



PRAYING FOR THE POWER TO FEEL THE AFFECTION OF CHRIST EPHESIANS 3:14-21

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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, 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. 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 (Eph. 3:14-21).

Before we dive into this incredible prayer of the apostle Paul, I want to describe the problem we all face that Paul's words are designed to heal and cure and overcome.

The problem is simply this: We all have moments when we question whether God truly and genuinely and sincerely loves us. For some here today, it is far more frequent than the occasional moment. For some of you, it is a lifelong battle. You live every day doubting God's affection for you. Let me suggest some possible reasons why this is such a struggle.

First, it may be due to *the crushing weight of obligations and responsibilities that others have placed on you, or that you have placed on yourself*. The demands piled on us by work and family and church often feel insurmountable and suffocating, almost to the point that we can't feel anything else. The expectations that well-meaning friends put upon us are unrealistic and the burden is simply too much to bear. We feel physically drained, relationally exploited, emotionally exhausted, and spiritually beat up. And the most appealing thought of all is quitting! They call this *burnout*. And most people face it and feel it at some point in their lives, while a few battle it almost daily.

Second, one of the more powerful lies that make this a challenge is the false belief that *God's affection for me is held hostage by my past*. In other words, we live in fear that our past failures govern our present identity and our future hopes. I *am* what I've done in the past. I *am* the sins I've already committed. I *am* what others have done to me. I *am* what others have said about me. And if that is what I am then it is obvious that God couldn't possibly love me. We must constantly remind ourselves that our history is not our identity.

Then, **third**, there is the false belief *my current circumstances are indicative of God's affection for me*. We measure God's love by how successful we are in terms of money, popularity, health, prospects for the future, friends, family, as well as by how we are doing in comparison with how others around us are doing, etc. This false belief is based on the assumption that hardship and adversity are signs of God's displeasure and his disappointment with us.

Fourth, we must also push back against *the false belief that God's love for me is based on what I do rather than what Christ has done*. We rehearse in our minds all the things we have done or failed to do and then conclude that the strength and steadfastness of God's love is somehow tied to our performance rather than resting in the performance of Christ on our behalf.

Fifth, an especially troublesome obstacle is *the belief that God's knowledge of us will forever preclude the possibility that he will enjoy us or delight in us*. We know ourselves all too well. We know our sins, our selfishness, our weaknesses, our failures, our tendency to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. And we hate ourselves for it. We live in self-contempt and self-condemnation. The guilt and shame are at times overwhelming. But if God knows us better than we know ourselves he must be a thousand times as disgusted with us as we are with ourselves.

That is when I remind myself of Psalm 103:14! You are probably familiar with all the glorious things God does for us, described in vv. 1-13 of this psalm. That is when my soul so often pushes back against God's Word. "But God, how can any of this be true given the fact that you know me infinitely more accurately than I know myself? Surely, your knowledge of how I'm made and what I do will undermine any hope of my experiencing your steadfast love."

That is when the next verse in the psalm comes to the rescue! Immediately following this beautiful list of God's love and mercy and forgiveness, the psalmist declares: *"For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust"* (v. 14). Hold on! That doesn't make any sense whatsoever. As best I can tell, it is precisely because God knows my

"frame" and remembers that I am a descendant of Adam, made from the dust of the ground, that he would never do for me the things that he says he will do in vv. 1-13. "Ah," says the Lord in gentle reply, "Sam, that's how you think. That's not how I think. Divine logic is immeasurably greater and more persuasive than human logic. It is indeed because ("for," v. 14a) I know your tendencies, your bad habits, your disposition, your sinful and selfish ways, that I have graciously chosen to do the very things you think are impossible."

Simply put, we must never let our knowledge of God's knowledge of us prevent us from understanding and enjoying the great love with which he loves us.

Sixth, there are *the lies and slander of Satan* that hammer us daily in an effort to convince us that a holy God could never love or care about unholy people like us. You know his tactics: "God is embarrassed by you. He's fed up with you. His patience for you has run out. He's done. It's over. You are a pathetic failure. You're hopeless. You're an unsightly wart on the body of Christ. You're too ugly, too dumb, too sinful, too overweight, too slow, too poor, too weak, too untalented, and it's just too late."

