

mankind. This plan for salvation is an eternal plan, fixed in the mind of God from the very beginning.

which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord—All the promises of God find their Yes in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). He is not a preliminary or intermediate phase; he is the final word and the climax of the whole plan (Heb. 1:1-4).

V. 12 in whom we have boldness and confidence of access—The word for “boldness” was the word for the “freedom of speech” of the Greek citizen. God has granted Christians the right to speak and be heard before his throne of grace.

The “confidence of access” reminds us of Eph. 2:18 and the removal of all barriers standing between various kinds of men and their Father. It is only in Jesus, our great high priest, that we can have such confidence before God (Heb. 4:14-16 and 10:19-22).

V. 13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you—Paul also had to encourage the Philippians (1:12-14 and 2:17-18) and the Colossians (1:24) in regard to his imprisonment. Paul wanted them to see that imprisonment was not defeat. Suffering and affliction should not be allowed to overwhelm oneself, but should be accepted gladly. It is often in our weakness and distress that God’s power is most clearly seen at work (2 Cor. 12:9).

which is your glory—It was an honor to all the early Christians that Paul suffered for them as he did. Therefore, they should not lose heart (Gal. 6:9) but take great courage in the power of God to sustain Paul even in imprisonment.

Study Questions

1. How had Paul’s association with the Gentiles caused him to be imprisoned?
2. What was the “stewardship of God’s grace” which was given to Paul in verse two?
3. What does “mystery mean in these verses?
4. Why did God hide his plan from the sons of men in other generations?
5. What three descriptions of the Gentiles in verse six point out their full citizenship in God’s kingdom?
6. What is a “minister of the gospel?”
7. What is God teaching the angels?
8. What object lesson is he using to teach them?
9. What does it mean that God has “realized” his “eternal purpose” in Christ Jesus?
10. What is the boldness and confidence of access we have?
11. Can you appreciate how the people of Asia Minor would be tempted to lose heart over Paul’s imprisonment? Would you have wanted to volunteer to preach in his place?

Lesson Six (3:14-19)

A Glorious Prayer (3:14-19)

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 might through his Spirit in the inner man, 17 and that Christ may dwell in you hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul now concludes the prayer from which he has twice digressed. The power and beauty of this prayer transcend the frailties of human language, speaking directly to our hearts. All the glory of the body of Christ, filled with resurrection power, is graphically stated. If this prayer can be fulfilled in our lives today, the glorious bride of Christ will be seen by a doubting world.

V. 14 For this reason—This is the third time Paul has said these words (1:15 and 3:1), and now he will finally conclude his prayer.

I bow my knees before the Father—The usual posture for praying throughout the Old Testament was to stand with one's hands lifted toward heaven. Exceptions to this usual practice may be found in the case of Solomon (1 Kg. 8:54) and in the case of Daniel (Dan. 6:10). Perhaps inspired by what Jesus did at Gethsemane, early Christians adopted kneeling as a favorite posture. (See Acts 7:60; 20:36; and 21:5.) Whatever the posture of the body, it is the posture of the heart which is most important to God.

V. 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named—Paul's emphasis on the total Fatherhood of God is closely connected to the preceding verses, especially verse nine. God is seen as the ultimate source of all things and the original source of all families. Knowing that God is the ultimate giver of "every good endowment and every perfect gift" (James 1:17), Paul makes his request known.

This phrase may also be translated "from whom all fatherhood takes its name" (Phillips, NIV margin). If this is the right translation, the point is that God is the original model for fatherhood.

V. 16 that according to the riches of his glory—Paul is not asking God to do something beyond his resources. God's treasure house of riches is inexhaustible (Eph. 1:7 and 18; 2:4). God's blessings are limited only by the measure of our willingness to get into a position to receive them.

he may grant you—Paul states his requests in a striking way, linking his three-fold petition to the three Persons of the Trinity. To summarize in advance the content of Paul's prayer, let us use this outline:

Paul Prays that God Will Give:

- I. The Spirit Within—for Strength
- II. Christ Within—for Love
- III. God Within—for Fullness

to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man—In language reminiscent of 1:19, Paul prays for strength from God in his readers. The Holy Spirit is to be the channel of this strength.

