

## A Prayer to Him Who Is Able

Ephesians 3:14-21

Would you bow your heads with me as we come before our gracious heavenly Father?

Father,

Thank you for Your Word, this precious gift. We ask that you would open our eyes to behold wondrous things out of Your law, unite our hearts to fear Your name, create in us what you command, and prepare our hearts to receive your Word so that it may bear fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to savor you and your Son. We ask these things in Jesus' name, amen.

### Introduction:

Good morning! I am privileged to be able to bring the Word of God before you this morning, especially as it falls on the three year mark of our family joyfully ministering here at Grace Fellowship.

This morning we will be in Ephesians 3:14-21. Ephesians 3:14-21. If you are using the Bibles in the pew in front of you, you may find our text on page 977.

Before we dive into the text, it important that we get a little context in order to grasp what Paul's meaning is in our text.<sup>1</sup> As my dad always says, "Context is king."

Paul is writing this letter to the church in Ephesus from prison in Rome as is indicated by his references to his "suffering" and "chains" in chapter 3 verse 13 and 6 verse 20. We can conclude from Acts 19-20 that Paul was very familiar with this church, because he spent 2 years ministering there, which is the longest he had ever stayed at any church.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many of his other letters, Paul's purpose for writing Ephesians is unclear.<sup>3</sup> A major theme in Ephesians, however, is that of unity, so we can safely say that one of Paul's main objectives in writing this letter was to encourage unity among the church both doctrinally and racially.

After Paul discusses the spiritual blessings available to us in Christ and explaining how God saved us by his grace, he goes on to explain the implications of that salvation on the *unity* between Jews and Gentiles, and the *reconciliation* between God and man in chapter 2, verses 11-21. Because of Christ's work on the cross, the laws and commands that created a wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down. God united these two people groups so that he could reconcile to himself the "one man." Now, the Gentiles who were outside of the covenant, strangers and aliens, and far away, had been brought near, adopted into the family of God as citizens and members of the household of God, and partakers of all the blessings of the New Covenant in Christ's blood. This one body, Paul says, is being "built together into a dwelling place for God's Spirit." After explaining the glorious mystery that the Gentiles have

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<sup>1</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Survey of Missions Lecture, Howard Owens.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Lion and the Lamb: New Testament Essentials from "The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown"* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 243-244.

been a part of God's redemptive plan all along, Paul begins to pray, but starts a parenthetical thought in chapter 3, verses 1-13 discussing his apostleship.

Transitions: This brings us to our text in verses 14-21 of Chapter 3, where Paul resumes his prayer for the "new race" united together by the cross.<sup>4</sup> Would you join me as we read Ephesians 3:14-21?

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength 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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Before we unpack this wonderful text of Scripture, I would like to give you a roadmap of where Paul is taking us in this prayer. Our goal is to find the big picture that Paul is trying to communicate, or as my professor says, the "one main idea." Paul's big picture is that **"God is more than able to fill believers with the fullness of God by strengthening them to know Christ's presence and his love."** Many commentators compare this text with a staircase, identifying each request as step in the ascent leading up to his glorious doxology, which I will call the "lookout."<sup>5</sup> Let's begin climbing with our first step.

***The First Step (vv. 14-17): Believers are strengthened to know Christ's presence through his grace.***

Look back in your Bibles with me at verses 14-17. Paul says "*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*"

Paul begins his prayer in a posture of earnest desperation as he prays before the Father "from whom every family on heaven on earth is named," an allusion to chapter 2, verses 18-22 where he calls the Ephesians "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" because of reconciling work of Christ on cross.<sup>6</sup> Paul's first request is that "*according the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*" Let's make a few observations about Paul's first request for strength.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (1990, repr.; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 95.

<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes, 112.

