

Ephesians 3:14-21

Exegetical Outline

Context: In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul is speaking to the Ephesian church about the doctrine of the gospel – Paul speaks about the gospel, how the beginning of the plan of the gospel existed before time in the mind of God. Paul lays out the spiritual blessings the believer has in Christ, who has redeemed all those who believe by his blood. He declares that all those who believe are sealed by the Holy Spirit, indwelt by him and secure for eternity. Paul points to the reality of the power of God in our salvation in chapter two where we find the verses, “for by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” – 2:8-9. The theme of the power of the gospel to reconcile continues in chapter two not only in regards to reconciling God and man but Jews and Gentiles, now included in one body in Christ. Finally here in chapter three, we have in the early verses of the chapter, Paul proclaiming the beauty and mystery of this awesome gospel that God in his wisdom has chosen to reveal in this time. Paul finishes his doctrinal section with a prayer – a prayer for spiritual strength.

The means by which he accomplishes this in the heart of believers – the Spirit of God

The prayer itself – that the believer might, through the strength of the Holy Spirit, by faith recognize the glorious Jesus Christ dwelling within them through the Spirit.

The fact that Paul prayed for spiritual strength is proof in itself that the health of the body of Christ begins in the heart. The way that God has designed us is not to act as robots, ignoring inner turmoil in order to fulfill lawful duties. Rather, God has designed us to be beings motivated by love. The life of the heart, the health of the inner man or woman is of the utmost important to Christ who quoted Isaiah when he spoke to the Pharisees, “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;’” (Mat. 5:18).

1. The Prayer – v. 14-17a

v.14-15 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named

Based on all that had come before, based on the glorious revelation of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The words “for this reason” are directly referring to the reason Paul is praying, but they are a connection to all that came before. Paul is pulling all this doctrine to its natural conclusion – a prayer. The natural outflow of knowing these glorious truths for Paul is for him to bow his knees before the Father. Paul specifically notes the posture of his prayer – notice that he doesn’t say prayer but we all assume he is praying. This was a common form of prayer position, indicating a sworn loyalty and reverence. And Paul isn’t speaking figuratively here, he is most likely talking about the way he normally prays – by bowing his knees. To Paul’s mind, to bow the knee was a submission to a king, and he uses the same word in Philippians 2:10 to describe how the entire world will bow and declare Jesus Christ is Lord.

And Paul is referencing the unity of both Gentiles and Jews in one family in the body of Christ when he states that God the Father is the father of the whole family in heaven and on earth. The Greek

construction used for *every family* (ESV) here is *pasa patria* and rather than every, it can, and in other places it does, mean the entirety of something. In fact in Ephesians 2:21, the same Greek word order and construction is used where Paul states that, “Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom **the whole structure**, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,” (ESV).¹ The KJV and NKJV both translate this verse as “whole family.”

What Paul is saying here is that he is specifically praying to God the Father, from whom the entire family of God is called by name. The same God who called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, formed Israel, brought them out of Egypt, brought them into the promised land, and promised them the seed of David would continue on the throne for all generations, the same God who sent forth Christ, the descendant of Abraham, the descendant of David, to purchase for himself a people made of not just Jews but people from every tribe, nation, and tongue. This is the Father to whom Paul prays, and this is his plea for the church of Christ to God the Father.

V. 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being (inner man)

Paul’s specific prayer here is that by the riches of the glory of God, the Holy Spirit would strengthen the inner man of believers – with a specific purpose in mind – that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith (v.17). Paul is pointing the Ephesians believers to the absolute reliance on the Father through the work of the Spirit for what he is about to pray for. And the subject of his prayer is for spiritual strength. It is a strengthening of the inner man according to the riches of the glory of God.

Paul’s inclusion of the riches of the glory of God is meant to draw the heart to an understanding that the riches of God’s glory are infinite. This specifically is a prayer for believers – one’s who already have the Holy Spirit within them. – as we will see the direct result of this spiritual strengthening is something that is miraculous and wonderful, powerful and life changing, utterly life shattering.