Seventh, there is one final obstacle to overcome. It is *the misguided conviction that God will only love some future version of myself*, the "me" that will hopefully one day emerge after my house is in order and my check book is in balance and my daily habits are broken.

So, that is the problem. And it's a big one. What, then, is the solution?

Paul's Prayer must become Our Prayer

Let me begin by providing you with an overview of where Paul is going in this prayer. Then we'll return to look at it in more detail.

Paul prays for several things here, all of which pertain to our *sensible experience* of the love of Christ for each of us. He prays that we might be internally strengthened by the Spirit so that Christ might dwell in our hearts. But how can that be, if we have *already* received Christ into our hearts when we were born again? The only viable explanation is that Paul is referring to an *experiential enlargement* or intensification of what is already theologically true. He wants us to be strengthened by the Spirit so that Jesus might exert a progressively greater and more intense personal influence in our souls.

The result of this expansion of the divine power and presence in our hearts is the ability to grasp "what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of Christ's love for. Again, this is Paul's way of saying that *God intends for us to feel and experience and be emotionally moved by the passionate affection he has for us, his children*. In other words, the pinnacle of Paul's intercession is that the Ephesians might experience intimacy with Christ! The point, the aim, the ultimate goal in view of which he pleads with God is that Christians might sense or be overwhelmed with reality of God's inexpressible and eternal affection for them! D. A. Carson, in my view, is right on target when he says that,

"this cannot be merely an intellectual exercise. Paul is not asking that his readers might become more able to articulate the greatness of God's love in Christ Jesus or to grasp with the intellect alone how significant God's love is in the plan of redemption. He is asking God that they might have the power to grasp the dimensions of that love in their experience. Doubtless that includes intellectual reflection, but it cannot be reduced to that alone."¹

But how are we to compute such love? What are its dimensions? Does it come in meters or miles? Do we measure it in yards or pounds? Does Paul intend for you to think in terms of mathematical proportions, as if to suggest that God loves you one-hundred times more than he loves the angels or fifty times less than he loves a purportedly more godly Christian?

Quite to the contrary, says Paul. There is a width and length and height and depth to Christ's love for you that goes beyond human measurement. The immensity and magnitude of that love is incalculable. Its dimensions defy containment. It is beyond knowing. Yet, Paul prays that we might *know* it! This deliberate oxymoron serves to deepen what is already too deep to fathom.

¹ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 191.

But what precisely does “intimacy with Christ” mean? What does it look like? What does it feel like? Allow me to answer that by appealing to our **five senses**. Think of intimacy, first, in terms of **sight**. Much of the affection in my heart for my wife and hers for me is awakened and stimulated by sight. So too in our relationship with God. David spoke of this in Psalm 27:4 – “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, **to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord** and to inquire in his temple” (emphasis mine). We “see” his glory and beauty in the face of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture.

Then there is the experience of **taste**. “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). David here speaks of savoring the sweetness of Christ; enjoying God as we enjoy the most exquisite of gourmet food.

We can't overlook the joy that comes from our sense of **smell**. The apostle Paul spoke of “the fragrance of the knowledge of him” (2 Cor. 2:14). Enjoying God smells good! There is a spiritually soothing and deeply satisfying reality in being awakened to love for God and his love for us.

And then we also **hear** of God's everlasting love for us. So deep, so profound, so intensely moving is God's affection for his children that he quite literally sings over us (Zeph. 3:17). There is a virtual symphony of song from the Father to his children and from them to him.

Finally, there is our sense of **touch**. Although we do not physically make contact with the risen Christ, there are physiological effects of his affection, such as weeping, laughter, peace, and even trembling. The biblical authors have in view not simply knowing this love of God but experiencing it in such a way that the whole of our being is engaged: affections are awakened, the mind is stimulated, the will is empowered, and the body is overwhelmed.

Paul's Prayer

After the parenthesis of Ephesians 3:2-13, the apostle resumes the prayer he broke off in v. 1. We see this in the phrase “for this reason” with which v. 1 begins, which is then repeated in v. 14. The specific “reason” in Paul's mind likely points back to all of chapter 2, but especially the concluding words which focus on us being part of the new temple in which God's Spirit dwells (Eph. 2:18-22).

