

Ephesians 3:14-21
December 4, 2022

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: As Christians, we understand that we have power because of the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. Why do you think God wants us to have power? [Let people engage]

Transition: I wonder if we take for granted that is incredible power that resides in each of us. How intentional are we in using it? For example, do you wake up in the morning and think, “I can’t wait to use His power today!” Probably not. But Paul shares a beautiful prayer in today’s text and tells us why he wants us to have power. Let’s read the text.

BOOK:

A Prayer for the Ephesians

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom his whole family (whom all fatherhood) in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Why does God share His power with us? So that we can build great churches for our own glory? So that we can boast of our own achievements? No! “To Him be glory in the church!” The Spirit of God was given to glorify the Son of God (John 16:14). The church on earth is here to glorify the Son of God. If our motive is to glorify God by building His church, then God will share His power with us. The power of the Spirit is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 2, pp. 31-34)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The Invocation (Eph. 3:14–15)

The first thing that strikes us is Paul's posture: "I bow my knees." (This must have been quite an experience for the Roman soldier chained to Paul!) The Bible nowhere commands any special posture for prayer. Abraham stood before the Lord when he prayed for Sodom (Gen. 18:22), and Solomon stood when he prayed to dedicate the temple (1 Kings 8:22). David "sat before the Lord" (1 Chron. 17:16) when he prayed about the future of his kingdom. And Jesus "fell on His face" when He prayed in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39).

You have noticed, no doubt, the emphasis on spiritual posture in Ephesians. As lost sinners, we were buried in the graveyard (Eph. 2:1). But when we trusted Christ, He raised us from the dead and seated us with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:4–6). Because we are *seated* with Christ, we can *walk* so as to please Him (Eph. 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15); and we can *stand* against the devil (Eph. 6:10–13). But the posture that links "sitting" with "walking" and "standing" is "bowing the knee." It is through prayer that we lay hold of God's riches that enable us to behave like Christians and battle like Christians. Whether we actually bow our knees is not the important thing; that we bow our hearts and wills to the Lord and ask Him for what we need is the vital matter.

Paul's prayer was addressed to "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the Bible, prayer is addressed to the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. This is the usual pattern, though you do find petitions addressed to the Son, and possibly to the Spirit (1 Thess. 3:12–13). In Ephesians 1:3, Paul calls the Father "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He was the "God ... of our Lord Jesus Christ" when Jesus was here on earth, for as man, Jesus lived in total dependence on God. This title reminds us of Christ's humanity. But God is the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" because Jesus Christ is eternal God; so this title reminds us of His deity.

There is a sense, however, in which all men in general, and Christians in particular, share in the fatherhood of God. Paul states that "the whole family in heaven and earth is named" after the divine Father. That word *family* can be translated "fatherhood." Every fatherhood in heaven and on earth gets its origin and name from the Father. He is the great Original; every other fatherhood is but a copy. Adam is called "the son of God" (Luke 3:38), referring to his creation. Believers are the "sons of God" by rebirth (John 1:11–13; 1 John 3:1–2). All men are not children of God by nature. Instead, they are children of disobedience and children of wrath (Eph. 2:2–3). As Creator, God is the Father of each man; but as Savior, He is only the Father of those who believe. There is no such thing in Scripture as the universal fatherhood of God that saves all men. "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7).

The Petition (Eph. 3:16–19)

There are four requests in Paul's prayer, but they must not be looked on as isolated, individual petitions. These four requests are more like four parts to a telescope. One request leads into the next one, and so on. He prays that the inner man might have spiritual strength, which will, in turn, lead to a deeper experience with Christ. This deeper experience will enable them to "apprehend" (get hold of) God's great love, which will result in their being "filled unto all the fullness of God." So, then, Paul is praying for strength, depth, apprehension, and fullness.

Strength (v. 16). The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life is evidence of salvation (Rom. 8:9); but the power of the Spirit is enablement for Christian living, and it is this power that Paul desires for his readers. “Ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you” (Acts 1:8, literal translation). Jesus performed His ministry on earth in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14; Acts 10:38), and this is the only resource we have for Christian living today. As you read the Book of Acts, you see the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, for there are some fifty-nine references to the Spirit in the book, or one fourth of the total references found in the New Testament. Someone has said, “If God took the Holy Spirit out of this world, most of what we Christians are doing would go right on—and nobody would know the difference!” Sad, but true.

The power of the Spirit is given to us “according to the riches of His glory” (Eph. 3:16). Christ returned to glory and sent the Spirit from heaven to indwell and empower His people. It is not necessary for us to “work something up.” The power has to be sent down. How marvelous that God does not give the Spirit’s power to us “out of His riches” but “according to”—which is a far greater thing. If I am a billionaire and I give you ten dollars, I have given you *out of* my riches; but if I give you a million dollars, I have given to you *according to* my riches. The first is a *portion*; the second is a *proportion*.

This power is available for “the inner man.” This means the spiritual part of man where God dwells and works. The inner man of the lost sinner is dead (Eph. 2:1), but it becomes alive when Christ is invited in. The inner man can see (Ps. 119:18), hear (Matt. 13:9), taste (Ps. 34:8), and feel (Acts 17:27); and he must be “exercised” (1 Tim. 4:7–8). He also must be cleansed (Ps. 51:7) and fed (Matt. 4:4). The outer man is perishing, but the inner man can be renewed spiritually in spite of outward physical decay (2 Cor. 4:16–18). It is this inner power that makes him succeed.

What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit empower the inner man? It means that our spiritual faculties are controlled by God, and we are exercising them and growing in the Word (Heb. 5:12–14). It is only when we yield to the Spirit and let Him control the inner man that we succeed in living to the glory of God. This means feeding the inner man the Word of God, praying and worshiping, keeping clean, and exercising the senses by loving obedience.

Depth (v. 17). Paul uses three pictures here to convey this idea of spiritual depth, and the three pictures are hidden in the three verbs: “dwell,” “rooted,” and “grounded.” The verb *dwell* literally means (and here I follow Dr. Kenneth Wuest) “to settle down and feel at home.” Certainly, Christ was already resident in the hearts of the Ephesians, or else Paul would not have addressed them as “saints” in Ephesians 1:1. What Paul is praying for is a deeper experience between Christ and His people. He yearns for Christ to settle down and feel at home in their hearts—not a surface relationship, but an ever-deepening fellowship.

Abraham’s life is an illustration of this truth. God was going to bless Abraham with a son, so the Lord Himself came down and visited Abraham’s tent, and He brought two angels with Him. They came to the tent, they talked with Abraham, and they even ate a meal with him. They felt very much at home, because Abraham was a man of faith and obedience. But the three guests had another task. They had to investigate the sins of Sodom because God planned to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot, a believer, was living in Sodom, and God wanted to warn him to get out before the judgment could fall. But the Lord Himself did not go to Sodom. He sent the two angels (Gen. 18–19). The Lord did not feel at home in Lot’s house the way He felt at home in Abraham’s tent.

The verb *rooted* moves us into the plant world. The tree must get its roots deep into the soil if it is to have both nourishment and stability; and the Christian must have his spiritual roots deep into the love of God. Psalm 1:1–3 is a perfect description of this word, and Jeremiah 17:5–8 is a good commentary on it. One of the most important questions a Christian can ask himself is, “From what do I draw my nourishment and my stability?” If there is to be power in the Christian life, then there must be depth. The roots must go deeper and deeper into the love of Christ.

Grounded is an architectural term; it refers to the foundations on which we build. In the first two churches I pastored, we were privileged to construct new buildings, and in both projects it seemed we would never get out of the ground. In my second building program, we had to spend several thousand dollars taking soil tests because we were building over an old lake bed. For weeks, the men were laying out and pouring the footings. One day I complained to the architect, and he replied, “Pastor, the most important part of this building is the foundation. If you don’t go deep, you can’t go high.” That sentence has been a sermon to me ever since.

The trials of life test the depth of our experience. If two roommates in college have a falling out, they may seek new roommates, for after all, living with a roommate is a passing experience. But if a husband and wife, who love each other, have a disagreement, the trial only deepens their love as they seek to solve the problems. The storm that blows reveals the strength of the roots. Jesus told the story about the two builders, one of whom did not go deep enough for his foundation (Matt. 7:24–29). Paul prayed that the believers might have a deeper experience with Christ, because only a deep experience could sustain them during the severe trials of life.

Apprehension (vv. 18–19a). The English words “comprehend” and “apprehend” both stem from the Latin word *prehendere* which means “to grasp.” We say that a monkey has a “prehensile tail.” That is, its tail is able to grasp a tree limb and hold on. Our word *comprehend* carries the idea of mentally grasping something; while *apprehend* suggests laying hold of it for yourself. In other words, it is possible to understand something but not really make it your own. Paul’s concern is that we lay hold of the vast expanses of the love of God. He wants us to live in four dimensions. When God gave the land to Abraham, He told him to “walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it” (Gen. 13:17). Abraham had to step out by faith and claim his inheritance. But we today have an inheritance in four dimensions: breadth, length, depth, and height. God’s fourth dimension is love!

