

Prayers

Opening prayer

Your Love, O Lord Jesus, saves us from more than we can imagine, that is, if we give Your Spirit free reign to do with us as He will. Your Love will save us from bitterness, from fear, from hopelessness, from aggression, and from all the works of the enemy designed to draw us back into the ways of sin. So we praise You, Lord Jesus, for Your love, for through Your death and resurrection You have shown us that love conquers all. **ALLELUIA!**

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WATER

1. For yourself

Pray today each time you use water, whether for washing or for drinking or for any other natural feature of life of which water is a part. Pray to thank God for water

2. For your friends and family

As you pray (as above), remember also the members of your family, and pray that they will all know the saving love of God and His wondrous provision

3. For the church and its work

Thank God for the faithful and their witness in your community. Pray that your own fellowship will be a true stream of 'living waters' within your neighbourhood.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray about the rivers of the world, and the great impact they have had on civilisations. Pray that your country will look after its rivers and use the great resource they can be to the full.

Meditation

If I walk in Your ways, Lord Jesus
I will become more like You
I will learn honesty and prudence
and acquire wisdom and knowledge
I will receive instruction from Your Word
and gain insight and strength

If I walk in my own way, Lord Jesus
I will become more like others
I will become insensitive and selfish
and learn arrogance and pride
I will speak carelessly and unhelpfully
and become spiritually blind and weak

For one thing is certain
be it one way or the other
I will indeed walk one way
and one only, never both
For my path leads only to my death
but His path, to the glory of new life

Bible Study

Bible passage – Ephesians 3:14-21

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, ¹⁶ so that out of the riches of His glory He may enable you to be strengthened in your inner being through His Spirit, ¹⁷ with Christ living in your hearts through faith. Being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ I pray that together with all the saints, you may be able to fully comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth... ¹⁹ indeed, to know the love of Christ that far exceeds all knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine by means of the power at work within us, ²¹ to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Review

Paul concludes the first half of Ephesians with a powerful plea to his readers to appreciate the benefits of Christ's grace and love, and to give Him the glory 'in the church'.

This is a truly wonderful passage of scripture, and it comes halfway through Ephesians and at the end of chapter 3. Overall, the first half of the letter contains a beautiful description of the Gospel and the saving work of God, and it reads rather like an address, perhaps even a sermon. The second half is quite different, and as soon as we read chapter 4, we will find that its tone is quite different. Paul changes into 'teaching' mode, offering all manner of advice about how to put the Gospel into practice.

Why then does Paul write like this? Many of his letters are split between a first half explaining the Gospel itself and defending his preaching, and a second half containing the 'meat' of his teaching; other examples are Galatians and Philippians, and also Romans. The reason may be because of the need for Paul to stamp his authority on the letter he was writing. In the second half of the first century AD, a considerable number of letters and documents were written claiming to be from one or other of the apostles, and it was essential for people to know the difference between authentic and false. The first half of Paul's letters may well have contained words and themes that Paul's readers knew from hearing him preach; they were his 'hallmark' of preaching, and served to authenticate the letter.

So what does Paul say here in these verses? To begin with, I need to point out that my translation differs considerably from that found in other Bible versions. In common with the rest of Ephesians 1-3, the original Greek of this passage is made up mostly of one long sentence, with the glorious themes rolling from one into the other. But it is far easier for us to understand what Paul is saying to us if we split it up into three sections. The most obvious dividing point is to be found at the end of verse 19, for the last two verses are clearly a prayer of praise to God, separate from what has gone before. They make up what we might call a 'doxology', which is a brief, self contained expression of praise and thanks to God. The distinctive feature of this doxology is its emphasis on God's limitless power and His never-failing glory in Christ; and not surprisingly, it has become a favourite of the church throughout the centuries.

Now the bulk of our reading today is found in verses 14 to 19, which are best understood separated into two sentences, with the break halfway through verse 17. This is different from what you will find in other Bible versions, which do not break the sentence here, and which are difficult to read. This is unfortunate, because the more we can understand Paul's glorious praise of God, the more we will be blessed.

The first part of our passage is found in verses 14 to 17, in which Paul prays for his readers, in Ephesus, and ultimately for us. He describes God's people as a family, whose identity comes from the Father (3:14). In this light, all human categories of nation, race, wealth, sex, age or class become irrelevant, for God sees each as the individual He has made. Today, we easily forget God's involvement in our creation, largely because children are mostly conceived within a 'planned' family. Nevertheless, conception itself remains a profoundly mysterious work of God, for although science observes this in part, it cannot account for our individuality or our 'spirit', by which each one is a sentient and spiritual individual (Genesis 2:7). The true destiny of the human spirit is to find strength in its Maker, by means of the Holy Spirit (3:16) and sustenance from Christ, by means of faith (3:17).

Verses 14 to 17 say even more, by describing the church as a family, which is not created and directed by human will, but comes under the authority of the Father. Because of this, it is at its best when its members

humble themselves and give Him free reign to work in their midst by His Holy Spirit (3:16,17). This is a timely warning to those who seek to create new churches, who gather people together to worship God and call it 'church'. We should be careful to know the difference between doing this and being so moved by God's Spirit that churches spring up from the work we are called to do by the Father.

Verses 17 to 19 is Paul's prayer that his readers appreciate the full magnitude of God's grace in bringing His plan of salvation into effect. Today, we are ourselves overcome by the enormity of God's grace in saving us, but in Paul's day, we may add the sense of amazement that the first Christians had in knowing that they were among the first to hear this message in all human history (as we read yesterday). Nevertheless, Paul urges all God's people to dwell on the amazing and awesome love of God (3:18), and he indicates that we will best be able to do this when we are indeed *'together with the saints'*, that is, a part of God's church, according to His will (3:18).

The love of Christ lies at the very spiritual heart of the universe, and this is why Paul is able to praise God for everything that He is doing amongst His people, the church. Of all the great 'doxologies' within Scripture, this one (3:20,21) more than any other, offers praise to God for His work through His people throughout the generations. We who stand at the cusp of history's wave do well to praise God for what He does through us, for He is bringing His plan to fruition even now; having swept through history and looking forward to all that is to come.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- What does it mean to be 'strengthened in the inner being through the Spirit'? (3:16)
- What is Paul saying about the true nature of love in verses 17 to 19?
- What do the words 'far exceeds', and 'fullness of God' mean here? (3:19)
- In what ways does the 'doxology' give praise to God? (30,21)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V14 *'... before the Father'*

In the Authorised Version of the Bible, you will find the following words added to this verse, 'the father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Since the days of the translation of the Authorised version, ancient papyri have been found that indicate these words have been added later perhaps by a scribe. They are not present in the earliest available manuscripts of Ephesians.

V17 *'Being rooted and grounded in love ...'*

If you were to read different versions of the Bible, you would find that they all come across rather differently. I explain the way that this message of Paul fits together in my notes, but what Paul wrote contained no punctuation, so each translator has to try and place full stops within the verse in a way that will help us make sense of it. I have started a new sentence here ('Being rooted and grounded in love') because Christ's love is the next subject of what says, so it seems right that the sentence should start with it.

V19 *'indeed, to know the love of Christ that far exceeds all knowledge ...'*

As previously, the way in which this Greek sentence fits together is awkward, but I have followed the logic of maintaining that this part of the text is exclusively about Christ's love. I have translated this clause as being like an additional thought to what is written in the previous verse about the 'length and breadth (etc.) of Christ's love, because in my view, this is the only way to make sense of what Paul has written.

What does it mean to be 'strengthened in the inner being through the Spirit'? (3:16)

Verses 14 to 16 are deeply moving. Paul's prayer suggests that we return to God as the source of life and the only one who can fully understand each individual. As with most of us, Paul knew about a certain amount about his own background, for example, he was born a Jew and a Pharisee. People tend to know something of 'who they are' in terms of ancestry and the nurture of the years, and today, people can research their background and ancestry. However, God knows much more. To go to the Father is to seek the most radical and complete form of 'self understanding'. The modern quest for self knowledge and self understanding will be achieved when people do what Paul did, and come in prayer to the Maker, touching once again the *'riches of His glory'* from which they were gloriously made.

More than this, Paul kneels *'before the Father'* in order to pray not just for self understanding but also that the Ephesians will do the same, and gain a greater understanding of themselves through Him who is love.

By being ready to submit everything to God in prayer and selfless praise, they will stand ready to receive the blessing and strengthening of the Father, and the strengthening of the 'inner being'. Instead of 'inner being', Paul could have used the word 'soul', 'heart', or 'body' at this point, but each of these would have been suggestive of his other teaching, distracting his readers from what he was saying.

The truth is that the human spirit can only be renewed by the breath of the Spirit that created it. We all have many experiences and feelings about our lives, our family members, and what has shaped us. We accept and live with some of this, but it can be a matter of great struggle. Standing before our Creator, however, we can have confidence in Christ that our God can deal with everything, even rebuild or remake us. He can heal our minds, our feelings, our bodies or our memories, and so much more. All things become possible through Christ, because through Him, we have access to the Father by the Spirit.

As a matter of interest, this passage is one of the few places in scripture where God is described in terms of the Father (3:14), the Son (Christ Jesus – 3:17) and the Holy Spirit (3:16). Here, these are not doctrinal entities, but a real Christian experience of God; where the Lord God is received openly by His people in prayer, as 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. Only the whole revelation of God can completely strengthen and heal the human condition.

What is Paul saying about the true nature of love in verses 17 to 19?

When we realise the depth of what Paul is describing here (3:14-17), we can understand why he turns immediately to the theme of 'love'. Paul consistently teaches that love is the very nature of God, shown through the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus (see 1 Cor 13, for example). To come before the Creator empty in heart and mind, is to stand openly in need of the one thing He longs to give us and the one thing that will heal, repair and strengthen us, and that is His love.

Paul begins this part of his prayer; '*Being rooted and grounded in love, I pray that together with all the saints, you will be able to fully comprehend the breadth, length, height, depth ...*' (3:18). But there, the sentence stops, broken off as Paul's mind thinks of yet another way of expressing what he has to say (in the next verse). If you read all the verses (17 to 19), it is obvious that Paul is speaking about 'the love of Christ'. However, because he does not actually say these words in verse 18, no translator can place them in the verse, although it is obvious to all who read the Greek text that this is what Paul means.

Nevertheless, Paul's phrase in verse 18 about the extent of God's love has captured the imagination of Christians for generations; that '*you may be able to fully comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth ...*'. Before the world of mathematical analysis and our understanding of 'three dimensions', Paul described the full extent of the world by speaking of the two obvious 'dimensions' of the earth; that is the general extent of the world that stretches out around us, its 'breadth and length'. Added to this, he described the two 'dimensions' that separate the earth and the heavens; that is, 'height and depth'. The message is obvious. The love of God is as universal as God Himself with the whole of His creation including heaven and earth. Just as Paul said in his letter to the Romans;

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38,39)

What do the words 'far exceeds', and 'fullness of God' mean? (3:19)

There are some who believe that wherever the word 'fullness' (Greek 'pleroma') appears in Paul's letters (as it does here in verse 19), this indicates the influence of 'Gnosticism' or Greek 'mystery' religions upon Paul. Then, together with other parts of Ephesians we have already studied (3:3f.), these small references have been said to imply that the letter cannot have been written by the apostle, who would have had nothing to do with the words of such paganism. Such literary arguments however cannot be proven one way or the other; they are pure supposition, because there is not enough evidence of the use of the word in the first century to draw such conclusions. Moreover, such ideas are profoundly unhelpful to our understanding of Ephesians, because they draw our eyes away from what these words can mean for those who read them with the intent to discover God's Word, as written by Paul.

After breaking off from his expression '*the breadth, length, height and depth ...*' (3:18), Paul used two other phrases to express the supreme and universal nature of love, which is the very character of God. Firstly, he said that it '*far-exceeds all knowledge*' (3:19). The Greek word used for 'far-exceeds' means quite literally 'covering completely over', as if speaking of a tent covering that stretches over an entire tent dwelling. You will find that other translations of the Bible describe the love of God here as 'all-surpassing', or 'far in excess'. However, the Greek word tells us that God's love does not just extend beyond all knowledge, it is like a covering that truly protects us, and more than this, it does not just exceed our knowledge, it even protects what we do know of ourselves and of God (our 'knowledge' – 3:19).