The prayer contains four parts or petitions, each of which is related to the one which precedes it as an effect is related to its cause. These four elements or stair-steps, as it were, are found in vv. 14-19: Paul prays that (1) they may be strengthened by the Spirit, (2) *so that* Christ may dwell in their hearts, (3) *so that* they may be able not only to understand but feel Christ's love for them, (4) *so that* they may be filled to the fullness of God. Paul then closes his prayer with a doxology in vv. 20-21. Note also the Trinitarian structure of the prayer: Paul asks that his readers be strengthened through the *Spirit*, indwelt by *Christ Jesus*, and filled to the fullness of God the *Father*.

Before we examine the actual content of his prayer, we need to look at the introduction to it in vv. 14-15. Paul's posture is significant: **he bows his knees**, whereas standing (Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11) was normal among the Jews (although, see 1 Kings 8:24; Ezra 9:5; Lk. 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5). Kneeling is the instinctive physical expression of worship, humility, and petition. Kneeling may also be an expression of Paul's intensity. For him, intercession was a struggle, a battle, a fight (see Rom. 15:30; Col. 4:2,12).

Power!

The essence of Paul's prayer is for **power**. He earlier prayed that believers might “know” God's incomparably great power toward them (Eph. 1:18-19). Now he prays that they might inwardly and personally experience it as well.

We can readily see that Paul prays for four things in particular. He first prays that God might strengthen them (v. 16), or more literally, “that he may give to you to be strengthened with power.” What makes this strengthening significant is that it is “according to the riches of his glory” (v. 16). The word translated “according to” points beyond the idea of source or origin. In other words, it is not merely “out of” his riches that he strengthens us but **in proportion to** his riches in glory. There is an emphasis on **correspondence**, i.e., **God gives on a scale commensurate with his riches**; God gives as lavishly as only God can (cf. Phil. 4:19).

Do you know why Paul prayed that the Ephesians might receive the power of the Holy Spirit? Do you know why you and I need this prayer for power? It is because we are **weak**, spiritually impotent, unable to consistently believe that God is for us and loves us. You may be strong in other areas of life. You may possess physical strength, intellectual

strength, financial strength, political strength, but when it comes to the strength to consistently and joyfully believe God's love, we are profoundly weak!

That is why Paul prays that we may be strengthened "with power" (v. 16b). To be strengthened with power according to glory may simply mean to be strengthened by God's radiant power! "Believers," notes Best, "are not left to whistle up strength from within themselves in order to be able to do God's will."² This strengthening happens only "through his Spirit" (v. 16c). Divine power is in one sense synonymous with the Spirit and in another sense mediated by the Spirit.

This empowering presence of the Spirit occurs "in your inner being" (v. 16d; see Rom. 7:22; 2 Cor. 4:16). This is the very center and locus of our conscious life; the deepest place within our souls where we commune with God. Paul could easily have used the word "heart" or "that part of them which is not accessible to sight but which is open to his energizing influence.

Needless to say, this tells us that if we are ever to experience intimacy with the Lord Jesus, if we are ever to sense and relish and rejoice in his affection, it is something he must do within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't will ourselves into this experience. We can't make it happen. No amount of self-exertion or clinched-fist determination can create this awareness and enjoyment of God's power. What we *can* do is ask God in relentless and prevailing prayer that he do it! Only God himself can impart this knowledge. Divine enabling is absolutely essential. Human willpower alone, together with good intentions and fervent passion, cannot produce the experiential knowledge Paul has in mind.

The purpose of this divine enabling strength is "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts" (v. 17). Some commentators argue that the dwelling of Christ in our hearts is simply an expansion upon or further definition of what it means to be strengthened by the Spirit in the inner man. But it seems better to understand Paul as praying for *inner empowerment of the Spirit so that we might more deeply experience the presence of Christ himself*. In the final analysis, the difference is minimal. But the most important point is that God wants you to feel the presence of Jesus in your inner being!

