

Week 7: Prayers for Spiritual Blessing: Ephesians 3:14–21

Hook



Main Point: Believers should pray for spiritual strength for themselves and others.

Q: What's something about God that you've always wanted to understand better?

Q: Is there a Bible passage or doctrine that still stretches your mind?

There are some things about God that are simply beyond us. We can know they're true without fully wrapping our minds around them. Things like the Trinity and predestination certainly fit into that category. In today's lesson, Paul presents a truth so profound and beyond the full grasp of our human minds that he prays for God to help believers understand it. It's not a prophecy, not an answer to suffering or tragedy, it's something much more personal – Jesus' love.

RECAP: So far, we have learned about Paul's long relationship with the church at Ephesus as their spiritual father. He wrote to the Ephesians from prison to encourage them to live into their identity in Christ. First, he prayed for them to grow in wisdom and power. Then he gave them a succinct theological description of the Gospel and emphasized how God brought the Gentiles into His kingdom through Christ so that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians are now one united body in Christ.

In this lesson, Paul prays for them again, for the power and the love of Christ, a prayer that ends in doxology – awe of the God who can do more than we can imagine.

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Book

Main Point: Believers should pray for spiritual strength for themselves and others.

Ephesians 3:14–17a (“dwell in your hearts through faith”) [Read]

Talking Point 1: Paul prayed for spiritual strength for God’s people.

Q: What did Paul say God will grant us according to His great riches?

Q: How is the power of the Spirit connected to Christ dwelling in our hearts?

Verses 14–21 mark the end of the first half of the letter and create a bookend to the beginning. Paul opened his letter with a hymn of praise for the spiritual blessings of the Gospel (1:3–14), then a prayer to know Christ (1:15–23). Praise, then prayer. In this passage, the order is reversed: a prayer ending with praise, creating a bookend: praise – prayer – theology – prayer – praise. Paul spent a good portion of Ephesians diving deep into theology, but his theology was never just an academic exercise; it always resulted in prayer and praise. It’s never just a head thing; it’s always head and heart.

Paul began this passage, like before, with “for this reason,” pointing back to all he had just said: that Gentile Christians are one body with Jewish Christians. This is the reason Paul knelt before the Father to pray – because in Christ, all believers can approach the throne of God with confidence. Paul used “father” to emphasize that “every family in heaven and earth” comes from God as Creator of all things. “Family in heaven” can refer either to Christians who have already died and are seated with Him in heaven or to angelic beings. Both are beings created by God (3:10-15).

In ancient culture, “name” represented identity and origin. Saying every family “derives its name” from God affirms that all human beings were created by God and originated from God. This doesn’t mean all human beings have the unique Father/child relationship believers do; that is something that comes with being made a new creation in Christ. But this language of *every* family was intentional, reflecting what Paul had been saying about Gentile Christians, that they are also sons of the Father and share in the inheritance of heaven. This is how his prayer and praise flow out of his theology. Now that he had made it clear that Christians from all nations are included, he repeated his prayer for spiritual blessings from the beginning over them again – for power, wisdom and love.

First, he prayed for the Holy Spirit to strengthen us with His power, but not the kind of power we may think of when we hear “the power of the Spirit.” It’s not supernatural power to do miracles but power in our inner being (3:16). “Inner person” in Greek is akin to “heart” in Hebrew (Old Testament). Hebrew culture didn’t separate mind and

heart the way we do. The heart wasn't just the seat of emotion, it was the whole inner person – mind, will, emotions – all of it.

The Bible emphasizes the inner person a lot. When God chose David as king, He said, "The Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Since "heart" means "inner person," this is a play on words. God doesn't look at what we *look like* on the outside, but who we *really are* on the inside. And yet, Scripture tells us that our hearts are "desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). Even if God looks at our hearts, we're still not righteous. The Good News of the Gospel isn't that God judges our hearts instead of our actions, it's that God *changes* our hearts. He makes us a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). That transformation begins at conversion, but it continues throughout the Christian life as the Holy Spirit progressively conforms us to the image of Christ. This is the transforming work Paul prayed God would accomplish in believers—strengthening us by His Spirit so that Christ would increasingly rule our hearts and conform us to His image (Ephesians 3:16–17; 2 Corinthians 3:18).¹

This can only be done by the Holy Spirit, by Christ dwelling in our hearts (3:16–17). Jesus promised that when we abide in Him, we will "bear much fruit" (John 15:1–8). The Spirit working in our hearts changes us from the inside and grows love, joy, peace, etc. in us (Galatians 5). These are the "riches of his glory" – not wealth or possessions but the Fruit of the Spirit. This is the greatest power of the Spirit, even more than the power to do miracles. This is what changes our lives in a powerful way. This is what will change the world through us. This is what we should pray for ourselves and one another – for the Holy Spirit to grow His fruit in us and change us from the inside out. Not only so we can experience the joy, peace and abundant life of the Spirit ourselves, but also so we can bear that fruit and bring joy, peace and abundant life to the world.

