

# Paul's Prayer

## Eph. 3:14-16 (NKJV)

*For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

The reason for my turning to this passage is quite simple. It is the only clear passage in the Bible that sprung to my mind offering an example of a prayer for the 'strength of the Spirit'. Spiritual strength is something that we all need, and if the Bible encourages us to pray for it, that's what we should be doing! All the better, then, to examine *how* Scripture indicates we are to bring such a prayer and what the point of such a prayer should be.

As it turns out, Paul's prayer that the Ephesians be strengthened through the Spirit, is quite a bit more specific than just a prayer for spiritual strength. So let's look at the passage as a whole.

Paul is quite specific as to how he prays. He bows his knees. Kneeling in prayer is something you find again and again in Scripture. It's not just something for small children, Jesus did it. His disciples followed his practice – and in fact you'll find it throughout the Old and New Testament. God's Word shows that a right *inward* attitude of prayer is always reflected by a right *outward* attitude.

Paul bows his knees to the 'Father'. Calling God 'Father' has, of course, taken on new meaning in the New Testament. Only through a union of faith with Jesus Christ are we able to know God as our personal Father. Paul expresses the extent of this great wonder in what he says next: 'from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named'.<sup>1</sup> The word 'family' is in Greek derived from the word for 'father'. Paul is talking about the whole worldwide church-family, a church made up of believers everywhere, both departed saints in heaven and those living upon this earth. This is, perhaps, clearer if you understand that when Paul begins by saying 'I'm praying for *this* reason', he is referring to the final section of chapter two where he described the church as being the gathering of believers everywhere, both Jew and Gentile together.<sup>2</sup>

Paul now describes the *content* of his prayer in three separate clauses. The letter to the Ephesians (in contrast to its sister letter to the Colossians) is highly structured and the way the sentences have been put together has obviously been carefully thought about. In order to see that, I provide here a more literal translation of vv. 16-19 and lay out the clauses in a way which shows their relation to each other:

1. *in order that He might grant you, according to His glorious riches<sup>3</sup>, to be strengthened with power (i.e. ability) through His Spirit in the inner man,—that the Christ may dwell through faith in your hearts, you who in love have been rooted and grounded,*

2. *in order that you may be strong enough (= 'be able') to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of the Christ which surpasses knowledge;*

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1 The translation 'whole family' is rendered 'every family' in the ESV and some other translations (the thought then being that every family of any creature in heaven or on earth owes its family – fatherhood status to the great Father of all). The Greek expression is admittedly somewhat vague, lacking the definite article. Since not a few commentaries do not adequately understand what is going on, I attach a couple of notes. When in Greek the word 'all' / 'whole' is used with a noun and no article, it often (but not necessarily) means 'every .....'. However, such an expression is vague and may still mean 'whole .....'. Paul has already used the same vague expression in 2:21 where the context conclusively shows that he means 'the whole building' and certainly not 'every building'. The thing is that in Hebrew or Aramaic it is context that determines whether you mean 'every .....' or 'the whole .....' and not the presence of the article. For Paul, whose mother tongue was Aramaic, it was quite natural to neglect the use of the article in such an expression.

2 See 2:19-21. The words "For this reason ..." begin in 3:1 but are interrupted by a long digression. Paul begins his sentence anew in verse 14.

3 'the riches of His glory' are a Semitic (i.e. Aramaic / Hebrew) way of saying 'His glorious riches'.

### 3. *in order that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God.*

Looking at the structure in this way, we can see that the first two clauses have an explanation added to them to help us understand what the first part of the clause means. Paul's first purpose in praying is that the Ephesians might be strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inner man. Paul generally uses phrases like 'the inner man' to refer to what we might call the 'soul' (Paul, who likes to think in Aramaic or Hebrew, never uses the word 'soul' to refer to the inner person, which is a more Greek way of expressing oneself). Nevertheless, he may also be making an implicit contrast with the way people in the Old Testament were strengthened by the Spirit in the outer man – think of Samson and the other judges for example. But Paul doesn't leave it here. He goes on to explain what he intends 'being strengthened through the Spirit in the inner man' is all about. It is about the Christ (that is, Jesus the Messiah) dwelling through faith in our hearts. The strength which the Spirit provides is the strength to live as one who walks this earth with and in Jesus, his Lord. If the Christ dwells within us, we learn more and more to live and act as He would. We represent Him. This is what the power of the Spirit provides for us. It is the same almighty power by which Christ was raised from the dead (Eph. 1:19). Paul states it a little more strongly in Galatians 2:20 where he says: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me". When Paul speaks of the Christ living in our 'hearts', once again as a Jew, he is not thinking of the heart as the seat of emotion (a Greek idea), but the heart as the seat of our thinking and planning. The final thought of this clause expresses the idea that the Ephesians (as also we), to experience this have already been rooted and grounded in love.

It is this love that forms the basis of the second clause. The power of the Spirit makes us strong enough to comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth of .... Indeed, of what? The explanation makes this clear, of the love of the Christ! A love that surpasses any knowledge. For Paul then, having the Christ dwell in our hearts by the power of the Spirit means *primarily* to live on the basis of a deep and personal experience of what the love of Jesus, the Anointed King ('Christ') has done for us – giving Himself up on the cross to reconcile us to God the Father. Grasping and understanding *that* love in faith will totally change the way a person looks at life, how he interacts with others, how he sets his goals. It puts life in a completely new and eternal perspective.

Finally, Paul indicates that this prayer for the strength of the Spirit, for the Christ dwelling in our hearts, for understanding the extent of the love of the Christ, is all there to enable us to be filled 'unto all the fullness of God'. That last phrase is admittedly a little cryptic, but Paul has explained the meaning of 'the fullness of God' already in Ephesians 1:23, namely that it is Christ's body, the worldwide church of which the Christ Himself is the head. It is a grand image of the way in which the Holy Spirit connects every believer on earth with his Lord and King.

As we pray for the strength of the Spirit, let us then not separate the Spirit from the notion of Jesus Christ dwelling within us. Let us not separate the notion of Jesus Christ in us from His love. And let us not separate His love from our intangible connection to every believer on this planet. As we as churches prepare for the upcoming Synod, may this great love of Christ be shown to work in and through us all. And may God's Spirit indeed strengthen us with His power to this end!

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