



Ephesians 3:14-21

Strengthened with Power

1st Sunday after Christmas – Feast and the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus
January 1, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Here on New Year's Day 2017, let's look into God's Word to reset our spiritual compass to true-north. It is so easy for us to get drawn away from that heading by the magnetic pull of so many different activities and involvements we encounter in daily life. We can so easily forget who we are and where we're headed, not just individually but even as a church.

As a body of believers, for instance, we've faced some difficult challenges over the last couple of years. We've been tested in our understanding of who we are, where we're headed, and whether we're following the true Head of the church as closely as we ought. When such questions arise in a context of disagreement, they can be very unsettling. They can generate no small amount of uneasiness and confusion and even conflict that tears at the fabric of the body, as we've seen.

But even when there is no question or conflict about the spiritual direction of the church, it's still pretty important to test our heading periodically—to check our instruments to make sure we're actually traveling in the direction of our appointed destination! And I can think of no better time to do that than at the beginning of a new year. If that's not central to why we even celebrate New Year's Day, I don't know what is!

We have a portion of Scripture before us this morning that seems tailor-made for this purpose: Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church that closes out the first half of his letter, 3:14-21, a prayer that points true north, that aims at their being *filled with all the fullness of God* (19). Would you like to see that happen in Grace Church of DuPage in 2017? I surely would!

In this passage, Paul is praying for the Ephesians to grasp and understand and enter in to *the fullness* of their relationship with *Jesus Christ*. It strikes at the heart of what we're all called to be and to do as the church of the Lord *Jesus Christ*. 19 ... *The mystery of (God's) will...*, hidden in times past but *now revealed* (3:4-5), is 110 ... *to unite all things in (Christ)*, to bring *all things in heaven and on earth* under His headship, under the reign of King *Jesus!* So, Paul is instructing the Ephesians on

how that happens—he's explaining the clear and comprehensive gospel, then seeking God in prayer that they may really get it, before heading off in the second half of his letter (cc.4-6) to tell them how to live it.

He's recalibrating their spiritual compass to true north. Let's see how he did it, and hear it as instruction for us today.

PAUL PRAYS THAT THEY WOULD BE STRENGTHENED BY THE SPIRIT TO LIVE BY FAITH – 14-17A

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, God is the Father over all creation. And Paul prays 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you, the Ephesians, the church in all ages, to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith... He prays that we will be *strengthened with power through the work of his Spirit* such that we think and speak and live by *faith*—such that we're more fully transformed into His likeness, more aligned with Him *in (our) inner being*, to *41 ... walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which (we've) been called.*

Our *inner being* is the place where we are *strengthened* by His *Spirit*, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *2Co4:16 ... our outer self is wasting away, but our inner self is being renewed day by day.* This is where we're *strengthened with the (Spirit's) power* to trust *Jesus*, and live in that trust. We have confidence that when *Jesus (Scripture)* says one thing and the heroes or authorities of this world say another, we trust Him. That trust feels unshakable. There's joy in obeying His Word, adventure, a sense of (*empowered*) privilege: to *love (our) enemies (Mat.5:44)*, to *overcome evil with good (Rom.12:21)...* And we *love* the challenge!

So there is adjustment #1 to our spiritual compass here at the start of 2017. In Paul's prayer for the Ephesians we hear a prayer we can begin praying for each other, for GCD. We can be praying for this body *to be strengthened with power in (our) inner being through (the work of God's Holy) Spirit so that Christ (will feel at home) in (our) hearts* because of the *faith his Spirit* is enabling. Wow!

Now, two things: first, please know that this is not a two-step process. We're not first *strengthened with power* so that at some later time *Christ may dwell in (our) hearts through faith.* *The Spirit's strengthening activity is the same as that of Christ's indwelling presence (O'Brien 258).* It is precisely our *faith in Christ* that's being *strengthened in (our) inner being.*

And second, just notice *that* it is according to the riches of (God's) glory that we're strengthened with power through his Spirit! Are you aware of any limitation to the riches of (God's) glory? Do you imagine that if our faith is being strengthened with power (by God's) Spirit according to the riches of his glory, it might make a difference in our lives—how we think and speak and live day by day? I believe if our bank accounts were being strengthened according to the riches of our newly elected President it would change the way we live day by day! How much different might the difference be when it is our inner being that is being strengthened according to the riches of the infinite glory of our eternal God? Again, there is adjustment #1.