God's Spirit has always been associated with power. In the time of the Judges, the Holy Spirit took possession of weak, fearful Gideon and destroyed a host of 120,000 Midianites (Judges 6:34 and 8:10). Some years later the Spirit "came mightily upon" Samson, enabling him to tear apart a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:6). On another occasion the Spirit "came mightily upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty men" (Judges 14:19). On yet another occasion the Spirit "came mightily upon him" and he killed 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:14). At the end of Samson's life we find him

praying for strength just one more time to destroy his enemies (Judges 17:28).

These incidents seem to illustrate a pattern of the Spirit's activity during the Old Covenant. The Spirit came with his might and strength upon only isolated individuals, and then for only a brief time period. The days had not yet come when God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28) to be a permanent resident within all believers. The coming of the indwelling Spirit at Pentecost was accompanied with many signs and wonders, but the real work of the Spirit throughout the Christian era was to be spiritual, not physical. His strength was to be for the inner man. He makes us strong to withstand not lions and Philistines, but to withstand the devil (Eph. 6:11-13) who walks about as a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8).

V. 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—Paul's second petition is that Christ may dwell in our hearts. Actually, this is very similar to the request for the Spirit in the inner man. The Spirit living within the Christian is Christ! (See John 14:23 and Rom. 8:9).

The indwelling Presence is promised as a result of repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38), but all this must be "through faith." To go through the motions without the underlying faith produces only mechanical emptiness. At the same time, to profess faith while disdainful obedience and commitment is to have no real faith at all.

One further lesson seems obvious. If a person ceases to have faith, he ceases to have a place within him where God in the Spirit may dwell.

that you, being rooted and grounded in love—The main thing associated with Christ living in us is love. (See also verse 19). To be "rooted" in love is to be firmly planted, with deep roots drawing both stability and nourishment from love. To be "grounded" in love is to have a "foundation" built upon the love of Christ.

It is remarkable how much of Christ's ministry was associated with love. His greatest commandments (in fact, all commandments) were summed up by love (Matt. 22:36-40). The identifying mark of his followers was love (John 13:35). The very first fruit of the Spirit (which is Christ within) is love (Gal. 5:22).

V. 18 may have power to comprehend with all the saints—Paul is still speaking of power, but now it is the power to comprehend the incomprehensible. The word for "comprehend" meant "to seize for oneself, to grasp with the mind." Just as Christ's riches are unsearchable (3:8), so is his love too great for us to grasp completely. Without God's help, for which Paul is now praying, we would be able to understand very little at all.

The phrase “with all the saints” is a subtle reminder that our mystic communion with Christ is not a private matter. Our faith is personal, but not private. We are not alone in the family.

what is the breadth and length and height and depth—Paul does not specify the object of which these are the measurements. While some have taken that object as the “mystery” named in earlier verses, it seems best to take these measurements in the present context of the love of Christ. Like a child who has just seen his first ocean or mountain, we should never cease to marvel at the magnitude of the love of Christ. He owed us nothing, he gave us all.

V. 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge—the word Paul uses here for “know” was used by the Greeks for the kind of knowledge that is gained by personal involvement and experience. The extent of this involvement is well illustrated by a use of the word in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In Genesis 4:1 Adam “knew” his wife and she conceived a son. In this context “to know” meant to enter into an intimate, productive relationship with one’s marriage partner.

What Paul is praying for is not just knowledge concerning the details and dimensions of Christ’s great love. He wants all Christians to really know that love through intimate, personal involvement. This, after all, is what eternal life is really all about (John 17:3).

