

For This Reason We Bow, Ephesians 3:14-21

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April 26, 2020

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Today marks about the halfway point of our emphasis on one of our five identities as a church: the identity of family. This emphasis also included what we called Formation Trainings. Now what does *family* have to do with *formation*? Well, our sermon series in the letter of Ephesians has been teaching us just that: it is only in the context of a loving church *family* that we can all be *formed* into the image of Christ.

I believe today's passage will make that very clear. So I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Ephesians 3:14-21. To help you follow along, here is a little guide for today's message: the title of today's sermon is "For This Reason We Bow". And the main idea is this: Our growth depends on God. And if our growth depends on God, then that means we must pray for it. We must:

- 1) Pray for the Power of God to Strengthen Us - vv. 16-17a
- 2) Pray for the Love of God to Enlighten Us - vv. 17b-19a
- 3) Pray for the Fullness of God to Fill Us - vv. 19b

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ephesians 3:14-21. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

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. Ephesians 3:14-21

The Lord has spoken to us. Let's say this together: Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

Exposition

Growing up, one of the things that helped form my relationship with Jesus perhaps more than anything else was something called a Chrysalis Flight. This was a weekend spiritual retreat for students, conducted by other students and adults who had already been on the retreat at some point. Of course it included the typical things that go with group retreats: teaching, singing, and being outside. But what made it unique is for months in advance, volunteers prepared for each person who would attend *by name*.

The idea was that on this weekend, every participant wouldn't just hear about the love of Jesus, but it would be demonstrated to them in radical ways by a community of Christians from different denominations: we're talking about delicious food prepared for them and gifts given to them and letters written by loved ones to them. But behind the scenes, what really characterized it all, was constant, desperate, bold prayer—that God would reveal his love in a powerful way.

And you know what? He did! It was one of the most powerful spiritual experiences I've ever had; both going on the retreat and then going back to serve at future retreats. But you know what was also heart-breaking about it? Many of the people who went and encountered Jesus in such powerful ways, they then returned to homes and churches where the concentrated love of God was not demonstrated, and community was not cultivated, and the prayer was not desperate. And within a few months, the flame that had begun to flicker that weekend, had sadly gone out.

As Paul concludes the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, I think he has the same sort of concern in mind. The mystery he's been unpacking is nothing less than *cosmic*—cosmic meaning epic, encompassing all of time and space. For it to be revealed to you is to have a powerful experience of the love of God. Awesome! Now what? Paul knows that if this doesn't get into our marrow in such a way that it characterizes our homes and church, then within a few months this flame, too, will be sadly gone out.

So how does he respond? Desperate, bold prayer. We read in verse 14:

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, Ephesians 3:14

As a demonstration of the love he's going to pray for the Ephesians to have, Paul bows his knees before the Father. That may not seem like a big deal, but the typical posture that Jews and Christians used for prayer was standing, not kneeling. Let me just ask you: how does your posture of prayer change when you find yourself praying desperately for someone you love, say a child who's headed into an emergency operation? You hit your knees! Well, that's what Paul is doing here.¹

But this is also a demonstration of the power Paul is going to pray for the Ephesians to have. That's why he describes the Father (in verse 15) as the One

¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, Ephesians 3:15

This also may not seem like a big deal, but think about how naming things in the Bible carries the idea of exercising dominion or even bringing those things into existence. One of the places we see this clearly is in the book of Isaiah, where God says,

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing. Isaiah 40:26

So, to make the connection back to Ephesians, when Paul is saying that every family in heaven and on earth is named by the Father, he's making a statement about God's power. It's like, 'I am praying to the One who *brought all of us into existence*—so you think he can answer this prayer?' Yeah Paul, pray as big a prayer as you want. Our heavenly Father can answer it!²

And that's exactly what he does. One pastor describes Paul's prayer like "a staircase by which he climbs higher and higher in his [desire] for [the Ephesians]."³ So church, let's climb this staircase together.

