

Ephesians: *Strength and Power*
Ephesians 3:14-16

Let me ask you a question. When you think of your Christian life, are you concerned most about what God wants FROM you or for what God wants FOR you? Lots of people sitting in churches worry that God wants their money, their time, their devotion, and their undivided attention. People worry that God wants them to leave everything and go to Africa. People worry that God wants them to break up with their lovers or to give up their addictions or at the minimum to stop having so much fun and look appropriately miserable!

I think the vast majority of people in the world think more of what they believe God wants FROM them rather than what God wants FOR them. So—if you ever think about God at all, please answer the following question: do you think mostly about what God wants FROM you or do you think mostly about what God wants FOR you?

As we return to our journey through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we will begin looking at Paul’s prayer for the church in Ephesians 3:14-21. In this famous prayer, Paul articulates what God wants FOR us. And since it will take me several weeks to work through this prayer, I’m officially declaring the next few weeks to be a mini-series called, “What God Wants *For Us*”. For the next few weeks, I hope you will join us and set aside all your assumptions regarding what God wants “from” you...and come with an open mind to consider what God wants FOR you, alright? OK, with no further ado, let’s read Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 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.

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

My message will fall under four subheadings: 1) A Pastor’s Prayer for the Challenged Church; 2) Strength and Power; 3) The Inner Man; and 4) Three Considerations.

I. A Pastor’s Prayer for the Challenged Church

In his commentary on Ephesians, New Testament scholar John Stott writes: One of the best ways to discover a Christian’s chief anxieties and ambitions is to study the content of his prayers and the intensity with which he prays them. We all pray about what concerns us and are evidently not concerned about matters we do not include in our prayers.

Church, think about that for a minute! What do you pray about the most, and what do you pray about with the greatest intensity? When I asked myself that question, the answer was obvious and humiliating: I most often pray about ME. I pray that I won’t blow up the church...I pray that I would become a more faithful disciple of Jesus...I pray that God would help me figure out how to be a pastor, father, and husband...I pray that He will give me a sermon every week...I pray that He will help me make faithful decisions about the never-ending impossible decisions that come with leading an organization like Colonial...and most of the time I pray that He will forgive me for being an idiot. Sadly...if you were to study my prayers, you would see that most

of the time, I'm praying about me. I suspect a lot of us burn up most of our prayers praying for Number One.

Consider then, that as Paul suffers his third year chained to a prison guard in Rome, he doesn't pray for his release. In fact, Paul doesn't even pray for himself at all. Here in Ephesians 3, Paul intercedes for the early church.

In vs. 14 he writes, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father..."

Now, given that we are going to spend a few weeks on this prayer, it's incredibly important to grasp the context that informs Paul's prayer. In other words, what does Paul know about the church in Ephesus and the small house churches in that region that is leading to this profound, urgent, and intense prayer on their behalf? What does Paul know about the challenges they are facing? What is he referring to when he writes, "For this reason..."? Remember, this isn't a generic religious document. This is a historic letter written in the first century from a pastor to his congregation and the church plants that went out from his congregation. So...what can we assume about the situation of those churches in ancient Asia Minor based upon what we have learned thus far in our series?

I think there are at least two very significant challenges that Paul is addressing in the first century churches that are apparent from the text. First of all, it seems evident that the pagan Gentile converts are worried about powerful evil spirits and entities. In other words, if the Gentiles are going to get led astray and fall away from Christ, it's because they are enticed by the power of the unseen world or they are intimidated by the unseen world. Such is why Paul has already addressed the "powers and principalities" in the heavenly places on a few occasions, and we will see that most of Ephesians 6 is written to address this concern.

The other challenge facing the early church is clearly the historic hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles...in other words, racism and divisiveness are still evident amidst the believers...and that's a huge problem, right? Fearful Christians and racist Christians misrepresent the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, in chapters one and two, in order to address the issues of his day and the issues in the church...what does Paul write about? He writes about the POWER of the Gospel...he writes of Christ and His finished work on the cross that overcomes all evil (including our own); and he writes about the POWER of Christ and His finished work on the cross that destroys the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, thus creating a new, unified humanity.

This is exactly what Paul is referring to when he writes, "For this reason..." here in vs. 14. He is pointing back to the *powerful* AND *unifying* work of Jesus that addresses the most pressing issues in the culture and the local church.

By the way, this is always what a good pastor should do. Pastors always need to honestly address the challenges, behaviors, and beliefs that are hindering the witness of the church, and then proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and point to how the Gospel specifically applies to

those challenges in a way that brings freedom, hope, correction, and healing to their struggling congregations. That's exactly what Paul has done so far, and he has done it masterfully.

