

To Grasp the Love of Christ

Ephesians 3:14-21

Key Verse: 3:17b, 18

“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ...”

In the previous passage we learned that through the gospel, the barriers between Gentiles and Jews have been removed and they can share every spiritual blessing of God together equally. There is no distinction and no hierarchy. We are brothers and sisters of our one God and Father. In this way, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God is revealed. God’s ultimate victory over enemies is made clear. God’s kingdom is restored. This is God’s vision for the church. From a human point of view, the church may seem to be weak. Sometimes it is full of problems like a dysfunctional family. When we experience this reality, God’s vision seems to be a fairy tale. After sharing God’s vision with the Ephesians, Paul may have felt the same way. So he prayed for the second time in this book (1:15-19) It was not a personal petition, but related to God’s vision for the church. It was not just for certain individuals, but for the church as a whole to grow to maturity until it fully embraced God’s vision and carried it out. Let’s learn for what, and how, Paul prayed. May God’s vision for the church be ours! We can study this passage in two parts. Verses 14-15 show us who Paul prayed to, and how he prayed. Verses 16-21 contain some specific prayer topics, and a doxology of praise.

I. "I kneel before the Father" (14-15)

Paul begins by repeating the words, **“For this reason,”** from verse 1. After pausing to explain God’s grace to him and his vision for the church, Paul begins his prayer. God’s vision inspired him. Compelled by this vision he knelt on the cold prison ground to pray. Here we see his attitude toward God. Usually the Jews prayed in a standing position with their arms extended toward heaven. But there are people who knelt to pray, such as Ezra (Ez 9:5), Daniel (Dan 6:10b), Stephen (Ac 7:60), and Peter (Ac 9:40). Our Lord Jesus fell to the ground and prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:39). This signifies humility, submission and reverence. Many people pray casually as if they were going through a drive thru. Richard C. H. Lenski (1864-1936), a New Testament scholar in the last century, said, “While we pray, our posture is important. It is because our posture reflects the

To Grasp the Love of Christ

attitude of our soul toward God.” Whatever position we take, we need to pour out our hearts to God when we pray. This is what Paul did.

Paul called on **“the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name”** (14b-15). Though Paul revered God greatly, he also approached him as a son to his father, with intimacy and deep trust. The word “Father” shows that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all, who cares for his creatures with a loving heart. God is not indifferent and inactive in the world today. He is the living God and loving God, and he is involved with his creation as a Father. The phrase “every family,” refers to all believers from every nation in the world, and even those who are in heaven. All believers are the new creation of God. Our new lives originated from God. God is our source of life and being. We all have the same root and the same spiritual DNA. We can say that we all share the same last name as children of the same Father. That is why we must love one another. That is why we should pray for one another and for the entire family of God, as Paul did.

II. “I pray that...” (16-21)

In verses 16-19 we find Paul's specific prayer topics for the Ephesians. The key words in his prayer are “strength,” “dwell,” “love,” and “fullness.” The first prayer topic is to strengthen their inner being. Let's read verse 16. **“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being...”** The city of Ephesus was full of mystery religions, myths, and philosophies. So it was easy for the Ephesian believers to be blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming (4:14). Ephesus was also a center of entertainment. It had a large theater where gladiators competed, a world-renowned emporium where even Cleopatra shopped, and many Roman baths, prostitute's quarters and gambling houses. Paul characterized life in Ephesus, quoting the poet Menander, who said, **“Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die”** (1 Cor 15:32). In this environment, it was easy for young Christians to be tempted and led astray. When our body is weak, we are vulnerable to sickness. Likewise, when our inner being is weak, we are vulnerable to temptation. That is why Paul prayed that God may strengthen their inner beings. Paul did not pray for the temptations to disappear, but for the Ephesians to overcome them by being strong in their inner being. God does not want us to be influenced by the world, but to influence the world. This is why our inner beings should be strong.