- 1) The first observation is the *source* of spiritual strength. Believers are strengthened “according to the riches of God’s glory.” First notice the command to “be strengthened.” He does not say “muster up strength from within yourself.” No, we are receiving strength from *outside ourselves*. 2 Timothy 2:1 says “You then my child, *be strengthened* by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” I want for all of us to embrace and treasure this verse from the depths our hearts. Strength comes outside of ourselves and from the “riches of God’s glory” or God’s “glorious grace” revealed to us in Christ as he says in chapter 1 verse 6. Notice too that we are strengthened from the “riches” or abundance of God’s glorious grace. Paul is in essence saying that the supply of strength we need is found in God’s infinitely abundant grace found in Jesus Christ. His grace never comes to an end, so we can always depend on him for strength.
- 2) Second, the *means* of receiving spiritual strength Paul identifies as God’s “Spirit” and “faith.” The indwelling Spirit works through faith to strengthen believers with the strength that comes from Christ’s grace. Christ and the riches of his grace are the objects of the believers’ faith, or trust. When believers take their eyes off of themselves and look with dependence on Christ and his grace, they are exercising faith, and the Holy Spirit applies the strength of Christ’s grace to “the inner man.”
- 3) Finally, the *goal* or *purpose* of spiritual strength is for “Christ to dwell in your hearts.” This phrase is loaded with meaning, some of which we will come back to in our second and third steps. Let’s begin by looking at the word “dwell.”<sup>7</sup> There are two different words that Paul could have used to express the idea of dwelling. The first refers to dwelling in a temporary sense, much like a traveler may temporarily dwell in someone’s house or an inn for a night, and then leave in the morning. The second refers to permanent dwelling, making one’s home, and residing. Paul uses the second one in this verse. He is in essence saying that Christ is “making his home” in the believer’s heart. This refers to his rule and his presence.<sup>8</sup> D.A. Carson provides a helpful illustration, and I quote,

“When Christ by his Spirit takes up residence within us, he finds a moral equivalent to trash, black and silver wall paper and a leaking roof. He sets about turning this residence into a place appropriate for him, a home for which he is comfortable . . . When a person takes up long-term residence somewhere, their presence eventually characterizes that dwelling . . . When Christ first moves into our lives, he finds us in bad repair. It takes a great deal of power to change us; and that is why Paul prays for power . . . [He is] transforming us into a house that pervasively reflects his own character.”<sup>9</sup> End quote.

Through Christ’s indwelling presence, we are being transformed to become more like him and to love him. Knowing Christ, his love and his presence, brings about our transformation into Christ’s likeness. That leads us to the next step in the ascending staircase of Paul’s prayer.

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<sup>7</sup> Tony Merida, *Christ –Centered Exposition: Exalting Christ in Ephesians* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 86.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 87

***Second Step (vv.17-19): Believers are strengthened to experience Christ's love revealed through the cross.***

Paul begins his second request in verses 17-19. He prays “*that you, being rooted in grounded in love, may have strength 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 . . .*” Paul’s second request is also a request for strength. This time, however, it is strength to know Christ’s love. The first request regards knowing Christ’s presence and rule. The second regards knowing Christ’s love. Let us once again make a few observations about what Paul says about knowing Christ’s love.

- 1) It comes from being *rooted and grounded in the cross*.<sup>10</sup> Notice that before Paul prays that the Ephesians would have strength to know Christ’s love, he prays that something would be true about them first. He prays that “*you, being rooted and ground in love, would have strength. . .*” What does it mean to be rooted and grounded in love? Whose love? The context seems to indicate that Paul is referring to Christ’s love for us. How has Christ demonstrated his love toward us? Through the cross. Romans 5:8 says, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Again, 1 John 3:16, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us,” and 1 John 4:10, “In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” We know Christ’s love only by seeing and being grounded in the cross. It reminds me of a line from one of Chris Tomlin’s newer songs, “God of Calvary,” “If I never, never lose sight of this place, I will never, never lose sight of your grace. Your cross is all, all I need to see, O praise the God of Calvary.” In order to know Christ’s love, we must have a firm grasp of God’s love demonstrated to us in the cross of Jesus Christ, which only comes about by a daily appropriation of the gospel. So, Grace Fellowship, preach the gospel to yourselves daily.<sup>11</sup>
- 2) We are strengthened to *comprehend and to know* Christ’s love. Once a believer has a grasp on the gospel, it is then that believers can begin to comprehend the love of Christ. The word for comprehend here means to lay hold of, grasp, understand, perceive.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Paul wants the Ephesians to “get it,” to “lay a hold of it” in their hearts and their minds. This understanding however, goes beyond head knowledge. Notice Paul prays that the Ephesians may know the love of Christ that “surpasses knowledge.” Christ’s love must be experienced.<sup>13</sup> He prays that the Ephesians may know “what is the breadth and length and height and depth” of Christ’s love. In other words, he wants them to know the ins, the outs, the ups, the downs, the “full dimensions of Christ’s love.”<sup>14</sup>

