

Prayer Beyond Reach

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[0 : 00] Now, I'd like this morning to read a verse that's a very well-known verse and try and look at that verse today and see what God is teaching us from it, because I think it's probably a verse that vexes some people and encourages other people and confuses some.

And I want to read it and look at it today in light of some of the passages that we read earlier on or some of the stories that were bits of which were briefly read earlier on.

So it's a very famous verse. In fact, I preached from this chapter not long ago. But it's Ephesians chapter 3 and verse 20. It's on page 1175 of the Pew Bible.

It's a very well-known verse on prayer. We've finished our series on Daniel. We aren't taking up a new series right away.

We may do a short series over the summer, but with lots of people coming and going and our own people coming and going, it's not so easy to have continuity. So they will be standalone sermons.

[1 : 11] But this is a standalone sermon based on this great doxology of Paul that he gives at the end of his prayer for the Ephesian church.

Now, to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is his work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever.

Amen. Now, I may be completely out of kilter with everybody else here. So my challenge is about this verse may not be yours, but on the other hand, they may be, and I hope by God's spirit and by God's grace, we might find common ground as we look at this passage.

I've entitled this sermon a verse beyond reach because I think that's what it is for some people.

Some people, some of us in our lives, look at our lives and look at our Christian lives and look at what's happening and look around us.

And then we see this amazing doxology and say, well, when I ask, it doesn't seem that he gives immeasurably more than I can ask or even imagine in return.

[2 : 31] And so we find that we have a problem and a difficulty and a challenge with a verse like this. And I think we can respond in different ways to a verse like this. And I'm sure that what I am listing here are not all the responses we can have.

But I think some of us can look at an amazing verse like this and simply say, well, I don't believe it. You know, I've prayed and I've prayed and I've prayed and my prayers are powerless.

And I don't see any of this. I don't see any of this amazing answers beyond even my thoughts and imaginations. So I don't believe it. Or you think maybe it's a kind of empty promise.

It's a statement made by Paul where he's saying, now God's able to do this. Oh, not saying he does. He's able, he's powerful enough to do all these things, but he doesn't do them.

It's an empty promise. Some of us feel when we look at it. Or maybe you simply don't understand it. And so when we don't understand things, sometimes we just ignore them and we just move on to the next verse.

[3 : 36] Others may claim it. Claim the promise. This is for me. This is so that great things can happen in my life and we may manipulate that. And then when we have great dreams and great visions that we bring to God and it doesn't happen, we blame Him.

Or we blame ourselves and say, well, it's just my faith's not great enough. Or if it doesn't happen in other people's lives, well, your faith isn't great enough. If you had more faith, God would do amazing things in your life.

And so we blame ourselves or we blame our lack of faith. Or I think sometimes we taste it. We taste the answer to this prayer.

Just taste, just maybe on the tip of our tongues. And it leads us to worship and renewed trust and renewed endeavor after this God who is full of grace and glory.

Now what I want to do for a few moments is wrestle with this verse for us as we look at it as Christians. And if you're not a Christian, I really hope that you will see how glorious God is and how wonderful it is to consider Him and to consider relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.

[4 : 52] So the first thing I want to do is just to face up to our own walk of faith, our own life of faith. Many people will take these promises and when they don't work out, they say, well, as I mentioned, it's because you don't have enough faith.

Your faith is hopeless. Well, faith's a very big and very interesting subject. But what I just want to bring out very briefly here is that we need to come to terms with what the Bible says about our walk of faith in relation to even a promise and a verse and a doxology like this.

We still are sinners, in other words. We are not yet perfected, we're not yet in glory and we're still sinners. And so sometimes we look at Scripture with the wrong kind of eyes and we look at a promise like this or an a verse like this and we apply it in our own way and we think it's saying something that it isn't.

We can look at a verse like this and say that God is able to do measureably more than all we ask and imagine and think this is a spiritual blank check. God's giving us whatever we want.

All we need to do is ask and we think that's fantastic. It reminds me of the sometimes of, I hope you all go blank when I say that, the cartoons.

[6 : 04] You know when the cartoons were on and one of the characters saw an opportunity to make lots of money or something like that, just dollar signs come from them, in their eyes or pound signs.

And it was just like, yeah, it's amazing. You're going to have lots of money and you saw this kind of promise or something and pound signs or dollar signs just comes up in your eyes.

