

Title: God is Able
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Passage: Ephesians 3:16-21
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Ever feel like you pray the same prayer over and over again with no effect? Ever pray and nothing seems to change. Does prayer really make a difference, any difference at all? Why pray if we are setting ourselves up for disappointment?

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is the prayer of a man who believes in the power of prayer. Words of praise and thanksgiving and expectation and hope spill out of Paul. This is not polite prayer; this is passionate and heart-felt prayer.

Paul was a man of prayer. His letters to the churches are saturated with them from beginning to end. And I think he has some profound things to teach us about how we might pray. In his prayer for Ephesians I believe there are some principles about prayer which we can translate into our own lives.

Basis for Prayer

Number one; the basis of prayer is the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul begins his prayer for the Ephesians with these words:

For this reason...

Paul links his prayer with all that he has written up to this point.

Because Jesus destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between man and God he can now speak to God directly. For this reason.

Because we are sons and daughters of God we can address with confidence God as Father. For this reason.

Because those saved by faith in Christ are not only sons and daughters, but also brothers and sisters, we are compelled to pray for one another out of love. For this reason.

In short, Paul can pray and we can pray because of what Jesus made possible through his life, death and resurrection. The initiative in prayer does not lay with us. Prayer is always and has always been initiated by God. Eugene Peterson has perhaps my favourite definition of Christian prayer:

Prayer is answering speech. The first word is God's Word.
(Eugene Peterson)

It was God's Word that created the heavens and earth. It was God's Word that, in the words of John the Apostle, became flesh and dwelt amongst us. It was the Word become flesh, Jesus, that was nailed to the cross, laid in the tomb and who later burst from the grave.

When we pray we speak with the God who has already spoken to us, not just with speech but with sacrificial action.

When we finish praying with the words 'in the name of Jesus, Amen', we are reminding ourselves that the basis of our prayer, the reason we can pray and hope to be heard is because God has made it possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Posture of Prayer

Number two; the posture of prayer is humble expectation. Paul continues his prayer with these words:

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I kneel before the Father.

The normal posture for prayer in the bible was standing. Praying on your knees was and is a vivid sign of humble submission.

Now I am not saying, and neither do I think does the bible says we must literally be on our knees if we want our prayers heard, although sometimes the physical act of bending our knee can be incredibly helpful. God is not so much interested in the posture of our body as He is in the posture of our heart.

I was given a book by my good friend Stuart last week. In the first chapter I read of some pastors who came together in an Asian country where they are persecuted for their Christian faith. Most walked many miles to attend a training event, risking jail and worse. They arrived one after another over many hours in order to not draw the attention of the authorities. When the meeting started, the author of the book, an American Pastor, watched as one after another the pastors shared the triumphs and tragedies of their ministries. After a while spontaneous prayer broke out. Every Pastor in the room fell to their knees on the dirt floor and pressed their faces into the soil as they cried out to God. They prayed and cried for one another for more than an hour until eventually they all sat up again. As they did, the American Pastor saw all around the room puddle of tears pooling on the dirt floor. Tears of humble expectation.

Where are our tears? Where is our humble submission?

When I read that story, I reflected that too often in my life, in the words of a song, my eyes are dry and my heart is cold.

God does not want our polite prayers; God longs for our passionate, heart-felt, soul-deep prayers. God wants us to pray with humble expectation.

Goal of Prayer

Number three; the goal of prayer is our transformation.

Paul is very clear about what he is asking of God. He is asking three things, three steps if you like:

- That God will strengthen the Ephesians by the Holy Spirit
- That Christ might dwell in their hearts
- That they will comprehend the magnitude of God's love for them

This all culminates with the Paul's request:

That you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Paul's request is astonishing. He is asking nothing less than that God will fill the Ephesians with His very self – with His perfection and holiness – to the point that they will overflow with God.

Paul is praying that the Ephesians will be so filled with the presence of God that they would overflow with the presence of God and touch the world around them. When we are filled with the presence of God to overflowing we water the lives of those around – we water our world with the grace, mercy and love of God.

Let me be really clear; the goal of prayer is not so much that we change God, but that God changes us. Specifically, God wants to transform us daily into the likeness of Jesus.

