

## **“A New Year’s Prayer”**

Ephesians 3: 14-21

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At our boys’ school there was a stately tree with a trunk about five feet in diameter. During our son Austin’s ball games, our younger son Cameron would play under that tree with his friends. It was a place of great adventure and fun. From the play equipment to the big tree the kids would run and play and hide. It appeared to be the strongest tree around.

When we had our first ballgame back at the Dare field after Hurricane Isabel we were shocked. Our favorite tree had broken off above the trunk and fallen to the ground. The roots and the base of the trunk were still in the ground, but the stately tree had fallen. We looked inside the trunk and the remains of the tree to discover that it was hollow. The tree we had thought to be so strong and stable was hollow, except for about eight inches of wood on the outer edges of the tree. There was nothing inside. So the tree cracked and fell to the ground. Never once had I feared this apparently strong tree under which the children played. But it’s hollow center, hidden from the outside world, was real and dangerous.

When the Apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians he could have prayed for many things. He could have prayed for their financial prosperity. He could have

prayed that they would have good health. He could have prayed that they would be spared hard times. He could have prayed that their church would have plenty of money. He could have prayed for many things.

But Paul prays for something different. He prays that the people will be “strengthened in their inner beings with power through His Spirit and that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith.”

You and I can look very strong on the outside. We can appear to be stately, robust trees. Yet it is possible that our inner beings are diseased or hollow. Broken in half by the storms of life, we too might be surprised at the emptiness within. When I saw that tree at the school I pondered my own life. Where am I hollow? And why?

There are quite a few things that can keep us spiritually hollow in our inner beings. Unresolved anger and guilt have a way of eating us up from the inside out. Secrets—untold, unconfessed—can hollow us out. The disease of “unforgiveness” eats us up and prevents healthy growth.

Busyness is also a real threat to our inner being. Some of us have broken in half the holidays. We have run at a pace that is unreasonable. We have tried to do it all—the circuit of parties; the entertaining; the decorating; the church services; the gift buying and wrapping, giving and returning; the baking; the card writing; and on and on and on. Many of us looked pretty good through it all. But then the melt-downs came. Some of us broke in half. Looking inside there was the frightening reality of nothing—a hollow tree. What was it all for? What did it all mean? Why do we feel so empty?

Paul's prayer goes to the heart of the matter. Give inner strength, inner growth and inner power to these people, he says. Don't just shine them up on the outside. Don't let them just go through the motions. Don't just let them look strong. Make them strong within. Strengthen them. Build them from the inside out.

If you have ever been rocked to the core of who you are by a horrible event in your life, you know that all the exterior stuff is blown away. You know that what you've got is that which is deep within you—the inner you. If we spend our lives only nurturing the external us, only living on the surface, only going through the motions, it is likely that the storms will topple us, revealing a hollow tree.

Paul prays that Christ would dwell in their (and our) hearts through faith. He is praying that we would invite Christ to take up residence in our lives—that we would invite him to be more than an occasional guest for whom we prepare the best dishes and welcome in the parlor where everything is neat and tidy. He is praying that we would invite Christ to take up residence in our lives—that we would also know Christ as more than the on-call emergency squad invited in only when things have really fallen apart. Paul prays: “That you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

During Hurricane Isabel we also observed enormous, old trees uprooted. Though they had full solid trunks, they were pulled out of the ground by the hurricane force winds. Tremendous balls of roots were torn from the ground and trees we thought could withstand anything, fell to the ground. We were at one of the other baseball fields in

York County about two weeks after Isabel. I looked into the backyard of one of the neighboring homes where an amazing and beautiful tree had fallen. It was on the ground, roots totally exposed. Even after such a short time, the life was gone from the tree. The leaves had dried and withered. With the roots out of the ground, the tree was dead.

Paul continues his prayer saying: “I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Roots torn from the ground cannot nourish a tree. Leaves wither and die. They fall from the tree. The tree dies.

Paul suggests that our roots need to be deep in our life-source. They need to be deep in Christ’s love, which is deep and broad, long and high. Our life-source is Christ’s love. We need to know about that love and understand it with our heads. We need to know Christ himself, who is the embodiment of that love. The head and the heart rooted in Christ’s love produce the fruits of love.

But how often we go through our daily lives forgetful of Christ’s love for us and for others. How often we forget that nothing can separate us from the love of God—nothing we have done, or been or said; nothing that has been done

or said to us by others; nothing in all of creation. How often we forget God's amazing love for all people—even the ones we find most unlovable. And when we forget, it is as if we have been pulled up out of the ground. We begin to wither and fade. We die.

John Stott says: "It seems to me legitimate to say that the love of Christ is broad enough to encompass all humankind, long enough to last for eternity, deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner and high enough to exalt that sinner to heaven" (The Message of Ephesians, John Stott, p. 137).

A writer in *The Spiritual Formation Bible* has suggested that we use this passage as "walking prayer." She suggests: "As you go about your day, frequently and gently repeat the phrase 'rooted in love.' Pray this phrase as you meet people, participate in activities, make decisions, drive your vehicle and so forth. What might happen to each person or activity if they were rooted in the love of Jesus Christ? What might happen to you?" I suspect the answer is embedded in Paul's prayer: fullness, instead of emptiness, strength instead of weakness; life instead of death. Perhaps we could pray this "walking prayer" this week: "rooted in love," "rooted in love."

Paul's prayer expresses my earnest desire and hope for myself and for you in the New Year of 2004. I personally do not want to be found hollow in my inner being and I do not want you to be so either. I pray that we would all be strengthened in our inner beings with power through the Holy Spirit. I pray we would be solid and full—filled with the fullness of God as Christ makes his permanent dwelling place and home within each of us. I pray that our roots

would be so deeply embedded in Christ's love that nothing could uproot us, leaving us unable to produce the fruits of love. I pray our minds would know the love of Christ, our hearts would experience the love of Christ and that our actions would show the love of Christ.

The hymn we will sing at the close of our service puts it this way: "O grant that nothing in my soul may dwell, but Thy pure love alone; O may Thy love possess me whole, my joy, my treasure, and my crown! All coldness from my heart remove; may every act, word, thought be love." ("Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me")

A lot to ask? Yes. But as Paul reminds us: "God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."