

## Sermon – 20/07/2008 am

### Strong and Full

Study Text: Ephesians 3:14-19

Creditors were threatening to take the poor widows sons as slaves (II Kings 4). She cried out to the prophet Elisha to help her. He told her to collect all the containers she could, anything that would hold oil, and lock her doors. She had a jar of oil and started to pour this into the containers as Elisha told her. To her amazement the oil kept flowing with one container after the next being filled. 'Bring another container' she called to her son but there were no more containers – and the oil ceased to flow. The limit of God's blessing was not with the oil but the volume of the containers she had available

When Jesus told Peter to put out into deep water and let down his nets for a catch he was reluctant to do so. But when he did his nets were filled to breaking point and his boat almost sank because of the great number of fish (Luke 5). Peter was literally swamped with fish which were a blessing from the Lord. His nets were not strong enough, nor his boat big enough, for all that the Lord had for him.

The Lord is powerful to bless. He is rich beyond measure in grace and love. God pours his love into our hearts, but how wide open are our hearts to receive his love. Paul's prayer is that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith – but is your heart open and ready for Christ? Does Christ rule over every compartment of your life or do you only give his access to some parts of your life? It is not easy to get rid of the old self completely but know that Christ is knocking on the door, the door to every room of the house (Revelation 3:20).

### Father

*For this reason I bow my knees to the Father (3:14).* You will notice that this verse begins with the same words as verse 1. Paul began with the intention to pray but was sidetracked when reminded of his chains. It is a very informative and wonderful sidetrack explaining the mystery of Christ and glory of God in the church.

'For this reason' therefore takes us back to the context of the previous chapter where Paul explained how Jew and Gentile were now one in the church of Jesus Christ. Gentiles were fellow members of the household of God, the one household or family of God the Father.

*The Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named (3:15).* This verse is difficult to translate and understand. Some insist that it should be 'every family' not 'the whole family'. They say it refers to fatherhood or lineage of a family or tribe in the broad sense. God is the archetype or model of all fatherhood. This would have to include angels as he speaks of heaven and earth.

However, in the context it is more likely that he is referring specifically to God as the Father of all the redeemed, of Jew and Gentile, those on earth and those now in heaven. All the descendants or children of Israel were called Israelites. All the children of God the Father are now called the children of God or if you like 'Christians' – although this name is widely misused. A Christian is not a person who holds to a religion but one who follows Christ. Many who follow the Pope or some favourite saint also call themselves Christians but they

neither know Christ nor follow him. Some do more rightly call themselves by some church order – Dominicans or Josephites or the like.

Paul said I bow my knees to the Father. In other words he knelt in prayer. This is a common posture in prayer, as is standing. We find both in the Bible. Kneeling expresses humility while standing expresses respect and reverence. But let us remember that the Lord looks upon our heart in prayer. Neither posture nor eloquent words nor vain repetition impress the Lord if our hearts are not right before him. We must pray with reverence, with humility and in the name of the only mediator Jesus Christ.

## Fit

Paul has two basic petitions in his prayer for the Ephesians. The first is that God might *strengthen them with power through his Spirit in their inner man* (3:16). God the Father is rich and powerful beyond measure. He is well able to make you spiritually strong. In 1:19 he spoke of God's exceedingly great power that works in us, the same power with which he raised Jesus from the dead. In another place Paul says *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* (Philippians 4:13). He could suffer as well as abound in Christ.

The inner man or being means the heart and mind of a person. It is in contrast to the outer person. Even though our outer man perishes our inward man is being renewed day by day (II Corinthians 4:16). Often there is conflict between the inner and outer part of our being – and our outer being usually wins. In our society great emphasis is placed on the outer being to the neglect of the inner. People are more concerned to be filled with food and drink than to be filled with the Spirit of God (5:18). Such thinking can enter the church.

Paul prays for our inner being to be strengthened – but how? How do we strengthen our hearts? Think how we strengthen our outer being? We must eat good food and get plenty of exercise. We must keep fit. Have you seen people who do not get sufficient food? They get thin and emaciated. Soon they are unable to work. Many Christians are spiritually emaciated. The Bible is like food for our souls. Prayer is like food for our soul. Those who neglect these will not be strong in the Lord.

Paul was concerned for the believers at Ephesus that they would lose heart. He prayed that they would be strong in the Lord. He knew the power of God in his own life and he prayed that they would know this same power. He knew the riches of the glory of God. He was writing to this church to tell them this and was praying that the Holy Spirit would work mightily in their hearts. There is no lack of power on God's part. The weakness comes in our failure to submit, to obey and to trust in the Lord.

In praying for the Colossians Paul says the same thing. He asked that they would be *strengthened with all might according to His glorious power* (Colossians 1:11). He prayed that they would walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing him and being fruitful in every good work. Is this how you pray – for yourself?-for others? We must meditate on God's word and pray that the Holy Spirit would convict us of sin, deliver us from worries, and remove any other obstacles that would prevent us growing in faith and becoming mature children of God.

## Full

The second petition in Paul's prayer is that they might comprehend the limitless dimensions of the love of Christ and be filled with all the fullness of God. Notice the Trinitarian character of this prayer. Christ dwelling or residing in the heart, being filled with the fullness of God

and being strengthened by the Holy Spirit. This is what we find in the gospels (e.g. John 14:23).

The fullness of God is a prominent theme in Paul's prison letters. Christ fills all in all (1:23). The fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Jesus (Colossians 2:9). Paul prays that believers will be filled with the knowledge and love of Christ. He prays that believers be perfect in the fullness of Christ (4:12). Yes Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, he lives in us, and we grow up into him who is the head.

We cannot grow in the love of Christ completely unless we are joined to the body. Because we are in Christ there must be unity in the church. Paul's prayer is that together *with all the saints* we will comprehend the magnitude of Christ's love (3:18). It is not easy to grasp these truths but this is what we are told and what we believe.

The love of Christ continually amazed Paul. Whenever he mentions it he is moved to utter a doxology – as we find in the verses which follow. He speaks of being rooted and grounded in love because the love of Christ is like roots to a plant and like soil to those roots – to somewhat mix metaphors. We live because of the love of Christ. We live because he loved us and died for us. The love of Christ keeps us every day. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35).

One of the challenges in the study of plant growth is the growth of roots. We can easily see and measure the top growth of a plant but measuring roots is difficult. They grow in the soil and we cannot see them. But the roots are essential to the growth of the plant. A plant that has no roots in the soil will not live long.

'The love of God in Christ is the soil in which Christians thrive'. So it was with Paul. He knew the love of Christ was the most important thing in his life. He knew he lived only because of Christ's love. Yet it was difficult for him to comprehend this love. Christ's love is so vast. When Christ comes to live in our hearts his love reaches out into every part of our being, sustaining us and empowering us for any and every eventuality in life.

The love of Christ 'surpasses knowledge' Paul writes in this most amazing and exalted passage of the Bible. The love of Christ is beyond our comprehension and our understanding. Yet like Paul we pray that we might understand more of its height and depth and length and breadth. Here is true experiential belief in Jesus Christ. Knowing his love is not just a matter of head knowledge but of heart knowledge.

Still our knowledge of Christ's love comes from meditating on his word, on the Scriptures. 'A genuine and deep perception of the love of Christ rarely comes to a person who is not spending much time in the Scriptures'. Our experience of his great love will be based upon what he has already done for us as told in the Bible.

Can you imagine Paul praying this prayer for you? Are you fit and ready in your inner being to be filled with the love of God in Christ Jesus? If not then pray that the Holy Spirit would empower you to clean up your heart, to throw out the old baggage that you are hanging on to, to put off the old self so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*