
EPH 3:14-21 : AN APOSTOLIC PRAYER [1]

No. EE7

The New Testament contains a number of apostolic prayers. Like the others, this one in Eph 3 is full of precious gold. It is more than worth the trouble mining this portion of God's revelation thoroughly. Let us first just consider v.14.

A SMALL TECHNICAL ISSUE

□ When you compare v.14 in various translations, you will see that they vary. Certain translations, such as the KJV and NKJV, have "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". Most translations, however, only have "the Father" (with "our Lord Jesus Christ" omitted).

This has to do with the different Greek texts which were used to translate from. The KJV was translated from the *Textus Receptus*, a 500 year-old Greek text. Since then a great number of older manuscripts and fragments have been found. These show that the shorter version probably corresponds to the original text as the apostle wrote it. We accept it as such, and consequently do not consider the longer version further. In any case it hardly makes any difference to the meaning of the text.

"FOR THIS REASON"

□ A careful reading shows that Eph 3:1 also begins with the words "For this reason". The apostle interrupts himself, however, and digresses in v.2-13 from his original point, describing his calling and apostleship. And then here in v.14 he returns to what he wanted to say originally in 3:1.

□ This indicates that Paul's prayer follows on something which he said prior to 3:1. Seen as such, it is clear that Paul prays for the Ephesians because Christ is gathering a church for Himself from all nations - building them up together to constitute a house in which He, through His Holy Spirit, can dwell (2:11-22). This is why he, as a Jew, can pray for them, a church consisting mainly of Greeks.

THE HOW AND TO WHOM OF PAUL'S PRAYER

□ The apostle writes that he is *kneeling* in prayer. This brings the issue of posture or physical carriage during prayer to mind. Is it important?

- We can indeed say, especially on account of the New Testament insistence on worship "in Spirit and truth" (John 4:20-24), that the primary concern in prayer is the attitude of a person's heart. Our physical posture is thus not of the essence. One could stand, sit, lie down or kneel. There are, after all, examples of all this in Scripture.

- However, it is also true that the attitude of the heart is reflected in the posture of the body. It stands to reason that this is subject to culture, but in our society there are many physical attitudes that unambiguously express a degree of disrespect. What does it signify if a man prays with his hands in his pockets? What about chewing gum open-mouthed while praying?

- Furthermore, it is often true that your physical posture can help in preparing the right frame of mind. If all of us would go on our knees as we pray during the service today, I can assure you that many of us would be touched to such an extent that we would have difficulty holding back our tears.

But, of course, very soon going on our knees can become a show and hypocritical.

- We have to avoid two extremes in our praying, whether in private or in a gathering. On the

one hand we must always guard against formalism and showing off. On the other, flippancy and disrespect are always to be regarded as deplorable.

□ When Paul says he kneels "before" the Father, he uses a very specific and exceptional word (Gr. *pros*). It is hard to translate, but the famed commentator, R.C.H. Lenski, puts it as follows: "... the face-to-face preposition which is used in intimate personal relations."¹

□ Paul prays to the "Father". This is significant.

Certainly we may and should pray to the Lord Jesus Christ in His majesty. There are, after all, instances thereof in the New Testament. And the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Divine Trinity, although there are no examples in Scripture of a prayer addressed to Him. *His* passion, after all, is the exaltation of Christ.

But if you - like so many Christians - pray almost exclusively to the Lord Jesus, something is amiss in your relationship with the triune God. No, the New Testament teaches us plainly that we should pray primarily to the Father - admittedly based on the merits of the Son and through the strength and faith granted by the Holy Spirit. Just think about the model prayer - the *Our Father*. "This, then, is how you should pray", says Jesus, "Our Father ..." (Matt 6:9; also compare Rom 1:8; 15:5; 13; 1Cor 1:4-7; Eph 1:17; Philem 1:4-6).

