

Praying Powerful Prayers

During the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, the Baptist minister Bill Moyers was asked to be the Presidential Cabinet’s press secretary. At one of the meetings, President Johnson asked Bill Moyers to open the meeting with prayer. As Moyers began to pray, the President said, “Speak up, Bill, I can’t hear you.”

“I wasn’t speaking to you, Mr. President,” Moyers responded.

Imagine the audacity! And yet, this is exactly what we have been seeing in this course about prayer. Prayer is not fancy. Prayer is not for other people. Prayer is just talking to God. As we saw earlier in this course, prayer is when we “Jes’ call ‘im Father, an’ ask ‘im fer somethin’.”

God doesn’t need big words and long prayers. He doesn’t need fancy or flowery language. He just wants us to come to Him as His child and talk to Him. That’s the way all the saints in the Bible prayed. Every person in Scripture who is known for their great faith in God is also known for their simple and straightforward prayer life with God. Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Elisha, and Daniel were all men of great faith and simple prayers. It was also this way with Jesus.

And so it is not surprising that the prayers of the Apostle Paul are also simple and straightforward. Paul writes about prayer multiple times in his letter to the Ephesians (cf. Eph 1:15-21; 3:14-21; 6:18-20), but let us look at the description of his prayers in Ephesians 3:14-21 as an example of how Paul prayed and what he prayed for.

The Posture of Prayer

For this reason I bow my knees ... (Eph 3:14a).

In Ephesians 3:14, Paul writes that when he prays, he bows his knees to God the Father. The term “bow my knees” is an idiom for kneeling. But does this mean that Paul knelt when he prayed? Maybe. But maybe not. While it might be true that Paul physically knelt on his knees when he prayed, Paul might also be using a figure of speech to describe the posture of his heart when he approached God in prayer.

The phrase “I bow the knees” comes from Isaiah 45:23. Isaiah 45 is a prophecy about the rule and reign of the Messiah. It is about how He alone will deliver Israel, and bring all her enemies to destruction. It is a lesson to the world in how He alone is Ruler and

King. Isaiah writes that “Every knee will bow, every tongue confess” the Lordship of the Messiah (cf. Rom 11:4; Php 2:10). Isaiah is saying that the Messiah deserves proper honor and respect, and that this can be symbolized by kneeling before Him. Yet even here, what matters more than the position of one’s legs is the posture of one’s heart. Despite what Paul writes here, one does not need to physically kneel in order to pray.

In fact, Paul himself might not have actually knelt when he prayed. Jewish prayers were often said while standing up (Matt 6:5). Jesus, of course, condemns the practice of praying in a way to be seen and heard by men, and so maybe Paul preferred to pray kneeling. But we just don’t know. And that is exactly the point. God doesn’t care about the position of your body as much as He cares about the posture of your heart. There is no “one right way” to position your body when you pray, just as there is no “one right way” to position your body when you talk to anybody else. Just as you can talk to anyone while you are doing anything, so also, you can talk to God while you are walking your dog, driving your car, mowing your lawn, doing the dishes, lying in your bed, or sitting on your back porch. Yes, you can even pray while kneeling, if you so desire. But regardless of your position, come with the respectful posture of a kneeling heart, submitting your life and your desires to God.

The Person of Prayer

... to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 3:14b).

Note as well that, just like Jesus instructed, Paul directs his prayers to God the Father. He says he prays to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Once again, this brings to mind the intimacy of prayer. It is like a little child coming to ask something from his daddy.

I read a story a while back about a man who was in the army who got promoted to the honorable rank of Brigadier General. When he received the news, he excitedly called his wife at home to inform her. But when she informed their young son, he became a little sad. When she asked the little boy why he was sad, he said, “Can I still call him daddy?”

Many people are like this little boy. They hear that the person to whom we pray is “God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, the Lord, Master, and Sovereign Ruler of the Universe,” and while they are happy to pray to a God with such honorable titles, they are afraid to simply call Him “Father” and ask Him for something. But that is exactly what Paul does in Ephesians 3. He prays to the Father.

So while it is true that our Heavenly Father is King, Ruler, Judge, Lord, and Master, and therefore worthy of all honor and respect, it is also true that He is our Father, and wants us to simply address Him as such, coming before Him like a child to his daddy. I hear some people refer to God as Daddy or Abba, which is also fine. Again, the point is not to get too caught up with the right words, but to simply speak to God in a way that is comfortable and personable.

