

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

A Prayer of St. Paul.

THERE are two prayers in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The first is at the end of the first chapter, and the second is the passage we are now studying (iii. 14-21). They are both of importance for showing us the spirit of Paul's religion, his attitude to the churches, and the fulness and profundity of his religious ideas. But the dominating conceptions of the two prayers are different. The first revolves round the idea of spiritual enlightenment as the supreme need of the churches, and the second round the idea of spiritual strength in order that the Christians may seize with both hands the great gifts which God has freely given to the churches.

The connection of this prayer is rather broken. In the second chapter of the Epistle, Paul builds up the doctrine of salvation. First, he shows how God has dealt mightily with the Christians in Jesus Christ. Just as He raised Christ from the dead in order that He might sit on the heavenly throne, so He has raised the Christians from the dead and given them the privilege of sharing in the heavenly power and splendour of Christ. That is the depth of God's saving purpose for men. Then He shows the breadth of it. God's grace is not confined to the Jews: it embraces all men. Christ is the peace of all the world. Those who were afar off, estranged from the commonwealth of God, are brought near in Jesus Christ, and are built up together with the Jews into a sacred edifice, the Church, of which the Spirit is the inspiring breath, and the corner-stone is Christ. Then he proceeds to draw out the ethical implications of it all. Paul is essentially an ethical teacher, always aiming at building up the characters of his converts, but he always makes his ethical lessons strike deep in abiding religious principles. His moralisings are never in the air: they always have as their foundation the rock of divine grace. In order to make a telling emotional appeal, he addresses his readers as the bondservant of Christ, so as to urge them to live worthily of the Gospel. But the phrase calls up memories, and in a perfectly unpremeditated fashion, he pours out his heart in thanksgiving to God for calling him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Then he prays that his readers, by the power of the Spirit and the indwelling Christ, may have the strength to grasp the immeasurable nature of the love of Christ in order that they may grow into all the fulness of God.

Before we discuss the prayer, it will be well to examine the view of God put forward in it. It may seem criminal to dissect

a prayer in order to discover the theology it pre-supposes, but we have to remember three facts. The first is that it is just in a man's prayers that he reveals his theology. If they are honest, it is just there that he shows his most real thoughts and desires, stripped of the veneer and technicalities of the theological system. That is as true of Paul as of anybody else. The second is that the prayers of Paul in his letters are literary. They may be the spontaneous expression of the heart, but so also is a good deal more of what he says. They form an integral part of his letters. They follow a well-known literary device in the ancient world. Which all means that they are not quite as spontaneous as they sound, and that we may legitimately use them as criteria for estimating his theological outlook as well as for studying his spiritual life. The third is that, seeing that Paul intended his letters to be read, he accepted responsibility for what was in them, whether it took the form of prayer or not. It may seem irreverent to examine a man's prayers under the microscope, but no man of prayer ought to be afraid of the examination.

Paul speaks of God as the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, and he prays that the Father will grant various blessings to the Christians according to the riches of His glory. Three points call for mention here.

(1) First, Paul speaks of God as the Father in an absolute sense: His predominant idea of God was that of His grace. His whole experience as a Christian man and a Christian preacher was due to the pouring out of the grace of God into his life. It was natural for him, therefore to follow his Master in speaking of God as Father. It is certain that the source of this conception of Paul is to be found in Jesus rather than in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, although the Fatherhood of God is taught, it is His Kingship that receives the emphasis. Even in the Psalms, the Hebrew book of devotion, the name Father is not applied to God. And even where the Fatherhood of God is taught, it is as a special relationship which He holds with the nation rather than as a loving relationship with individuals. He is Father because He has an interest in the nation as a whole, and because He has chosen it out to be the medium of His revelation to the world. But Fatherhood is not the predominant conception of God, and it is not yet seen that Fatherly love and grace are the essential elements of His moral nature. But the Fatherhood of God is fundamental in the religious thought of Jesus. That Paul is dependent upon Jesus can be seen by the instances in his letters in which the Aramaic word for Father as it was actually used by Jesus in prayer is used side by side with the Greek word. It is as though *Abba* had become so endeared to the early Christians because of its associations with Jesus that unconsciously