Paul isn’t praying for some small thing, for some tiny event, but rather for the power of God according to his infinite riches in glory to strengthen your inner man. The inner man in Scripture is that which was born again at the moment of your conversion. God created within you a new inner being, one that is responsive to his word, one that desires Christ, and one that was created in righteousness and true holiness. Along with the Spirit of God himself dwelling in you, you yourself, Christian are a new creation. But Paul is praying for spiritual strength, but spiritual strength that comes in large doses. Paul is praying for the spiritual strength to grasp what he is about to lay down.

V. 17a – So that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith –

This is the point of the spear of Paul’s prayer – the purpose of spiritual strength, the purpose of the Spirit strengthening the inner man according to the riches of God’s glory is that Christ may dwell in the hearts of believers by faith. Now the Spirit of God already dwells in every believer, and Paul calls him in Romans the Spirit of Christ. Jesus was clear that the chief work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ, and he is called the “other Helper.” The heart here is the inner man, the spiritual part of every believer. This is not speaking of a second indwelling, but rather of a spiritual realization of the glory of Christ through the Spirit of God. Paul’s words later in this passage indicate this is a spiritual comprehension, a spiritual

¹ Baugh, S. M. *Ephesians: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*. Edited by Wayne H. House, Hall W. Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts. Evangelical Exegetical Commentary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015.

understanding. Paul isn't saying that the Ephesians believers should receive Christ after receiving the Spirit indwelling. Rather, that the believer would recognize Christ for who he is, his glory, his power, his love, his mercy, his unending faithfulness, his glorious person as fully God and fully man, complete Savior and Lord, that the Spirit of God would strengthen the inner man of believers to catch a glimpse of the glory of Christ. The supreme joy and focus of the heart of the believer should be Christ himself.

Jesus compared himself as recorded in Matthew 13 as a treasure, hidden in a field. A man stumbled upon this treasure in a field that he did not own. With astonishment, he goes, sells all that he has, and purchases the field so that he might have the treasure.

Christ is to be the occupation of the heart of the believer. He is to be the treasure that is worth more than life. He is to be seen as glorious, dwelling alongside the believer, upholding them by his powerful right hand.

Theological Main Point – Paul is praying to the Father for the spiritual strength of believers by the power of the Spirit of God that they might by faith realize the indwelling Spirit of Christ and be rooted and grounded in his love.

Hermeneutical Main Point – Paul's prayer here should be ours. In this prayer specifically, but in prayer in general, we must let the majesty and power of God fuel the faith of our prayers to pray for large doses of spiritual strength.

Source of the power for prayer – God himself

The will of God for us as believers is for hearts that are near to him, that are captivated by his love.

Christ is concerned for the heart of believers – and so Paul prays where our prayers must land – at the spiritual strength of the heart. This is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit strengthening the hearts of believers to grasp the glory of Jesus dwelling in them.

Paul is praying – Father, let those who belong to you, who are called by your name, by the riches of your glory, be strengthened by the Spirit of God to be captivated by the indwelling Christ. Christ is already there, dwelling in us by the Spirit of Christ, but what Paul is praying for, and so should our prayer be, that we grasp and comprehend even but a glimpse of his glory.

Believer, let your heart pray along with Paul here – knowing that this is the direct will of God for your heart. Let the Spirit of God open your eyes like a bolt of lightning to see the glory of Jesus who dwells with you by the Holy Spirit. And how does he do this but by increasing our faith.

And what are the results of this? What is this glorious experience that Paul has prayed for us and led us to pray for?

2. The Results v. 17b-19

V. 17b – 19 – 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.

We see here that Paul is speaking about a spiritual comprehension which causes the believer to be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. Paul here narrows his focus for the results of the prayer – his

intention is that believers should be completely captivated by Christ – but Paul pushes one step deeper here – he says that this is a knowledge of the love of Christ. He uses four dimensions of measurement to give the reader an idea of the power and scope of what he is speaking of.

The result of God the Father granting this spiritual strength to the inner being of believers by the Holy Spirit that their hearts would be held captive by faith in Christ is that the church collectively together, will have the strength to comprehend the love of Christ which passes knowledge.

