
EPH 3:14-21 : AN APOSTOLIC PRAYER [4]

No. EE12

Now we come to the apostle's prayer itself. It is quite profound, and has a few exegetic challenges. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones calls it "undoubtedly one of the great mountain peaks in the Scripture". And indeed, if only we could experience in this life more of what the apostle is praying here.

Looking at the Greek text, it is clear that the prayer can be divided into four parts (16-17; 18-19a; 19b; 20-21). And each of these portions can be subdivided again into smaller sections.

Let us start then with the first part (v. 16b, NASV): "according to the riches of His glory . . .".

ACCORDING TO THE RICHES OF HIS GLORY

❑ What treasures are hidden in this expression! Unfortunately, few Christians treat this with the seriousness it deserves. In this expression we find the secret of a joyful and God-glorifying life that has eternal meaning. Here we have a cure for stagnation, boredom and fruitlessness in the church - an ailment that has struck down tens of thousands, no, millions, through the ages. Indeed, Paul knew exactly what to pray for the Ephesians!

❑ In this prayer Paul not only asks; *he remembers from Whom he asks*. The word that is translated with "according to" (NASA; Gr. *kata*) means *according to the standard of*. Thus, what the apostle is asking, is that the Lord will give to the Ephesians in accordance with *His* riches.

To illustrate: Jesus was impressed when the

poor widow threw two copper coins into the treasury. She gave *according to her ability*; in fact, she gave more than her ability. It would be a shame, however, if a rich man threw in that little. He would be giving far below his means.

❑ What is God's glory? *It is the sum total of His attributes - the totality of His Being*. Paul is therefore praying that God will give the Ephesians something that will be worthy of Him. It is staggering! So magnificent must His gift be that not only the receivers, but also the observers, must have no choice other than to realise how great and glorious God is. Paul prays that He will give according to the *riches* of His glory.

❑ Is the apostle not arrogant? Does he realise what he is praying? Should one not be much more reserved and humble before God's throne of grace? After all, we are just insignificant sinners; saved by God's undeserved mercy. Should we not much rather pray like the tax collector in Luke 18?

Let us remember a few things.

First, surely there are times, perhaps the majority of times, when one should pray like the tax collector. One does not only pray humbly for forgiveness when first coming to Christ, but also every time when - as a child of God - one stumbles and commits sin.

But there are other times when, like yet another character in Luke 18, we have to pray with the utmost boldness. The nagging widow refused to take "no" for an answer. And Jesus was clearly pleased with that.

Secondly, there is nothing more important to God than to glorify Himself. And Paul knows that what he is asking here honours God par excellence. After all, he is not merely desiring the fulfilment of his own carnal desires (James 4:3).

Thirdly, nothing brings more pleasure to our gracious and good God than to pour out His gifts on His beloved children. And what the apostle is praying for here, is indeed God's best gifts for His

children in this life.

Fourthly, let us remember that here we have the prayer of an inspired apostle, recorded in the absolutely reliable Word of God. Therefore we should take these words very seriously.

And do not think that Paul was praying without thinking. In Phil. 4:19 he prays a similar prayer: "And my God will meet all your needs according (Gr. *kata*) to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

A general rule would be: If it is about God's honour, if it is about those things He undoubtedly finds pleasure in, we don't have to hold back in any thing that we ask. In fact, then we can hardly set our sights too high. It honours Him as God when we ask for something that no man can achieve. Remember, there are times when modesty in prayer is not pious, but rather a manifestation of small faith and an indifference to God's honour.

WHAT DOES THIS SAY TO YOU AND ME?

It is true that everyone who is united with Christ has already, in principle, received his or her total heritage in Him - everything that he or she will ever receive to all eternity. It is like a child who inherits a vast sum of money, but only receives it when he reaches a certain age. Legally the money is his from the very start, but the realisation of his inheritance only takes place years later. Now, of course, part of our inheritance in Christ becomes a reality in this life already - and that is what Paul is dealing with here.

In coming weeks we will take a good look at Paul's prayer, but first I want to talk in general about how we should pray about this realisation.