they slipped into it, even though they used the Greek word *Pater* in the same breath. But Paul is not only dependent upon the teaching of Jesus. Christ is to him regulative of the Fatherhood of God. God is the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is only as the Father of Jesus Christ that the Fatherhood of God is seen at its highest and best. Through his experience of the saving grace of God in Christ, Paul has been led to see that Fatherly grace is the essential quality of the Godhead. God is eternally and essentially Father because Christ is eternally and essentially Son. What Paul teaches is not a bare, abstract Fatherhood, but a Fatherhood revealed through Jesus Christ, and through Christ made the common possession of all those who put their trust in Him. Vital experience of God the Father belongs only to those who have vital experience of Jesus Christ His Son.

(2) The Fatherhood of God is regulative of every other Fatherhood. God is Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. The word *patria* is hard to translate. It is used to describe not only a family but any body of people, however large, a tribe or even a nation, which derives its being from a common ancestor. God is the Father of every race in heaven and earth. And the union of a single race in its common ancestor has its symbol in the union of the whole race of men in God. This is a very pregnant conception, and we must give it careful study. It is assuredly legitimate to draw out the following points.

(a) God is creator. He called all men and angels and worlds into being. It is His power that made them and it is His providential interest and care that keeps them alive. But that is not the deepest or most fundamental part of the conception. That much could be said by the majority of religious teachers.

(b) The whole universe is built up on the pattern of Fatherhood. The relationship of Father and Son, with its intimacies of fellowship and the ethical responsibilities that it lays upon the shoulders of men, lies at the very heart of things. God has made the world in His own image and the image in which He has made it is that of Fatherhood. God is immanent in the world, but He is immanent as Father. Just as all the sons of Abraham are in the loins of the patriarch, and all the sons of Adam are mystically present in their father Adam, so all the sons of men are mystically present in God and were known by Him before the beginning of time. Fatherhood is regulative not only of Paul's theology, but also of his ethics, and angelology and cosmology.

(c) It is possible here perhaps to see the influence of the Platonic doctrine of ideas, yet not coming to Paul directly from

Plato, but as meditated through Hellenistic Judaism. The things of earth are only transitory and a shadow of reality. The reality is to be found in the archetypal ideas. There is very little of this kind of thinking, however, in Paul. There is much more of it in John and Hebrews.

(d) We see coming out again the thought which is very common in Colossians and Ephesians, of the essential unity of heaven and earth, and the Lordship of God in Christ over all created things. Salvation in the real thought of the New Testament is never merely spiritual: it embraces the whole personality, body and soul alike. But it is not men only who are to be saved: the whole physical universe is groaning and travailing in pain, waiting for the redemption. When the Messianic Age fully comes, all things in heaven and earth will be gathered together, every kind of evil will be put down, and Christ will be all in all. That is one side of Paul, and that side is the logical outcome of Hebrew thought which has come under the influence of Christ. But there is another side, derived from the dualism of Hellenistic Philosophy, in which Paul is made to look upon matter as essentially evil, with salvation as the deliverance of the soul from the prison-house of the body. Unfortunately, the Greek and the Hebrew in Paul never fully met, and in fact, I suppose, it would be impossible for them to meet.

(e) God is more than creator. He is even more than Father of all men. He is the archetypal Father, from whom every other Fatherhood derives its being and significance. The name Father to Paul is no mere symbol to set off certain spiritual qualities in God, a symbol taken from the relationships of earth: he says, indeed, that the very idea of Fatherhood has its origin in God and not in man. The Fatherhood of God is eternal and essential: that of man is but derivative. There can be Fatherhood on earth only because there is Fatherhood in heaven. Paul would have disputed the idea that God is man writ large: he would sooner have said that man was God writ small. Or, to be more accurate and more true to Scripture, he would have said that in Fatherhood as in everything else, man is made in the image of God. Like a true Hebrew, Paul makes his thought move from God to the world and men; whereas the philosopher makes thought move from the world and men to God. The difference between him and other Jews was a difference in the conception of God.

