

You'll have heard of the preacher who was invited to speak at a particular church for the first time and he was talking to one of the elders before the meeting started. The elder said to the preacher, 'I hope you're not one of those golfing preachers.' The preacher was a bit confused and asked, 'What do you mean – golfing preachers, I've not heard of that term before.' The elder replied, well he's like a golfer who shouts 'Fore', takes five shots, and writes down he's taken three! The golfing preacher thinks he'll talk for twenty minutes, says he'll take thirty to be safe, but ends up taking forty! I hope you're not one of those!

I'm not saying how long I'm going to take!

Let's read the verses we're going to be looking at this evening, in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians 3:14-21. There was a Religious Studies teacher who asked a teenage pupil what an epistle is; the answer he received was 'An epistle is the wife of an apostle!' Paul's letter to the Ephesians 3:14-21.

A couple of weeks ago we went to visit my family in sunny Donny – Doncaster in Yorkshire (great place) and we got to see my parents and my two brothers and my sister. And seeing how my brothers and sister have **aged** over recent years, I have to say my wife Wendy has got the best deal! But that's only going on external impressions – what they look like on the outside. To get a true impression, though, you have to look on the inside, don't you? – but how do we get to know what's going on inside a person?

Well, you can look at what they want in life; you can look at what their interests are; you can look at what they ask for. You can look at what their ambitions in life are. What do they say they want for a birthday present? Or for Christmas? What items are on their wedding present list? Are they always asking for clothes, or the latest gadgets? Or a pet? Or can they not live without the latest Playstation game? Perhaps they ask you to donate to charity rather than wasting your money on them. The Headmaster at my school has just retired, and as a leaving present he asked for loads of garden equipment and furniture – the chairs for him and the spade and fork for his wife! You can tell what a person is like by what they ask for.

It's been said that you can tell what a Christian is like by listening to their **prayers**, how do they communicate with their God? What are the desires and concerns they **express** in their prayers? It's easier with some Christians than others because some are shy or quiet, and their prayers are not always spoken out loud. But people can see what we're like as Christians by our prayers.

The letters of Paul encourage us to pray for our fellow Christians. This evening I want us to ask ourselves the question ‘How do we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ?’ Our fellow members of the family of God – what do we pray for them?

We’re looking at how Paul prays for his fellow believers. Here he prays for the Ephesian Christians, although early manuscripts didn’t **mention** Ephesus in chapter 1, verse 1, and it’s commonly thought that this was a sort of circular letter, to be read at the various churches in the area around Ephesus. There aren’t any references to specific problems or people in the church, so we can see that the contents of this letter are relevant to all believers.

The church at Ephesus had a special place in Paul’s affections: He’d established the church in 53 AD on his second missionary journey; he returned on his third journey and stayed there three years. We can read about it in Acts 19 – we’ll get to it in our morning series soon. He kept in contact with the church; 1 Timothy 1 tells us he sent Timothy to serve as a leader there; and now a prisoner in Rome, we read in Ephesians chapter 6 he is sending this letter to them with Tychicus, (a short man?).

Now this prayer is central to what Paul wants to say, and it also comes slap bang in the middle of the letter – three chapters before, and three after. In the chapters before the prayer, he reminds us of what Jesus has achieved in his death and resurrection – salvation for all who believe in him as Lord and Saviour; he reminds us that our salvation is by **grace** – God’s undeserved love and forgiveness; he reminds us that salvation is for people of **all** nations. In the chapters after the prayer, Paul then goes on to **apply** the doctrine – to talk about what this salvation should mean for our lives. After the message, the application, with this prayer central to the outworking of the message in our lives.

Interestingly, this reminded me of chapters 13-17 of John’s gospel that we were reading not too long ago. In chapters 13-16, Jesus spends time, you’ll remember, teaching his disciples about what life will be like after he dies, rises and ascends into heaven. Then – after the preaching – Jesus **prays** to God the Father for his disciples and for all believers. So Paul is following the Lord’s example here.

So let’s look closely at this prayer. Verse 14.

‘For this reason’ echoes verse 1 of this chapter, and refers back to what Paul has said in chapter 2 about Jesus being central to God’s purposes of salvation. For this reason, Paul is praying. His prayer is a result of his understanding of God’s purposes.

