructive passages on this point is Romans 8 and verse 9 and 10. Romans 8:9 and 10, "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin." Now you notice there that the Spirit of God in the first part of verse 9 is then called the Spirit of Christ later in the verse, and the Spirit of Christ, having the Spirit of Christ, is then referred to in verse 10 as Christ in you. So to have the Spirit of God is to have the Spirit of Christ, and to have the Spirit of Christ dwell in us is to have Christ in us.

Another very important passage is John 14. John 14:17, "Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know

him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. Judas saith unto him, not Iscariot, Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world? Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." Now, notice this. Christ in verse 16 says that he will send another Comforter, but then in verse 17, he says that this Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, shall be in you, but then in verse 18, he says, I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you. So, he will go away and send another Comforter, but the other Comforter coming, the Spirit of Truth, is described as, I will come to you, and then in verse 20, "At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you."

So, the sending of another Comforter is Christ coming to them, by the Comforter, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth, and yet, also, the other Comforter dwelling in them, is Christ in them. But then there's one stage more. Verse 23, "Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." So then, the Holy Spirit coming is Christ coming. The Holy Spirit indwelling is Christ indwelling. And Christ indwelling is the Father and the Son indwelling so that the Christian is indwelt by the Spirit, and therefore Christ is in him, and the Father also.

The only explanation of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. The only explanation is the doctrine of the Trinity, one God in three persons. And that whilst particular works and actions are ascribed to one person in particular, yet such is the unity of the Godhead, that what is ascribed to one entails the other persons also so that the Spirit dwelling in us is Christ dwelling in us, and it's the Father making his abode with us, and only the doctrine of the Trinity can account for these things.

So whilst there is what we call the economic Trinity, the Trinity in action, certain works are attributed to particular persons of the Godhead, yet there is a complete unity and harmony in the Godhead, and they are of one essence and that's why baptism is called, on the one hand, being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus in the book of Acts, but the official formula to be used at the end of Matthew 28 is baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost because those who are united to Christ are united to the Triune Godhead, and the Triune Godhead saves through the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, and his accomplished work is applied by the Spirit who is sent forth by the Son according to the promise and the counsel of the Father. And that's why the word name in the Trinitarian baptismal formula is singular, not the names, but the name, one name, of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. How can being what is described more generally as being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, for example in Acts 19, how can that be baptism into the one name, and yet Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? And the answer is because of the doctrine of the Trinity, the three persons in one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. And so when the apostle says that Christ should dwell in their hearts, he's not talking about something different from this working

of the Spirit, because the Spirit working in them and dwelling in them is Christ dwelling in them also.

But then he says that Christ should dwell in their hearts by faith, and here we might be puzzled. How is it that this work of the Spirit is said to result in Christ dwelling in their hearts by faith? How is this Christ dwelling through faith or by faith? And the answer is that though the Spirit imparts the strength, it is a strength and a might that results in increased faith, and by faith we consciously enjoy communion with Christ, and thus we enjoy his indwelling by the Spirit. So the Spirit of God strengthens with might so that faith is increased and the conscious enjoyment of the presence of Christ is increased. Thus we need greater faith to see more of the excellency of Christ and thus experience more of the joys of his indwelling, and the result will be a greater revulsion towards sin and a greater owning of his Lordship over us. Why do we not hate sin more than we do? We know it's wrong, we know something's wrong, but we don't hate the sin as much as we ought. It's because we have too low an appreciation of the excellency and the glory of Christ and when the Spirit of God strengthens with might in the inner man and faith is increased and appreciation of Christ is increased, then godliness of life is increased and hatred of sin is increased, and the manifold wisdom of God is displayed in it to the principalities and powers.

Note then very carefully that communion with Christ is the route to spiritual progress. That seems fairly basic, but we forget it, we constantly forget this. We think we can make ourselves holy. We cannot advance in holiness no matter how accurately we know our duty unless we are strengthened by the Spirit to greater faith and apprehension of Christ and his excellency and greatness. The knowledge of God's law tells us our duty and we need that, but knowing our duty will not make us love holiness and hate sin. It will make us feel more guilty as we ought when we do sin, but it won't make us hate sin. Knowledge of duty alone will never make us holy. It might make us Pharisees or Romanists, but it will not make us godly. Let us then pray this prayer for ourselves and for one another and for all saints that the church will be adorned not with a slick image, not with a supposedly attractive conformity to the world, but with Christ-likeness, that man may take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus.