

# What Christians Need Most

by Mark Jarvinen

## A Prayer for the Ephesians

*<sup>14</sup> For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup> Now 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, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

The Apostle Paul's dream for the church of Ephesus went far beyond their mere existence, or their ability to hold forth a new form of religion. **He wanted them to experience God's power to live full lives as Christ followers.** Today's text is Paul's prayer to that end for the church in Ephesus, which of course is applicable to the church of today as well. Paul's prayer reveals what he believed Christians needed most.

## INTRODUCTION TO PAUL'S PRAYER

In **chapter 2 of Ephesians**, Paul takes great care in laying out the central truth that although mankind is by nature sinful and under God's wrath, by God's grace, through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, who died and rose again on our behalf, we are made alive in Him, and destined to be united in a new humanity with all who believe, overcoming the man-made obstacles and

barriers that tend to separate people. Clearly, we see that God in Christ has done a new thing in establishing the church, both redeeming and uniting a people for Himself. Therefore, Paul begins his prayer in **vv. 14-15** with the words, ***“For this reason I kneel before the Father from whom the whole family of believers in heaven and on earth derives its name,”*** acknowledging that regardless of one’s ethnic identity or family heritage, God the Father is the source and sustainer of all believers, including those already in heaven and those still on earth, thus making us all one family in Christ.

We learn a lot about a person based on how he or she prays. **E.K. Simpson**, a 20<sup>th</sup> century NT scholar out of Oxford, calls this text **“Paul’s enraptured supplication,”** a prayer consisting of three major petitions that demonstrate his passionate heart for the growth and development of the church at Ephesus.

## **THE CONTENT OF PAUL’S PRAYER**

Paul’s prayer breaks out into three main petitions, each introduced by the Greek word, ***“hina,”*** which translates to the word ***“that”*** in English. Paul prays for ...

### **A. The Strength of the Spirit (vv. 16-17a)**

***“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. ”***

NT commentator, Klyne Snodgrass, defines the ***“Spirit”*** (the 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Trinity) in **v. 16** as ***“the power of God at work in people,”*** and notes that Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians is that ***“the Spirit will be so strong an influence at the controlling center of their being (their “inner being” or***

*their hearts) that their lives will show it.*” Dr. A. Skevington Wood, in the **Expositor’s Bible Commentary**, understands God’s strengthening with power through his Spirit as a deep sense of **encouragement**, in opposition to the discouragement of the Ephesians that Paul alludes to in the preceding context of **Ephesians 3:13**, where he writes: ***“I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.”*** This encouragement of the Spirit that Paul asks for on behalf of the Ephesians should not be construed as a request for a repetition of the Pentecost event, which was a one-time moment in history, which served to give birth to the church, but rather as a petition for **“a continuous provision for the church through the Spirit” (Skevington)**. Notice too that Paul’s emphasis on the strengthening of the Spirit in **v. 16** issues forth from the benevolent generosity of God and the initiative of His grace – ***“I pray that out of his (the Father’s) glorious riches ....”*** In other words, this strengthening is not something we can accomplish on our own, by pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps and summoning forth our resolve to try harder to be better, stronger Christians. This provision of the Spirit’s strengthening is a gift of God’s grace, freely given from the storehouse of His glorious riches to be humbly received by a grateful church.

That said, our text goes on to impart a very important understanding concerning the manner in which the Spirit strengthens us with power. We are not given a jolt of superhuman will power to be better Christians, as I mentioned a moment ago. Rather, the Spirit’s strengthening power is described in **v. 17a**, in a phrase that begins with the words ***“so that,”*** meaning *(with the result that)* ***“Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”*** This speaks of Christ taking up residence in a believer’s life so as to be completely

at home, not an occasional guest. It speaks of a believer's daily walk of faith, to the extent that his or her whole personality - the mind, will, and emotions, are impacted by Christ's indwelling spiritual presence. This is very much akin to the language of **John 15:5**, in which Jesus speaks to His disciples saying, ***"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man abides (or remains) in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."*** This is speaking of the manner in which the life giving presence of Christ flows into the life of the Christian, as one partakes in Word and Sacrament, producing the ***"fruit of the Spirit"*** that Paul refers to in **Galatians 5:22-23**: ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law."***

In a second petition closely related to the first, Paul prays for ...

## **B. The Comprehension of Christ's Love (vv. 17b-19).**

***"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - ...."***

With Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith as stated in **v. 17a**, believers are ***"rooted and established in love"*** (**17b**). The thought here is that if a **tree** has deep and healthy roots, then the whole tree will be healthy and produce beautiful and plentiful fruit. The analogy is obvious. We as God's people will be healthy and produce beautiful, plentiful fruit in terms of character in our lives because we are rooted in Christ's love. Likewise, as our life's **foundation** is anchored in Christ's love, like a solid foundation of a building keeps the entire structure on firm footing, then Christ's love will influence, instruct, and motivate the way we think and feel, speak and act, and

in short, make a difference in how we live.

Paul's petition is that the love of Christ would be something that all Christians ("**all the saints**") would be given the power "**to grasp**" (to comprehend, or to hold as one's own); and "**to know**" in a way that "**surpasses knowledge,**" or in other words, to know the love of Christ ever more fully, even though His love will always exceed our full knowledge and leave us awestruck in our appreciation of its magnitude.