1) Pray for the Power of God to Strengthen Us - vv. 16-17a

This brings us to our first application: pray for the power of God to strengthen us. We read in verse 16,

¹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 201; Matt Chandler, "Strength, Love and the Fullness of God, Ephesians 3:14-21,"

<https://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/strength-love-and-the-fullness-of-god>

² Lincoln, 202-204

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 134

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, Ephesians 3:16

Why does Paul start with asking God to strengthen the Ephesians? Well, when a perfect, infinite being reveals himself and comes to dwell in an imperfect, finite being like you and me, it's kind of like dropping a concrete block into a paper sack. We need spiritual strength to be able to contain such a weight of glory.⁴ That's part of why so many people walk away from Christ—it's just too much to handle—without help.

The help that Paul seeks, however, is a certain kind of strength. For example, when I became a teenager who thought I could take my dad, I quickly learned that young man strength is very different from old man strength. Young man strength is all about effort; old man strength is all about wisdom—let's just say dads know how to put a young man in his place.

Paul's not interested in young man strength here, the kind we see in the Old Testament where God empowers a warrior for battle, or in the New Testament where Peter cuts off a soldier's ear to protect Jesus. That's the outer man. Paul is praying for the inner man—the heart, the deepest part of our being. The part that, even while the outer man is wasting away (like Paul rotting in jail), the inner man can be renewed day by day.⁵

In case this kind of strength still isn't clear, Paul qualifies it further in verse 17,

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith— Ephesians 3:17a

Well this is kind of strange—doesn't Christ already dwell in their hearts by faith? Why would Paul pray for this? Well, what's helped me to understand this is one of the most famous sermons in the 20th century; it was titled, "My Heart, Christ's Home," and it was preached by Presbyterian pastor Robert Boyd Munger. Instead of being a purely expositional sermon (like we're used to), it was based on an analogy of the Christian life as Jesus Christ coming to live in your home. Now Robert didn't just make up this idea—it actually was based on Ephesians 3:17, which might also be translated,

that Christ may settle down and be at home in your hearts by faith, Ephesians 3:17a, WEY

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), Loc 1848

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:16; Arnold, Loc 5576-5596

So throughout the sermon Robert walks you through what it's like for Christ to dwell in each part of his home (or heart). At first his desire is to be a good host, to make Jesus feel as comfortable as possible:

- Ok Jesus, I'm going to bed. Rest well, I'll see you tomorrow.
- Ok Jesus, I'm going to work. Make yourself at home.
- Ok Jesus, I'm going to be busy today. I'll try to find time to hang out later.

But Jesus isn't just satisfied to stay in the guest room—he wants to be present in *every part* of Munger's life. At one point Jesus says to him, "The trouble is that you have been thinking of [being with me] as a means for your own spiritual growth. This is true, but you have forgotten that [being together] means something to me also...Whether or not you want to be with me, remember I want to be with you."⁶

That's what Paul is praying for. And that's what we must pray for one another. Let's not just be satisfied that we are saved. Let's settle for nothing less than Jesus vividly dwelling in every part of our lives! Church, pray for the power of God to strengthen us.

2) Pray for the Love of God to Enlighten Us - vv. 17b-19a

But there's something else that goes hand in hand with our need for God's power. This brings us to our second point of application: pray for the love of God to enlighten us. Paul continues in the second half of verse 17,

that you, being rooted and grounded in love, Ephesians 3:17b

What Paul is referring to here, I think, is the love the Ephesians had already experienced from God and among one another. This is what defined their introduction to the Christian life (and should define anyone's introduction): *love*.