Think about what Paul has written thus far to the ancient Church: We are chosen, we are predestined for adoption, we have been granted spiritual blessings, we have been given power, and authority in the heavenly places, we have redemption through the forgiveness of sins, we have obtained an inheritance, we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit; even when we (all of us) were once dead in our transgressions, God saved us by grace in Christ; and because of that grace...and by the power of His grace poured out upon Jew and Gentile alike...God has created a new man...a new humanity, destroying the wall of hostility. He has brought peace to those who were far away and to those who were near so that there is now ONE...all in Christ are fellow citizens...we are no longer strangers or aliens...we are being built into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

If your heart doesn't soar when you hear this teaching from Paul, you're either not listening or you're dead! This is the good news of the Gospel, and it speaks to the issues in our culture and our church in exactly the same way that it addressed the issues in the first century! This teaching of Paul...this Gospel of Jesus Christ...is true, and it is life changing...IF...and that's a big if...if the Truth of the Gospel makes the famous journey from our heads to our hearts!

And FOR THIS REASON, Paul is essentially going to say, "I am praying that the truth that I have proclaimed...a truth that is now in your head...will take up residence in your heart with power...because that's what it will take for the freedom and unity that Jesus died for to become a reality in the local church."

Can you see it? Paul is praying for the personal and corporate transformation of souls that will eventually lead to the powerful, unifying work of Jesus being realized in individuals, families, and the local congregations. Paul is absolutely praying now that the new believers will inherit everything that God wants FOR them...that they will come to know and experience everything that Jesus died to accomplish for them and in them. And that's what we will be looking at over the next several weeks.

Notice first, however, how Paul refers to God in a way that transcends racial divisiveness. He refers to God as "the Father from whom every family in heaven and earth is named..."

We must remember that in the ancient pagan mindset, each geographical region was thought to be governed by its own god. NT scholar Lynn Cohick writes: "Paul's claim that God the Father is the God of all ethnic and language groups was not a dominant view at the time, for most people believed that gods ruled over territories and those territories were under the care of and were responsible to that deity."

Paul makes it clear that he is not just praying to a "Jewish" God, or a regional god. He's praying to the One True God who is responsible for naming every tribe, tongue and nation...and not just those who are on earth, but also all the families in heaven! In other words, God is over not just the souls on earth, but also the unseen souls in the heavenly places.

Notice also that Paul writes, "I bow my knees before the Father..." It was normative for Jewish people to pray standing up, just as they still do today by the wailing wall in Jerusalem. The fact

that Paul kneels in prayer is a point of emphasis as well as humility. As Paul approaches the Father on behalf of the church, he comes with passion and intensity...but he also assumes a humble posture.

Listen: I don't think sitting, standing, kneeling, or laying down makes much of a difference to God when it comes to praying. I do think, however, that the posture of your heart and your attitude before God makes a lot of difference. Kneeling is a physical manifestation of what needs to be happening within us when we approach God. We should always approach our Heavenly Father with humility, deference, and submission, even though we are invited to enter into His presence with confidence. There's a difference between confidence and cocky, right? We would all do well to learn from Paul here...we approach the Father with humble hearts, and if getting on our knees is what it takes for us to truly humble ourselves before God, best get on our knees, right?

OK, as we look again at the prayer itself, Paul's petition is like a staircase by which he climbs higher and higher in his aspirations for the church. His prayer-staircase has four steps, whose key words are 'strength,' 'love,' 'knowledge' and 'fullness.' More precisely, he prays first that they may be *strengthened* by the indwelling of Christ through His Spirit; secondly that they may be rooted in and grounded in *love*; thirdly that they may *know* Christ's love in all its dimensions, although it is ultimately beyond knowledge; and fourthly that they may be *filled* right up to the very fullness of God.¹

Church...we simply cannot breeze through these four steps as though we are reading a recipe. Each of these steps builds upon one another, and each deserves unique treatment. Each part of this prayer is so rich that I'm concerned we cannot handle more than one bite at a time, so I am going to take a few weeks to slowly and intentionally consider each part of Paul's prayer because, ultimately, this is my prayer for you Colonial, even as it is my prayer for me! Christ has accomplished our victory, our liberation, and our unity. The question now is: how do we enter into and experience what Christ accomplished on our behalf? How do we receive everything that God wants FOR us so that our witness is consistent with the Gospel? I believe those questions are addressed here in Paul's prayer.