The Petitions of Prayer

The most instructive elements about Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 are his requests. By looking at what Paul prayed for, we can learn what sorts of petitions we can ask for in prayer as well. And the most striking thing about Paul’s prayer requests is their audacity. Paul is not content to pray about toe bunions and the weather. He enters boldly before the throne of grace and tosses down the most daring requests. Paul does not pray for the mundane and commonplace; he prays for the impossible.

Do you ever get bored with prayer? If so, it might be because your prayers lack boldness. You know you’re supposed to pray, but it sometimes seems that God doesn’t hear or answer your prayers, or that you pray the same old thing over and over and over. When this happens, prayer becomes more of a habit you mindlessly perform than the powerful force in your life that it is supposed to be. But when you pray the way Paul prays, you will never get bored with prayer because you are asking for the impossible. When you pray the way Paul prays, your prayers will be anything but ordinary.

Paul prays for three things in his prayer. Clearly, these three petitions are not the only things Paul prays for when he prays (for he lists other prayer requests in Eph 1:15-21), but these three items provide some good ideas on what Paul prayed for and how you also can pray.

To Do What Cannot Be Done

*That He would grant you, ... to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ... that you, being rooted and grounded in love
(Eph 3:16-17).*

The first impossible prayer request of Paul is that God will enable the Ephesian Christians to do what cannot be done. In Ephesians 3:16-17, Paul prays that God will give them the power ... to be rooted and grounded in love. Initially, this may seem like

just another ho-hum request from Paul. But when you read this request in the context of everything Paul has written in Ephesians 2–3, you see that one of the main problems in the Ephesian church was a failure to love each other.

Paul spent two chapters talking about how Jews and Gentiles are one in Jesus Christ, and how they are to get along. For some, this might seem like an impossible task. Some Gentiles would be thinking, “You mean I have to love that annoying Jewish neighbor of mine? There’s no way! He’s always judging me by his standards of living and acting ‘holier than thou.’ I can’t love him. I can’t fellowship with him!”

Some of the Jews, on the other hand, were likely thinking, “You mean I have to go over to that Gentile’s house when he invites me over for dinner? I can’t do that! He might serve meat sacrificed to idols! He might not be following the strict cleanliness laws. I might become ceremonially unclean! Paul can’t be serious. There’s no way I can get along with them!”

Many people today fail to grasp the deep divide that existed between Jews and Gentiles in Paul’s day. If you were to take all the divisions that exist today—cultural, political, racial, economic, and religious—and lump them all together, this is similar to the strife that existed between Jews and Gentiles. And in Ephesians 2–3, Paul instructed them to get along and live in unity with each other. Here in Ephesians 3:17, he tells them that he is praying for them to be rooted and grounded in love for each other.

As I write this, every day includes news about how the world is being ripped apart by political divisions, racial strife, economic disparity, theological disagreement, and a wide variety of similar issues. The various political parties strongly disagree about critical issues such as healthcare, global climate change, gay rights, gun rights, open borders, and taxes. Regardless of where you stand on these issues, how easy will it be for you to love and befriend a person who holds opposite views? You might say, “There’s no way. I can never be in the same room with such a person, let alone love and like them!”

Yet this is exactly what Paul is instructing the Ephesian Christians to do, and is exactly what he prays about in Ephesians 3:17. He wants people to love each other who, in every other walk of life, hate and despise each other. In other words, Paul is praying for the impossible. He is praying for two groups who hate each other to turn their hate into love.

Of course, the only way that Christians can do this is to understand that we are all loved by God, regardless of our political, economic, racial, social, cultural, or theological

backgrounds. Once you see that God loves “them” as much as God loves you, you then begin to realize that He wants you to love “them” as well, regardless of whether or not they ever change their views. This is what Paul means then he talks about being “rooted and grounded” in love. We can only love others with the love of God when we know that we are loved and that the love of God which He extends unconditionally to us is also extended unconditionally to others.

So the first prayer request is an impossible prayer request. It is a request to do what cannot be done, to love those you would rather hate. Paul says, “I know you cannot love these people by your own power. So I am praying that God will give you His power to do what He asks, to love the unlovable.” Do you want to spice up your prayer life? Start asking God to show you the people you hate, and then to transform your hate into love. Then step back and watch out, for you are about to encounter more Trump voters (or Hillary voters) than you ever knew existed. And it may not just be people with political or cultural differences, but people with theological differences as well. There are all sorts of issues that divide Christians, and Paul prays the impossible prayer for us to live with each other in love.