PAUL PRAYS THAT THEY WOULD BE STRENGTHENED IN LOVE TO GRASP JESUS' LOVE – 17B-18

This second adjustment is parallel to the first, and indeed flows from it. So, Paul prayed ¹⁶ *that, according to the riches of (God's) glory, he may grant (us) to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in (our) inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in (our) hearts through faith—and now that (we), being rooted and grounded in (Christ's) love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of that love.* What he's saying is that, *through the strengthening of (our) inner person by God's Spirit and Christ's indwelling (presence), (we) are to be established in love so that (we) will comprehend the greatness of the love of Christ* (O'Brien 260).

We were ²¹ ... *dead in trespasses and sins...* ⁴ *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ ... made us alive together with Christ, and saved us by His grace!* He loved us so much that He saved us! Now we're rooted in (Christ's) love, drawing life from Him, like a tree draws nutrients from soil (cf. Psa.1), or a branch from a vine (cf. Joh.15). We're grounded in His love like a building set on a sure foundation. So, our life and strength are established, ensured by (Christ's) love, which is showered upon us in (God's) saving grace! (cf. Rom.8:32) And as we begin to see the indescribable immensity of His saving grace toward us, we begin to grasp the vast dimensions of (Jesus') love. Paul is praying that the (strengthening) of our inner being will not only show itself in the quality of our faith in Christ, but also in our full reassurance of His unbounded love!

PAUL PRAYS THAT THEY WOULD KNOW THE UNKNOWABLE TO BE FILLED WITH GOD – 19-21

And this second adjustment rolls straight on into the third, where His love is magnified in vivid ways! We truly need to grasp the vast dimensions of (Christ') love, ¹⁹ *and more, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...*—to know His (unknowable) love—the paradox of our Savior's

love! Note first that this is not a call for us to *love Jesus* more, but a call to drink in His *love* for us. And this *love* we're called to *know, surpasses knowledge!*

So, what does *surpasses knowledge* mean here? Two possibilities: either Jesus' *love* cannot be known completely—no matter how much you *know* of it, there is still more to *know*, to *comprehend*; there's no way to grasp it all—or Jesus' *love* cannot be known cognitively—there's no way to *comprehend* the true essence of it; thus, until you experience it to the point where you realize it defies description, you can be confident you haven't understood the uniqueness of it! You're probably still hindered by the limitation of human *love*. But even if you are beginning to understand its indescribable nature, you must grant that you can never really *know* it in its *fullness*. So, really, these two categories merge into one. Even if we're capable of experiencing (*Christ's*) *love* to the point where we recognize cognitively that it's indescribable, there is therefore no doubt that we don't *know* it completely! So, Paul is praying that we will come to a clear enough (*comprehension*) of (*Christ's*) *love* that we're awestruck by it! And we're so awestruck by it that our response to it is a confession that, without question, it *surpasses knowledge!* Are you hungry for that paradoxical *knowledge* of Christ's love here at Grace Church?

Now, with this in mind, we need to pause for a moment to reflect on what it means that something is so vast that it is (*unknowable*), actually infinite, (*surpassing*) *knowledge*. Think about it. Have you ever stood on the beach on a clear night underneath a canopy of stars, those twinkling points merging into a sheet of light? The sand stretches out of sight to your right and to your left. The incessant rolling of the ocean shouts out its untamable immensity. Yet, the exact number of water droplets in the world's oceans can be numbered. Their total volume can be measured. The same is true of the grains of sand on the world's beaches, and the stars in the heavens. They can all be counted. It's pretty simple math, just with unusually large numbers! All of this is measurable, (*knowable*). But ¹⁹... *the love of Christ...*, for us, *surpasses knowledge!* And as we begin to grasp that—(*knowing*) the (*unknowable*)—in that (*knowing*) ¹⁹... *we may be filled with all the fullness of God!*