(3) What does Paul mean when he asks that God will give blessings according to the riches of His glory? In the Old Testament, the Glory of God means roughly the manifested splendour of God, the revelation of His essential nature. Through the influence of Isaiah, this becomes spiritualised in tone, until the

whole natural world and the long course of human history is seen to be the manifestation of God's power. The Glory of God is revealed in the mighty structure of the universe and in the handiwork of men. But comparatively early in Hebrew thought, the phrase begins to be used to describe a theophany, the manifestation of God in human form. That is the case, for example, in Exodus xxxiii. 17-23, which comes from the seventh century. In Ezekiel, the phrase quite clearly describes a physical occurrence. Ezekiel really sees in his visions the movements of the Glory of God. This is taken further in the Priestly Code, which comes from the fifth century, where men are described as seeing the Glory of God with the naked eye in their waking moments. In Paul, the phrase sometimes has an ethical significance. That, for example, is the case in Rom. iii. 23, "we have all sinned and come short of the Glory of God," where obviously what Paul means is that men have fallen short of the standard of ethical perfection set them in God. But often it is to be interpreted literally. Thus, his conception of the future existence of the faithful as sharing in the Glory of God has a quite physical reference. Sometimes, Paul seems to give the idea that the divine Glory is a brilliant, dazzling light, on the lines of the Shechinah, surrounding the Spirit, which is a super-sensuous substance, and which is passed on by God to Christ and thence to men. But in such a phrase as we have here, he is simply using a figure of speech, and it must not be analysed too minutely. For Paul, as for the Scriptures as a whole, the Glory of God stands for the manifested splendour of God. Sometimes the symbolic meaning is uppermost, and sometimes the literal, but invariably it is the holiness of God, the essence of God on its ethical side, which is being emphasised. The revelation of the Glory of God is a revelation in such a way as to act upon human thought and to influence human conduct. It is not mere spectacular display. What Paul prays for here is that the whole fulness of the glorious perfection of God may be granted to the Ephesians. He does not want then to touch merely the fringe of the divine nature; he wants them to be absolutely saturated with the divine perfection.

There are three prayers offered for the Christians. He prays (1) that they may be strengthened in the inward man according to the Spirit, (2) that they may be strong enough to apprehend the greatness of Christ, and (3) that they may be filled with all the fulness of God. We will study the three petitions in turn.

(1) First, he asks God that the Christians may be strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inward man, that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith, to the end that they may be rooted and grounded in love. Three points call for notice here.

(a) We are introduced to one of the most characteristic of Paul's ideas, the conception of the Spirit as the source of spiritual power and life in the Christian. By nature, men are fleshly, weak, under the influence of sin, incapable of doing the will of God. The Spirit is a power coming into them from the outside, from a higher world, and miraculously transporting them into a new realm of being. The Christian is transformed at the very centre of his life. He is renewed in the inward man. The springs of his life are changed. He is no longer under the corrupting power of the devil, but under the life-giving power of the Spirit of God. Sometimes, it seems that Paul views the change as gradual. There is a continual approximation towards spiritual life. The carnal part of man gradually decreases in power as the spiritual part of him increases. But his general idea is that the change is made miraculously and immediately at the very moment of conversion. Just as Christ, at His resurrection, passed at one stroke from the earthly life of the body to the heavenly life of the Spirit, so, at the moment of baptism, at one stroke, the Christian, by mystically entering into the resurrection act of Christ, passes out of the life of the flesh into that of the Spirit.