Let me use my guitar as an illustration of this kind of knowing. It is one thing for me to know that my guitar is a Taylor Grand Symphony 716ce cutaway with an Engelmann Spruce top (believe me it was as expensive as it sounds), but it is quite another thing for me to know how it sounds in comparison to other inferior brands, how it feels as my

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<sup>10</sup> Merida, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Transforming Power of the Gospel* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 53-64.

<sup>12</sup> Mounce Dictionary, 1183.

<sup>13</sup> Merida, 88.

<sup>14</sup> Stott, 137.

fingers glide across the fretboard, even how it looks when the neck is in healthy shape. I can only achieve this knowledge by *experience*; spending time with it, playing it. And it is only when I know my guitar this way that I can truly *enjoy it* to the fullest. Paul is communicating the same principle to knowing Christ love. Knowing goes beyond mental assent to the fact that God loves you. It is living, breathing, and walking in light of the cross, clinging to it in all circumstances whether in rejoicing, pain, life, or death. It is this love that enables us to enjoy, see and savor Jesus Christ more and more as we walk in fellowship with him.<sup>15</sup> It is the kind of love that Paul speaks of in Romans 8:35-39,

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*<sup>36</sup> *As it is written,*

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

*<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

When we grasp the fact that nothing can separate us from God’s love revealed in Christ Jesus, we are left in wonder of Christ’s love that cannot be measured and has no bounds. We exclaim in awe with the psalmist, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it!” (Psalm 139:6), and Paul, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11:33). Grace Fellowship, ponder daily the love of God revealed through Christ Jesus in the gospel.

***Third Step: Believers are strengthened to be filled unto all the fullness of God through Jesus Christ (v. 19).***

Paul’s final request for the Ephesians is found in the last part of verse 19, “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” What does this mean? Surely it must look back at verse 17, where Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. After all, it is in Christ that “the fullness of deity dwells bodily (Col. 2:9) and “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19). It appears as if Paul is praying that the Ephesians would be filled to the same measure by which God fills himself, his perfection.<sup>16</sup> How is this even possible? How can finite creatures be filled with God’s infinite perfections? Many have compared it to a cup or a shell that is submerged into the ocean and is filled with all the ocean’s fullness.<sup>17</sup> I agree

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<sup>15</sup> John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Stott, 138-139; James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (1997, repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 112.

<sup>17</sup> Michal P. Green, ed., *1500 Illustration for Biblical Preaching* (1989, repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 428; Boice, 112; Hughes, 116.

with James Montgomery Boice in concluding that this picture “falls short of the idea” being communicated.<sup>18</sup> He says, quote,

“Here is the highest rung of the ladder, the highest step of the stairs. We are to be filled with all of God’s fullness, an infinite thing. But then, we have all eternity (an infinite time) to be so filled. I think Paul is praying that we will be filled and filled and filled and filled and filled—and so on forever as God out of his infinite resources increasingly pours himself out into those sinful but now redeemed creatures he has rescued through the work of Christ.” End quote.

If I may borrow yet another phrase, this time from John Piper, I believe being filled with God’s fullness is being filled and satisfied with “all of who God is for us in Jesus.”<sup>19</sup> What a marvelous and magnificent thought! This leads us to the top, the lookout after Paul’s three step climb.