The Good News of the Gospel is that we don't have to manufacture peace, joy and the other fruit on our own; it is grown in us by the Holy Spirit. We don't have to work hard to change our inner person; God gives us a new heart! We don't have to try to do this in our own power or strength. We just need to stay connected to the Vine (Jesus) – dwell in Him, pray for the Spirit to do His work in us, and watch the fruit grow.

Q: How has God changed your inner person since you started walking with Jesus?

Q: What fruit have you noticed in your life that this change has produced?

Q: What does this passage make you think about how we should pray?

Ephesians 3:17b-19 [Read]

Talking Point 2: God's love for us is without measure; we cannot comprehend it.

Q: How does this passage make you feel about God? About prayer?

Q: How can it impact our lives to try to grasp the greatness of God's love for us?

It's not as clear in every translation, but this next section also emphasizes power from the Holy Spirit in a way we may not typically imagine. Paul described believers as "rooted and grounded in love" (v. 17), picturing Christ's love as both the soil from which we draw strength and the foundation on which our lives are built.² From that secure foundation, Paul prayed that they would have the strength to comprehend the greatness of Christ's love. Some translations simply say, "may [you] be able" to comprehend (CSB, KJV), but the ESV gets closer to the meaning of the Greek: "may you have *strength to comprehend*" (3:18).

From the context, this strength can only come from the Holy Spirit, as the previous verse indicates (v. 16). The greatness of God's love is not something we can understand through human logic. It takes the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit to even come close to grasping how deep the love of Christ is. Even then, this side of eternity, we will never fully understand it. It's a love that "surpasses knowledge" (3:19). We can grow in our understanding of God's love through His Word and see its reality illustrated through our experiences and the testimonies of others, but we will never fully comprehend its vastness.

"Comprehend" literally means to "grasp" or "seize or grab hold of eagerly." It's more than just knowledge of God's love; it's *appreciation* for His love as experienced by the believer. This is where Paul's focus on grace comes in. You may know in your head that God loves you, but do you really appreciate it? Those who have experienced God's grace have gotten more of a taste of the depth of His love for us. Jesus illustrated this when the "sinful woman" anointed His feet with her tears at Simon the Pharisee's house. Simon was mortified that a woman of her reputation would be touching Jesus, but Jesus showed him that because she understood the depth of her sin and the greatness of His forgiveness, she responded with great love.

To illustrate, Jesus told a parable about two men who owed debts, one bigger, one smaller. The moneylender cancelled both. Jesus asked, "Which one would love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one who was forgiven more." Jesus explained how the sinful woman had showed Him more honor than Simon did: Simon didn't provide water for His feet or kiss Him in greeting or anoint His head with oil, all customary things for a host to do. But this sinful woman did all those things. She showed Jesus great honor because she understood the enormity of His love by forgiving her great sin (Luke 7:36–50). She grabbed onto it.

Jesus' parable underscores why it's so important to understand the depth of our sin and our need for forgiveness. We have *all* sinned and fallen short of God's glory. If we don't really think we're sinners, we don't really think we need God's forgiveness. Or at least

we don't think we need it as much as the guy over there who has done "really bad" stuff. Which means we won't grasp the enormity of His grace or His love for us. If we think our sin is small, then God's grace will seem small. But if we understand how great our sin is, we will at least begin to grasp just how great our God is.

This is why those with a more dramatic testimony of God rescuing them from a life of crime or drugs sometimes seem more on fire for the Lord than people who have spent their whole lives in church. Their sin isn't actually bigger; we are all sinners separated from God (Romans 3:23; James 2:10). But because of their past, they tend to appreciate God's grace more. It's like what Jesus said about the two men praying at the temple. The Pharisee thanked God that he was "not like other men, ... or even like this tax collector," but the tax collector beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus said the tax collector was the one who went home justified before God. They were both sinners, but the tax collector admitted his sin and asked for mercy (Luke 18:9–14).

It's not just at our conversion that we can appreciate the depth of God's love for us. We can see it by how, like a loving father, He provides for us in times of need (Matthew 6:25–34; 7:9–11). When He speaks to us, comforts us, or reveals wisdom to us (John 14:15–18; 16:17–22; 1 Corinthians 2:6–16). When He intercedes for us when we don't know what to pray for (Romans 8:26–27). When He works things out for our good, even through hard circumstances that seem bad at the time (Romans 8:28). So many life experiences help us get closer to grasping how wide and deep God's love is.