OK, let's move now to the first step of Paul's prayer which brings us to my second subheading:

II. Strength and Power

Many of us have been Christians for some time, but our stories are very different. For some of us, our faith began with a radical, powerful transformation when we came to know Jesus. Our friends and family would say that we have become radically different people...hopefully for the better! There are many of us, however, who have a different story. We have always gone to church; we believe the claims of the Gospel; but that's about it. We don't have a story about God's power bringing about radical change in our lives. Truth be told, many people who sit in churches secretly wonder if they are actually saved because they don't feel God's presence...they don't know God's power...and their experience of God is very non-remarkable. I suspect there are many here today who can relate with what I just said. Whatever your story may be, I want to invite you to consider this prayer of Paul as the

¹ John Stott, Ephesians, p 134

vision/pathway to a more powerful, life-changing Christian life than you ordinarily entertain. Paul's prayer reveals God's purpose for every believer, and that begins with strength and power. Again, Paul begins with these words: 14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being

If you are a Christian, and you feel powerless, please pay careful attention to what we just read. God's purpose for those in Christ is that we would be strengthened with POWER.

How are we strengthened with power? We are strengthened with and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember what Jesus said to the disciples before He ascended in Acts 1:8? "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses..."

In Luke 24:49 Jesus said, "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

Jesus understood that it would take more than intellectual belief and good intentions for His disciples to pursue the Great Commission. They would need to be strengthened with power...supernatural, straight-from-Heaven, Holy Spirit power...and Jesus delivered.

In Acts 4:33 we read, And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

In Acts 6:8 we read: And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Now, don't jump ahead. I'm not suggesting that every believer should be expected to perform great signs and wonders. I am simply showing you what Jesus promised and a few examples that demonstrate how faithful Jesus is to the promises He makes. If Jesus promised His disciples power...if God's intent is to strengthen believers through the power of the Holy Spirit...we should 100% expect that the supernatural power of God is ours for the taking. And not just a little bit of it. Paul prays that the measure of our strength and power will be "according to the riches of His glory." God has a limitless supply of power to grant to His Church for His glory!

Paul knows that if the believers in Ephesus are ever going to overcome their fear of the unseen spirit world...if they are ever going to be rise above their inherited prejudices...they will need this power. They need to be strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit, particularly in their "inner being."

III. The Inner Being

What does Paul mean when he prays that the church will be strengthened with Holy Spirit power in our "inner being"?

Listen, we would all like to be stronger physically...and if God could just send down His Spirit and make me look like a bodybuilder...come Lord Jesus come...and please add some hair

up here! We would all love to have stronger bodies, stronger personalities, or stronger immune systems...that's often what comes to our minds when we think of power. Or we would like to have better positions at work, or be more popular at school, or have more control over the circumstances of our lives. Who doesn't want more power, right?

Listen, Paul knows that at the core of our being is where our True Self is found...and it is there that we need God's supernatural strength and power. It takes Holy Spirit power to change a person's identity from damned to saved. It takes Holy Spirit power to heal the wounds of the inner man. It takes supernatural power to change a person's character.

Our "inner being" is our spirit...and it is our spirit that directly interacts with the Holy Spirit. Alexander Maclaren observes: There is a direct passage between God and my spirit. It lies open to His touch; all the paths of its deep things can be trodden by Him ...the whole inward region which makes up the true man is the field upon which this Divine Spirit is to work. It is not a bit of your inward life that is to be hallowed. It is not any one aspect of it that is to be strengthened, but it is the whole intellect, affections, desires, tastes, powers of attention, conscience, imagination, memory, and will. The whole inner man in all its corners is to be filled, and to come under the influence of this power, until there be no part dark, as when the bright shining of a candle giveth thee light. When the Spirit is poured out on men, their whole nature is invigorated and helped.

Let us consider three ways that the Holy Spirit empowers us.

First, the Holy Spirit empowers us to suffer well. In Colossians 1:11 Paul writes, "May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy..."

Life is hard. Being a teenager is hard. Marriage is hard. Raising kids is hard. Being single is hard. Getting old is hard. Caring for an aging parent is hard. Dealing with stresses at work is hard. Having no work is hard. It would be silly and futile to suggest that the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit absolves us of having hard lives. Jesus had a hard life, and He was perfectly filled with the Holy Spirit, right? A hard life awaits us all...but the power to endure well, to persevere, and to not lose our joy in the midst of suffering is precisely what the Holy Spirit empowers us to do as those who are in Christ. This is exactly what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16: So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. The Holy Spirit empowers us to suffer well.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit empowers us for conflict. Every day of our lives is a battle of the will, right? We are tempted...we are tempted to quit, we are tempted to cheat, we are tempted to lie, we are tempted to strangle our teenagers! Every day is a conflict between good and evil, right and wrong, obedience and disobedience. Every day we face an Enemy that would destroy us...He is the Tempter...The Father of Lies...The Deceiver...The Accuser...and his work ethic is admirable. Conflict...inner conflict and outer conflict...is inevitable in our lives. God's power given by the Holy Spirit does NOT absolve us of the fight, but it fits us for the fight.² We are given spiritual power to stand, to fight the good fight, and to repel the fiery arrows of the Enemy. We will look deeply into the spiritual armor and weapons that the Holy Spirit empowers us to leverage in the great spiritual conflict of our age when we get to Ephesians 6.

