

Ephesians 3:14-21 Message

Intro: Today we're going to study a prayer. It's a prayer that Paul prayed for Christians in the city of Ephesus. In this prayer, Paul asks God to give them spiritual strength.

Spiritual strength. That sounds good doesn't it? But what does it really mean? A lot of us might not know exactly what spiritual strength is, but I think we all have an idea of what it means to feel spiritually weak.

Several things happened the past few days that left me feeling spiritually depleted and weak. A dear couple in our church lost their 6-week old baby daughter. Another couple who has already faced significant trials learned that the husbands' 23-year old brother had died in a construction accident. I also received a letter from young woman who is not part of our church but who detailed the sad story of harsh physical abuse she had suffered at the hands of her father. My heart was heavy for these people.

The question I asked was, "How do I pray for these people? What do they need most?"

How do you pray for people who are discouraged and overwhelmed by circumstance? What do you ask God to do? And what if *you* are the person in the sad story? What do you pray for yourself?

Maybe that's you. You might not be facing extreme tragedy, but maybe you experience low-grade, persistent discouragement. You want to make progress in your faith but you feel stuck. You look at your life and all you can see is what you're not doing or doing wrong. You struggle against sin, but feel pinned to the floor. You try to read your Bible and pray but God feels distant.

Or maybe you're someone who is doing okay—there's no big problem, no discouragement—but you don't feel like you have clear direction when it comes to your faith. You're a Christian...but what now? You're not sure what it means to make progress. How should you pray? What should you ask God to do?

There's a lot we can learn from the prayer Paul prays in Ephesians 3. His prayer is divinely inspired. In these verses God himself is teaching us how to pray for others, how to pray for ourselves. He's teaching us what we need most. And he's teaching us what we should ask him for.

Text: Eph. 3:14-21

Prayer is such an important part of the Christian. God talks to us through his word, the Bible. But we talk to God in prayer. You can't have a relationship without communication. And prayer is more than just a spiritual exercise. Prayer reveals what we believe about God—what we think he's capable of doing and how we view him.

So as we study this prayer, we're not just studying prayer...we're really learning about God and what it means to rightly view the Christian life.

Paul draws our attention to the connection between the truth we know about God and how we pray in his opening words. He begins by saying, "For this reason...". He's connecting the content of his prayer to all that he's written in the preceding verses.

He's saying "In light of all that God has done for you through Jesus—how he chose you, redeemed you, gave you spiritual life, adopted you as his sons and made you his people—because of all that God has done for you, here's what I am asking God to do in your life today..."

John Stott writes, "The basis of Paul's prayer was his knowledge of God's purpose."

This is why studying God's word and biblical doctrine is so important. If you don't clearly understand who God is and what he's doing in you and in the world...if you don't know how he's doing it...than you won't be able to measure progress in your spiritual life. You won't know what to ask God to do. You won't know how to rightly relate to God.

So what do we learn from Paul's prayer? Let's examine it by seeing how it answers four questions...

1. Who do we pray to?

What does Paul's prayer teach us about the God we pray to? Paul says he bows his knee before the Father. We pray to the almighty God who is also our Father.

We learned in Eph. 1:5 that in love, through Jesus, God predestined us for adoption. Through faith in Jesus we are brought into God's family. Christians are people who have become God's sons and daughters.

To know God as Father means to know his tender love and intimate care. But it also involves submitting to his loving rule. A Father has authority. He's in charge. We obey him. We submit to him.

Even as his children, Christians should never lose a proper sense of reverence before the Father. When Paul considers God's power in overthrowing death, reconciling sinners and defeating Satan he approaches him with humility. Verse 14 says, "I bow my knees before the Father."

Jews prayed standing up. To bow was an expression of desperate need and submission.

What is the posture of your heart in prayer? Some of us stand and lecture God when we pray. We rattle off a list of all we need. We treat him like a personal assistant.

Some of us barely make time to talk to God in prayer. We text message God while we're driving home. We're distracted and preoccupied with our own activity and work.

Some of us have trouble believing that we're truly forgiven and that God is truly our Father. And so when we pray, we stand cowering from a distance.

But when we understand all that God has done for us in Christ—when we know the good news that we have redemption through the blood of Christ. When we learn that God predestined us for adoption *we draw near*. Eph. 3:15 says, we have *access with confidence*. God is our Father, we love him, we come near to him, we bring our requests, but we bow. He is the authority. And he has all power.

Look at the next phrase in verse 15. It says that God is the “Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named”

What this means is that God has all authority over all people. In scripture naming something means you have the power to define it. My wife and I named our children. We were here first, they are under our care and authority. It reminds me of the old Bill Cosby line. He used to tell his kids, “I brought you into this world and I can take you out of it!”

This tells us that God brought everything and everyone into existence. He is the creator. Every family means every people-group—every ethnicity, every tribe on every continent. And that includes heaven—angels and demons and spiritual forces are under God’s authority. God is not threatened by Satan. He named Satan.

Then in verse 16 Paul refers to the riches of God’s glory. This is another reference to God’s unlimited power. He can accomplish anything.