A primary goal of prayer is our transformation.

Arthur Burns was a Jewish economist who was during the 1970's the chairman of the US Federal Reserve, like our Reserve Bank. He was once asked to pray at a gathering of Christian politicians. Stunning his hosts, he prayed like this:
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"Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ."

And then, most stunning of all: "And Lord, I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ."

Like that prayer, the ultimate goal of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is that they will know Jesus Christ to the point they are filled with his presence to overflowing.

Power of Prayer

Number four; the foundation for prayer is that we pray to a God who is able. Paul famously prays:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

Paul prays such a passionate and bold prayer out of the unwavering conviction that God is able. He is convinced that God hears and responds to our prayers. He is convinced that God is active in our world.

Paul really stretches the Greek language to make his point. He strings adverbs and adjectives together to form a word 'hyperekperissou', which translates in the NIV translation we use as 'immeasurably more'. Like the NIV, other translations struggle to convey the depth of meaning in Paul's word:

God is able to do 'vastly more than more' or 'infinitely more' or 'exceeding abundantly above all we ask or imagine.' The JB Phillips bible simply says there are no limits to what God can do.

How can Paul be so confident? Is this just a case of blind faith or a preacher overpromising on behalf of a God who will under deliver? Paul bases this astonishing claim on an even more astonishing claim. He says that God is able to do immeasurably more:

...according to his power that is at work in us.

Paul is saying that God's dunamis – God's power lives in us.

This is the power of Pentecost.

This is the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the same power that came on Jesus at his baptism like a dove.

This is the same power that rested on the disciples like tongue of fire.

And this is the same power that liberated Jesus from his gravedothes, rolled away the stone, raised him from the dead.

This is resurrection power!

And this resurrection power lives in all those, without exception, who call Jesus Lord. And so if God's resurrection power lives in us – then there truly is no limit to what God is able to do in and through us. God is Able!

This week as I have prayed in preparation for this message I believe that God has given me four specific words for us this morning. They are simply four reminders of what God has done before, and is able to do in and through us today.

God is able to Restore our Dignity

We all make mistakes. The person who thinks they don't make any mistakes is making the biggest mistake of all. Some of us carry our mistakes around with us like a millstone around our neck. We are wracked by regrets or shame or guilt from events that might be yesterday, last year or even decades ago. We are paranoid that others might find out the secrets of our life we spend all our time and energy hiding. For some of us our sense of self-worth has been shattered and we doubt it can ever be rebuilt.

One of the striking features of the gospels is Jesus' interactions with those who had no dignity or sense of self-worth. They were the forgotten and marginalised and even hated people of his day. And every time Jesus had an encounter

with these people, he restored their dignity. Jesus was a friend to the sinners and outcasts; he was and is a friend to the mistake-ridden.

Every time Jesus associated with the outcast, he became undignified in the sight of some so that outcast might have their dignity restored.

There are people here this morning that live with secret shame or guilt.

There are people here this morning who wonder if they have committed the unforgivable sin.

There are people here this morning, some of us, who could not conceivably love ourselves because our dignity and self-worth was robbed by mistakes we made in the past.

Hear the Good News. The resurrection power of Jesus lives or can live in you and is able to restore your dignity, forgive your sins, break the shackles of your past and heal your life! God is Able!

God is able to Refresh our Hearts

A few weeks ago I met with a friend and as we sat down for coffee, I had a smelt a small whiff of body odour. It was pretty embarrassing – I never thought my friend has personal hygiene issues. But it got worse. As I sniffed again, I realized the smell was not from my friend, but from me! I was mortified. Then I remembered that while I had a shower that morning, my deodorant had run out – hence my embarrassing moment. Two things came from that experience.

One, I found some of Joel's Lynx and sprayed myself liberally.

Two, it reminded me that what is true of our bodies is also true of our hearts.

A body that is not washed regularly becomes stale and starts to emit unpleasant odours.

A heart that is not washed regularly with the Spirit of God, or that is not drinking in his presence, likewise becomes stale.

A church that does not seek to be regularly drenched with the spirit of God will become dry and stale and smell with the odour of complacency, gossip and division.

