

# **EPHESIANS**

Part 6: “A Prayer for Strength”

Ephesians 3:14-21

Sunday, September 23, 2018

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## **Scripture Reading**

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, <sup>16</sup> that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup> may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup> 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, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. <sup>1</sup>

Almighty and Everlasting God, we thank you that you hear our prayers and that you have spoken to us by your word. May your Spirit give us eyes that see and hearts that understand this day. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus. AMEN.

## **Introduction**

- “Heartburn” youth ministry in Casper, Colorado
- The barn, the haystack keyboard stand, the gross youth games that I refused to play, and most importantly, the special guest speaker who promised he could fold a frying pan into a burrito
- I did not know a lot about Christianity, but I did know that Phil. 4:13 wasn’t about an angry man folding a frying pan into a burrito in Casper, Colorado.
- *Christianity knows a different kind of strength; a strength that is greater than we could ever imagine, but a strength that is often hidden from the eyes of the world.*
- That strength is the subject of today’s passage
- Review of Ephesians: the glory of the gospel of grace, the mystery of the Church, the people of God as the new and true Temple of God

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Eph 3:14–21.

- Paul wants his readers to know these truths and wants them to experience these truths.
- Because of this, he will pray on his knees, which indicated this was a passionate and extraordinary prayer.<sup>2</sup>
- What is the subject of this prayer? I want you to have true strength; a strength that flows from the Triune God in three ways:
  - 1.) **The Strength of the Holy Spirit's Power,**
  - 2.) **The Strength of Christ's Love**
  - 3.) **The Strength of the Father's Abundance**

## Exposition

### **1.) The Strength of the Holy Spirit's Power**

- The type of strength Paul is talking about is not an athletic strength, not an intellectual strength, not a political or military strength – it is a strength rooted in the Holy Spirit

*“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” (Ephesians 3:14–16, ESV).*

- The power of the Holy Spirit is a power that comes from recognizing our weakness; not our personal strength. It is a power that comes from our dependence; not our independence; a power that is experienced in our and through our “inner being” – the truest and deepest part of who we are (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16); it is not something that we can fake or merely imitate.
- There is a very true distinction between this spiritual power and the way we normally understand power.
- The story of Elisha, his servant, and the Syrian army (2 Kings 6:8-23)
- A strength greater than an angel army lives within us: the Holy Spirit.
- This is strength that is not beholden to our circumstances, our health, our social pedigree, popularity, influence, or wealth

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<sup>2</sup> “...it was not customary for Jews to kneel in prayer. The ordinary posture was standing, just as we see pious Jews doing today before the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, rocking back and forth as they intone their prayers. Kneeling indicated an extraordinary event or an unusual passion. For example, when King Solomon prayed at the dedication of the Temple, he knelt on a wooden platform before all the people and lifted his hands to Heaven in prayer (2 Chronicles 6:13). In Gethsemane, on the eve of his death, Jesus fell to the ground in agonized emotion as he prayed to his father (Mark 14:35, 36). And when Paul made his tearful goodbye to the elders of Ephesus, he knelt with them and prayed (Acts 20:36–38).” R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 114.

- Does this sound like weakness to you? Something that would never work in the real world? Well, let's for a moment consider the most Spirit-dependent person in history – Jesus.
  - Jesus is the model of being empowered by the Holy Spirit: his prayer retreats, his commitment to do what the Father showed him to do
  - To be Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered and Spirit-dependent is to be like Jesus
  - As the Spirit of God filled Christ, so too the Spirit is to fill the Church which is Christ's Body
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- And how do we depend on the Spirit in daily life? Prayer.
  - Prayer is what we do when we are depending upon the power of the Spirit
  - Worry is what we do when we are depending up the power of self
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- The first thing that amazed me about this church was the prayerfulness of the faithful remnant of people who were still here.
  - There is nothing God cannot do with a prayerful people.
  - The elders of this church have blessed me with their consistent commitment to pray for one another and this church. Prayer is the number one item on our agenda every time we gather; even when we are busy and have a lot of important things to discuss.
  - We desire a culture of prayer; wouldn't that be amazing if this was how we were known?

## **2.) The Strength of Christ's Love**

- Of all the things that Paul could pray for, Paul prays that they would know the love of Christ.
- He does not pray for the end of persecution or for greater power or that a new Caesar would get into office or that the Christians would take over or even that he could just get out of prison.
- He prays that they would know the love of God.