- The Biblical revelation of God as our Father in Christ is inexpressibly glorious and precious. The highlight of the Old Testament lies in the fact that the living God engages in a covenant with insignificant and sinful people. But in the New Testament we have a dramatic further development: *this living God is his chosen people's Father!* We are not only His people; we are also His family, His children, and

1. The interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians, p.490

His heirs! Whereas He was virtually inaccessible in the Old Covenant, He now commands us to boldly enter into the Most Holy Place again and again through the torn curtain (Mark 15:38; Heb 10:19).

- In his famous book, *Knowing God*, the theologian, J.I. Packer, writes: "You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. ... For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. "Father" is the Christian name for God."²

- Luther put it like this: "If I could just *genuinely* believe that God, the Creator of heaven and earth, is my Father - I would never forget that Christ is my brother, that everything belongs to me, and that my Father has sent out angels to serve me."

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

1. The worldwide unity of the body of Christ transcends cultural and national identities.

Paul was never ashamed of being Jewish. And he had a very, very fervent zeal for the salvation of the Jews (Rom 9:1-5). But he never allowed this to prevent him loving the gentiles. In fact, he considers himself primarily an apostle for the gentiles. And how he did toil and labour to ensure that the Greeks and Romans would hear the gospel!

What was behind it all? Undoubtedly his passion for the gospel of the Lord Jesus, His kingdom and His church. And he was profoundly convinced that the honour of Christ was closely linked to the

2. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 1973, p.224.

universal nature and unity of His church.

How much would the current worldwide reach of the Christian church have delighted Paul! Yes, the church in the western world is in trouble - because over the past two centuries it has lent its ears to unbiblical and man-centred theology. But two thirds of the church today is to be found in the Third World. Almost a hundred million Christians in China! Korea, which is only beaten by America as far as foreign missions are concerned! South America! Africa!

2. No circumstances can hinder us from reaching the entire world through our prayers.

Paul is writing here as a prisoner. How eagerly he would have liked to visit and encourage the Ephesians personally! But his shackles cannot thwart him in his prayers for them. And never think that this is an inferior and inconsequential ministry!

Often our ideas of how to serve the Lord and His body are too narrow. Those of you who are confined to a wheelchair or a bed; those of you spending day after day in a room in an old people's home - do you realise that you can reach the entire earth, as well as the decades to come, with your prayers? Remember, the Lord never disregards the sincere and biblical prayers of His children. Admittedly, He does not always grant our prayers immediately - but every one of our sincere prayers are woven into the execution of His eternal council.

3. Note how highly Paul values prayer.

The apostle doesn't stop at teaching so wonderfully in his letter to the Ephesians; he also prays for them. And not just once either. Consider his heartfelt prayer in 1:15 and following. In fact, *there* he says that he never stops praying for them at all (1:16).

Moreover, he pleads with the Ephesians to pray for him too. And notice his request - *Paul* of all people: that he may fully comprehend the mystery of the gospel, and preach it fearlessly (6:18-20). Truly, for Paul, prayer was a key!

4. Let us observe the sensitive balance

between reverence and boldness in our relationship with God - also in our prayers.

There are two precipices flanking the narrow road of prayer: on the one side a reticent timidity, and on the other a bombastic, irreverent and brash impertinence.

On the one hand Paul prays to *his Father* - which implies intimacy, confidence and boldness. On the other he *bows his knees* - which reflects his deep sense of respect and awe.

The same balance can be found in the model prayer: "Our Father" ... "in heaven".

5. Let us make it a matter of the highest priority to know the triune God precisely as He has revealed Himself to us.

May the Lord in His grace protect us from creating a God for ourselves according to our own image. There are countless church-goers who are to all intents and purposes idolaters. Only think of the epidemic proportions of man-centredness - as if the Lord exists to dance to *our* tune.

To know God is indisputably our highest calling. But then we need to bow before His self-revelation in humility and with a desire to learn. There can be no scope for self-willfulness and selective preconceptions.

And let us always keep in mind that we can only know God in Christ - His highest and final revelation of Himself to us (John 1:1-18; Heb 1:1-3).

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