But there is a paradox here. Paul wants us to know personally the love of Christ “which passeth knowledge.” There are dimensions, but they cannot be measured. “The love of Christ which passeth knowledge” parallels “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). We are so rich in Christ that our riches cannot be calculated even with the most sophisticated computer.

Perhaps you saw the cartoon that depicted a man chatting with a boat salesman. In the beautiful showroom were yachts and cabin cruisers that glittered with elegance. In the caption, the salesman is saying to the customer: “Sir, if you have to ask how much they are, they are too expensive for you!”

No Christian ever has to worry about having inadequate spiritual resources to meet the demands of life. If he prays for spiritual strength and spiritual depth, he will be able to apprehend—get his hands on—all the resources of God’s love and grace. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13). And what is the result of all of this?

Fullness (v. 19b). It is said that nature abhors a vacuum. This explains why air or water will automatically flow into an empty place. The *divine* nature abhors a vacuum. God wants us to experience His fullness. “Filled *unto* all the fullness of God” is the more accurate translation. The *means* of our fullness is the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), and the *measure* of our fullness is God

Himself (Eph. 4:11–16). It is tragic when Christians use the wrong measurements in examining their own spiritual lives. We like to measure ourselves by the weakest Christians that we know, and then boast, “Well, I’m better than they are.” Paul tells us that the measure is Christ, and that we cannot boast about anything (nor should we). When we have reached *His* fullness, then we have reached the limit.

In one sense, the Christian is already “made full in Christ” (Col. 2:9–10, where “complete” means “filled full”). Positionally, we are complete in Him, but practically, we enjoy only the grace that we apprehend by faith. The resources are there. All we need do is accept them and enjoy them. Paul will have more to say about this fullness (Eph. 5:18–21), so we will reserve further comment until we reach that section.

The Benediction (Eph. 3:20–21)

After contemplating such a marvelous spiritual experience, it is no wonder Paul bursts forth in a doxology, a fitting benediction to such a prayer. Note again the trinitarian emphasis in this benediction: Paul prays to God the Father, concerning the indwelling power of God the Spirit, made available through God the Son.

Perhaps the best way for us to grasp some of the greatness of this doxology is to look at it in outlined form:

Now unto Him that is
able to do *all*
above all
abundantly above all
exceeding abundantly above all

Paul seems to want to use every word possible to convey to us the vastness of God’s power as found in Jesus Christ. He has ended each of the two previous chapters with praise to God for His great victory in Christ. He tells us that Christ’s power is so great He arose from the dead and ascended *far above all* (Eph. 1:19–23). He teaches us that His power is so great He has reconciled Jews and Gentiles to each other, and to God; and that He is now building a temple to the eternal glory of God (Eph. 2:19–22). But in the paragraph before us, Paul shares the exciting truth that this *far above all* power is available to us! It is even “above all that we ask or think.” In other words, the power of Christ, like the love of Christ, is beyond human understanding or measurement. And this is just the kind of power you and I need if we are to walk and war in victory.

The word “power” is again *dunamis*, which we met back in Ephesians 3:7; and “working” is *energeia* (energy) found in Ephesians 1:11, 19; 2:2; 3:7; and 4:16. Some power is dormant; it is available, but not being used, such as the power stored in a battery. But God’s energy is effectual power—power at work in our lives. This power works *in* us, in the inner man (Eph. 3:16). Philippians 2:12–13 are parallel verses, so be sure to read them. It is the Holy Spirit who releases the resurrection power of Christ in our lives.

One winter day, I had an important engagement in Chicago, and the evening before the area was hit by a severe snowstorm. I did not have a garage, so my car was not only covered with snow, but heavy cakes of ice had formed under the fenders and bumpers. These ice cakes I simply kicked off, after I had swept off the car. I drove to the gas station to fill the tank. When I pushed the button on the dashboard to open the gas cap, it didn’t work. No matter how hard or

often I pushed, the cap stayed shut. The station attendant looked under the fender and discovered the problem. In kicking off the ice, I had broken the wire that connected the gas cap with the battery.