A good many have condemned Paul for teaching a purely magical change. But he is not guilty of that. For first, he realises that the Christian, even though he is living the life of the Spirit, still has to live the same physical life as before, and still has to resist the enticements of the flesh. The saints have to be warned against evil. Paul knows that even he has not yet fully apprehended all that there is to apprehend. Secondly, the reception of the gift of the Spirit is ethically conditioned. It is given as a result of the opening up of the heart and the surrender freely of the will to God in faith. Thirdly, the fruits of the Spirit are ethically defined. They are love, joy, peace, and so on. High above all the miraculous gifts, such as the Glossolalia and the power of working miracles, stand faith, hope and love, and highest of all is love, which is at once the dominant ethical motive of the Christian and the highest gift of the Spirit. And fourthly, Paul recognises that there has to be continual growth in the life of the Spirit and continual appropriation of the Spirit's gifts. The Spirit is the earnest of the future immortal life. The essential change of the Christian at baptism is not conspicuous. The change is evidenced only by the different ethical fruits produced by the spiritual man. But these are the proof that the real substantial nature of the change will one day be made conspicuously manifest. This is one more evidence for Paul's thought that all is of grace. The gift of the Spirit is not the result of human endeavour. It is very much the other way about.

Moral change comes only because the Christian has had implanted within him the real Spirit of God.

(b) Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts. The connection of this is not quite clear. It may mean that the indwelling Christ is the result of the strengthening by the Spirit. That would imply a progress in thought, but it would also imply what Paul never elsewhere does imply, that the possession of the Spirit is necessary before we can possess the indwelling Christ. Or it may mean that the power of the Spirit is inseparable from the indwelling Christ, and that Christ is the source of spiritual life in the Christian. That is, without doubt, the sounder interpretation. That being so, several facts require notice.

(1) Christ dwells in our hearts only as we have faith. To Paul, faith never means the mere acceptance of a creed. It is one of his great words, one of his imperishable words. Faith is the opening up of the heart to God in Christ. It is allegiance, fidelity and love. It is enthusiastic loyalty. It is the quality which makes a man willing to be the offscouring of the earth for the sake of Jesus Christ. It is the response of the whole personality to the gracious will of God. That is essential before Christ can completely dwell in the heart. At first, faith may be only weak and childlike. But in the progress of the years, it becomes strong and virile, the concurrence of every element of the personality, so strong as to command the very presence of God. This is a sign of Paul's ethical and religious sanity. When you get to the bedrock of his thinking, he is not influenced by any magical conceptions. All the work of God in the soul is ethically conditioned. And yet he would have said that even faith was not the work of men: it was the gift of God.

(2) What Paul asks for is the abiding presence of Christ in the heart of the Christian. It is no mere spasmodic visitation in hours of spiritual enthusiasm or spiritual crisis, but a permanent, unbreakable, familiarity of intercourse between Christ and the believer. Christ is to dwell at the very centre of the personality, casting out the old ego of sin, and forming the new ego of life and Godliness. All the powers and fruits of the Christian's life are the result of the indwelling Christ.

(3) We must at least notice the close connection between the Spirit and Christ. So close indeed is the connection that many scholars have said that, to Paul, they are the same. The historical Jesus has ceased to have any meaning for him. He desires no longer to know Christ after the flesh but only Christ after the Spirit. And Christ is little more than a name to define the divine power which dwells in the heart of the spiritual man and which is working for the overthrow of all materiality in the world. It would take too long to examine this theory

properly, but it does not seem to be substantiated. The historical Jesus was not nearly so foreign to Paul as many think. He made zealous efforts to keep true to the older Christian tradition. He obviously modelled his ethical teaching on that of Jesus. The appearance which led to his conversion was that of Jesus whom he was persecuting. Salvation was rooted in historic facts, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus Christ was a real historic personality who had been the fulfilment of the Messianic promises of the Jews. And yet He is not merely a man of the past. He is one who has regained by death and resurrection what He lost before birth. He has been elevated to the rank of divinity, and can dwell as an abiding spiritual presence, not merely a sacred memory, in the hearts of those who trust Him. Paul holds the two conceptions side by side.

