July 19, 2015 Don Riley

Woodland Presbyterian, Thank you for allowing me to serve you these past six weeks. It has been a joy, a delight and a privilege to be worshipping with you. The six week series on the glory of God has been personally beneficial and I have been able to again consider the fullness of the glory of God. For all of us, why has it been important to have a series on the glory of God? Well, we are mirror people. We look at ourselves like the dog with a bone in his mouth. The do walks up, looks into the clear reflection of the bone in the reflected dog’s mouth and drops his own dogbone to go for an illusion. On a daily basis we wake up, forget who owns us and strike out to get a better owner, to seek a better God. We forget God owns us, yet we seek other gods. We drop the God we have, like the dog looking into the pond for the false gods of this world. Before you think I am “barking” up the wrong tree and you “unleash” contempt on my “dog-eared” opening illustration, remember it is true. Even if were were right now on a sugar white beach with assorted coral colored shells gathered at our feet, we would still search for the better shells yet uncollected. We long for the counterfeit and disdain the cashable currency already in our spiritual account.

We are so man and woman centered, we would rather discuss not who is this Jesus who fed 5,000, but rather how will Jesus feed us? We worship the provision rather than the provider. We hunger for bread rather than the Bread of Life. We are on a life-hike. The tendency on a hike is only to look down at our dirty boots rather than look expansively at the great landscape rising up before us. We are climbing Jacob’s ladder. We are ascending. It’s why we’ve had a six week series on God’s glory. It prepares us to think panoramically, prepares us to be stronger, prepares us to go deeper, prepares us to think comprehensively, to be fully be filled. Praying about the glory of God prepares us for heaven. It prepares us to see God face to face. It enables us to worship better. It enables us to hunger for Bible reading. It enables us to follow God’s word. It propels us to want to live for God’s glory and not our own. So, it is beneficial.

The six week series has encompassed three Old Testament passages and three New Testament passages. Moses in Exodus could not see the glory of God, God protected Moses from God himself by himself, a clear prefiguring of the death of Christ for us.

Habakkuk asked God why he allowed so much corruption in the government, in the nation, and among the people. Habakkuk went to his prayer tower and God answered his prayer by revealing the fact that he was at work. That his glory would be known throughout the earth as the waters cover the sea, that the just shall live by faith, that God reigns and rules in his kingly government.

The Psalmist in Psalm 19 said the heavens declare the glory of God which we know through general revelation, and specific revelation declares the glory of God in the flesh, the person of Jesus Christ.

Then we turned to John 17, the high priestly prayer shows that Jesus perfectly depicts God’s glory. Jesus perfectly fulfilled God’s glory. Jesus perfectly enables us to live for the glory of God in that Jesus prays for us, Jesus intercedes for us daily.

Last week we considered Paul’s prayerful persistence in thanking God for their faith and love. Paul’s prayerful petition that they would know the Father of Glory, that they would know the hope of their call given to us by the Father of Glory, that they would know the riches of their inheritance, that they would know the power of God for us and in us. Paul prayerfully acknowledged that the Father of glory reigns and rules.

We now consider the second prayer in the book of Ephesians, chapter three verses 14 through 21 starts with the riches of his glory and ends with the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. This passage will enable us to live out the admonition to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. It enables us to glorify God through spiritual growth. How do we glorify God? To him be glory in the church. How is this possible? So to glorify God through growth, we turn to this magnificent prayer. We will see Paul’s posture, Paul’s perspective, his petitions, and his participation in prayer.

First, his posture. It says, “I bow my knees.” Jewish men normally stood when praying. David did. Solomon did. But Paul comes in humility, as a child humbly coming to one’s Father.Where respect is in the home. Where the father is honored, not demeaned as in all TV sitcoms. Paul bowed his knees. We are not making an argument here regarding physical posture, but rather the posture of one’s heart. When we pray to glorify God, we approach the throne with confidence but with a bowed heart. There is no room for presumption. We come humble without vain repetition. We pray with bowed heads to honor God. We pray with closed eyes to avoid distraction. We pray with bowed hearts for it is a fearful thing to come into the presence of almighty God.