² Maclaren, Ephesians, p 189

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit empowers us for service. Only the power of the Holy Spirit strengthening the inner man can liberate us from selfishness and sloth. I know that hits close to home for me, and I suspect for many of us. Many of us believe in Christ...we consider ourselves to be Christians...but when it comes to giving our time for service to God's Kingdom...we fall victim again and again to our selfishness and that irresistible magnet called our recliners.

But listen Church...there's a whole big world out there that is perishing. People who have no homes; children who have no parents; and untold millions who have no hope. In this very room there are people who have contemplated suicide this week...they are convinced that no one sees them or even cares if they are dead or alive. And here's the deal: we, the CHURCH, have been entrusted with the GOOD NEWS of the GOSPEL. We are those who bear the Light of Jesus, and I think we all know that if we would simply get over ourselves and take one step towards this hurting culture, God would honor our obedience and move powerfully through us to bring help, hope, and healing in the midst of this present darkness. So pray. Agree with Paul. Pray that God would grant us strength, according to the riches of His glory--that we would be empowered by the Holy Spirit in our inner being and LIBERATED to serve with gladness!

The Holy Spirit power will strengthen your inner being to suffer well, to fight the good fight, and to serve with gladness...and there is so much more! The Holy Spirit strengthens every bit of our inner man, and we'll see more examples next week...but here's the deal: we must ask for this power.

This leads me to my final subheading...which will be VERY brief:

IV. Three Considerations

First of all, know that this power of the Holy Spirit...this strengthening of the inner man...will only come to those who want it. This is what God wants for you, but may I ask: is this what you want for you?

Remember what Jesus said in Luke 11:11-13: 11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; 12 or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

God is most willing to grant you the strengthening of the Holy Spirit...but let us be honest: there are many in the western Church, and I suspect that there are some here today, who have such a small, pitiful vision of their Christian life that the idea of new Holy Spirit power surging within them, strengthening them, purifying them, transforming them...sounds both odd and unattractive. These are church goers who are interested in an appetizer, but not the whole meal. Friends, if that description fits you...I shall pray that you change your minds, and here's why: with all due respect, the plague of churches everywhere in the world are those who claim to be "Christians" and yet have no life-changing power within them. Without the Holy Spirit strengthening and empowering your inner being, your fears and prejudices, your biases and your stubbornness, your ignorance and your pride will remain unaffected by your "faith." You will be in the church, but you will behave as one who is in the world. You will claim to have the cure, and yet you will unwittingly propagate the disease. I challenge you to ask the Father to give you everything that He wants FOR you...beginning with strength in your inner being through the

indwelling of His Holy Spirit! “Ask, and you shall receive...seek, and you will find...knock, and the door will be opened unto you.”

We must also consider that the selfish inner man must die if the Holy Spirit is to reside within us. As Maclaren writes: The life of nature, dependence on self, must be weakened and subdued if the life of God is to overcome and to fill you. You must be able to say, “Not I!” or you will never be able to say “Christ lives in me!” Please do not assume this is something that God wants from you...that God wants you to render yourself a martyr for His cause. No sir...freedom from your selfish inner being is a *gift* that God wants FOR you...I’m simply reminding you that it’s impossible to entertain both. We cannot remain selfish and “I” oriented and at the same time be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. So...if we invite the Holy Spirit to come, we must be prepared for the selfish man to leave...and by grace over time to never return.

Finally, we must remember to use that which has already been given to us by the Holy Spirit. This is the teaching of the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. If the Lord has given you just a bit of power to serve, start serving...even if that service is not as glorious as you like. Remember that part of your Holy Spirit empowerment is killing the selfish inner man’s desire to be noticed all the time. Part of your strengthening is receiving just enough power to get off the couch and pursue obedience in service, but one should not think that means an immediate assignment on the mission field! Let’s start with serving in the nursery, or as an usher, or a greeter, or volunteering to read with a second grader at a local school.

The scriptures are clear: if we are faithful with a little, we will receive more power and more responsibility. If we are not faithful with the little we have been given, why should we expect to receive more? In fact, what little we have been given will be taken away.

So...Church...what do you want for you? Paul has shown us what God wants FOR you...for all of us...He wants us to be strengthened with POWER in our inner being through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. Should you want that as well, ask...and you shall receive.

Let us ask...ask for everything that God wants FOR us...and we shall shine brightly as the Light of Christ in this hurting culture, amen?

Let us pray.