And yet though Paul does not regard the Spirit and the indwelling Christ as the same, he regards their functions as very much alike, and, in the last resort, we cannot keep them apart. He can speak of the Spirit or the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of God, as though they were the same, and he can pass from one idea to the other without seeming to realise it. The fact is that, although for several reasons, Paul felt it to be necessary to stress the reality of the Spirit, yet it was not a real part of his thought, any more than it was a real part of the thought of Jesus or the Fourth Evangelist. Paul's use of the doctrine of the Spirit lay partly in its prominence in the earliest Christian thinking, partly in his own possession of outstanding spiritual gifts, partly as a result of faulty analytical examination, and partly owing to his essentially practical and ethical interests. His mind was so occupied with the work that God actually did in the soul, that he was not interested in examining how precisely the work was done. The functions of Christ and the Spirit are almost identical. His fundamental conception is not that of the Spirit, as it is in the earlier thought of the Church, but rather that of the indwelling Christ who has taken upon Himself all the work of the Spirit.

(c) The third point is that the Christian's life should be rooted and grounded in love. Here what is meant is not the love of God or of Christ, but love as the foundation principle of Christian life. There is no need to spend time on this. It is familiar to every reader of Paul. Love is of absolute worth. There are all kinds of gifts of the Spirit and qualities of the personality which are necessary for wholeness of life, but in worth they are incomparable with love. Love is also indestructible. It is the absolute, eternal, all-embracing, ethical ideal.

(2) Paul's second petition is that the Christians may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the length and

breadth and height and depth, to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. There is an advance of thought in the petitions. First, he asks for spiritual power. Without the Spirit, no man can be in the fullest sense a Christian. But some Christians are "babes." These accept the plain facts of the Gospel, which can be apprehended by faith and love. And those facts are fundamental. They lie at the centre of his preaching. But other Christians are "men." They know the secrets of the Gospel. They can search the deeps of the nature of God and understand the love which passeth understanding. In his ordinary teaching, Paul kept rigidly to the main facts of the Gospel message, the love of God, the saving power of the cross of Christ, the need for repentance, the reality of the indwelling Christ. But to those who possessed the insight, he undertook to unravel the mysteries and to lay bare the plan of salvation. What these secrets were we do not know, but they could be grasped only by those of a refined spirituality. Nor do we know how these secret things were made clear to him, whether by his own reflection or in the hours of ecstasy and mystic revelation. But we know this, that the knowledge was the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit was the agent of revelation. And it was the directing power in reflection and enquiry. Whether as ecstatic or thinker, the Christian was under the control of the Spirit. It was only the Spirit of God which could reveal the deep things of God. Paul here shows himself to be influenced by the Hellenistic idea of Gnosis. Revelation to the Hebrew is confined to the ethical nature of God; His work in the history of man, His will for the world. For Paul, revelation goes further than that. It deals with the world of truth locked up in God, which can never be discovered merely by human reason. Revelation in the highest sense, Gnosis, is the possession only of those who are very much under the control of the Spirit. But again his sanity must be noticed.

For (a) this knowledge is open to all the saints. It is not reserved for a few select souls. It is meant for the whole body of the Church. There were grades of Christians, it is true. Some had greater insight than others. Unconsciously the way was being prepared for the time when it would be thought that there were two kinds of Christians, the lower sort who walked by faith and the higher sort who walked by Gnosis. But, according to Paul, all Christians could rise to the level of knowledge. There was no reason why they should be satisfied to remain "babes" all their days.

(b) The knowledge of the love of Christ is not an individual possession: it is the possession of the Church as a whole. The united work of all is needed before the real greatness of Christ

is to be understood. The whole Church is to share in the belongings of every individual. Each is to make his contribution to the body. One Christian sees one thing in Christ, and another sees something else. And each has his function with a view to the building up of the Church as a whole. Knowledge of Christ grows only as it is imparted. What is selfishly kept to oneself is eventually lost. It will take all the saints of the Church together to understand the love of the Christ who is the Lord of all the Church.

