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“To Him Who Is Able”
Ephesians 3:14-21

The prayers of the apostle Paul set a pattern for our prayers. Just as the Lord's prayer serves as a pattern for prayer, so do the prayers of the apostles. And just as the acronym “ACTS” sets the pattern – namely that we pray with adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and then supplication – so also this prayer of the apostle Paul sets a pattern for your prayers and mine.

We see the pattern of the prayer, along with its first petition, in verse 16, where Paul writes, *“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”*

The apostle Paul knew the struggles of living as a Christian. He faced many problems in his life. He suffered greatly because of his faith in the Lord and the proclamation of his word. Because of his suffering he knew what it was like to be discouraged. The context of the prayer includes spiritual discouragement. He knew that discouragement is contagious; it has a way of spreading from one person to another, so he writes in vs 13: *“I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.”*

But the apostle was not alone in his experience of suffering. Suffering is something that you all can relate to. And I'm sure that you can relate to the discouragement that suffering often brings. Is there anyone here who hasn't at times felt overwhelmed? Is there anyone here who doesn't feel weak – too weak to face life itself at times?

If that describes you or someone you know, then consider that in answer to prayer the power of the Holy Spirit will strengthen you. One of the amazing truths of Scripture is that the Holy Spirit – true, eternal God – dwells within believers, making our lowly, frail human bodies his holy temple. As he dwells within us, the Holy Spirit not only convicts us of our sin, and focuses us on our Savior, but he also comforts, guides and strengthens us throughout all the struggles of life. No wonder that some of the many names of the Holy Spirit include the Comforter and the Counselor!

That God strengthens his people with power through his Spirit in their inner being has been a comfort to God's people in every era of time. Isaiah 40:30-31 describe how *even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

No wonder Psalm 103:5 describes God as the One *who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

We all need that strength that comes from the Lord and his indwelling Spirit, but how often do we pray for that strength, not only for ourselves but also for our brothers and sisters in Christ? Paul's

prayer sets an important pattern for our prayers, that in all the weakness that we face – not just physically, but spiritually – we would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

Another petition flows from the first petition. In verse 17 Paul prays *that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*. It might seem strange that the apostle would write to believers who already had faith in Christ, to tell them that he prayed that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith. Wasn't that already happening in their lives? Were not the Ephesians the ones who had received the amazing news that they were predestined before the foundation of the world to believe in Christ and to live to the praise of his glorious grace? Since Paul wrote about that in chapter 1, why would he tell them now that he is praying that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith?

He does so because he is telling them that he prays that their faith will always be focused on Christ, and that by focusing on Christ they will grasp something of the magnitude of God's love for them. He prays that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith so that, in the words of verse 17-19 ... *you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Although we will spend all eternity discovering the greatness of God's love for us – for his love *surpasses knowledge* – the apostle prayed that those who read this letter would comprehend to an ever greater degree how wide the love of Christ is, that we would grasp something of the breadth of his love.

The love of Christ is so wide that it includes all types of people. It is certainly wide enough to include both Jews and Gentiles, which is one of the themes of Ephesians. Ephesians 3:6 puts it in a nutshell: *This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

It is hard for us to grasp the hostility between Jews and Gentiles in the first century. They were deeply divided by their animosity against each other. That they could be reconciled by faith in Christ was an astonishing mystery to many.

We live in a nation that is racially divided. And yet when we grasp how wide the love of Christ is, we are able to cross all racial boundaries as the love of Christ not only flows into us, but also out of us into the lives of other people, regardless of their nationality or the color of their skin. The love of Christ is so wide that it encompasses people from the whole world.

Paul also prayed that we would grasp how long the love of Christ is. He prayed that the Lord would impress upon us the infinite length of his love for us. The love of Christ is so long that it lasts forever. Human love strives for longevity. In a marriage each anniversary becomes a milestone. But our love for each other is just a grain in the hourglass of time. If you look at all of history and then look at the span of our love, whether it is for our spouse or parents or children or friends, we see that it is a span of years – years which are no more than a grain of sand in the hourglass of history.