And I think sometimes spiritually we look at a verse like this and we go, boom, boom, boom, dollar signs. God's going to give us anything. This is what we want. It's a spiritual blank check. God's the great Jeannie and he's going to give me my three favorite wishes and he's going to do immeasurably more than I can ask or even imagine.

It's the divine underwriting of our own ambitions. Have you got these great ambitions? I'll just take them to God and ask him, he underwrites everything that I want to do because he says he'll do immeasurably more than we can ask or even imagine.

And then when it doesn't work out like that, we curse God and die. We blame him. We say, what kind of God is he? He's made these promises and I've gone to him with all these requests and nothing's happening.

[7 : 14] Not even beyond it, doesn't even reach my imagination. It doesn't come near it. So we blame God and we see a verse like this and we think God's a liar. God's a cheat. God is taking us down the garden path.

I think there's a couple of verses that remind us a little bit about our own walk of faith and the need to examine our own lives in the light of a verse like this.

In James 4 it says, you desire and you do not have. So you murder. You covet and cannot obtain. So you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask and then you ask and you do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

So we've got a great verse in James which reminds us that God is saying it's not just enough to ask that we need to look at our motives for asking and we need to ask for the right kind of things.

It's a very important verse and it's a verse that speaks about the motives we have in prayer, the motives we have in asking and why we want from God to do a measure of the more than we can ask or even imagine.

[8 : 24] So that sometimes as we wrestle with a verse like this in our lives and with the character of God, we might have to wrestle with the fact that he's saying no or he's saying not yet or he is saying, I have an answer but it simply isn't the answer that you're expecting.

And I'm dealing not only with your request but also with your motives because he's God and it's amazing the kind of God he is.

And I think so our motives are very important when we think of a verse like this but so is also knowing what we need or not knowing what we need. Romans 8 says that beautifully for us in a very encouraging and uplifting way.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know what to pray for as we ought but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. So it's just a reminder to us that sometimes we don't really know what we need and Romans reminds us of that.

We often know when we come before God what we want. I know what I want. I know what I'd love but I don't always know what I need.

[9 : 34] Sometimes I think I know what I need but I don't know how God will provide that need for me. And so often in our prayer lives when we take this verse like this we're dictating to God how he should answer it and how he should give us this and how he should deal with us in our lives and yet in our dictating to God sometimes our motives aren't right and we don't know what we need.

We're blinded all the time by diminishing certainly and defeated certainly but real sinful nature that is sometimes selfish, sometimes proud, sometimes only interested in our own comfort and sometimes only interested in a life of ease and pleasure and passion.

So that brings another dimension to our understanding of a verse like this. So face up to the walk of faith. But then I think we also have to face up to reality.

When we take a verse we don't just read it blindly and we don't just blame God when he doesn't appear to answer it the way we think he should in an immeasurably great and powerful way.

But we need to also face up to the reality that we find in our lives. Both the reality biblically and just life around us. Anyway, we need to look at the people of faith in the Bible as well and wonder well did God answer their prayers this amazing way beyond their imagination and giving them everything that they asked?

[11 : 07] Well I think not and we read some of it in our readings. Russell and Xana read for us. When Joseph was thrown into the pit by his brothers, by his brothers and left to die.

I wonder if he felt that God was answering his prayers beyond his dreams at that point or then having been taken out and being taken and given a place of relative significance.

He's then accused of trying to molest Potiphar's wife and he's thrown into prison again. He's not answering his prayers. He's given them immeasurably more than they ask and imagine.

Or Moses is mum with her first born. When she sees the killing fields around her and all the sons being murdered. And she takes him, sees how beautiful he is and places him in a papyrus basket onto the water.

Is God doing for me there? Measurably above and beyond? Daniel as he walks into towards the den of lions or alicious servant.

[12 : 09] When he looks round him and says, how can we fight this army? Or Elijah as he sits depressed?

Imagine he was the only believer in the whole of the world after the defeat of the prophets of Baal. Lurched into an unexplicable depression.

Is God answering his prayers above and beyond? Mary as she moves away from her home with a legitimate child as an immigrant heading towards Egypt?

Is God answering her prayers? The disciples when they're scattered? The apostles when they're persecuted? The troubles that were in the churches? The two great leaders who had a great big disagreement and went their separate ways?

Is that God answering their prayers in ways above and beyond? Or they could ask or even imagine? Doesn't seem so, does it? We look at these passages and we know how do they relate to this prayer?