Apparently, this is what has happened to many Christians. They have been cut off from their source of power. Unbelief, unconfessed sin, careless living, worldliness in action or attitude—all of these can rob us of power. And a Christian robbed of power cannot be used of God. “Without Me, ye can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Why does God share His power with us? So that we can build great churches for our own glory? So that we can boast of our own achievements? No! “To Him be glory in the church!” The Spirit of God was given to glorify the Son of God (John 16:14). The church on earth is here to glorify the Son of God. If our motive is to glorify God by building His church, then God will share His power with us. The power of the Spirit is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

But the amazing thing is that what we do in His power today will glorify Christ “throughout all ages, world without end” (Eph. 3:21). The church’s greatest ministry is yet to come. What we do here and now is preparing us for the eternal ages, when we shall glorify Christ forever.

He is able to do all—*above* all—*abundantly* above all—*exceeding* abundantly above all!

Get your hands on your spiritual wealth by opening your heart to the Holy Spirit, and praying with Paul for strength for the inner man ... for a new depth of love ... for spiritual apprehension ... and for spiritual fullness.

“Ye have not because ye ask not” (James 4:2).

Hoehner, H. W. (1985). *Ephesians*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 631-632) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

G. Prayer for strengthened love (3:14–21)

Having stated that positionally the Gentile and Jewish believers are “one new man” (2:15), which is the body of Christ, Paul now prayed that they may be united experientially. He desired that they might genuinely know and experience Christ’s love and thus exhibit it toward each other.

1. THE APPROACH TO PRAYER (3:14–15)

3:14–15. Verses 14–19 in the Greek are another of Paul’s eight long sentences in Ephesians (see comments on 1:3–14). **For this reason** is an expression that is repeated from verse 1 when Paul was about to pray. He then broke off before finishing the sentence in order to elaborate on the mystery, the body of Christ, and on his ministry of dispensing the mystery. Paul’s kneeling in prayer is one of several postures for praying (standing, kneeling, lying prostrate) seen in the Scriptures. The shorter reading, **the Father**, is preferred over the longer one found in the KJV, “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The expression **from whom His whole family** means that all Creation including angels and humans are one family under the fatherhood of God. But this is problematic grammatically for the Greek has no pronoun (“His”) before the word “whole.” This also has problems theologically. A better translation both grammatically and theologically is “from whom every family” (cf. ASV, NASB, RSV). Paul was not saying that God is the Father of all but rather that He is the Prototype of all fatherhood. “Father” is derived from God, not man. He is the first Father, the only One with “underived” fatherhood. Thus, every human family **derives**

its name, that is, exists as a family with a father, because of Him. It is to this Father that Paul prayed.

2. THE APPEAL IN PRAYER (3:16–19)

Though the sentence begins in verse 14 and ends in verse 19, Paul's request begins in verse 16. In this prayer he asked for only one thing.

a. *Petition stated: to be strengthened in the inner man (3:16–17a).*

3:16–17a. The first part of Paul's request is that God, **out of** (*kata*, lit., "according to the standard of") **His glorious riches** (cf. 1:7, 18; 2:4, 7; 3:8) might **strengthen** (*krataiōthēnai*, "be strong to overcome resistance," cf. *kratous* in 1:19 and *kratei* in 6:10) believers **with power** (*dynamis*, dynamic living power; cf. 3:20) **through** the Holy **Spirit in their inner being[s]** (lit., "in the inner man," i.e., believers' innermost beings). The result of this is that **through faith Christ may dwell in** believers' **hearts**, that is, their whole personalities. "Dwell" (*katoikēsai*) refers not to the beginning of Christ's indwelling at the moment of salvation. Instead it denotes the desire that Christ may, literally, "be at home in," that is, at the very center of or deeply rooted in, believers' lives. They are to let Christ become the dominating factor in their attitudes and conduct.

b. *Purpose stated: to comprehend Christ's love and to be filled unto God's fullness (3:17b–19).*

3:17b–19. Paul continued his prayer by repeating his request that Christ be the center of believers' lives. He stated this in a mixed metaphor of biological and architectural terminology: **being rooted** (like a plant) **and established** (like a building) **in love**. The participles "being rooted and established" are in the perfect tense, indicating a past action with continuing results. They could be translated "having been rooted and established." The purpose of the request is that they **may have power** (*exischysēte*, "have inherent strength"), **together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ**. These measurements most likely describe not the thoroughness of comprehension but the immensity of the thing to be comprehended.