Some of us here this morning have been Christians for a long time and are feeling stale. It's been a long time since we felt drenched in God's presence. We might have become complacent or busy or undisciplined, but the end result is that we have drifted from God and our heart has suffered.

Let me ask you a question, if you were to ask the person sitting next to describe your aroma, what do you think they would say? Before you get too worried, I don't mean your physical aroma, I mean your spiritual aroma. Paul says to the Corinthians:

We are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ.
(2 Corinthians 2:15)

Do you have about you the aroma of Christ?

If you are feeling stale this morning, Paul has some very simple advice later in his letter:

Be filled with spirit.
(Ephesians 5:18)

The tense of this statement is continuous imperative; that is Paul is saying be filled again and again and again and again. Daily, hourly, minute by minute drink in the Spirit of God. We drink in the Spirit of God every time we gather for corporate worship, or read our Bible, or open up to God in prayer. And when we drink in God's Spirit, when we are showered by His presence we find our hearts refreshed.

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God is Able to refresh the stalest of hearts. God is Able!

God is Able to Renew our Strength

While some of us are spiritually stale, others of us are spiritually stuffed; we're tired to the point of giving up. Disappointments have piled one on another and have worn us down. If faith is likened to a marathon race, we have hit the proverbial wall.

This may surprise you, but I have never run a marathon. I am told that to run a marathon successfully you must rehydrate regularly. It makes sense. Running a race you are constantly expending energy. Sweat is cooling your body. That energy and fluid needs to be replenished. In the Gold Coast marathon, drink stations were placed every 5 kilometres along the 42 kilometre course.

We are called to run the race of faith. But we cannot run through to the finish line without replenishing our souls, without constantly renewing our strength by drinking in the Spirit of God.

Israel was bone-tired, spiritually parched and on the point of giving up when God spoke words of hope to them through the prophet Isaiah. This was God's word for them and this is God's word for those of us who are tired to the point of giving up:

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.
(Isaiah 40:28-31)

God is able to renew our strength. God is Able!

God is Able to Revive our Hope

If some of us are running low on strength, others of us have all but run out of hope. While I was on holidays and since I have come back God has stirred my spirit in a number of ways. In particular, I have been struck by how many of us in our Newlife family are doing tough.

Some of us are doing it tough in our families, with kids who are stretching our parental patience to breaking point. Joel turned 18 last week. We are so proud of him. I thought once the kids got older, my role as a father would get easier. I am coming to understand that in some ways it gets harder because I am making less and less decisions for my kids. I don't have the control I once had. Some of us are despairing at the decisions our kids are making. We feel hopeless.

Some of us are doing it tough in our marriages. Just staying married is tough, more a defiant choice than a loving delight.

Some of us have been married, or never been married and are losing hope that there may be a partner that God has for us.

Some of us are facing bleak uncertainties around our health.

And a lot of us are in the midst of financial storms that are stripping us any optimism we have about the future. Talking with people who have lived on the Gold Coast a lot longer than I, they are saying they have perhaps never seen our economy flourish. Business is at risk and employment is uncertain.

Hope is the lifeblood of Christian faith. When hope is stolen from us, faith falters and fails.

The Apostle Paul had many reasons to lose hope. He was persecuted, beaten, robbed, slandered, imprisoned and shipwrecked. And yet he wrote these hope-filled words to the church in Rome:

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In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
(Romans 8:37)

God can, and sometimes chooses to reverse or overturn our difficult circumstances. God can and does miraculously heal. God can fix the brokenness of our marriage or finances. But even beyond that, even if we find ourselves enduring a sustained period of difficulties in our life, God says we can live not just as a conqueror, but more than a conqueror because and only because the God of love has invaded our life and that love will never leave us nor forsake us and will sustain us from here to eternity and beyond. We have hope, eternal!

God is able to restore our hope. God is Able!

Purpose of Prayer

Finally, number five; the purpose of prayer, as with everything for a Christian, is to glorify God. Paul finishes with doxology:

To (God) be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

The Westminster Catechism asks, 'What is the chief end of man.' The response is, 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.' By logical extension the chief end, the high purpose of Christian prayer is to glorify God in our lives and in the church, and to enjoy the wonders of God's love forever and ever. Amen!