There are two words typically used for the concept of indwelling. The first, *paroikeō* means to abide or to inhabit, but not necessarily permanently. The second, the one used here, is *katoikeō* refers to "a settling in or colonizing tenancy." The risen Christ, through his Spirit, lives permanently within us (cf. Col. 2:9). ***Christ doesn't sojourn in our hearts. He is no divine nomad! He is, reverently speaking, a squatter. He is a permanent, abiding resident.***

But this raises an important question. Isn't "indwelling" a ministry of the *Spirit* (see Rom. 8:9-10)? According to the NT, Christ dwells in his people by means of or through his Spirit (see 1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 4:6). Also, if Christ, through the Spirit, indwells the believer from the point of the new birth, how can Paul pray as he does in this text? It would seem, once again, that he is praying for the emotional increase or experiential expansion of what is already a theological fact. His desire is that the Lord Jesus, through the Spirit, might exert an ever-increasing and progressively more powerful influence on our lives and in our hearts. It is what I like to call, the incessant spiritual reinforcement in the human heart of the strength of Jesus and his love.

Several additional things should be noted. This indwelling influence occurs in the human "heart" (i.e., in the depths of our personality; the core of our souls). And this indwelling influence occurs only through human "faith". It isn't automatic; it is only as we, through the Spirit, continue to trust Christ as our only hope, our only source of salvation, the lover of our souls. The point is that doubt and skepticism concerning who Jesus is and what he has done is the enemy of feeling his affection).

This indwelling influence is in some way related to being "rooted and grounded in love" (v. 17). Here Paul employs a double metaphor: one from agriculture and one from architecture. Love, says Paul, "is the *soil* in which believers are to be rooted and grow, the *foundation* on which they are to be built."³ Is this yet another, perhaps subsidiary, prayer, or does it describe the attendant circumstances, so to speak, in which this experience might come to pass? If the latter, then a precondition for experiencing the fullness of Christ's indwelling presence is having been rooted and grounded in love.

² Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 340.

³ Ibid.

But whose love? Is it God's love for us in Christ? That would mean, you are rooted and grounded in God's love for you so that you can know God's love for you. But that sounds oddly redundant. Is it our love for God? I don't think so, for how can that enable us to know his love for us? I believe Paul is speaking of *our love for one another* (see 1 John 4:7-12).

For all its glory and the great heights from which it came, such love can only be experienced together "with all the saints" (cf. 1:1,15; 3:8; 6:18)! Our experience of Christ's love is personal, but not private. It is meant to be felt and proclaimed and enjoyed in the context of the body of Christ. It is a personal, yet shared, experience. "The comprehension the writer desires for his readers is not some esoteric knowledge on the part of individual initiates, not some isolated contemplation, but the shared insight gained from belonging to the community of believers."⁴

Love!

Paul then prays that we might grasp the incalculable dimensions of Christ's love for us (vv. 18-19a). But the breadth and length and height and depth of what? As you might imagine, the options are numerous and they are all worthy of our consideration.

Perhaps he has in mind the perfections of God (i.e., his infinite attributes; cf. Job 11:7-9). Others point to the mystery of salvation itself (Eph. 1:3-14 and esp. 3:9). It has been suggested (purportedly by Augustine) that Paul is referring to the actual physical structure of the cross (pointing up, down, left, right) which supposedly symbolizes love in its breadth, hope in its height, patience in its length, and humility in its depth. But it is highly unlikely that such developed symbolism would have developed by this early stage in the life of the church. Or could it be the dimensions of the Christian temple, i.e., the Church (cf. 2:19-22 and Rev. 21:16)? Some see here the multiple expressions of divine power as an antidote for reliance on magical practices so common in southwest Asia Minor. The manifold wisdom of God in all its unfathomable dimensions has been put forth as a theory (Eph. 3:10; Rom. 11:33-34).

In all likelihood, this is simply ***a metaphor of the immeasurable, incalculable, and unfathomable dimensions of Christ's love for his own*** (as defined in the subsequent clause in v. 19a). Says Stott: "the love of Christ is 'broad' enough to encompass all mankind (especially Jews and Gentiles, the theme of these chapters), 'long' enough to last for eternity, 'deep' enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and 'high' enough to exalt him to heaven."⁵

In v. 19a Paul simply restates v. 18b. To grasp the incalculable love of Christ for his own is to "know what can't be known"! It is a form of knowledge "that surpasses knowledge" (v. 19). This oxymoron (statement of apparent inconsistency) is designed to emphasize that what we might know in part is ultimately incomprehensible. We may know Christ's love in some measure, but we will never exhaustively comprehend it. No matter how much we learn, no matter how much we think we know and see and feel and grasp, there is always an infinity left over!