Listen, if you're a tree that's gonna survive all the storms about to blow your way, you've gotta have what? Deep roots. And if you're a skyscraper that's gonna bear the weight of all that steel and concrete, you're gonna need what? A deep foundation. God's desire for us is that we would be deeply rooted and firmly founded in the assurance that—no

⁶ Robert Boyd Munger, *My Heart, Christ's Home: A Story for Old and Young* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1963). Loc 78-81

matter what storm blows or what weight crushes—he loves us and his family loves us. If the enemy can begin to convince you that isn't true, you'll immediately start to crumble.⁷

Paul continues his prayer in verse 18, (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, Ephesians 3:18

As important as our initial experience of love is, that's not enough for Paul. Here he is praying for an ever-deepening experience of this love.⁸ A loving spiritual family is the soil in which we grow. The way we measure out God's love for us over the course of a lifetime is according to the measure of God's family, and the endless expressions of love that we experience from each individual part.⁹

But notice once again the mention of strength—remember, without God's power we cannot grow in our comprehension of God's love. In fact, look at this weird construction in the verse: “what is the breadth and length and height and depth”—Paul doesn't even clarify what he's referring to; most people just think he's talking about God's love. But there's good reason to think he's actually referring again to God's power:

For one, the only places where this four-dimensional phrase seems to show up in ancient literature is in books of magic. There, the magician is always seeking insight into the measure of a spirit's power—its breadth and length and height and depth.

But also, think about who Paul was writing to:

- The Ephesians came from a background of manipulating spiritual powers.
- Their lives were defined by the conviction that the goddess Artemis controlled the cosmos.
- They were still using books of magic even after their conversion.

So the massive lingering question for them wouldn't so much have been God's love, but his power. Can he finish what he started? Can he carry through with what he's promised?¹⁰

⁷ Stott, 136; Lincoln, 207; Arnold, Loc 5695

⁸ Arnold, Loc 5676

⁹ Stott, 138; Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 104

¹⁰ Arnold, Loc 5756-5791

So Paul prays that God would give them the strength to know the measure of what cannot be measured: the power of God. It's like taking a tape measurer to the Great Wall of China. You stretch it out until you get to the end of tape, and then you look up at the endless wall wrapping over distant mountaintops. Now what? You chuck the tape over the wall and stand in awe of the awesome structure, that's what you do! Paul wants us to stand in awe of the power of the one whom we cannot possibly measure.

And along with it Paul wants them to, verse 19,

19 know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, Ephesians 3:19a

Paul is basically praying that we might know that which cannot be known—what?! Anybody tracking with me here? This is why I used the word “enlighten” in this point—we need God to supernaturally shed light on what we otherwise cannot see. How does that happen?

Well, it happens through two kinds of experiences that are just as inseparable as God's power and love: objective experiences and subjective experiences.¹¹

Objective	Subjective
Reading my Bible, rightly dividing the word of truth, growing the grace and knowledge of the Lord—sacred and uneventful	Reading my Bible, having a profound experience of God speaking something very clearly and specifically—sacred and unforgettable
Worshiping on Sunday, being fully present, singing out, giving praise to God in the midst of his people—sacred and uneventful	Worshiping on Sunday, being deeply moved by a song, sensing the Lord's presence, lifting my hands with tears—sacred and unforgettable
Meeting with Family Group, sharing my evidence of grace, praying for others, applying the Word—sacred and uneventful	Meeting with Family Group, confessing hidden sin, feeling deeply loved in my vulnerability, changed—sacred and unforgettable

Church, this is life in the family of God, millions of both objective and subjective experiences—and we need them all!¹²

¹¹ Chandler, “Strength, Love and the Fullness of God, Ephesians 3:14-21”

¹² Hughes, Loc 1916

But the love of Christ will not continue to dawn on us in these ways unless we ask for it! So let's not settle for the experience of love we had years ago when we first followed Christ. Let's pray for the love of God to enlighten us.

3) Pray for the Fullness of God to Fill Us - vv. 19b

This brings us to our third and final point of application: pray for the fullness of God to fill us. We read in the second half of verse 19,

that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:19b

Here Paul reaches the top of the staircase in his prayer—and there's nothing bigger he could ask for.¹³ It's so big that, honestly, I don't really know what it means. But here's a crack at it.

I think this comes from Ephesians chapter 2, where Paul described God's universal family as a temple. Remember that? Jesus is the cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundation, we are the stones—and it's all still under construction. Well, God doesn't just want to finish building his temple, he also wants to fill up his temple with his presence. He wants to give all of himself to us, in such a way that we look exactly like him, both individually and collectively.