[13 : 12] And what is God saying to us about their lives and what this prayer means? But maybe today you come to a prayer like this in your Christian life and it might be a troubled Christian life, cold, indifferent, distant from God.

You may be surrounded by trouble. You may be plunged into debt. You may be suffering from depression. You may be estranged from your family. You might be in a dead end job or have no job at all.

You may be part of a rubbish church. You may be feeling old and that you're getting old and weak and tired. You may be postnatal.

You may have no children. You may love to have children. You may have a poor marriage you would love to be in a marriage. You may be widowed. You may be looking after some family member who has become old and with dementia.

And you struggle to see, oh God, isn't really giving me more than I can ask or even imagine in my life. It doesn't seem to be this great, sunny, beautiful, faith-kissed life of blessing and joy and fellowship and unbridled answers to prayer.

[14 : 25] The spiritual blank check just seems to be bouncing all the time. It seems to be providing what I'm looking for as I see God speaking through His word.

Can we just look at this for a moment in a bit more detail? Can we look at coming to terms with God's own truth, both here but at a wider level as well?

We need to confess that we don't see what God sees. Now all of us need to do that. It's a great thing to learn in our lives that we just don't see what God sees.

1 Corinthians 13, for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then shall I know fully, even as I have been fully known. And it's reminding us of a biblical truth that we have to confess that we don't see what God sees because He's God and we simply are not God. We don't have the master plan from the beginning to the end of even our own lives. We don't have the whole story. We have the glimpse of the end of the story and which we're apart as Christians that God knows and that He has His purposes and His plans.

[15 : 38] But we confess we don't know the end game. We don't know what God is doing with us and we can't even understand the depth of our brokenness and our selfishness and our pain that has driven Him in all His majesty and glory to dine across, to offer us healing and renewal.

And sometimes I think we underestimate the pain of healing. Healing's a great thing, isn't it? A spiritual healing with God coming closer to us is a great thing. But we maybe often think of that in purely pleasurable terms.

But as there's great pain and genuine healing as we are brought back into that place that He wants us to be in when we are made whole, it's the cost of transformation.

We can't see really what God sees. What God sees. But yet in your own time and when you have a few moments, take time to work through some of the stories about the characters we read about like Joseph and like Elijah and like Alicia, servant, Alicia's servant and like Mary and like the apostles and see that we're given at least in part what God is doing and that God hadn't finished with them at that point and it wasn't the end of the story and what Satan intended for destruction, God intended for good and that Joseph didn't see that to later on and so on and so forth.

We can't see what God sees and that's a hugely important thing as we pray to Him. Nor can we think God's thoughts.

[17 : 19] We have such a tendency, don't we, to dictate to God how He should answer His promise or how He should answer our prayers and how He should outwork His promises to us.

Isaiah 55 reminds us that my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways. My ways declares the Lord and I think that is at the very core of this doxology.

He's able to do immediately more than we ask or even imagine. In other words, we can't begin humanly to imagine how God will outwork His answer to our needs and our prayers.

We often, don't we, go to God with just the everything, the beginning and the end of our prayers and exactly how we want His prayers to be answered in our lives because we think and we believe that we have the answers and yet He says, well, I will answer you.

I do love you. I am committed to you. I will do immediately more than you ask and imagine but I will not be at your dictate and it will not be what you think because I know perfectly and know gloriously what you need and what purpose for good I have in your life.

[18 : 34] We limit Him often, don't we, to our own solutions and to our own standards and when we don't get what we want, we blame Him and we walk away from Him.

Really this doxology is reminding us of a different scale altogether, that this incredible God is willing to come into our lives and to answer us and to deal with us and to transform us but He will do it His way.

But He will do it because He loves us and He is gracious to us. We are often dreaming of the answers we want and recoil from the answers that we need.

But the great thing about this verse, it reminds us again, doesn't it, not just that He has got a great plan beyond our own understanding but that it is His power that is at work within us.

He is working, He is working within us, He is transforming us and sometimes you will be doing that in ways that we struggle with because we can be proud, can't we?

[19 : 40] And we can think, well, you know God, don't do that to me, don't deal with me that way. I want it like this. Please don't do it differently.

And yet He promises that He is at work and what He is doing is sometimes breaking a self-reliance and a self-determination and a self-centeredness and replacing it with beauty and with grace and with humility in our lives.