Look down at verse 20...Paul communicates the same idea when he says that God “is able to do far more abundantly than we can ask or imagine.” Other translations say God is able to do “immeasurably more” or “vastly more” or “infinitely more.”

The loving Father we pray to is not limited by our imaginations and requests. He can do infinitely more than we can even ask. ~~On many occasions when I’ve prayed with Jeff Purswell he will quote this verse as he prays. He will say, “God we can imagine you answering in this way, we can imagine you doing such and such...but you can do abundantly more than all we can imagine.” That always stirs my faith when I hear it.~~

So who do we pray to? We pray to a loving Father who always has our best interest in mind. A Father who is worthy of our reverence because he has total authority, unlimited resources and who is able to accomplish anything. Doesn’t that fill you with faith to pray?!

2. What should we ask for?

Have you ever noticed that a lot of times when we come to God with prayer requests we ask him to work *outside* us. We ask him to change our circumstances. Our job. Our relationships. Our spouse. Our kids. Our country. We say, “God please work in power out there! Deal with all that stuff!” These prayers aren’t necessarily wrong...

But notice how Paul prays just the opposite. He doesn’t pray about their outward circumstances. He asks God to do an inward work. Verse 20 speaks of God’s power “at work *within* us.” In verse 16 he asks that God would grant them “to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your *inner being*” and that “Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith.”

We learn here the priority of God’s power working in the heart, the inner being of the Christian. This doesn’t mean that God doesn’t care about our circumstances or the physical world. He does. But he’s teaching us that what we need more than outward change is inward, spiritual power and strength.

Now let’s look even more closely at what Paul prays for. There are three phrases to note. He asks that they would be:

- strengthened with power (vs. 16)
- Christ would dwell in their hearts (vs. 17)
- Filled with all the fullness of God (vs. 19)

Now based on my study of this passage, I believe these three things are different ways of talking about the same thing. I don't think Paul is describing different levels of spiritual attainment like different Boy Scout badges. (Joke: "Is Christ dwelling in your heart? No, I've only been strengthened with power. But, Billy has been filled with all the fullness of God." I guess that would be like an Eagle Scout.)

No, I think these three requests are different ways of expressing the same petition. Paul is asking that they would brought into a deeper union, a greater awareness of Christ's presence and power and knowledge of his great love displayed on the cross.

The important thing to note here is that Paul is praying for more of what they've already been given the moment they first trusted in Jesus. When a person turns from sin and trusts in Jesus as Lord, God gives new spiritual life. Christ, by the Holy Spirit fills them.

W But what we learn here is that there's more! Isn't that good news? And the more isn't something besides Jesus. The more is more of Jesus!

We learned in chapter 1 that our salvation is completely dependent on Jesus. We are saved if we are "in Christ." Well the same is true of Christian growth. You were saved in Christ. And you will only grow and be strengthened "in Christ." The key to spiritual strength is closer union with Jesus, more of his truth, his word, his spirit ruling and reigning in your heart.

3. How does God accomplish this?

How does God strengthen us in our inner being? How does Christ dwell in our hearts even more? How are we filled to greater measure with God's fullness?

We know that the key is union with Christ. But how do we grow in that union? We learn several things from this passage.

- First, look at verse 16. We learn that God does this work "through his Spirit." This is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity sent by the Father and Son to comfort, convict and lead God's people into the truth of the gospel.

The Holy Spirit regenerates spiritually dead sinners. The Holy Spirit gives us new desires and the spiritual strength to obey God. The Holy Spirit enables us to understand and apply God's word.

John Murray in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*:
"Few words in the New Testament have been subjected to more distortion than the word "spiritual." Frequently it is used to denote what is little more than vague sentimentality. "Spiritual" in the New Testament refers to that which is of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual man is the person who is indwelt and controlled by the Holy Spirit and a spiritual state of mind is a state of mind that is produced and maintained by the Holy Spirit. Hence when we say that union with Christ is spiritual we mean, first of all, that the bond of this union is the Holy Spirit himself." – page 166

So how specifically does the Holy Spirit give us spiritual strength? How does he fill us with more of the fullness of God? How does he work in us so that in a greater way Christ dwells in our hearts?

Read Text: Eph 3:17-19

So how are we strengthened? How does the Spirit fill us with more of the fullness of God? How does he work in us so that in a greater way Christ dwells in our hearts? Here's the answer:

God's Spirit strengthens our inner being by deepening our comprehension of the love of Christ.

The Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts more, we are filled with the fullness of God, our inner being is strengthened with power when we become more rooted and grounded in the love of God displayed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now maybe you're thinking, "That's it? I get spiritual strength by knowing that Jesus loves me? I already know that. I learned that son. I know that story. I already know all about gospel. I know Jesus died for me. I know bled for my sins. Yeah, I know God loves me."

Friend, if that's the response in your heart do you see how little you really know of the love of Christ? Do you see how different your attitude is from Paul's?