Then we come to Paul’s perspective. Paul’s glorious perspective in prayer encompasses the mystery of the third chapter. Verse three “Which is defined as”, verse six says, “that being that the Gentiles are being fellow heirs of the gospel. This was radical to them, that these non-Jews would be brought into the church-that the church mentioned in verse 10 is part of God’s glorious, eternal purpose for all ages, for which every family in heaven is named, the whole family of God. How am I praying? To be a part of the whole family of God seen in the eyes of our brothers in Kenya, our sister in the Ukraine, our leaders in Malawi, our missionaries in Lebanon, our brothers imprisoned in Iran, our cousins fleeing ISIS in northern Iraq, our brethren still worshipping in near empty cathedrals of Europe, our ruddy faced Irish friends heating winter homes with peat in the rock hewn countryside of Connemara, Ireland. Am I praying locally, or globally? Am I zip code bound that is it difficult to make disciples of all nations? Did you notice how the enemy, Satan, was so clever with the Charleston incident? One of the most radical things took place after the murder of those in a church. Did you notice that there was incredible forgiveness that took place? There was forgiveness given by the family members of those who were murdered. But then immediately, there was absolutism to erase heritage and erase history. We moved from forgiveness, which is a Christian response to absolutism, which is a rabid nuance. Don’t confuse this with history. Shift your new to things that did not pertain to the incident. Satan is very clever. We need to pray that God would keep the focus on things like forgiveness. You can follow this in the news. This happens over and over and over. Instead of honoring those four, now five, service personnel and navy gentleman who died yesterday, instead of focusing on how they served the nation, there is an ongoing investigation on what everybody already knew. The shift in the news. It is easy to be shifted in prayer, and get away from an eternal perspective and to bore down in distraction. Paul had a passion for the lost like lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost boy in Luke 15. I don’t know how many of you have followed this in the news, but there is a new TV ad by Ron Reagan, the son of former president Ronald Reagan. Have you seen it? He comes on. It is in your face. He comes on and says, “Hi, I’m Ron Reagan and I am an avowed unabashed atheist and I am alarmed by the intrusion of religion into our secular government.” He goes on to ask for support for a Freedom from Religion Foundation. Then this is how he closes his message, “I’m Ron Reagan, a lifelong atheist and I am not afraid of burning in hell.” Galatians is very clear. Paul says in Galatians 6:7, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever one sows that will he also reap.” Are we praying about the bigger Kingdom assembly of the church militant or looking forward to the church triumphant?

Now Paul teaches us his glorious petition. He has four glorious petitions: strength, depth, comprehension and fullness. When I was taught this, I started praying this in my own life. Strength, depth, comprehension and fullness. That is the main theme that he has bracketed here between the opening glory and the closing glory. How do you grow spiritually? You pray for spiritual characteristics. Strength, depth, comprehension and fullness. That we would have spiritual strength, that we would have spiritual depth, that we would have spiritual comprehension, and that we would have spiritual fullness.

Let’s look at these. He knew that the Ephesian Church was a strong church with strong members, but we can grow stronger. Plus he is saying all Christians can be stronger than they are--beyond just knowing that you are saved, beyond knowing you are definitely going to heaven, Paul is saying that all Christians can be strengthened, regardless of our experience and regardless of our age. We can be strengthened. Our minds can be distracted, depressed, detached, distorted, and doubtful, but Christ can strengthen us to focus us, to lift us, to give us concentration, straighten us, and strengthen our faith. Pray for strength. You can become stronger by praying for spiritual strength. Our strengthening is with Holy Spirit power because in the passage it says, “according to the riches of his glory.” You can be strengthened according to the full character of who he is.

Then Paul prays, “That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” That’s the depth. Christ is already in your heart as a Christian. This is addressed to Christians. To dwell is to be at home with, to be intimate with, to be comfortable and live in when Jesus said behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. We use this evangelistically. But actually, that passage was written in Revelation 3 to the lukewarm Laodiceans. Jesus is not interested in our indifferent, lukewarm, “I wish I was not here” attitude. He wants to have a real fellowship with him. Some people say I didn’t get anything out of a service. God does not want you to be entertained like a free concert at the Levitt Shell. We have come to vibrantly worship and Paul prays that you will be strengthened to worship. Paul prays that you would realize that Christ wants your zeal, your zeal of love. The depth. As Rebecca gave us in the lesson for children. He uses both an agricultural term and an architectural term. He uses an agricultural term: rooted. He uses an architectural term: grounded. Notice in the wording here, this grounding a rooting is in love. He wants us to go deep. When a large backyard flower bed is being choked out because of strong roots you have to pull them up and put in deep soil. The roots are there for the Oak trees. They take the water and nutrients. The roots may go the length of the backyard, making flower beds and fescue grass hard to grow. Roots are strong and spiritually we need them. We need depth in our Christian lives.

