

***Praying for Spiritual Vitality and Power***  
***Ephesians 3:14–19***

Today we are going to consider Paul's prayer for the Ephesians found in Ephesians 3. Please stand as we read Ephesians 3:14-21.

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. 20 Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, 21 to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

We see here that Paul prays for spiritual vitality and power in the lives of the Ephesians. I am going to urge us to be the type of people who can pray the same type of prayers for the people that we care deeply about. Sometimes this type of praying gets crowded out by prayers for more urgent issues. Since we need God to act in relationships, in our careers, in our finances, and in our health, we pray for those issues. And rightly so because we are told throughout Scripture to bring such requests before God (e.g., Psalm 43:1, Matthew 6:11, Philippians 4:6, etc.). But Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 strongly suggests that we not let our circumstantial prayers crowd out praying for foundational, spiritual needs.

As we work our way through this passage, consider the possibility of imitating Paul and praying big, bold, powerful, meaty prayers for the people you love. Who do you know (including yourself) who needs God to do a deep work in his/her life? Keep that person in mind as we study Ephesians 3:14-19.

Before we get to this passage, consider two guiding principles that inform how we hear this passage.

First, ***you can give others great encouragement when you tell them what you are praying for them.*** You might initially balk at the idea of informing other people ***that*** you have prayed for them and ***what*** you have prayed for them. You might initially think, "That's not very humble; what you pray should be between you and God alone." Surely there are some things that you express to God in prayer that are too personal and precious to share with anybody else.

But we will see in today's passage that Paul expressed to the Ephesians in some detail what he was praying for them. Jesus did the same thing (Luke 22:31-32) when He told Peter, "I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. . . ." Of course telling others what you have prayed for them should never be a prideful or manipulative thing. You shouldn't tell someone, "I just want you to know that I've been asking God to change

you so that you wouldn't be such a spiteful, mean, petty person. . .” But if you have been faithfully pouring out your heart to God on behalf of someone else, it can be a powerful encouragement for them to know about it. I think that the Ephesians were encouraged when they read what Paul was praying for them. And his prayer probably gave them a vision for their lives.

Second, ***your prayers should reflect your deepest theological convictions***. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians reflected profound understanding of God and of human spirituality.

Please don't hear me saying that you need to pray in complex, highly nuanced theological language or else your praying is deficient. No, your prayers should reflect the way you think and speak; you don't need to shift into some super-spiritual mode when you pray to God. Paul prayed the way he did because he was one of the most brilliant persons who ever lived and because he had such a rich interactive relationship with Jesus. The form of your prayers may be quite different from Paul's, but the heart should be the same.

### ***The God to whom we Pray (Ephesians 3:14-15)***

In verses 14 and 15 Paul describes God in an interesting way:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,

The normal posture for prayer among Jews in the first century was standing (see Mark 11:25, Luke 18:11, etc.). Kneeling expressed greater fervency or helplessness (e.g., Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:41). That seems to be what Paul is expressing here; he wants the Ephesians to know that he is “face to the floor” on their behalf.

Interestingly, Paul writes that he bows his knees “before the Father,” adding “from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” I think he is stressing that every grouping of beings - whether angels in heaven or people on earth - is named by God the Father. In the Bible, you have authority or dominion over what you name (as when Adam gave names to all the animals). By mentioning that “every family [grouping] in heaven and on earth derives its name” from God the Father, Paul is stressing His authority and lordship over everything. When Paul prayed, he went straight to the top - to the One who has all authority; God doesn't need to check with anybody else before taking action.

***Three core requests:*** Paul prayed three core things for the believers in Ephesus. Remember that Paul 1) wanted them to know that he was praying these things for them, and 2) that Paul's prayers reflect his deep, theological convictions.

### ***Strong, Christ-filled Hearts (Ephesians 3:16-17a)***

Listen again to verses 16 and 17:

16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . .

Paul asked the Father with all authority to grant that the believers in Ephesus would be “strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man/person.” Paul speaks of the “inner” as opposed to the “outer” person. The outer person is external and seen while the inner person is internal and unseen (see 2 Corinthians 4:16). This is another way of speaking of the human heart (which he mentions in verse 17).