The Greek word for “surpasses” is the same word which was translated “immeasurable” in 1:19 and 2:7. In all these places it refers to some facet of God’s nature that is too great to be completely understood or defined by mortal man. While we cannot totally grasp so great a concept as the love of Christ, we can come to know it and participate in it. It is this experiential knowledge for which Paul is praying. Christianity is not just feeling and emotion, but if there is no feeling and emotion, then it is not the Christianity of the scriptures.

that you may be filled with all the fullness of God—Paul’s third petition is that his readers be filled with the fullness of God, the third member of the Godhead. To think that the Creator, in all his vastness, could come and dwell within our insignificant frames is a mind-boggling thought! To be filled with God’s fullness is much the same as to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). In promising the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). Thus, it becomes very difficult to draw strict lines of separation between the Father, Son, and Spirit, and their respective

activities. The unity and diversity within the Trinity cannot be reduced to simplistic, easy terms.

It is “in Christ” that we are able to come to this “fullness of life” (Col. 2:10). As we become part of the body of Christ, God enters our lives and begins to fill us with his fullness. It is a process that is only just beginning at baptism, for even the mature Christians to whom Paul was writing were still in need of more filling. This is why Paul made this third petition and also charged them to be “filled with the Spirit” in 5:18.

Please consider this one additional thought. Is it possible for God to fill us more and more when our lives are stuffed full of the things of this world? Can you pour very much clean water into a cup full of garbage? Think about this the next time you sing “Fill My Cup, Lord”!

A Glorious Benediction (3:20-21)

20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

V. 20 Now to him who by the power at work within us—Paul’s prayer for God’s participation in God’s kingdom. The glorious power that is mentioned here is a power “at work within us.” God could have done all the Kingdom’s work by himself, but he has chosen to work through us. God rarely will do for us what he can do through us!

Most translations put the phrase “who by the power at work within us” at the end of this verse, where it is overlooked or ignored by many people. Perhaps we get so excited by the thought that God can do anything we could ask for or even think of, that we forget that he plans to do it through his power in us! If we sit back and wait for God to do it for us, it simply won’t be done. God will still be waiting for us to get up and get ready to be the appliance through which his power works.

This benediction is the close of the same prayer Paul began in chapter one. The power mentioned here is the same resurrection power of that chapter. Please review the comments made regarding verses 19 and 20 in that chapter.

is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think—Literally, “is powerful to do superabundantly beyond all things that we request or think of.” God has the power to grant anything we ask. However, he may refuse to grant it if it is contrary to his will (1 John 5:14-15) or contrary to his very nature. For instance, under no circumstances would God honor a request to lie (Heb. 6:18).

The energy resources of God’s kingdom are infinite. We need never fear that God will be unable to

provide the power to achieve great victories. We need only confirm that a given project is indeed according to his will.

God's plan is to work through his children. God has all the power needed to carry out this plan. It appears that the only thing lacking is the confidence and cooperation of his children. This verse opens up vistas of opportunity almost too great to grasp. The more one meditates on it, the more he is staggered by the possibilities. God is willing...and able!

V. 21 to him be glory—We do not actually “give” God glory. Rather, we recognize and acknowledge that he is already in full possession of it. God's glory is his majesty and shining splendor. It is his magnificence and radiance which are natural outgrowths of his very being. The word “glory” has an unavoidable association with brightness and light.

in the church—God is glorified in and by the church of Jesus Christ. One cannot bring glory to God while disdaining the church. Even choirs of angels cannot glorify God in such a way as to replace the glory God seeks from the church.

and in Christ Jesus—Just as the body glorifies God, so also does the head of the body, Jesus Christ. Throughout his earthly ministry it was always Jesus' purpose to glorify his Father, rather than himself. (See John 7:18; 12:28; 13:31; 14:13; 17:1).

to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen—If God is to be praised on the basis of his power working through us, and if that praise is to be sounded forth in all generations, then that includes us! Even in this generation it must be possible for the church to bring honor and glory to God. Even now God's power must be available to work through his people.

The word “Amen” comes from the Hebrew language, meaning “it is firm, heavy, solid, and trustworthy.” Paul believed in his heart and proved in his life that God's inworking power was a present reality. We add our “Amen” to this benediction today by proving that same power to be at work in us.