And that's what prayer should **always** be, the result of our understanding of God's Word. That's why we need to read God's Word, to find out God's will and purposes, because we read in 1 John 5:14, *'This is the assurance we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything **according to his will**, he hears us.'* We have to know God's will and purposes, and then pray in the light of what we understand.

How does Paul pray for the believers? He prays for these vital things for them: he prays for strengthening by God's power, true understanding of God's love and that they be filled with God's fullness.

He prays for strengthening by God's power. Verse 16, *'I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.'* Out of his glorious riches. Think who we're dealing with here – almighty God who is all-powerful. Out of **his** glorious riches, he works in our inner being by his Spirit, he strengthens his people by his almighty power, so that Jesus can dwell in our hearts by faith.

God is at work in our hearts, strengthening us with power. Derek reminded us recently that the word for 'power' – 'dynamis' – gives us our English word dynamite – great explosive power. But it also gives us the word 'dynamo' – a dynamo is a source of continuous power. So power, continual explosive power. That is what Paul is praying for these Christians, that they will know the power of God at work in them, strengthening them, as Christ dwells in them.

Chapter 1, verse 19 (second half) says, *'That power is like the working of his [God's] mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.'* Get this, friends, understand what this is saying – as Paul prays for his fellow believers, he asks God to strengthen them with the same almighty power which raised Jesus from the dead, the same incomparable power which was at work when Jesus ascended into heaven.

What an amazing request. What a very **bold** request. That the power of God should be exerted in the strengthening of those who believe in God through faith in the salvation won through Jesus on the Cross. And notice that Paul is asking for God the Trinity to be at work: he prays to God the Father that Jesus will indwell his people and strengthen them by his Spirit: Father, Son and Spirit all at work. God is at work in his people with great power – do we believe that? Do we pray for that?

We know that when someone becomes a Christian, Jesus lives in them by his Spirit, but as we understand more, experience more, it is as if we know it more and more **intensely**. As we pray for our fellow Christians, like Paul let's pray that God will *'strengthen [them] with power through his Spirit in [their] inner being, so that Christ may dwell in [their] hearts by faith.'*

Paul prays for power. **He also prays for true understanding of God's love.**

Second part of verse 17, *'And I pray that 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.'*

Again we see that Paul isn't just praying this for the immediate recipients of this letter, but for all the saints, because this is relevant to **every** Christian, **every** believer in God through Christ. Paul prayed this for you and me, right now. This is vital for every Christian to know in their lives. As well as knowing strengthening by God's power, we need to have a **real understanding** of God's love. So Paul prays for his brothers and sisters.

In John's first letter, we read that God is love. Chapter 4:16 says, *'God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in him.'* Verse 19 of that chapter says, *'We love because **he** first loved us.'* And how did he do that? In verse 10 we read, *'This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.'*

God first loved us by sending his Son Jesus to bring forgiveness for our sins by dying on the Cross. Because he loved us, when Jesus makes us a new creation, when we become a Christian, **we** can love God. And because God is love, love is at the **heart** of our whole new life as members of God's family. This causes us to love God, fellow Christians, and the world around us.

We are rooted and established in love (Ephesians 3:17). Paul uses two pictures here to illustrate the **importance** of this love:

Firstly using the picture of a tree, he says we are rooted in God's love; as a tree's roots go deep into the soil for support and sustenance, so our lives as Christians are rooted deeply in God's **love** for support and sustenance.

And secondly, he uses the picture of a building which is established, in other words has firm and solid foundations for stability; likewise our foundations are built upon the firm foundations of God's **love** for our stability.

That's where we are as Christians – firmly supported, sustained, stable and solid through being rooted and established in love.

But there's more for us to know and understand, much more; and this is what Paul is praying for here: *'that you ...may have power ...to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.'* Again we need God's power to understand this, because this love *'surpasses knowledge'*.

You can hear Paul's excitement as you read this, can't you: 'What amazing love – it's so wide, so long, so high, and so deep – in fact this love is so amazing it's beyond anything that we can ever understand with our finite minds. My tiny mind just can't take this in.' But he prays that whoever reads this letter will be given the power to better understand this love which is so big that it completely surpasses understanding.

Just like God's power is incomparably great (chapter 1:18), and there are incomparable riches in God's grace (chapter 2:7), and there are unsearchable riches in Christ, on the same lines God's love is unknowable. These things are beyond our understanding, but we **can** know more of them.