Paul says that we need strength from God to be able to comprehend the love of Christ. He knows that just reading the words he's written in the first 3 chapters isn't enough. They will just be empty, lifeless words unless the Holy Spirit works in power. Unless the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see and truly comprehend.

➤ Brothers and sisters, sound doctrine is so important. But don't ever settle for merely knowing doctrine. Let us be a people who cry out to God to pour out his Spirit afresh into our hearts so that doctrine becomes the story of God's great love for us. So that it melts our hearts. So that this truth sets us on fire with love for the Savior who loved us first. Let's ask him to overwhelm us with an awareness of God's love.

What this passage tells us is that God's love in Christ is bigger than we think. If you think you've measured it off and grasp it's parameters, you're sorely mistaken. I don't care how many sermons you've heard or how long you've been a Christian, you only have the smallest glimpse of the breadth, length, height and depth of God's love.

Paul's point here is that God's love is massive. It's greater than we know. It stretches out in every direction. And the cry of our heart as God's people should be, "God give us strength to comprehend this love! Show us more! Help us see!"


This is why we talk so much about the cross and Jesus dying for our sins. It's not because we're obsessed with death and blood, it's because we want to comprehend the love of Christ for us. It was on the cross that God's love was most powerfully displayed. The righteous one died as a criminal. The holy one took on our sin. The eternal Son laid aside his glory and humbled himself. Why? Because he so loved us. Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends! Behold what manner of love the father has given to us that we should be called Sons of God!

Don't ever think you've "got it" when it comes to God's love...that you can move on. None of us get it. The love of God displayed in the gospel surpasses knowledge. Do you remember the time in your life when that truth first gripped your soul? Do you remember when you first realized that this sacrifice was done for you, for your sins? Do you remember when your heart was filled with the joy in knowing the love of almighty God?



Here's what you need to know: there is more where that came from. It was the work of the Spirit that gave you spiritual comprehension of God's love. And you thing you need most is not something new but more and more and more of the same.

There is more? Do you want more?

 I want more. I'm a charismatic. I believe in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. And here's what the Spirit loves to do: he loves to exalt the work of the Son! He loves to illuminate the love of God revealed in the gospel to the hearts of believers. This is the key to spiritual power!

What I want you to realize is how practical and powerful this is in the life of Christians. You name the aspect of your life that you want to see growth and change. Is it victory over sin? Is it boldness in evangelism? Is it love for your wife or kids or husband? Is it faith in the midst of suffering and uncertainty?

Do you know what you need? You need to be rooted in the knowledge of the love of God for you revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is where spiritual strength in your inner being comes from. It comes from a greater revelation of God's love for you.

Verse 16-17 says that being strengthened in your inner being and having Christ dwell in your heart is to be "rooted and grounded in love."

Are you rooted in the knowledge of God's great love for you? There's a huge maple tree in my backyard. Every spring drops thousands of seeds all over my yard. Many of these seeds land in the grass or in the mulch and a few weeks later they'll begin to sprout. But hardly any of them really take root. The lawn mower knocks them over. You can pluck them out of the ground with your fingers because they're growing on the surface of the soil.

A lot of Christians are like those tiny seedlings with no roots. They got saved, they trusted in Christ, but then they move on. They make the focus of their spiritual life their own good behavior and spiritual effort. Many never take the time to study the doctrine that explains what Jesus has done for them on the cross. They don't study the reality of human sin or God's holiness. They don't give attention to redemption, justification by faith or adoption. The result is that they have no roots. Their sense of God's love is superficial.

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And here is what happens. When suffering comes. When temptation come they're not rooted and grounded.

God's word confronts their sin and because they don't truly understand God's love they get angry, upset by God's unrealistic standards and run after sin.

Or a trial comes into their life. They lose something or someone that they care about. They begin to doubt and question God's love. They have no roots.

I don't want you to be a tiny, rootless seedling. I want you to be like that big strong Maple tree in my backyard. The storms and winds come and that tree stands firm. I want you to be rooted in the knowledge of God's love for you. When the storms of suffering come. I want you to stand firm. When struggles with indwelling sin beset you, I to see you weather the storm.

4. What is the ultimate result?

Read verses 20-21...

The result of inner strength isn't an inner focus. When we know God's love through the gospel, when Christ dwells in our hearts through faith the result is God being glorified.

TOGETHER
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When we know his love, we can love and serve others. And as we do God is glorified in the church. When we know the immeasurable love of Christ we can sacrifice for the sake of the gospel so that other generations will know the good news of Christ and him crucified.

In the coming chapters of Ephesians we're going to study how people live who are rooted and grounded in the love of God revealed in the gospel. We're going to see how they deal with sin, with relationships, with their sex drives, how they treat their spouse, their kids, their parents.

But here's what we have to understand: the spiritual strength to live the Christian life is rooted in a knowledge of God's love displayed in Jesus Christ.

Read your Bible and ask God for strength to comprehend...review the gospel and ask God to root you in a knowledge of his great love shown for you. You can't do this yourself...you need the Power of the Holy Spirit.

Pray