To Know What Cannot Be Known

That you ... may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge (Eph 3:18-19a)

Paul turns from praying for the Ephesian Christians to do what cannot be done, and asks God to let them know what cannot be known. The second prayer request in Ephesians 3:18-19 is a prayer for knowledge. Paul wants them to comprehend the width and length and depth and height of the love of Christ which passes knowledge. Once again, this is an impossible prayer.

Imagine a third grade teacher giving her class a test on quantum physics. They can’t know quantum physics! Most educated adults can’t grasp quantum physics. It would even be absurd to try to teach quantum physics to third graders. They don’t have the right mathematical foundation or brain power to grasp even the elementary principles of quantum physics, let alone comprehend it.

This is similar to what Paul prays for here. He is praying that the Ephesian Christians would know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge. Paul prays for them to know

what cannot be known. And unlike quantum physics which can be understood and grasped by some people, Paul’s description of the love of Christ indicates that nobody fully understands or comprehends this vast subject. Paul writes about its width, length, depth, and height, indicating that the love of Christ is eternal, or infinite. It is without beginning or end. It cannot be measured or contained. It is wider than the universe, farther than the east is from the west, and deeper than the ocean. God’s love is so vast, it cannot be understood or comprehended. Yet Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians will come to know it anyway.

This is another impossible prayer.

Nevertheless, it is a prayer which God works to answer. Though you will never come to fully understand, grasp, or comprehend the length, width, breadth, or height of God’s love for you in Jesus Christ, you can come to learn a little more about it each and every day. This is what Paul hopes will happen with the Ephesian Christians, and which you can pray for yourself as well. Imagine how your life will change if each and every day you became more and more convinced of how much Jesus loves you? Imagine how much excitement each day would hold if you knew that somehow, in some way, Jesus was going to show you that He loves you.

Many Christians live with so much fear in their life. Fear of the future. Fear of the unknown. Fear of sickness and death. Fear of sin. Yet since perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18), as you come to know how much God loves you, your fear of all these things fades away as well. You come to know that you are safe and secure in the loving arms of God. You come to realize that even though you may face sickness, trial, danger, or sword, God will never leave you nor forsake you. If this sounds like what you want, then begin to pray for the impossible. Pray that you will come to know that which cannot be known. Pray that you will comprehend the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.

To Be Filled With What You Cannot Be Filled

That you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:19b).

The third prayer request of Paul in Ephesians 3 follows the same pattern of the previous two. Paul continues to pray for the impossible. He prayed that the Ephesians would do what cannot be done and know what cannot be known. This third petition is that the Ephesian Christians would be filled with what they cannot be filled. The last half of

Ephesians 3:19 contains Paul’s prayer that the Ephesian Christians be filled with all the fullness of God.

How big is God? If you know some theology, you know that God is omnipresent. This means that He is everywhere. God is fully present everywhere, and He even exists where nothing else exists beyond the limits of space and time. How great is God? How powerful is He? Again, in theological terms, He is omnipotent. He is all powerful. With a mere thought, He could obliterate the universe. With another mere thought, He could recreate it. He can do whatever He wants, wherever He wants, whenever He wants, however He wants. (Thank goodness He’s a loving and merciful God—this kind of power would be terrible in the hands of a tyrant).

So with God’s omnipresence and omnipotence in mind, think of what Paul is praying for in Ephesians 3:19. He prays that you, as a teeny, tiny speck of flesh and bones, made from dust, dying, decaying, sinful, insignificant piece of the vast universe, with life that is but a breath, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. This is an impossible prayer request from Paul.

It wouldn’t even matter if the structure of our body was much larger. When King Solomon built the first temple, he prayed a prayer on the day the temple was dedicated (cf. 1 Kings 8). He said, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Solomon, the wisest man who has ever lived saw the truth that God could not be contained in any sort of building or structure.

Yet Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians will be filled with all the fullness of God. This also is an impossible prayer request. If God could not fill the temple, how can God fill a Christian? The solution, I believe, lies in how God answers the previous two impossible prayer requests from Paul. The fullness of God in the world is best seen in how Christians know they are infinitely and unconditionally loved by God and then learn to show this same love to others. The fullness of God in our lives is seen and experienced through the love that comes to us from God and the love that we show toward others. Just as Jesus is the fullness of God, we, as the body of Christ on earth, reveal the fullness of God to the world in the same way that Jesus did. We are filled with God the way Jesus was filled, as we show God’s love to the world. So even this third and final impossible prayer request is answerable by God, and is answered as we show love to one another.

Praying Impossible Prayers

We have seen three impossible prayer requests from Paul. He prayed that the Ephesians would do what cannot be done, know what cannot be known, and be filled with what they cannot be filled.