***The Top Lookout: Being filled with all the fullness of God is accomplished by God who is able (v. 20-21).***

Here we are. We have finally reached the top of our climb. In verses 20-21, Paul concludes his prayer with a doxology, “*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*” Paul in essence “looks out” over his prayer requests, and sees the thread that ties them all together – the God who is able. Paul’s prayer is focused on God and his ability from the very start. Look back with me one more time at these verses. Verses 14-16, he prays to the Father because of the abundance of *his* grace. The strength to know Christ’s presence and rule is *his* strength. Verses 17-19, believers are strengthened to know *Christ’s* love. Verse 19, we are filled with all of *his* fullness.

Paul then concludes that because of God’s abundance of power at work to strengthen us, God is able to “do far more abundantly than all that we may ask or think.” This is incredible! As if Paul’s prayer requests were not lofty enough, Paul declares that God, because of the riches of his power is able to surpass even the highest request, being filled with God’s fullness. It’s as if Paul is screaming “Look at God! Look at what he has done! Look at what he is doing! Look at all he can do! It is far more than you can *ever* imagine!” He ascribes glory to the one who is able, because God delights in being glorified through his Son and the Son’s bride, the church.

This plea to look at God is a plea to have faith. Faith is looking not to ourselves, but to God himself and his ability to accomplish his work within us. Once again, verse 15, we are strengthened by looking outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ and his glorious grace. Verse 17, Christ dwells in our hearts, fills us with his fullness through faith. If I might summarize the idea

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<sup>18</sup> Boice, 112.

<sup>19</sup> John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 1995), 213.

this way, *when we are looking to Christ for spiritual strength, we realize that all of God is all we need.*<sup>20</sup>

Paul's doxology compels us to rush to God in prayer daily, hour by hour, moment by moment. If all of God is truly all we need, and he has shown that he is able to do far more abundantly than all that we may ask or think, why do we not come to him as Paul does? An immediate application for this church comes to mind. Should not the promises of God in this passage compel you to be faithful in coming to our 9:00 prayer time before our heavenly Father who is able to accomplish all that we may ask or think in this church? The truths that this word displays gives me assurance that God will act when we trust in him, because he is able.

**Conclusion:** As we come to conclusion of this message this morning, a simple poem by Nancy Spielberg and Dorothy Purdy that expresses this idea well,

Lord/ I crawled /across the barrenness/ to You/ with my empty cup

Uncertain/ in asking/ any small drop of refreshment.

If only/ I had known You/ better/ I'd have come/ running/ With a bucket.<sup>21</sup>

**God is more than able to fill believers with his fullness by strengthening them to know his presence and his love.**

**Invitation:** If you have not been depending on God through prayer to strengthen you to walk with him in the fellowship of his great love that is revealed through the gospel, I urge you to get on your knees! Assume a disposition of desperation before God, because he has promised to strengthen you by his grace, and fill you with his fullness.

Or if you do not know fellowship with Christ at all, hear the word of the Lord and place your faith in the Lord Christ. We were dead in our sins and were children of wrath with the rest of mankind. But God being rich in mercy because of his great love has made us alive together with Christ. By his grace alone, he has secured the salvation of all who place their faith in him. Do you want to know the breadth, length, height, and depths of this incredible saving love? Look to Christ and place your trust in his finished work on the cross. Elders will be available after the service for you to talk to if you sense the Holy's Spirit's call to take your cross and follow Jesus. Would you bow you heads with me as we pray.

**Benediction:** Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we may ask or think according to the power at work within us, to him be the glory in church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever, Amen. Go and be filled unto God's fullness by his power and his Spirit. You are dismissed.

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<sup>20</sup> Passion, "More Like Jesus," Performed by Kristian Stanfill, et. al. on *Whole Heart (Live)*, Capitol Christian Music Group, Inc., 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes: Over 1,500 Outstanding ways to Effectively Drive Home Your Message* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 196.