That is much of His work. He is at work within us and remember that His way is absolutely different at every level, isn't it?

I mean, God nailed to a cross. I mean, can there ever be anything different as a standard than that? And you know, He makes clear, you know, for consider your calling, brothers, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many would have noble birth. You know, it's counter-intuitive God's way, isn't it? My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Do you get that in any business manual?

[20 : 57] Do you get that in any kind of way of dealing with furthering your own life and self-help? The weaker we are spiritually or in our own estimation, the more we depend on the strength of God, the greater it will be.

The fullness and the power of Christ resting us. That is counter-intuitive. None of us like particularly to hear that message. And when we look at Him who is able to do immediately more than ask or imagine, it's not in a commercial or in a business or in a popularity stake that He's considering it. It's for our spiritual good and for our spiritual blessing. It's often difficult for us to imagine what He is doing. Not just in this life, but what His end game will be for us.

The perfection, the beauty, the glory, the satisfaction, the pleasure, the joy, the wonder of living with Him eternally.

It's tremendous to consider that. So we need to come to terms with God's truth and what He is doing in our lives. God therefore, I think, we still need to ask.

[22 : 14] You know, ask. He's able to measure more than we ask or imagine. I think in light of Him, in light of His divine nature and His differentness and His glory and His perfection and His knowledge and His Son and what He has done in His Son already, in light of His greatest gift, remember to ask.

But remembering asking sometimes is a dangerous thing to do. It's a great thing to do, but it's a dangerous thing to do. And can I challenge any that might not be Christians here today and challenge you by asking whether that is why you're not asking for Jesus into your heart?

Maybe you've been coming to church for a long time, but you've not committed your life to Christ. Is it because you're afraid that in asking Christ into your heart, He will change you and He will change your life?

Because actually you do know who He is and you do know about Him and you recognise that something major will change.

That is absolutely the case, but can you hold on to what you grasp as being your own and hold on to what you are deferring to lose and not gain Christ and the eternal glory and the pleasure and company and healing that He offers?

[23 : 53] So remember to ask because He's at work and it's His work in us that He will finish and He will glorify Jesus through your life when you ask and when you ask through Christ and with the right motives when you're seeking the glory of Christ and even the glory of the church.

It's interesting that He speaks here about according to His power that is a work within us to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. The church is a really important part of God's answers to our prayers and it's not a bit role that it plays.

It's a significant crucial role and everything is geared in God's will and in God's mind to the glory of the church and to the kingdom of God coming and to everything being according to His people being brought into His kingdom.

He's working. Remember that, ask because He is working and He is working the power of His love. That's very important. I didn't read the previous verses to this verse here but it speaks about the prayer of Paul for the Ephesians that we looked at recently that we would grasp how have the power together with all the saints 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 will be filled with to the measure of the fullness of God.

So it's what, it's another one, it's a passes knowledge. It's beyond just intellectual ascent. It passes knowledge and it's the love of God and it's the fullness of God.

[25 : 30] And so when God is working in us, immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine, it is in the context of His healing love and His transforming love and in the belonging that He is working into our lives that He is our Father and He is molding us in His own image.

And we can see, that is the key to understanding. That is the motive that we must seek in asking and in pleading before God. And I believe when we do so, we begin to grasp and only maybe begin, I certainly only begin to grasp what He's able to do immeasurably more than I can ask or imagine when He is working.

And we see it, don't we? In the lives of many Christians, hope in Christians who are suffering from clinical depression, peace, Christians who have been diagnosed with terminal illness, freedom among Christians who are not enslaved by seeking self-worth outside of Christ, who are not bound by society's assumptions, who appreciate the pain that sometimes they've gone through, is a pain to bring healing and forgiveness and wholeness, Christians who can rejoice in suffering when they have nothing, when they don't have anything that we have, who trust in God, when they don't know where their next meal is coming from, who serve for no other reason than the privilege of obeying Christ, who look back five years from a prayer, ten years from a prayer, forty years from a prayer, and see God's answer immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine.

Prayer's answered in the future in ways we could never have dreamed of, people brought together, people coming to faith in Christ, situations developing that we could never have planned or asked about or brought before God, but His answers are way above and beyond what we can ask or even think, the song of praise in a gentle old dementia sufferer who's a Christian, but has moments of lucidity and can recognise the glory and the wonder and the majesty of their God, the power of God in our lives.