Let's go back to the old sermon "My Heart, Christ's Home" for a moment. The analogy goes on to describe Jesus moving around in the home from one room to another. And the whole time Robert wants to be a hospitable host. But what he realizes by the sermon's end—Jesus isn't satisfied with just being a guest. He wants Robert to surrender every part of his home. Jesus wants to rule over it all, and fill it up with his presence.¹⁴ It's just like we told Luka a couple weeks ago: Jesus moving in is not the end of the journey, it's only the beginning. He wants to grow us up to look exactly like him, just as Romans 8:29 tells us,

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, Romans 8:29

So church, may we have a holy dissatisfaction. Let's not settle for anything less than every member of this family formed to the image of Christ. Let's pray for the fullness of God to fill us.

¹³ Stott, 134; Lincoln, 215

¹⁴ Munger, Loc 180-192

Conclusion

After serving on Chrysalis Flights for almost ten years, I finally became aware of something: how desperately I wanted that retreat weekend, and the diverse people who gathered in the love and power of Christ, to be my church. And, of course, they were, in the sense of the universal church. But I wanted them to be my year-round, local church. Now as any of you who have been on a retreat or camp or mission trip know, the flame that you experience in that concentrated time is hard to be maintained in the grind of daily life.

But could it be, that right here at little Antioch Church, we might be a community marked by the love and power and fullness of God; a people among whom the flame does not go out? Is that possible?

Paul says, ‘Yes! That and far more.’ He concludes his prayer in the way that cosmic theology is always supposed to conclude: with epic praise.¹⁵ He says in verse 20,

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. Ephesians 3:20-21

God isn’t just able to answer Paul’s staircase of prayer. He isn’t just able to empower us to live out all the commands that Paul is gonna unpack in the next three chapters of Ephesians.¹⁶ No, God is able to do what might be translated “infinitely more abundantly above all”.¹⁷ Above all what? Above anything we might ask for or even imagine.

Now this might fall flat on you. Perhaps you have asked God for something really big, but he seems to have not answered you. My mind goes to those in our church who have cried out to God for children, all to no avail. And to a distributed member for whom we were asking some very big and specific things, but seemingly with no response. Is God really able? And if he is, is he willing? Why would we have confidence to bow our knees before the Father?

For this reason. The language Paul uses here is similar to a quote from both Isaiah and 1 Corinthians. It says,

¹⁵ Hughes, Loc 1937

¹⁶ Arnold, Loc 5462-5479

¹⁷ Lincoln, 216

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him. Isaiah 64:4; 1 Corinthians 2:9, NLT

Now we typically think of this verse as referring to heaven. But what Paul's referring to as that which no mind had imagined, was "the mystery hidden for ages...but now revealed to his saints"¹⁸: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, life itself, coming to die in the place of sinners, and rising so that we could be reunited to God and one another forever. No one knew to ask for or even imagine such a thing! But God was able, able to take seemingly unanswered prayers for ages, and do infinitely more abundantly above all that was asked or imagined. This is the power at work in us.

And so for *this* reason we bow. Church, are you willing to bow with me? Recognizing that our growth totally depends on God? That if Antioch Church is going to contribute to the glory of God that is rising up throughout all generations, then we must pray for it. Not just pray for the virus to avoid us or job loss to elude us or a reopened country to relieve us, but:

- The power of God to strengthen us
- The love of God to enlighten us
- The fullness of God to fill us

And for those outside of Antioch and outside of Christ, don't let these days be like a weekend retreat, where the flame that flickers in you goes out as soon as life rushes back to normal. Let me offer you a loving invitation, jump into virtual community with us, where you can experience the love and power of God as he reveals his mystery to you more and more. While we are praying for each other in just a moment, would you pray for yourself? Ask God to help you repent, to stop running away from him and instead run to him. Ask him to open your eyes to the love he offers you through his Son, and the power over the sins you just keep returning to. Let your heart be Christ's home.¹⁹ Let's pray.

¹⁸ Colossians 1:26

¹⁹ Arnold, Loc 5892

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