

Continue the Race

12/29/24

Every year, most good businesses will do a year end check of itself. The leaders will look at all the numbers for the past year and see where they did well and check for areas where they did poorly. If you've been reading the news of late, many businesses that has been around for awhile are going out of business or cutting back drastically. Macy's looking at closing their New York store that was in the old Christmas movie Miracle on 34th Street because the close is not meeting expectations. The large automaker Nissan is doing very poorly and they're trying to save the company by trying to get Honda to merge with them. So, businesses usually will try to do a check on itself to see the weak spots and the strong spots in the past year. Churches do that as well. Nazarene Pastors have to do end of year report for the Nazarene headquarters in Kansas City. The report is full of all the numbers that have to be added up and it shows how a church is doing number wise – financial, membership, etc. Those numbers can be compared to the year before so you can see if the church is doing ok or is not. A good business will look at areas where there can be improvement on. There is nothing bad in that. There can always be some type of improvement. There is no perfect business or church. A business can always improve on customer service, inventory, employee relations, and the list can go on and on. How about a church? What areas can a church always work on?

As we close 2024 and start to look forward to 2025, what can we improve on as a church? What can we focus on to help improve ourselves as a church? God's Word is a perfect resource to find what a church can improve on and we're going to take a look this morning at one item. Let's turn to Ephesians 3: 14 – 21. Here we have Apostle Paul writing to the Church in Ephesus and he states this, "When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts

as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen. (NLT, 1876)"

This is a prayer from Paul for the church he is overseeing and he gives them an example of the type of prayer we can have for each other. We didn't read the first thirteen verses of chapter three, but the reason Paul offers this prayer is because he knows God has a plan for the Gentile Church. Paul knows he was called by Jesus to lead the Gentile Church, so Paul is excited about the great possibilities that can be in store for them because of Jesus dying for His Church. So, for this reason, Paul falls to his knees in prayer for the Church. So, we're going to look at this prayer because we all can use another blueprint of a prayer as an example for our own prayers. We have the perfect prayer from Jesus, The Lord's Prayer, and now we have this prayer from Paul. We need examples because we can always use improvement in our prayers. Most people feel inadequate in prayer. Most people will not pray in public because they feel inadequate and that shouldn't be. I remember years ago when I started to come to Wednesday night Bible study when Pastor Dunlap did them. He would call on someone to close in prayer after the study was over and I would pray that he wouldn't call on me. I felt so inadequate to pray out loud. I didn't know what to pray for out loud. So, let's take a peek at how Paul prayed for the Church of his day.

Paul starts in verse 16 by praying the Church will be given mighty inner strength. This is given by the Holy Spirit and Paul tells us that this mighty power is glorious and has unlimited resources. When we pray for each other, we should be praying for mighty inner strength. The NIV has this translation for verse 16, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being." I like both NIV and NLT here. Paul is praying that the

people, the Church, will be filled with the Lord's mighty power which gives them inner strength. This is given through the Holy Spirit and it is glorious and has unlimited resources because it is through the Spirit of God. In other words, we can say Paul is praying that the people will be filled with God's Spirit because Paul knows they need inner strength. This may be the greatest need in the Church today. We need to pray for inner strength by the filling of the Holy Spirit for each other. If you haven't noticed lately, life can be very rough. I know I have felt days where I felt totally spiritually drained. Paul knows that for the Church to be able to carry on the mission of Jesus, they would need their inner strength to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Paul was witness to what the Spirit of God could do. He saw his own transformation from murderer to saint by the work of the Spirit of God. When we pray for the filling of the Spirit upon each other, the Spirit of God knows what each of us needs to draw closer to Jesus. Willaim Barclay, a past theologian, stated this about verse 16, "The church is to be the complement of Christ, the body through which the Spirit of Christ acts and operates....If the church is ever to be like that, the people within it must be a certain kind of people." In other words, we need to pray for the filling of the Spirit upon us all so we can be that certain kind of people Jesus wants us to be as a Church – a holy and righteous people that does His work while we're on this earth. Also, because of this great power through the Spirit, there is no reason for us to give up and stop doing the work of the Lord. We have unlimited resources through the Spirit of God. Verse 16 will be the verse you'll see in the bulletin for 2025 to remind us to continue to pray for each other for Holy Spirit inner strength. Let's continue with Paul's prayer.

Next, Paul tells the Church he prays that Jesus may dwell in their hearts through faith or trust in verse 17. This goes in line with what Paul states in another letter, Colossians 2:7 where Paul states, "Let your roots grow down into him and draw nourishment from him, so you will grow in faith, strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught. (NLT, 1903)" Not only should we pray for inner strength through the Holy Spirit, but for each other's faith to grow as well. We need His Spirit to water our spiritual roots so that they grow and become strong. That way, we can handle any storm of life because our roots (faith) have

grown deep into Jesus. You need strong faith if you're going to be able to handle strife and suffering. If we go back to Ephesians 3: 17, Paul uses the term "root" again by telling the Church to let their roots be grounded in the love of Christ. The Greek term for "rooted" is "rhizoo" which means to be firmly planted. Paul wants the Church to be firmly planted in Jesus' love and that requires a faith that is continually growing from the nutrients of the Holy Spirit. To make this a little more simple, we need to pray for each other's faith to grow. So we pray that our inner strength will grow through the filling of the Holy Spirit and for our faith to grow so we can handle life's battles.

Paul also prays for the Church to be able to grasp how deep, wide, long, and high the love of the Lord is. Let's go back to verse 17 – 19, "So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (NIV)". When our faith grows, we can grasp the love of Jesus better. Paul wanted the Church to be filled to the measure of God's love. When you have inner strength and faith from the Holy Spirit, then the love of God becomes your passion. You want His love inside you and you want to know all about it. You want to live God's love out in full measure as well. Let's remember that Paul adds in verse 18 the "Lord's holy people". We know we are to be a holy people and God's love is needed inside us to be a holy people. Without it, we can't love Jesus and then we can't love people the way the Lord wants us to love people. Paul WANTED the Church to live in the fullness of Jesus' love. The Church needs to spend time looking around them during services and stop looking at what people are wearing. We should be more worried about each other's spiritual condition to the point where we pray for God's love to flow freely in each church member. So, we pray for inner strength, for growing faith, and for full measure of God's love in each person. Paul doesn't stop there.

In verse 20 – 21, Paul states, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for

ever and ever! Amen. (NIV)" The last thing we can pray for each of us is that God's power will work through us. Why should we do this? So that the glory of Jesus can be revealed to those around us. Paul uses the term "power" again. He used it in verse 16. Paul believed in the power of God. He believed God's power could even be inside people. We should pray that the power of God will fill each person because His power can do immeasurable things. Why do we do so much stuff on our own when the power of God can help us accomplish so much more? When people see how the Lord helps us in every situation, they may want to know Jesus better and we can have the opportunity to witness to them about what Jesus has done for us.

So, we pray for inner strength, for growing faith, for full measure of God's love in each person and for the filling of God's power in each person. All of this can be done through the filling of the Holy Spirit that gives us holy knowledge. We need to pray for each other's spiritual development. Paul did for his Church and he passed that model to the Church and to us. I think our prayer life could use some improvement. Let's follow Paul's blueprint and let's witness what the Lord can do with our church family. God can do immeasurable things.

. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

NLT Life Application Study Bible. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.: Wheaton, 1996.