And I think when we recognise that His love is at work, His love, divine love, perfect love, transforming love, that He is not our genie and He is not the one who is our servant but our master and Lord, then I think we can begin to pray and see answers beyond our wildest dreams.

[28 : 35] And we can begin to see the miracles that He will give to us as we ask with the right modes, maybe miracles in our own hearts, we're always wanting miracles in other people's lives and we love miracles that are kind of verifiable kind of scientifically or socially or that bring glory to the church or to ourselves, but maybe the miracles in our own hearts, we're not grumpy at seven in the morning, that's a miracle for some people, not abusing your wife, it's a miracle in some people's lives.

All kinds of things, all kinds of gentle miracles that happen as He deals with our pride, as He motivates us by love as we are able to live for His glory and His kingdom and His future, I think our prayer life is energised and becomes three dimensional because we see that He is answering, we see that His purposes and His plans are indeed far greater because He is working, His power is working and as it might not be what we expect but I do believe it will be way beyond our expectation in many ways, not just in this life but there will be a day, there will be a day when we will taste His glory in the new heavens and the new earth where this will absolutely be nailed and we will see exactly what He means and where we will understand everything He's been doing in our lives and the resistance and the grumpiness and the unbelief and the doubt and the fear and the darkness and depression and the difficulties and the oppositions will have dissolved away but He is not finished with us, He is work to do and we recognise that.

And again can I finish just speaking to someone, anyone who might not be a believer today, I think when we look at Christ sometimes and as Christians we do as well, our view of Christ and our view of prayer, our view of Christ is way too small and our view of prayer is way too small and our view of security is way too misguided and our view of the future is tremendously warped without Jesus Christ as our core and as our security and I know I'm asking people possibly to ask a dangerous, dangerous question but can I ask you to ask that question of God that He will do in you immeasurably more than you can ask or even imagine if you're not a Christian that begins by recognising and seeing Jesus Christ.

And I just finished with the actual phrase here in Ephesians 3 verse 20, it's beyond, it's really beyond Paul's words, he's trying to put into words what can't be put into words.

So what he's doing is saying all we ask and he's saying above all we ask and he's using a superlative abundantly above all we ask and he's saying exceedingly abundantly above all we ask

and then he says exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think.

[32 : 19] You know he's trying to put into words what it's like to have answered prayer from God and what it means and the superlatives that he's using, the super superlatives aren't enough and he's running out of words but that's what it is, it's God is able to do and God does and God is working and because he's working in us for his glory and the glory of the church in the future he's doing these things for us exceedingly abundantly beyond and we need to trust him.

I know it doesn't look like that but can I say I don't think it looked like that for Joseph and I don't think it looked like that for Peter and I think in the garden it didn't look like that for Jesus.

I don't think it looks like that for us sometimes because we are dictating to God how he should answer that prayer but let's not believe it any less and let's not stop asking and seeking the right motives and longing to be moulded and guided by him because I think his miracles are very different sometimes from what our miracles would be.

You know as a congregation loving one another and serving one another humbly that's a great miracle as asking above and beyond his provision above and beyond what we can ask or even imagine.

So he's a great God and he is answering these prayers I think sometimes we need to just simply mould our lives and our hearts and our thinking more to him and being surprised by his glory and his grace.

[33 : 51] Let's bow our heads and pray. Dear God forgive us when we don't understand you, forgive us when we blame you, forgive us when our lives just seem rubbish and we think well what's the point of being Christians, forgive us when we beat ourselves up because we don't have enough faith to believe and think that your working in our lives is dependent on the level of our faith.

Help us simply to come and ask, make us people who ask. Lord give us the time today or in the next few days to just be aside from everything to take 20 minutes and ask and meditate and be in your company.

Drag us into your presence Lord we pray if sometimes we find that so hard take us to that place where we will do our business with God and where we are in Christ and deal we pray with all the impossibilities that we face in our lives every day, impossibilities that maybe nobody else here knows about.

Weaknesses and fears and circumstances and problems and difficulties that lie very much before us as impossibilities.

So Lord God may your Holy Spirit take your word and apply it to our hearts, may you come for us by encouraging us and enthousias and drive us back to yourself.

[35 : 23] We ask this and we do so pleading Jesus' name for we can have no other name given in heaven or among men by which we are being and must be saved.

For Jesus' sake.