The more we understand God's love, the more we will understand His character, because God is love. God isn't just loving; He *is* love (1 John 4:8). Paul prayed that we would grasp Christ's love—not just know about it in our heads, but experience its transforming power in our lives—so that we may be "filled with all the fullness of God" (3:19). In other words, knowing and experiencing Christ's love helps us grow toward spiritual maturity and become more like Him (4:13).³ When we grasp the greatness of His love and grace for us, that love begins to shape the way we love others. As we love one another, God's love is "perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). His love fills us so that it overflows through us.

Q: Describe some experiences that have given you greater understanding and appreciation of God's love for you.

Q: How have those experiences, help you show love to others?

Q: What practical steps can you take to grow in your comprehension of His love?

Ephesians 3:20–21 [Read]

Talking Point 3: God can do super-abundantly more than we can even think to ask.

Q: Why do you think Paul closed this prayer with a hymn of praise?

Q: How does the grandiosity of his language reflect what he had been saying?

Paul closed this section with a short hymn of praise, giving glory to the One who is able to do “immeasurably more” than anything we could even think to ask (20). This is another of those times where he added “hyper” to words to describe the indescribable – the extra abundance of God’s power. This time he used “hyper” twice. Literally, the One who is able to do “hyper-all” “hyper-abundantly more” than we could ask or think. That’s like three layers of “more” – super, super, super more than we could ask.

It’s the perfect response to both how powerful God is and how much He loves us. Paul was not only telling us God *can*; he was also claiming God *would* shower these spiritual blessings on us. This power is “already” at work in us (v. 20). He is already growing His fruit in our hearts, already growing our comprehension of His love. But that didn’t stop Paul from praying for more. We can always ask for more of Jesus, more of His love, His grace, His power, His spiritual blessings, because it is never-ending. It is without measure. It is limitless. This is why God is the only One worthy of glory throughout all generations (v. 21).

Sometimes people read verse 20 out of context and think the “super abundantly more” is about God giving us material things, blessing us with more stuff. But the context is clearly about the spiritual blessings of love, power, wisdom and understanding. Of course God *can* bless us materially. But that isn’t what Paul was praying for, because it’s not what really matters. It’s the spiritual blessings that have both eternal significance and life-changing power for us today.

Q: In what ways have you experienced God, blessing you more than you could imagine?

Q: Is your prayer life balanced between spiritual blessings and material needs?

Q: What does it tell us about God that He can imagine better things for us than we could imagine for ourselves? How can knowing that affect your prayer life?

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Took

Main Point: Believers should pray for spiritual strength for themselves and others.

Paul's prayer forces us to examine not just whether we pray, but what we're praying for. Many of us spend most of our prayer lives asking God to change our circumstances – to provide, protect, heal, or solve problems. Those are good things to pray about. Paul shows us there are other things to ask for too. He prayed that believers would be strengthened in their inner being, rooted in Christ's love, able to grasp more what cannot be fully grasped, and filled with all the fullness of God. Those are the kinds of prayers that change a life.

C.S. Lewis captured this beautifully in *The Weight of Glory*: "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."⁴

Paul's prayer is an invitation to stop making mud pies. God is able to do "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" – not merely by changing our circumstances, but by changing us. So don't settle for praying only for temporary blessings when your Father delights to give you eternal ones. Ask Him for the riches of His glory, the power of His Spirit, and a heart that knows the immeasurable love of Christ. Then watch how He answers those prayers.

CHALLENGES

THINK: How is God challenging you to think differently about your prayer life? How is He leading you to pray for your family and friends? For yourself? For believers? For unbelievers? For our church? For the Church universal? What kind of a difference would it make in your life if you prayed more for spiritual blessings? What would it look like to live your life in expectation that God will bless you super-abundantly more than you could imagine? What does it look like, practically, to live an abundant life in Christ? How is this different from the way the world lives? How is it different from the kinds of riches the world seeks?

PRAY: Now that you have studied it in depth, pray Ephesians 3:16–21 for yourself and for others – friends, family, church family, coworkers, whoever. Read it slowly. Read it out loud. Read it multiple times. Whatever will help it sink deeply into your heart and inspire you to desire to know the love and grace of God the way Paul described.

I pray “that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love,¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do far more [super-]abundantly more than all we could ask or think, according to the power at work within us,²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”

ACT: Prayer for spiritual strength. Pray specifically for yourself and other believers to 1) be strengthened with God’s power in the inner being (to grow in spiritual fruit) and 2) to have the spiritual power to understand more deeply God’s love for us.

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 86–87.

² Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 89.

³ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 90.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001).