But the love of Christ for us is everlasting. Not only will he love us eternally, but he has already loved us from before the creation of the world. Do you remember the Lord's words to Jeremiah? In Jeremiah 1:5 he says, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you."* And later, in Jeremiah 31:3, the Lord declares: *"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."*

Even before he created the universe and all that is in it, he already loved us. As Ephesians 1:4-5 puts it: *"...He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will..."* Already before he created the world, Revelation 13:8 tells us, he wrote the names of his elect – your name and mine if by grace we have saving faith in Christ alone – in his Book of Life.

How long is the love of Christ? It is immeasurable, infinite and eternal - yet what a crucial prayer it is that we would grasp something of the length of the love of our Lord for us!

The apostle also prayed that that we would grasp how high the love of God is. Just how high is the love of God? It is high enough to exalt the most vile sinner who repents and believes into the realms of heaven.

Because Christ was willing to leave the highest place in heaven to come to a lowly manger, we who believe in him are exalted to the heights of heaven. The love of Christ is so lofty and so high that he came to this fallen world from the glory of heaven and sacrificed himself for us, covering our sins with his precious blood and imputing to us his perfect righteousness.

But not only did Paul pray that we would grasp the breadth and length and height of the love of Christ, but also how deep his love is. God's love is so deep that he loves the unlovable. It is relatively easy for us to love those who are lovable, humanly speaking. But we find it very hard to love those who are different than we are; they often seem unlovable. But the love of Christ is so great that he has a love for those the world disdains. The Pharisees were appalled and angered that Jesus loved tax collectors who were known cheats. They were appalled that he loved common fishermen and the blue-collar workers of his day. They were appalled that he would love – with a pure love – women of ill repute.

And the apostle Paul was amazed at the depth of God's love for him. He had persecuted the church and yet the Lord still loved him, redeemed him, and used him for his glory. As he writes in verse 8, *"To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ..."*

Part of those unsearchable riches is a knowledge of the depth of Christ's love for his people. Do you think Peter understood something of the depth of the love of Christ, when he was forgiven and restored, even after denying ever knowing Jesus, three times over, with curses, before the rooster crowed? Or what about Thomas? What depth of love Christ used, dealing gently with doubting Thomas, restoring and bringing him into fellowship again!

Perhaps there are some here who wonder, "Could God really love me? Would God really love me

since he is omniscient and knows my thoughts? Does God really love me knowing my actions, knowing my apathy, knowing my sinfulness?”

The prayer of the apostle is that you would know how wide, how long, and also how deep the love of Christ is – that yes, it reaches down into the depth of depravity in your life and mine, and redeems us and sets us in the heavenly realms with Christ, for as he himself said, *“I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance”* (Luke 5:32).

As Paul concludes his prayer, he adds another petition. At the end of verse 19 he prays *“that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”* Some have asked why the apostle would pray this petition. They ask, “How can limited, finite creatures like us be filled to the measure of the fullness of God? What does he mean by that petition?”

The petition of the prayer is that we would realize that our cup is truly filled in this life, regardless of our circumstances, and that throughout all eternity the Lord will continue to fill, and fill, and fill – the full measure of his love to us. As David wrote in Psalm 23: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* – That is being filled with the fullness of God!

Immeasurably More

This prayer, winding heavenward like a beautiful stairway, leads to a magnificent doxology of praise. In verse 20 and 21 we are assured that the Lord will do *“immeasurably more”* – *“far more abundantly”* (ESV) than all we can ask.

You ask for strength and he does abundantly more. He gives you his Holy Spirit. You ask for faith he does immeasurably more. He strengthens your faith so that you can walk through even the deepest trials, for God himself has promised:

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:2-3a)*

You ask for a token of his love, and he does immeasurably more. He allows you to grasp an increasing measure of the width, the length, the height and the depth of his love in this life. And he assures you that you will be filled with all its fullness, discovering the full measure of his love throughout all eternity.

Not only does he provide immeasurably more – far more abundantly – than all we can ask, but the doxology in verse 20 and 21 assures us that he will provide more than what we can even think, even more than what we can even imagine. Verse 20-21: *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.