Have you ever thought of praying for the impossible? How does your prayer life compare to Paul's? Paul prays for the impossible; what do you pray for? If your prayer life is boring, maybe it is because your prayer requests are boring. When you start praying for the impossible, you will quickly discover that prayer becomes exciting, thrilling, and even a bit terrifying. Rather than try to think up more things to pray about, you begin to wonder about the wisdom of praying for certain things. I mean, if you asked God to help you get along with that annoying neighbor, you might discover that God will start having you spend more time with that neighbor. Is that really what you want? If you pray for God to save the co-worker who intentionally blasphemes God when you're around, don't be surprised if you get assigned to work on a project with him. God wants you to ask Him to do the impossible, but only if you are willing to let Him do the impossible through you.

And when God starts to work in response to impossible prayers, He will do more than we can even ask or imagine. Paul writes in Ephesians 3:20 that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or imagine. What is impossible with men is possible with God. When we think something is impossible, God can run circles around it with His eyes closed and one hand tied behind His back. Nothing is impossible for Him.

So what is your impossible situation? Keep it in your mind and ask God to take care of it, knowing that He will likely take care of it through you. And don't worry about coming up with solutions for impossible problems. You don't have to make suggestions to God about how to handle impossible situations. All you have to do is present your requests to God and let Him take care of it. All you have to do is say, "God, here it is. I don't see a way out. It's yours." Ask God for the impossible.

Can I Get an “Amen”?!

The last word of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 is the word "Amen." Based on this, as well as some other places in Scripture where the word "Amen" is used (cf. Deut 27:15-26; 1 Chr 16:36; Neh 5:13; 8:6), some Christians think that every prayer should be concluded with the word "Amen." But the word "Amen" actually means "Truly, so be it, let it be."

When you pray impossible prayers, you are simply asking God to let it be as you have prayed. And when you pray according to His will, know that He will do what you have asked.

God does the impossible because this is how His name is glorified as stories of what God has done are shared from generation to generation. The story of Hannah in the book of 1 Samuel is a great example. Hannah was unable to have children, and so she prayed to God. She asked for the impossible. God heard her prayer and opened her womb, and within one year she gave birth to Samuel. We are still telling that story today.

Consider the account of Elijah in 1 Kings 18. He held a contest between God in heaven and the false god Baal. Elijah and the prophets of Baal built altars and each called on their own God to light the fire. God answered Elijah's prayer and rained down fire from heaven.

We could go on and on through Scripture. In response to Joshua's prayer, God halted the sun in the sky for a full day. In response to prayer, Peter was set free from prison. In a way, the Bible could be viewed as one long account of how God acts on behalf of those who pray impossible prayers.

And don't let the fact that they are Bible stories make you think that something similar could not happen with you. In November of 1835, George Mueller set out to prove that God hears and answers prayer. In looking for ways to prove this, he wrote:

It needed to be something which could be seen, even by the natural eye. Now, if I, a poor man, simply by prayer and faith, obtained without asking any individual, the means for establishing and carrying on an Orphan-House, there would be something which, with the Lord's blessing, might be instrumental in strengthening the faith of the children of God, and being a testimony to the consciences of the unconverted, of the reality of the things of God. ...When I was asking the petition, I was fully aware what I was doing. I was asking for something which I had no natural prospect of obtaining, but which was not too much for the Lord to grant.

By the time George Mueller died, the Orphan House founded and funded by prayer was able to house 1000 children at a time.

If you have spent much time praying for the impossible, you might have similar stories yourself. I once prayed a man out of a life-sentence in prison. From a judicial point of view, prison is probably where he belonged. But under mercy and grace, I was convinced that prison was not at all where God wanted him. So I prayed. On the night

before his trial we went down to a local lake. It was March and the ice had just melted. He sat there on the shore, staring at the mountains thinking he would never see them again. Then he stripped off his shirt and pants and went swimming in the ice cold water, thinking he would never again feel lake water on his skin. The next day, he received a “Not Guilty” verdict. Why? Because of one thing—praying for the impossible. The man is now married, has a child or two, and is serving God with all his strength.

Does God answer prayers for the impossible? Of course He does. He is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that you ask or imagine. If you want the impossible done in your life, pray for the impossible. Then let God work.

But what if you have prayed impossible prayers that were according to the will of God, and yet God never answered and never stepped in to work in impossible ways? What happens when you pray for God to work, but God doesn’t seem to hear, listen, or respond? This question is considered in the next lesson.