(c) The greatest secret of God is the love of Christ. Gnosis is of value only as it is understanding of the love of God. And the knowledge of the love of God is of value only as it aids us in living the life of God. Gnosis which ends only as Gnosis is not real Gnosis. Paul always guarded the Church against becoming stranded in subjectivism or non-moral mysticism.

(d) It was the Spirit which was the agent of revelation. In spite of the Hellenistic colouring of his thought, he kept true to the Hebrew tradition. The prophetic Spirit which always served an ethical purpose and interpreted the will of God for men's lives, revealed the deep things of God.

(e) Christians themselves had to respond to the leading of the Spirit. They had to exert themselves to progress in knowledge. They had to seize with both hands what God gave to them. They had to have strength to apprehend. They had to consecrate themselves to the task of following the Spirit.

(f) In the last resort, the love of Christ cannot be known. It passeth understanding. We may know a little of its principles and its manner of working. We may see a little the diligence with which it seeks for the sinner and builds up the life of the saint, but the length of it and the breadth and the height and the depth, nobody can know. Even the man of Gnosis cannot have complete Gnosis. The love of Christ is immeasurable. It is beyond the grasp either of intellect or insight. Even the Spirit cannot adequately reveal it.

(3) The third petition is that the Christians may be filled with all the fulness of God. This is the climax of the prayer. It defies analysis. And yet by the aid of other sections of the epistle, we can draw out the salient points.

(a) Christ is the fulness of God. He gathers up into Himself the totality of the divine manifestations. To understand the nature of divine revelation and the purpose of God to save the world from sin, the only work of God in which the religious man, *qua* religious man, is interested, there is no need to seek the guidance of men or angels. Jesus contains the whole of God's revelation in Himself. He is the consummation of all that went before and the principle of all that is to follow. Through Christ

alone, men enter into the knowledge of the saving purpose of God.

(b) Just as Christ is the fulness of God, so the Church is the fulness of Christ. Through the presence of Christ at the centre of the Church's life, the Church becomes the incarnation of Christ in the world. It gathers up into itself the totality of the manifestations of Christ.

(c) Christ is mystically present in the Church. He is the head of the body, the inspiring breath of the Church's life, the invisible essence of it. Through organic connection with Him, it gains the possession of His characteristic qualities. It lives and dies and rises again in Him. The life blood of the Church is not human but divine.

(d) It is the Church that is the fulness of Christ. It is the whole body of believers, striving together as a whole, that is to attain to the full measure of the stature of Christ. The Spirit is given to the Church, and it is only as a man shares in the life of the Church that he shares in the life of the Spirit. The individual is but a partial reflection of Christ, and is a reflection at all only because he shares in the life of the Church. And even the Church is only a partial reflection of Christ. Christ is eternally the fulness of God. But the Church is only a gradual approximation to the fulness of Christ.

After his prayer, Paul breaks out in a doxology. It looks very much as if he quotes one of the common doxologies of the Church. The appearance of it gives that impression. But whether his own or not, it marks the high-water mark of the epistle. All the blessings that come to men are the work of an eternal God and have their ultimate source in His age-long purpose which embraces the very ends of the earth. The entire epistle is an elaboration of that theme.

H. J. FLOWERS.

FROME. A group separated about 1700 under Pauling or Paling. They met in a chantry near St. Catharine's Hill, organised as a church 1707, and built a meeting-house next year. William Hendy, a pupil of Davison at Trowbridge, was their pastor 1706-1741. Edward Henwood was colleague 1825, successor, died 1753. John Sedgfield was colleague 1745, and successor. Job David was colleague 1773, and successor, in 1775 when Sedgfield retired, leaving 98 members. These statements were made that year to Josiah Thompson, probably by David. The church became all but Unitarian under him, but under John Foster took a different turn, as Sheppard's Barton.