We cannot begin to imagine what God has in store for us. We can grasp something of the essence of his love, but our imaginations cannot even begin to fully comprehend the greatness of that love. And that has been true for God's people throughout all the ages.

Consider Abraham. God promised Abraham that even though his wife, Sarah, was barren he would have so many descendants that they would outnumber the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. But do you think Abraham could really imagine the greatness of God's promise? Could Abraham really imagine how his descendants would not only be physical descendants, but spiritual descendants? Could he imagine the truth that would later be written, in Galatians 3:29: *"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*? Could he really imagine that people from every tribe and language and nation would be a part of Abraham's seed?

In Abraham's life, the Lord certainly did far more than what Abraham could ever have thought. And the same was true for Moses. He never thought that he could be a leader of God's people. He had a stuttering tongue, he had killed an Egyptian, he had blood on his hands. How could God use him to be a leader of his people?

And beyond that, do you think that Moses ever thought – ever imagined – that he would be a type of Christ? As he interceded for the people, after they made the golden calf and on other occasions, his intercession was a foreshadow of the intercession of Christ who ever lives to intercede on our behalf, so that in the words of Hebrews 7:25 we are *"saved to the uttermost."* Do you think Moses could ever fully imagine that?

Or what about David? David was that younger brother, looked down upon by his older brothers, just a shepherd boy watching over his father's flock. Admittedly he saw God do great things in answer to what he asked - when he fought Goliath, conquered the Philistines, even became the King of Israel. Admittedly he rejoiced in the promise that the Messiah would come from his descendants. But do you think David could grasp the full magnitude of God's blessings to him, that God's only begotten Son – the eternal Christ – would be born out of the lineage of David?

You see, the Lord did more than any of these believers could have thought or imagined. – But what about you? Do you realize that God has promised to not only do immeasurably more than what you ask, but that he has promised to do immeasurably more than what you can think or imagine?

The reason why God will do immeasurably more than you can even imagine is there in verse 20 where Paul writes: *(He) is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us*

It is because he is in us that we can be assured that he will do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. We can be assured that just as we do not see the complete story now – just as Abraham,

Moses and David, did not see the completeness of God's work in their lifetime – we, along with them, will see the fullness of that redeeming love in the life to come.

And the reason we have this blessed assurance is because of Christ. His sacrifice for us on the cross, along with his life of perfect obedience to every nuance of the law, assures us that he is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine, for he dwells within us, through the Holy Spirit who brings to mind all that Christ has taught us (John 14:16-20).

That truth is impressed upon us whenever we take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Whenever you see, hold and taste the elements of wine, juice and bread, remember that Christ has done immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine.

But that blessed realization should be with us every day, not just when we take the sacrament. Whenever we consider that the Lord left the glory of heaven for a life of persecution and sorrow, which culminated on the cross of Calvary – where he suffered and died for sinners like you and me – we should realize that he has done immeasurably more – far more abundantly – than anything we could ask, think or imagine through the sacrifice of himself.

With the hymnwriter, we can only ask:

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me? (Charles Wesley, 1738)

Not only when you take the Lord's Supper, but always, remember with deep gratitude that the Lord our God has done immeasurably more than all that we can ask, think or imagine. In this life we see only the outer fringe of his greatness and glory, but in the life to come we will experience the fullness of the magnitude of the love of God demonstrated in the giving of his Son, for there is no greater demonstration of love. As Jesus himself said, "*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13).

That supreme act of redeeming love is above what any of us could ever ask, think or imagine, but it is freely given to all, who by God's grace, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ with saving faith! May that describe you, and may that describe me, this day and always! Amen.

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. – Ephesians 3:20-21

“To Him Who Is Able”

Ephesians 3:14-21

I. Paul’s prayers set a model for our prayers as he prayed:

1) That we would be strengthened inwardly by the Holy Spirit (16)

2) That Christ would dwell in our hearts by faith (17) so that we understand the greatness of His redeeming love (18)

3) That we would be filled to the full measure of God (19)

II. God’s promise:

1) He will do far more than we can ask (20a)

2) He will do immeasurably more than we can think or imagine (20b)