To Grasp the Love of Christ

The problem is how? Paul prayed that **“out of his glorious riches,”** God may strengthen them **“with power through his Spirit.”** God’s glorious riches are the source of strength. God is the One who has unlimited resources, such as wisdom, love and power. Human fathers want to give good gifts to their children, but sometimes lack the resources to do so. Then they are frustrated and children complain. But our Father in heaven is very rich. He never runs out of resources. How can we obtain these resources? Jesus promised us, **“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”** (Mt 7:7). God has given us access to his glorious riches. But they do not fall upon us at random as we just sit down and wait. We must ask God in prayer. The Holy Spirit is the source of strength and power. So Jesus said, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you..”** (Ac 1:8a). The Holy Spirit is called, “Counselor,” “Comforter,” and “Advocate.” When we need wisdom, encouragement, or strength, the Holy Spirit gives them to us. Sometimes Satan condemns us. But the Holy Spirit takes our side as our Advocate and pleads Jesus’ blood on our behalf. Then all the whispering words of condemnation disappear. May God, out of his glorious riches, strengthen our inner beings with power through his Spirit so that we may overcome all temptations and influence the world for Christ.

Paul’s second prayer topic is **“...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith”** (17a). When we receive Jesus as our Savior personally, he comes into our hearts as Lord, and we become members of his church. In Matthew 18:20, **Jesus said, “Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”** The problem is whether we want Jesus to stay permanently or temporarily. There are two similar Greek words for “dwell.” One means to inhabit as a guest. The other means to take residence, as a master takes residence within his home. Paul uses the latter here. So we can paraphrase Paul’s prayer: “that Christ, by [God’s] Spirit, may be allowed to settle down in their hearts, and from his throne there both control and strengthen them.”¹ Before we met Christ, our self was at the center of our hearts. We thought, felt, acted, and spoke as self-centered people with an “i-my-me” mentality. After meeting Christ, he became the center of our hearts. Now, whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do it all for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). The spiritually young may treat Christ like a guest. When they feel good, they welcome him. When their mood changes, they ask him to go on vacation for a while. But the spiritually mature know the importance of Christ ruling our hearts, both in times of blessing, and adversity. Christ’s constant dwelling in our hearts is possible only by faith. To live by faith in Christ means to live a Christ-centered

To Grasp the Love of Christ

life. To have a Christ-centered life, we must deny ourselves, as Jesus told us (Lk 9:23). One noble young Korean woman was a promising pharmacist. She wanted to bring honor to her family as a good daughter. After she accepted Christ as Lord, the center of her life changed to Christ and his mission. She left her family and her homeland and became a missionary to America. Later her brother followed her. She suffered many hardships. But her life has been used by the Lord to bear spiritual fruit. In this way, each member of a church should be Christ-centered. At the same time, the church itself must be Christ-centered also.

Paul's third prayer topic is about Christ's love (17b-19a). Let's read verses 17b-19a: **“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”** “Love” is repeated three times in these verses. Love is the most important and excellent virtue for God's people to have. In 1 Corinthians 13:13 Paul said, **“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”** Here we learn how all kinds of people can become one as members of God's household. We are all so different in character, ethnicity, culture, and so on. There have been many human attempts to unite people, but all have failed. It is impossible by human effort alone. Then how can we be one? Christ's love can make us one. In Colossians 3, Paul talks about the importance of practicing compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. Then he says, **“...and over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity”** (Col 3:14). Christ's love is the only way to overcome all barriers. This love transcends human distinctions and unites people in genuine harmony.

Paul prays for the Ephesians to be **“rooted”** and **“established”** in love. These metaphors refer to the source or foundation of the church. It is the element without which the church cannot stand. If we have excellent facilities, such as a comfortable, spacious sanctuary with high-tech sound and video, the best instruments, and comfortable, modern classrooms with excellent programs for education, and basketball and tennis courts, but have not love--it is nothing; the church cannot stand. On the other hand, if we have none of these things but we have Christ's love, the church will stand and be fruitful and influence the society around it. The early church was poor materially. They had no facilities: no building, no beam projector, and not even a microphone. They met in people's homes. But they had genuine love for one another based on the words of God. Through them the gospel spread until it reached the whole world. We may think

To Grasp the Love of Christ

we need many things. But let's remember that the church must be rooted and established in love.