The ultimate goal in view of all that Paul prays is that we "may be filled with all the fullness of God" (v. 19b; see 4:13). That is the standard or level to which we are to be filled. What does *that* do to our low expectations of what is available to us in this life?

But *with what* are we to be filled? To what does the word "fullness" refer? Is it the "power" of God, his moral perfections, or perhaps his majestic excellencies? Or is Paul speaking again of the "love" of Christ? Maybe it is the Holy Spirit? Certainly, all of these are possible, but there is more in Paul's mind. Note well: they are to be filled *by God*, "and presumably if they are to be filled up to the fullness of God, it is *with this fullness* [emphasis mine] that they are to be filled."⁶ In some sense, then, it is with the *radiant power and presence of God himself* that we are to be filled, the measure of which is *God himself*! Whereas the church as Christ's body already shares in, embodies, and expresses his fullness (Eph. 1:23), we have not yet experienced the plenitude of God in the way that is available for us. That is why Paul now prays as he does.

Paul's doxological response (3:20-21)

Have you ever felt that perhaps you crossed a line in what you asked of God in prayer? Have you recoiled in fear that what you brought to the throne of grace was far beyond God's ability to provide? If so, stop it! Bring to God your most audacious and seemingly outlandish petitions. Why shouldn't you, if what Paul is about to say of God is true? ***It is simply impossible to ask for too much, since the Father's giving so far exceeds our capacity for asking!***

⁴ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 213.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 137.

⁶ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 214.

Paul's effusive praise of God reflects the unbounded bounty of his ability to bless his people in response to their prayers. This doxological outburst should forever put to rest your concerns about God's power to do for you what needs to be done.

God, says Paul, is able to *do* or to work, for he is neither idle nor inactive, nor dead (contrast the dumb idols in Ps. 115:1-8).

He is able to do what we *ask*, for he hears and answers the very prayers that he commands we pray! When it is God's will to bestow a blessing, he graciously incites the human heart to ask for it.

He is also able to do what we ask or *think*, for he reads our thoughts, and sometimes we imagine things which we are afraid to articulate and therefore do not ask. In other words, his ability to provide for us must never be measured by the limits of our spoken requests.

He is able to do *all* that we ask or think, for he knows it all and can perform it all. There is nothing that is proper for us to have that transcends or outstrips his power to perform. Don't ever think that one of your prayer requests is simply beyond God's paygrade.

He is able to do *more . . . than* (*hyper*, 'beyond') all that we ask or think, for his expectations are higher than ours.

He is able to do much more, or *more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for he does not give his grace by calculated measure.

He is able to do very much more, *far more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for he is a God of superabundance (the single Greek word that stands behind this idea, *huperekeperissou* (see 1 Thess. 3:10; 5:13), has the idea of an extraordinary degree, considerable excess beyond expectations).

And all that he does he does by virtue of his power that even now energetically works within us. We must never envision God's gracious power as if it were some free-floating energy outside of our own experience. The place where God's power resides and operates is "within us"! God does not ask us merely to marvel at how his power achieves great tasks elsewhere, out there, somewhere. His omnipotent strength has been infused into our innermost being. This is what Paul alluded to earlier in Ephesians 1 where he spoke of "the immeasurable greatness of his power" toward us who believe (Eph. 1:19), the "great might" of God "that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:20). This, and nothing less, is the power even now at work in you and me to hear and answer our most outlandish requests.

That God can do this for weak, broken people through his power that dwells within us is cause for the highest praise. "To him be glory," shouts Paul! That this "glory" should be revealed "in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever" make perfectly good sense. But of all the places one might think God would choose to reveal and embody and express his manifest glory, "in the church" hardly seems to qualify. Yet, notwithstanding all its weaknesses, divisions, pettiness, and failures, the gathered body of Christ Jesus is the vehicle in and through which God's power is put on display (see Eph. 1:22-23; 2:7,22; 3:10).