There are two prayers that we should pray regularly. Let us look at these two prayers.

1. "Father, never give me less than a child of yours - elected, washed by the blood, Spirit filled - should receive in this life as a joint heir of Your Son. Give me according to Your riches."

❑ Do you remember how Elisha, from his

deathbed, ordered king Jehoash to strike the ground with his arrows? (2 Kings 13:14-21). The number of times that the king hit the ground would determine how many times, and how devastatingly, the Israelites would defeat the Syrians. Do you remember how disappointed - angry actually - Elisha was when Jehoash struck the ground only three times instead of five or six times?

Why was Elisha so upset? Because Jehoash did not enthusiastically take everything that God offered. Owing to his lack of faith and half-heartedness, he would indeed defeat the Syrians three times, but he would not destroy them once and for all.

❑ The prosperity theology has a big following in our time. Everyone who reads the Bible with honesty, will know that what they preach is seriously off the mark. But let us be careful not to overreact and develop a pauper mentality.

Too many Christians think that they are pious and humble when they present themselves as wretched sinners who are totally happy just to be in the forecourts of the Lord. If I can only be saved, they say, I am more than content - even if it is by the skin of my teeth. A thousand times, no! Of course we are Christ's love-slaves through the grace of God - but we are also beloved children of our heavenly Father, and joint heirs of His Son!

❑ No, God's Word is quite clear: It pleases God, and it glorifies Him, when we embrace as much as we can of our inheritance in Christ.

When the Israelites had to take possession of Canaan, the Lord told them: "I will give you every place where you set your foot" (Jos. 1:3). They had to destroy all the pagans, because God had given the entire land to them. But, they did not do that. And in the second half of the book, we hear the ominous refrain more than once: they did not drive out the Canaanites completely (Jos 15:63; 16:10; 17:13; etc). And the result? These pagans would in the centuries to come seduce the Israelites again and again to worship idols.

❑ No, let Is 62:6-7 be written on the tablets of our hearts: "You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give Him no rest till He establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth."

Let us keep on praying: "*Give me - no, give us, because Paul prays for all the believers in Ephesus - everything that, in this life, You can give to your children according to Your Son's merits.*"

Let us plead with the Lord for ourselves and for our brothers and sisters: "*Lord, stretch our capacity to know You as deeply as people before their glorification can know you. Sanctify us to the degree that mortal man can be sanctified. Give us more and more strength to do Your work - as You did during times of revival in the past. Give us faith and energy to serve You, so that William Carey's words will become a reality in our lives: Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God! Bless us financially in such a way that we will have fortunes available to provide for and feed the poor among us, and to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Please, Father, bless us so that others - because of us - will give glory to You.*"

2. "Father, do not give us more than what You in Your infinite wisdom and love know that we should have. Give to us according to Your wisdom."

❑ This may sound shocking, but the Lord's blessings can also, in the course of time, destroy. Does not the history of revivals show this?

It is the same with individuals. When a congregation lives in spiritual prosperity for too long, the sharp edge of people's gratitude, humility and vigilance have a tendency to become blunt. And before we know it, we take God's kindness for granted. Boldness before the Lord is one thing, but arrogance is quite another. It is so easy for a person's humble and dependent admiration for the Lord's kindness to change into pride and complacency. And on the heels of such a sinful attitude, false doctrine always follows.

Remember then, when we pray to the Lord to provide for us according to the riches of His glory, we should also ask Him never to give us more than what His wisdom allows.

Let us frequently pray: "Father, do not give us more of Your blessing than what You in Your infinite wisdom know will be good for us. Yes, we want to know you, but do not show us more of Yourself than what we can handle. Keep us, by way of speaking, under Your hand when You pass by, like You did for Moses."

Proverbs 30:8-9 talks about financial blessings, but the principle should be applied to all God's gifts: "give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God."

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ earned us an infinitely great inheritance. Nothing, no nothing in this life, should be more important to His Church than to live in such a way that He is praised and glorified. And He will be exalted to the extend that this prayer is embodied in our lives - in accordance with the riches of the Father's glory.

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