*"I bow my knees before the Father... 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." (Ephesians 3:17–19, ESV)*

- Let's look at these dimensional descriptions of the love of Christ.
- Breadth – there is no type of person that is outside of his saving ability
- Length – there is nowhere we can run from him that he cannot find us; I thought I was running from Jesus, but I was running toward him
- Height – there is no level of human achievement where you will know satisfaction outside of his love
- Depth – there no depth of sin that he cannot rescue you

- Charles Spurgeon once said, “[The love of Christ] is so long that your old age cannot wear it out, so long your continual tribulation cannot exhaust it, your successive temptations shall not drain it dry; like eternity itself it knows no bounds.”<sup>3</sup>
- Knowing the love of Christ is the most important thing you could ever know.
- Indeed, this subject is arguably the main subject of Jesus’s final teaching to his disciples on the night he was betrayed.
- He taught his disciples the truth of his enduring love as he washed their feet, knowing full well they would soon betray him.
- Knowing the love of Christ is the most important thing you could ever know. Now that doesn’t mean there are not other truths that you need to know. What it does mean is that it is the most important truth you will ever know.
- The love of Christ is the most important truth for your marriage, family, purpose in life, the way you use your money, the way you have friendships, and the way you pursue holiness.
- Knowing the love of Christ is the solution to our pride, our lust, and our fear.
- Knowing the love of Christ fuels the mission of the church, because we cannot give away what we do not have.
- And especially in this passage, knowing the love of Christ fuels our confidence to pray.
- *The entirety of the Christian life flows from knowing the love of Christ.*

### **3.) The Strength of the Father’s Abundance**

- Paul grounds his prayer in the abundant ability of God.
- Paul wants us to know the strength that comes from resting in God’s strength.

*“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” (Ephesians 3:20–21, ESV).*

- He is able to do and work – our God is not a dead or inactive God; he is the living God!
- He is able to do what we ask and think – our God is not a distant or uncaring God; our God is a God who hears and answers the prayers of his people!
- He is able to do more than we ask or think – our God is not an evil genie who will answer our prayers to our own detriment and pain; he is a God who loves us enough to give us not just what we ask, but what we really need!
- He is an abundant God – he is not limited or calculated or stingy in his grace; he

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon quoted in Hughes, 117.

is a God who is infinitely generous to his people<sup>4</sup>

- As John Calvin once wrote, “*Whatever expectations we form of Divine blessings, the infinite goodness of God will exceed all our wishes and all our thoughts.*”<sup>5</sup>
- What does mean in everyday life?
- God is in control even when it feels like life is out of control.
- This gives us all the more reason to pray.
- As the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, “indeed, he is more sure to listen to our prayer than it is we really even desire what we pray for.”
- Your prayer life reveals how sovereign you really think God is.
- There is a story that has been passed down through the ages about an audacious request given to Alexander the Great by one of his generals.<sup>6</sup>
- Alexander loved this general so much that he offered to pay for the wedding of this general’s daughter. But when the bill for the wedding came in, it was exorbitant and unlike anything anyone had ever seen. The bill scandalized and offended Alexander’s administrators who handled the money in his court, but Alexander himself thought differently.
- He said to them, “Do you not see how greatly his request honors me? For to request such a thing means that he not only believes that I am immensely powerful and wealthy, but that I am also generous and good.
- We do not know for certain if this story is true.
- What we do know is that our God infinitely powerful and infinitely good.
- If we knew this in the core of our being, we would pray more and we would pray consistently and audaciously.

## **Conclusion**

- This, says Paul, is true strength.
- The ancient world was convinced that true strength was political and military power.
- We are not so different from that world as we might think.
- Jesus was a king who showed that true power was the way of the cross.
- This is the power that will make all things new.
- May we be a people who are dependent on the power of the Spirit, who knows the love of Christ, and rest in the abundant ability of our heavenly father! AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 139–140.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 266.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Keller. “The Supremacy of Christ and the Post-Modern World.” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-supremacy-of-christ-and-the-gospel-in-a-postmodern-world>

## Discussion Starters for Community Groups

1. In Ephesians 3:16, Paul prays that Christians would be strengthened through the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and how is this type of strength different than our normal understanding of strength?
2. Paul also prays that his readers would comprehend “the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18-19). Why is it so important to truly know the love of God? Why is this arguably the most important thing we could ever pray for?
3. Paul grounds his prayer by referring to God’s ability “to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). Why is it so important to be reminded of God’s goodness and power?
4. How might this biblical prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 teach us how to pray?

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