Paul prays that we will grasp how wide God's love is – it is wide enough to include all mankind – people of every generation, every tribe and nation; he prays that we will grasp how long it is – long enough to last forever, for all of eternity; he prays that we will grasp how high God's love is – high enough to lift his people up to glory in heaven; Paul prays that we will grasp how deep God's love for us is – so deep to save the worst sinner.

Lets' remind ourselves of another passage expressing this – Romans 8:38,39 – where we read, *'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*

Nothing is as wide, or long, or high or as deep as God's love. And Christians will be able to spend the **whole of eternity** exploring the breadth of it, I'm sure. And Paul prays that Christians from his generation and into eternity will be able to understand that in an increasing measure.

He prays that we will be strengthened by God's power; he prays that we will have an increasing understanding of the greatness of God's love;

And thirdly **he prays that we will be filled with God's fullness.**

Verse 19 again, '*[I pray] that you will be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*' (repeat)

While he was on earth, Jesus said, '*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*' John 10:10. An abundant life, fullness of life is promised by Jesus to those who place their lives in his hands. Philippians 1:11 tells us that we can be '*filled with the fruits of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.*'

David says of God in Psalm 16:11, '*... you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*' Fullness of life, fullness of experience through Jesus.

But someone once said, 'We can only find the fullness of life we crave when we realise that we're **empty**.' Men, women and children need this fullness of God, but they don't realise that they're empty. How sad when we see news reports on telly where youngsters say they're binge drinking because they're bored and there's nothing better to do. We need to tell people that abundant life, life in all its fullness, can **only** be found in Jesus.

But what Paul is praying for here is something much greater than that – '*that you will be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*'

Paul writes to the Colossian church, '*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity [that is God] lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ,*' Colossians 2:9,10. In other words, the fullness of God is in Jesus, and when we become Christians, we receive Christ, Christ lives in us, so we have the fullness of God within us.

But in Ephesians, Paul makes it clear that we need to **grow up to** the fullness of God. Let's take a look at chapter 4, verse 11 onwards, where Paul is talking about the church: '*It was he [God] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*'

It's clear that there is progress to be made – Christ lives within his people by his Spirit – fullness, perfection, completion is promised and assured; and as it is **God** who is promising these things, the letters say with confidence that it is ours **already**.

But as we read in 2 Corinthians 3:18, Christians are being transformed into Christ's likeness with ever increasing glory. We are being made up to the measure of fullness of God. Just like we're being made holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15,16), and we're being made perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48), likewise we're being made full as God is full. We're not there yet.

So Paul prays for this too – that believers *'may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.'* What an amazing request – to be filled to the fullness of God. Incomprehensible. How can this be? How can the fullness of God be compressed into me? Into you? What a thought! To be full as God is full. Why not spend some time thinking about this later.

So what does Paul pray for his fellow believers? He prays that they will be strengthened with the almighty power of God; that they will come to understand the greatness of God's love more and more; and he prays that they will be filled to the fullness of God.

When **you** pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ, do **you** pray these things for **them**? OK, each person has specific problems, difficulties to go through and we pray for these situations with them and for them. That's only right. But these are only temporary experiences. These are just physical needs. Perhaps we pray for our brothers and sisters if they have worries or fears. But these are passing mental needs.

Much more important are our brothers' and sisters' **spiritual** needs. This is what the example of this prayer in Ephesians is teaching us here. We have a duty, obligation, responsibility (call it what you like) to our brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for their **spiritual** wellbeing. I'm sure that this is according to the will and purposes of God, and I'm positive that it will please him. So let's do it. As we pray for the physical and mental needs of members of our family here and elsewhere, let's also pray for strengthening for them by God's power; let's pray that they will grow in understanding of the greatness of God's love; and let's pray that they will become full as God is full.

That's what Paul prays, that's what is written here under the prompting of God's Holy Spirit, so it must be possible, and I guess that one day **all** God's people will know the reality of it.

Read with me the final verses of this chapter. *‘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, forever and ever! Amen.’*

Paul and we know that God **can** answer such prayers as these, because he is **God** and he is at work in his people with the power that raised Jesus from the dead. He hears our prayers, he knows our hearts; he **knows** everything, and can **do** anything. There are **no limits** to his love, there are no limits to his power – he **can and will** do immeasurably more than we ask or even imagine. To him be the glory forever and ever, amen.

[Pray for your brother/sister near you along the lines of Paul’s prayer here.]