As bible believing Christians we are good at knowing facts. We pride ourselves with having a knowledge of Scripture, of holding to the truth of Scripture, and for searching the Scriptures and so should we! But the Word of God corrects us here if we think that a head knowledge of Christ and his love for us is enough to spur us on to genuine holiness and obedience.

There is a bit of a paradox here – the goal is that we know the love of Christ, the love of Christ passes knowledge. – Paul is pushing us beyond a head knowledge of the love of Christ for us to a heart knowledge, and that can only be accomplished by the work of God through the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Paul is referring to both a personal and corporate love of Christ.

Personal – Christ loves every believer personally. This was the motivation of Paul's life

– Galatians 2:20 – *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Paul was gripped by the personal love of Christ for him – that he Son of God – the eternal Son, who has dwelt in glory with the Father for all eternity, would step down into time, take on the form of a servant, becoming a man, and live a righteous life in obedience to his Father, then die taking on the whole wrath of God for all those who would believe in him, and rising again on the third day, Christ stands now in love.

Jesus, in his final words to his disciples on the night he was betrayed, states this to them as recorded in John 15 – *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.* (15:9).

The Father and the Son have been in an eternal relationship of constant infinite love for all of eternity. The same way in which the Father loves the Son, the Son has loved you, believer. He has loved you with an intense and complete love. He has loved you with a love that is stronger than death. His love for you and for His Father were the logs of fuel for the flame that burned in the heart of Christ to fulfill the Father's plan. This love for his Father, and for us, drove Christ to love us by being physically tortured on a cross, but even worse, that the entire wrath of God in our place would be taken by him in his own body there on Calvary.

And this love for the individual believer moves outward to assure us that Christ loves his body, the church. They are called collectively his bride. Later in Ephesians, Paul in describing marriage, points to the reality that marriage is a representation of the marriage between the Son of God and his bride, the church. Christ laid down his life for the church.

To grasp this, even to grasp a glimpse of this, to have the heart understanding that God desires for us of the love of Christ, we are completely reliant on the work of the Holy Spirit. And this is why Paul pours fuel onto the flame of our desire to pray with our final point –

3. The Power v. 20-21

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all 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.

This takes our minds to two aspects of our own comprehension in prayer – our thoughts and the petitions themselves.

Paul makes it clear that the substance of our prayers and even the thoughts underlying those prayers cannot even begin to touch the infinite power of God in his ability to answer.

He brings our minds back to the previous points when he says, *according to the power at work within us*. We think in our minds what this spiritual comprehension might be the answer to our prayers, and expect these things, but in the end God is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think. We may think we might understand what it means to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, to experience his love and know it, but God says, “let me be the one to answer and give, because you don’t even know how much I can give!”

And the final purpose for all of this is – that God may be glorified in the hearts of believers in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever, Amen.

Now let me break this down practically for some application –

This passage clearly commands us to pray alongside of Paul. We are to pray this same prayer, trusting that this is absolutely God’s will because he has given it to us in Scripture.

But as we pray, we must put ourselves in the position to receive what we have prayed for. If we are praying for the Holy Spirit to strengthen our inner man that we might grasp the love of Christ in greater manner, then we must put ourselves in front of the tools the Spirit uses to do so. Prayer is the first, but the second means by which the Spirit works in our lives is through the word of God. He is the author, and through it he can and will reveal the glory of Christ to us as we read, expecting him to do this work.

Pray before you read Scripture that the Spirit of God would open your eyes to see Christ’s glory from the word of God, so that your heart might be strengthened in faith, rooted and grounded in the love of Christ.

This is the necessary first step in building spiritual strength. Paul uses the illustration of being rooted and grounded and we can’t help but think of a tree. A small, flimsy tree is uprooted in a storm and cannot produce fruit. But a mature tree, with roots 30 feet deep and 50 feet wide won’t be destroyed so easily, and produces fruit year by year. This is the application here – if you want to be “filled with all the fulness of God” filled to serve, filled with the love of Christ in your own heart, filled to be used and poured out, filled to be a mature, grounded Christian, to be spiritually strong, you must, by the strengthening of God himself, be able to comprehend the love of Christ.