There are two major office buildings with an interior connecting enclosed atrium with an ice rink in downtown Dallas called the Plaza of the Americas. A 100 million dollar structure covering 5.5 acres where I held a weekly bible study. The developer, Clyde Jackson, who built this structure in 1978 told me that in order to go tall, you had to go equally as deep. They went 25 stories down in order to go 25 stories high in order to support this multi-use office, hotel, restaurant complex. When Jesus said, “Abide in me,” “Love one another,” he challenged us not to have slick programs but rather to love one another deeply. In order to love one another deeply, you have to go deep being rooted in love, being grounded in love. How do you glorify God? Be strengthened according to the riches of his glory. How do you glorify God? You allow Christ to dwell in your hearts by being rooted in love and grounded in love.

The third prayer petition is to have strength to comprehend the love of Christ. When I was working on this sermon, I came across this portion of it and I stopped. Notice the wording, “Comprehend with all the saints the breadth, length, height, and depth and to know the love of Christ.” How can we possibly understand the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ’s love? Paul is taking us places, and yet he goes on to pray that we would comprehend something that surpasses knowledge. Spiritually this is possible or he would not pray it. Spiritually this is doable or he would not have prayed it. Let’s take a verse that all of you know, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world.” I think it is one of the most challenging verses in all the Bible. How do you understand the breadth, length, height, depth of that verse? Later in Ephesians 5 Paul says, “walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” To be able to comprehend this love, the breadth of it, the length of it, the height of it, the depth of it. You can circle the globe and the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. You can summit Mt. Everest and the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. You can plummet the Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench, 35,840 feet below sea level and the love of Christ supasses knowledge. But Paul prays that we may have strength to comprehend that which surpasses knowledge. That is pretty powerful prayer.

The fourth petition is that we may be filled with the fullness of God, this is the glory of God, all that God is, the fullness of God. He is praying that we would be filled with the total fullness. This is a very challenging prayer. Strength, depth, comprehension and fullness. Finally, Paul’s petition in prayer he says, “according to the power at work within us, to him be glory. throughout the church and throughout all generations forever amen.”

The last point is his participation in prayer. It is one thing to get a prayer answer. It is another thing to be a prayer answer. Although I don’t see him today, one of the men who has stopped on his way out and greeted me has been Rev. Ed Knox. He has been, for many, throughout the years, a man who has been a prayer answer. There are so many in this room who are more excited to be a prayer answer than to receive a prayer answer. When you hear the congregation led in prayer, do you pray that you would be part of the solution? There are three kinds of people. Those who can count and those who can’t. No, that’s a whole other story. Those who make things happen. Those who wonder how can it happen? Those who say, “What happened?” We are called to be a participant in prayer. How can you participate in spiritual growth at Woodland to make a difference? Don’t just pray for a prayer answer. Pray to be a prayer answer. How can you do that? Put your finger on the text. It says, “According to the power at work within us.” It’s not your power because earlier in that same verse it says, “To him who is able to do for more abundantly than all that we ask.” In fact, all that we think. When you pray, and you ask God to use you and work through you, God is able to do more through you than you can even think. He exceeds your asking. He exceeds your thinking. That is why he uses the terms beyond comprehension. That is spiritual power.

We want everything to be logical. We want everything to be explained. We want a ledger in life with a bottom line. But spiritually, God wants to do in and through you regardless of your place in life, regardless of your age, the youngest in here or the oldest in here, because God is still doing things. I’m convinced the only reason you have a heartbeat and that God hasn’t taken us all home yet is to live to the glory of God. To that end, you can pray, “God do in me beyond what I ask.” Isn’t that great because often enough we don’t know how to ask; we don’t know how to think. He is saying that he is working in you a power that is greater than you can even ask. He is working in you a power that is greater than you can even think. Now that should encourage you. Often times people say “Well I don’t know how to pray.” or “I don’t like to pray,” of “Praying is difficult.” This passage is saying that he knows that. He knows our indifference or our lack of prayer or our difficulty in prayer when he says this. “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly.” Notice he is not saying that occasionally he will do something and sneak up on you. No, he is saying that he is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. According to the power that is in us, that is in you. That power is not your power. That is his power. He is resident within you. How powerful is God in me? Even if you don’t believe it, the answer is it’s God’s power. Believe in the gospel. Believe in the shed blood that was given for you this day. for you to realize that you can be a participant in prayer that is greater than anything you can ask or anything you can think. And he closes, “To him be glory in the church. To him glory in Christ Jesus in all generation forever and ever.” So I encourage you, Paul’s posture, humbly, Paul’s perspective, the whole church, Paul’s petition, strength, depth, comprehension, and fullness, and Paul’s participation. Be a prayer answer. To God be the glory. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.