In the Bible, the heart is the command and control center of a person’s life. We live from the heart. In Proverbs 4:23 we read:

23 Watch over your heart with all diligence,  
For from it flow the springs of life.

The NIV translates it, “everything you do flows from it [your heart].” Jesus confirmed this when He said that “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34). This is a sobering reality: if you want to know what is in your heart, pay attention to your words because they are an accurate indicator of the condition of your heart.

16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . .

Paul was praying very strategically when he prayed that God would “strengthen them with power through His Spirit in the inner man.” He knew that there is no way a person can be faithful to Christ without the power of the Holy Spirit; the demands of Christ require supernatural strength and stamina (i.e. power). And that’s exactly what God is eager to supply through the Holy Spirit. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:7 that “God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.”

Notice how Paul expresses the result of being strengthened in the inner person in verse 17: “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Of course Christ already resides in the heart of the believer through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Here Paul is talking about Christ being fully “at home” in a person’s heart so that that He shapes and forms a person’s thoughts and motives and desires. In other words, Christ reigns and rules in a person’s heart when He is fully at home there. As with every area of the Christian life, this flows from our faith/confidence in God.

Paul asked the Father to grant this request “according to the riches of His glory.” God has a vast reservoir of glorious riches; God not poor and limited in what He can give. Since Paul believed this about God, he asked Him to answer his request lavishly.

Last Sunday I preached at Bridge of Hope in Kansas City where Luther Eatman is pastor. We have a partnership with Bridge of Hope; Luther preaches here at Faith about once a year. After I preached, a woman came up and asked me to pray for her. She said that she struggles with a drug addiction and was tempted the previous night. She said that she was driving to pick up her granddaughter when she got a call that she didn't need to pick up her granddaughter after all. Immediately she was tempted to go buy some drugs and the necessary paraphernalia; she was even in the neighborhood where she used to buy drugs. It was a perfect storm for a temptation: she had desire, the opportunity, and the time needed to indulge the desires of her flesh. What did she do? She cried out to God and drove straight home.

How is a person battling a drug addiction (or any habit of the flesh) able to cry out to God in the midst of a perfect storm of temptation? What gives you the desire and the power to do that? In the terminology of Ephesians 3, because Christ dwells in this woman's heart by faith, she had the strength to "flee temptation." The voice of Christ was the loudest voice in the moment of temptation. That's what I need and that's what you need.

Paul prayed for the hearts of believers because he understood that we live from the heart and because he believed that God loves to answer such prayers in power. We (and the people we love) need that same power; therefore we too would be wise to pray as Paul did.

Paul's second request involved the Ephesians' ability to comprehend the love of Christ.

***Comprehension of the Love of Christ (Ephesians 3:17b-19a)*** Notice how Paul expresses himself in these verses:

17 . . . and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge . . .

He mentions "being rooted and grounded in love." It's as if love is the soil in which they grew, and love is the foundation on which they were built. The love of God provides nourishment and stability in the believer's life. "Being rooted and grounded in love," Paul prayed that they "may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of Christ.

He presupposes that it is possible for believers can know ***about*** the love of Christ without really experiencing it firsthand. It's not enough to have ***opinions about*** the love of Christ; we need to ***know*** the love of Christ. Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century preacher and theologian, made this point using honey as an illustration (cited in Keller, *Prayer*, p. 170). It's one thing to hear other people explain that honey is sweet; mentally you may be convinced that honey is sweet because people you trust have told you so. But when you actually taste a spoonful of honey, you ***know*** that it is sweet. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would know the love of Christ - that they would have firsthand knowledge of His love. [If you know the love of Christ, you talk about it very differently.]

Notice that Paul prays that they “may be able to comprehend **with all the saints**” the love of Christ. Certain aspects of the love of Christ are only grasped in community. When you experience the love of other believers (especially those from different cultures and different slices of the body of Christ), you understand more fully how Christ loves you.