In speaking of comprehending Christ's love, I feel compelled to speak of this as more than an intellectual exercise. We're comfortable with comprehending or knowing about Christ's love with our minds. After all, many of us grew up singing "**Jesus loves me this I know; for the Bible tells me so.**" But that said, knowing Christ's love also moves us, sometimes in ways that are a bit scary. Some of us aren't bold or outgoing by nature. Furthermore, our culture conditions us to know our place as people of faith – to recognize the diversity around us and keep our beliefs to ourselves. We're nervous about being noticed, about daring to make a difference, stepping out in faith, or being branded as a social misfit. I've shared moments of that trepidation in my life, particularly when I'm focusing on myself (I'm thankful for the grace of forgiveness). However, when I'm operating out of a focus on Christ's love for me, and the extent to which He was willing to go to demonstrate that love, my fears begin to subside. In **II Corinthians 5:13f**, Paul, in seeking to defend his motivation for ministry as an apostle to those who had questioned his integrity, writes:

***"If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ's love compels us, (to share the gospel) because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.***

***And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”***

What was it that motivated Paul’s life? It was the love of Christ demonstrated most supremely at the **cross**, where He paid the price for our sins, coupled with His subsequent resurrection from the dead, which sealed His victory. That’s why Paul prayed for the Ephesians in **v. 18** of our text, that they might **“grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,”** who gave His life as a ransom for many. Paul’s expansive language here points to a saving activity on the part of Christ that is so large in scope and dimension that it encompasses the entire universe of people. **A. Skevington Wood** says it well in the **Expositor’s Commentary on Ephesians**:

**“The love of Christ is wide enough to reach the whole world and beyond. It is long enough to stretch from eternity to eternity. It is high enough to raise both Gentiles and Jews to heavenly places in Christ Jesus. It is deep enough to rescue people from sin’s degradation and even from the grip of Satan himself.”**

All this is to say that this petition of Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians was that they would receive the power to grasp and be amazed at the significance and centrality of Jesus’ death and resurrection as the primary expression of His love for us. When this recognition becomes real in people’s lives, it produces deep gratitude and a motivation to get involved in the cause of Christ.

Finally, Paul prays for ...

### **C. The Fullness of God (v. 19b).**

**“... that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”**

It would be easy to read these words and at first blush shrink back, thinking to ourselves, **“Oh great, Paul expects me to `be filled to the measure of all**

***the fullness of God,' another impossible expectation!***" A careful reading is required here. Paul isn't saying that all that constitutes God's fullness is to fill us. After all, who among us as finite human beings could contain all of the attributes of an infinite God? That's not only illogical, it's absurd! God is the Creator, while mankind is the created. I never could understand how the Caesars of the ancient Roman Empire could even hope to pass themselves off to the citizens of the empire as divine. I guess it's just as **Lord Achton** of England said to **Bishop Creighton** in 1887, "**Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.**" Paul was well aware of the impact of Adam's fall into sin and the innate limitations of a sinful humanity. Furthermore, let's not forget that **Lucifer** (the angel of light) was cast down out of heaven for wanting to be like God. Paul's prayer is simply that the Ephesians (and we) would be filled from out of the supply of God's fullness until the limit of our capacity is reached. It's much the same idea as that expressed in **John 1:16**, which says, "**From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.**" Perhaps we've overcomplicated this. **Colossians 2:9** says, "**For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ....**" Perhaps Paul is simply praying that the Ephesians (and we) would realize that in having Christ, we have enough.

## **THE CONCLUSION OF PAUL'S PRAYER**

The compelling conclusion of Paul's prayer is known as a doxology, or an expression of praise to God, found in **vv. 20-21**:

***<sup>20</sup> Now 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, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.***

I've always been intrigued by the sense of **expectancy** in prayer that this doxology creates. It tells us that God can do ***"immeasurably more"*** ("exceedingly abundantly more") ***"than all we ask or imagine."*** It tells me **"Don't limit God!"** It suggests that as followers of Christ we have something in us that is bigger than we are. One of my favorite movies is **Mr. Holland's Opus**, starring **Richard Dreyfuss**. Remember the extremely serious minded **red-headed student** who played the **terrible sounding clarinet**? She was the youngest child in a family of high achievers, who in spite of taking lessons from Mr. Holland, and practicing long and hard, just couldn't master her instrument. One day, she walked into Mr. Holland's music room ready to quit. Her sense of failure was overwhelming.

As she turned to walk away, almost as an after-thought, Mr. Holland asked her, ***"Miss Lang, is playing the clarinet any fun?"***

Hesitantly, she replied, ***"I wanted it to be."***

Mr. Holland said, ***"We've been going about this all wrong, we've only been playing notes on a page. Playing music is supposed to be fun. It's about heart. It's about moving people and being alive, not just playing notes on a page."***

Then, Mr. Holland took away her music and told her to play the piece she had been practicing. Out came the squawks and squeaks of her clarinet, in addition to more tears stemming from her deep sense of failure.

Mr. Holland, in a stroke of genius, asked her, ***"What do you like best about yourself, Miss Lang?"***

With a shy smile she said, ***"My hair – my dad says it reminds him of a sunset."***

In one of the most touching moments of the film, Mr. Holland simply said, ***"Miss Lang, play the sunset."***



You know what happened next. She closed her eyes and started to play, not just notes on a page, but the music. Somehow, the thought of herself as the object of her father's love, helped her to forget about herself and her past failures, and enabled her to start having fun with the music. She was playing the same notes but they had taken on new life, becoming something bigger and grander than before. (You may recall that by movie's end, Miss Lang appears at Mr. Holland's farewell from teaching as the Governor of the state.

**How's that for immeasurably more?)**

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians was that in their walk of faith, through the power of the Holy Spirit and anchored in the love of Christ, they would spiritually speaking, begin to "**play the music**" and not just "**the notes on the page,**" that they would experience something "***immeasurably more than all they could ask or imagine.***"

And guess what? That's God's desire for us as well. **A-men.**