Lastly, this prayer of Paul 'that you may be completely filled with all the fullness of God.' (3:19) expresses the inexpressible and asserts the impossible, at least in this life! However, it is indeed our destiny to know all things, to be filled with love, to find complete forgiveness, to be content with all things and be complete and 'full' when God's Kingdom comes in glory! It seems that it was Paul's aim to lift the sights of his readers higher, so that they aspire to the greater things of God even whilst they live, and he speaks to us. We will never be completely filled with the fullness of God' in this life, but one day, we will, and what glory there will be!

In what ways does the 'doxology' give praise to God? (30,21)

Little wonder, therefore, that Paul turns to give praise and glory to God at this point in his letter. The doxology is not, as some suggest, Paul's first attempt to end the letter before realising afresh that he had a further message to give (recorded in the rest of Ephesians!). It is a natural conclusion to this part of the letter. Neither does it conveniently speak of all the 'persons' of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit', for as we have already noticed, Paul has already done this in our passage (see verses 14 and 15).

The doxology captures the heart of the entire first three chapters of Ephesians, which is a magnificent prayer of praise to God. It catches the clear theme of these chapters, which is the overflowing generosity of God, and it does so with a wonderful phrase that is worth remembering. This is because it powerfully summarises God's characteristics and His generosity in Christ; '*Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine by means of the power at work within us*' (3:20). This is the God, says Paul, who is our Saviour, and '*to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus ...*' (3:21).

This is only a small point, but Paul urges that glory be given to God '*in the church*'. I am well aware of the deep unhappiness many people have with the church today, to the point of many deciding that they do not care to live with it. Some feel that the complexities of being part of a community of people are intolerable, even Christian people, as are the compromises and challenges to be faced in order to live at peace with others. Unfortunately, this is a modern social trend used by the devil to pull people away from the true unity of God's people, and the heart of God longs for His people to live together at peace in His church. In this way, the church gives glory to God on earth, indeed, one of God's greatest desires, according to Scripture, is that His people give this witness on earth so that more may come to know Him.

Discipleship

Application

This passage is a challenge to all God's people, because it speaks deeply about the life of prayer. It describes Paul's prayer that God's people may know the full extent, measure and protection of His love, and it gives praise to the Almighty for His supreme generosity in love. It also suggests that the Lord loves the prayers of His people not just individually, but together, the prayer of His people the church, 'throughout all generations' (3:21).

The passage illustrates how we may know ourselves most fully and be strengthened for the life of faith through returning to our God in prayer. It also assumes that people who have come to know the Lord find it natural to pray and that they know the presence of the Lord Jesus in their hearts. His prayer or 'doxology' is an example of the overflowing of the human heart in praise to God that illustrates his theme. Even though Paul undoubtedly has issues to deal with in the church at Ephesus, and as we will find out later, he needs to speak forthrightly about key issues of faith to them, his heart is bursting with praise to God. It is certainly my experience that when God's people turn from their own contentions and strife to give the Lord glory and praise, then the earthly issues by which they are divided pale into a less significant light. Real prayer accepts that nothing is more important than the love of God, and real prayer accepts that all things are possible through Him who loves us.

Questions for groups

1. After studying this passage, discuss what this passage teaches God's people about prayer.
2. What are the main characteristics of God revealed in this passage, and what do they mean for us now, in our own day.
3. In what circumstances would the words of the 'doxology' (3:20,21) be appropriate, given that they do not represent the 'Trinity' of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Discipleship challenges

- *Ask yourself the question, 'How does Christ make me strong?' over a number of days. As you do this, read the passage over several times. The Lord will reward the honest seeker for truth.*
 - *Write down a form of prayer along the lines of Paul's prayer, summarising what he says, and making this easier to use in either a church or a personal setting.*
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Final Prayer

Bless us this day, Lord Jesus. Bring praise to our lips and open our hearts to offer You the highest praise our hearts can offer. Speak through spiritual tongues which transport us to the throne of grace and into the presence of Almighty God Himself, and may our praises be worthy in His presence; AMEN