By using four dimensions - breadth, length, height, and depth - Paul is acknowledging the enormity of Christ’s love. It is not small, shallow, or superficial. Christ’s love for us is vast; it is more fierce and more comprehensive than we can fathom. As a matter of fact, Paul writes in verse 19, the love of Christ “surpasses knowledge.” We will **never** get to the place where we have completely understood the love of Christ. This is one of many reasons why we won’t be bored in the next life.

As in any relationship, **knowing** that the other person loves you makes all the difference. Because Paul knew the love of Christ, he could write in 2 Corinthians 5, “For the love of Christ controls us,” so that we “no longer live for [ourselves] but for Him who died and rose again on [our] behalf.” **Knowing** the love of Christ doesn’t make us soft and complacent; it motivates us to live for Him. Knowing the love of Christ helps us live with ourselves (weaknesses and all). Knowing the love of Christ gives us security and peace and freedom; certain fears and anxieties fade into the background.

Paul was so very wise to pray that they would know the love of Christ.

**Filled up to all the fullness of God** (*Ephesians 3:19b*) Paul’s prayer has been building up to this last request:

19 . . . that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Instead of being empty or being filled with something destructive like anger or anxiety, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be filled up to all the fullness of God. He doesn’t exactly say that they would be filled **with** God (although he expresses that thought in other places such as Ephesians 5:18). He prays that they would be filled up in a way that is commensurate with the fullness of God. When the God of the universe dwells within you, you won’t be underwhelmed. You won’t tell your friends, “Yeah, the God who created and sustains the universe dwells within me, but it’s no big deal.” No, you should be able to say, “Because God Himself dwells within in me, I experience a type of fullness and abundance that I would not otherwise have.”

Tim Keller gives a helpful illustration in his book on prayer (p. 168):

Imagine you get a notice that someone left you some money, but for various reasons, you assume it is a very modest amount. You get busy and don’t get around even to checking on it for quite a while. Finally, you do so and are thunderstruck to discover it was a fortune, and you had not been doing anything with it. You were actually rich but had been living poor.

Paul prayed the way he did because he didn't want his fellow believers to live spiritually poor lives when they had been given the riches of Christ. He prayed that they may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Imagine the power of knowing that someone has been praying these types of things for you. It would probably soften your heart and humble you; it would probably prompt you to want these things; you would probably be more attentive to the ways that God might answer such prayers.

Imagine, as well, if you were the type of person who prayed this type of prayer for others. The past four weeks we've talked about the type of person who prays well: a person of the Word, a person of faith, a person of obedience, and a person of perseverance. I think you'll agree with me that Paul met these conditions and that his prayer in Ephesians 3 reflects as much. Paul prayed such a bold, theologically-profound prayer because. . .

- he was a person of the word: he had the mind of Christ and he prayed according to the will of God.
- he was a person of faith: he had confidence that God had the power and the desire to transform the hearts of His people; he actually believed that God can give people the ability to comprehend the love of Christ; he had faith that God could fill up flawed, imperfect people to all the fullness of God
- he was a person of obedience: he routinely called himself a "bondservant of Jesus Christ"; there was no assignment he wouldn't accept from Jesus; his devotion to Jesus fueled his prayers.
- he was a person of persistence: in Ephesians 1 he mentioned, "I . . . do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers."

It would be a mistake simply to be "wowed" by Paul's prayer. And we definitely should not think, "I could never pray that way. I'm not that smart or spiritual. I don't have what it takes to pray that way." Instead, I would urge you to resolve in your heart, "By the grace of God, ***I will become the type of person*** who prays like Paul prayed. There's too much at stake to do anything else."

Think about it: there is too much at stake in the lives of the people you care about ***not*** to become a person who prays like Paul prayed. People you know and love need so much more than you can give them. They need the touch of God in the deepest recesses of their lives. They don't need a bandaid and a pat on the head. They need our Father (from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name) to grant them strong, Christ-centered hearts; they need to know the love of Christ; they need to experience the fullness of God. Since those are things only God can do, we have to grow up and become the type of people who pray the way Paul prayed for the Ephesians.