In verse 18, Paul describes this love with dimensions: wide, long, high and deep. **Width** refers to the scope of Christ's love. It includes all and every kind of people. **Length** refers to the duration of Christ's love. It is never-ending. **Depth** refers to the humility of Christ's love. Jesus is willing to go into the lowest place to meet the lowliest person. No matter how far someone has fallen, Christ has the power to redeem him. There is no sinner Christ cannot save. **Height** tells us how the love of Christ reaches to the heavenly realm to exalt his beloved until we are seated with Christ and reign with him (2:6; 2 Ti 2:12a). We are raised from the depth of sin to the height of God's glory. Let's remember that we can experience this love together with all the Lord's holy people (18); we cannot expect to experience it in isolation.

It has been good to analyze the love of Christ. Still, we feel that we are missing something. It is because love transcends analysis and reason. Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, was very analytical and prudent. It was hard for him to make decisions because he was so careful to consider every aspect of a matter. He dated a woman, but did not propose to her. When she could wait no longer, she proposed to him. His answer was: "I will think about it." After that, he studied about marriage. He collected all possible information from libraries, and read about all the pros and cons of marriage. Finally he reached his conclusion to marry her. He went to her house to propose. Then her father told him, "Well, you are too late. My daughter married and became a mother of three children." **We cannot just analyze love. We must practice it with faith right away.**

Love is unconditional and sacrificial. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails (1 Cor 13:4-8). The love of Christ can do amazing things. There was a girl who had been abandoned by her parents and even abused. As a result, she became mentally ill and was institutionalized outside of Boston. Her room was like a dungeon, reserved for the hopelessly insane. Sometimes she behaved like an animal, charging at her visitors or totally ignoring them. No one had hope for her. However, an elderly nurse believed there was hope. She had Christ's love for the girl. So she began to talk to her and to bring her brownies. Eventually the elderly nurse's love moved the girl's heart. The doctors noticed a change in her and decided to release her from the institution. She was completely healed. But she chose to stay and serve others like herself. This was Little Annie Sullivan, who

To Grasp the Love of Christ

later cared for Helen Keller out of her experience of Christ's love.² Christ's love reaches any kind of person. Christ's love heals, restores, and raises them as new creations.

Love does not see circumstances or conditions, but the person. One man contracted polio at the age of 39, and his legs were crippled. His promising future seemed to vanish. At that moment, he asked his wife, "Do you still love me?" She answered, "It was not your legs that I loved, but you yourself." She encouraged him and planted hope in his heart. Through her help he overcame his fear and despair and became the 32nd president of the United States. This was Franklin D. Roosevelt, and his godly wife Eleanor. When America was paralyzed by the Great Depression and faced the Second World War, Roosevelt planted hope and courage in our nation. He is famous for saying, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." One woman's Christ-like love for her husband brought blessing to our nation and the world.

Jesus' love is boundless. While on earth, Jesus served all kinds of sick people: the paralyzed, lepers, tax collectors, the demon-possessed, and many more. Jesus bound their wounds, healed their diseases, comforted their broken hearts, and wiped their tears one by one. In love, Jesus bore his disciples' weaknesses and raised them as great servants of God. As Jesus suffered on the cross, he prayed for sinners, and died for us. In this way Jesus demonstrated God's love for us (Ro 5:8). In the past, we did not know true love. But through Jesus, now we can. 1 John 3:16 says, **"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."** Paul prayed for us to "grasp" and "know" the love of Christ. To "grasp" is to lay hold of it and make it our own. "To know" is to experience an intimate love relationship with Christ. Let's grasp the love of Christ, know this love, and practice it.

Paul's fourth prayer topic is that they **"may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God"** (19b). As the believers grasp the love of Christ and increase in love for one another, Christ's love grows to fill the church with the fullness of God. As he considered God's fullness, Paul was awestruck. He burst into praise: **"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen"** (20-21). Here we learn that God's power and wisdom are unfathomable. God is able to do more than we can ask, or imagine. God is living and working among us. God is not complacent, idle, or weak. God is working within us, among us, and through us

To Grasp the Love of Christ

in order to save people. That is why Jesus said, **“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working”** (Jn 5:17). Paul expresses that the church and Christ are inseparable, like a head and body or a bride and bridegroom. God receives glory through them **“throughout all generations.”** Paul sees that the church of Christ never diminishes, but advances from one generation to the next, and into eternity. The conclusion of it all is: **“To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen.”**

1 Stott, John. The Message of Ephesians. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 1979.

2 <http://godsworship.org/emailmessage226.htm>