This seems impossible, doesn't it—that we could be so *strengthened in faith* that *Christ* could actually feel at home in our *hearts*, and that we could so *know His love* that we actually realize it is beyond description, and that we actually experience it in all of its indescribable *fullness*? Doesn't that seem impossible to you, like it's hyperbole—stirring, even motivating, but not really attainable?! I believe that is why Paul finished this prayer, and indeed this opening half of his letter, with one of my favorite doxologies in all of Scripture: 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,*²³ *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* I like the NIV: *20 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.* Recognizing that God can do more than we can even imagine, not to mention *ask—more than we can dream up, or fantasize about!*—*according to the power of His Spirit Who is at work within us, (strengthening) us in our inner being,* this is absolutely necessary in order for us to have any sense of hope that what Paul prays for us here can actually be accomplished *within us!*

Do you see how these adjustments recalibrate our spiritual compass? Do you see how they re-aim our sites here at the beginning of 2017?

CONCLUSION

So, what do these adjustments do for us? Three brief lessons: first, *they spotlight our need.* All that is done here is done *to us, for us!* The *Spirit (works) in us to strengthen us in our faith* (16) and in our *(comprehension) of (Christ's) love* (18). It is only by His *work* that this becomes our experience! Second, *they fire our imagination.* These adjustments remind us that, even with our severe limitation, we can actually *know* the joy of trusting *Christ*, and of *(comprehending)* of His *(utterly incomprehensible) love* for us! And third, *they call us to pray.* Pray for this body like Paul prayed for the Ephesians! Pray according to his requests offered here. Use your *(imagination)* guided by these requests, realizing that *God Himself* has reminded us here that He can do *immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine through his power that is, right now, at work in (our) inner being!*

Now, if we're going to pray for this body in this way, we need to give time to prayer. Let me suggest a few action steps: first, email me one or two requests that you would like to pray for GCD this year, and I will pray them with you. Second, spend one extra, unbroken hour in prayer weekly—perhaps at Prayer Meeting on Wednesday evenings. Third, avail yourself of opportunities to pray: Prayer Meeting, women before the service, men during it, ABF, FLOCKS, and right here in our corporate worship services. Fourth, treat your times of prayer seriously, like the *God of the universe* is actually listening, and has promised to answer! Fifth, pray our Vision prayer often: *ask, seek, and knock for God to develop us into a community of worshipers that bears much fruit as we live and proclaim the gospel with authenticity and passion.* And sixth, look for signs that *God* is active among us, answering prayer, and encourage one another with those answers.

I have one. We've been praying this year, among many other things, for *God* prove His presence with us by enabling us to meet our financial need. Back in late January, we had to put the whole staff on notice, not knowing whether *God* would meet our need by bringing in additional funds, or by leading us to cut expenses to the level of income we were seeing. We budgeted as conservatively as possible. And our staff has been reduced by two for entirely other reasons. But we are finishing the year in the black, to the praise of (*God's*) glorious *grace*! Earlier this week one of our Elders let the body know that we were short about \$15,000 as year-end approached. And as the week ended, we are now roughly \$16,000 over.

God is for us, my friends, and not just GCD. He is for His church, His people. He has promised to answer our prayers (cf. 1Jo.5:14-15). And here He has promised to do so *immeasurably (beyond) than all we can ask or imagine*, as we seek His (*strengthening*) of our *faith*, and of our understanding of His *love*.

So, what does it look like when the spiritual compass of (*God's*) people is reset to true-north? Like Paul here, they ¹⁴... *bow (their) knees before (their) Father*, asking that they may *be strengthened with power according to the riches of His glory* to trust *Jesus*, and to *know His (unknowable) love*, such that (*they*) may *be filled with all the fullness of God!* Let's do this in 2017! Let's really do it!