Interestingly once again—as in (a) 1:13–14; (b) 1:17; (c) 2:18; (d) 2:22; and (e) 3:4–5—Paul spoke of the Trinity: the Father (v. 14), the Spirit (v. 16), and the Son (v. 17).

The content of this comprehension is **to know** experientially the **love** of Christ **that** supersedes all **knowledge** (cf. Phil. 4:7). The more a Christian knows about Christ, the more amazed he is at Christ's love for him.

The final purpose is **that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God**. The KJV and RSV translations, "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God," wrongly imply that the whole fullness of God can be contained in a believer's life. But this ignores the Greek preposition *eis* which denotes a goal; this is translated accurately in the NIV: "to the measure." The fullness of the Godhead is only in Christ, and only through Him is a believer made complete (Col. 2:9–10). Though in Christ this divine fullness is ideally a believer's already, Paul prayed that it might be experientially realized in each one (cf. Eph. 4:13). Experiencing God's moral excellence and perfection causes Jewish and Gentile believers to love each other. Positionally they are one in Christ; experientially they are to love each other as one in Him.

3. THE ASCRIPTION OF PRAISE (3:20–21)

3:20–21. Paul closed this prayer with a doxology. He praised God **who is able to do far more than one could ask or imagine, according to the standard of His power** (*dynamis*; cf. v. 16; 1:19) **that is at work** (*energoumenēn*; cf. 1:19) **within us**. No human or angel (cf. 3:10) would ever think that Jews and Gentiles could function together in one body. But with God's power of love in each believer's life, Paul was confident that Jewish and Gentile believers can function and love one another. This is astounding and though it is not naturally possible, God is able to accomplish it. Paul therefore ascribed to God **glory** which is to be manifest **in the church**, where the miracle of love will occur, **and in Christ Jesus**, who made the union of Jewish and Gentile believers possible.

Praise to Him for this accomplishment is to continue throughout eternity (cf. Rom. 11:36; 2 Tim. 4:18). This doxology serves as a fitting conclusion not only to this prayer but also to this book's first three chapters.

Dockery, D. S. (1998). The Pauline Letters. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 579). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

UNITED IN HIS LOVE (3:14–21)

Paul now continued the prayer he started in 3:1. What he described in 2:11–22 is now the subject of his prayer. He desired for the church to be united experientially. He wanted them to know and experience Christ's love and share it with one another.

Paul addressed his prayer to the Father. He expressed his aspiration for the saints to be strengthened, grounded, and filled. He asked that they comprehend Christ's love and be filled unto God's fullness. His confidence in prayer was grounded not in his abilities or his readers' but completely in God's abundant power. Astoundingly he claimed that God can do abundantly more than we can ask or even imagine. Following these majestic words the apostle concluded with a beautiful doxology.

Fields, W. C. (1972). Ephesians. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible Commentary (pp. 746–747). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

Paul's Mission (Eph. 3:1–21)

The first thirteen verses of this passage are a parenthesis. Paul begins a prayer on their behalf but pauses at the beginning to explain his relationship to this mystery of God that has unfolded in their midst. Verses 5 and 6 explain that the "mystery" of God's intentions toward the Gentiles is now cleared up. In the old days godly men knew more about this subject than they understood. But through Paul's unique mission to the Gentiles it now has been clearly demonstrated that God's purposes of redemption always extended well beyond the Jews. In Christ, salvation is for all mankind. This all-embracing purpose of God had not been clearly recognized before. Christianity is not merely a reform movement within Judaism. The Christian mission is a worldwide mission.

Paul's prayer for the believers is resumed in verse 14. He asks that Christ might become incarnate in them (vv. 14–17). He desires for them the strength and perception to understand the vastness of God's love as revealed in Christ (vv. 17–19).

The apex of Ephesians is the magnificent doxology in verses 20–21. It states eloquently that God is able to perform his promises. The experience of salvation is personal but it is not unrelated to the "glory in the church," the fellowship of all believers.

Special point—In 3:3 he refers to the mystery "as I wrote (before) in few words." This probably refers not to a previous epistle but to earlier references to the "mystery" in this epistle. The mystery was not the gospel itself, or in the nature of God's message, but in the destination of the gospel. It was not just for the Jews, historically a chosen people, a messenger people for God's love. The mystery had to do with God's intentions for the non-Jewish world. The followers of Christ now see that God's purpose is to redeem all who will accept salvation, Gentiles as well as Jews.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ephesians 3:14-21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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