SPECIAL NOTE

Much has been said recently about how God works through us by giving each of us a special gift. Before we can serve him effectively we must “discover” our gift. Ray Stedman has even said, “The supreme task of every Christian's life is to discover his gift and put it to work” (*Body Life*, p. 131). It is often implied that a Christian who tries to serve God outside his own “gift” area will be ineffective and disappointed.

I believe it is possible to go to an unhealthy extreme concerning these gifts. To counter such excesses, let us consider these questions:

1. Where in all the Bible are we encouraged to “discover” our gift(s)?
2. Where does the Bible ever give any instructions on *how* to accomplish this “supreme task of every Christian's life”?
3. Has God ever warned us that his power at work within us is available only in our special “gift” areas? Will not God support and bless any work we attempt in His name and in His will?

I choose to temper the “gift theology” with an appreciation for resurrection power. I believe that God will work in and through whoever makes himself available to God. I believe we should attempt to work in the Kingdom not only on the basis of what we suppose our gift(s) to be, but also on the basis of the urgency and the need. I believe some people have been led to an unhealthy introspection, always asking “What is my gift?” instead of “What is my brother's need?” Finally, I believe it is possible to use the “gift theology” as a cop-out on God: “Lord, I'd love to serve you and meet this urgent need, but it just isn't my gift!”

Study Questions

1. Where did Paul begin the prayer which is concluded in this chapter?
2. How does the Trinity fit into this prayer?
3. How was the working of the Holy Spirit different in the Old Testament from that in the New Testament?
4. What is the “inner man” of verse 16?
5. How does Christ dwell in our hearts?
6. Can one be a true Christian, believing all the right doctrine and obeying all the right commands, if he does not have the love of Christ?
7. What does it mean “to know” the love of Christ?

8. What was Paul's request connected with God in his three-fold prayer?
9. Does God usually choose to work *for us* or *through us*?
10. Explain "to him be the glory."
11. Do you believe all this business is *really* possible in all generations—including this one?

Lesson Seven (4:1-10)

The Unity of the Body 4:1-6)

1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

We have reached a major turning point in this epistle. Paul now leaves the grand theology of how God gives salvation, to take up the practical application of how man lives it. If a person chooses to be "in Christ" and a part of the covenant people, there are certain obligations which are laid upon him. All these duties are for his own good, and they in no way earn him the favor which God has given him. They are simply the lifestyle the Christian should expect to live.

V. 1 I therefore—In nearly all of Paul's epistles, he sooner or later comes to the "therefore" or "so what." He has spent three chapters describing God's work in salvation and is now ready to make some specific applications. It will deepen your understanding of each of the many obligations which follow to consider them in light of what God has done to make salvation possible and in light of the body of believers to which we belong.

a prisoner for the Lord—As in the beginning of chapter three, Paul's reference to his imprisonment adds strength to his appeal. He is not an idle bystander just offering advice. He is the soldier of the Lord, serving and suffering to carry out his mission.

beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called—Perhaps the word "beg" sounds too pathetic or helpless. The Greek word Paul used meant originally "to call to one's side" and is usually translated "exhort" or "change." (Note the parallel usage in Rom. 12:1.)

In an absolute sense, there is no way we can "walk worthily of the calling," as Paul puts it. No Christian ever lived a perfect life—even after being cleansed and reborn. However, this does not mean we should ever be content to set our sights on anything less. Total perfection may never be attained, but we will certainly come closer to it if we aim for it. Human nature will always cause us to fall a little short of our goal, whether that goal is high or low.

The "calling" of this verse and verse four refers to God's invitation to become a part of the chosen people "in Christ." God never forces a man to join his covenant people, but "calls" or "invites" him. Many are "called," but only those who accept the invitation are "chosen" (Matt. 22:1-4).

V. 2 with all lowliness and meekness—The very first step we must take to "walk worthily" is to humble ourselves. Likewise, the very first pre-requisite for the unity sought in verse 3 is humility. (See Phil. 2:1-3.) People can never live together in unity so long as each person thinks to highly of himself.

The Greek word for "lowliness" means literally "humble-mindedness." The word was always used in a bad light in the secular literature of Paul's time, because lowliness was not considered to be much of a virtue.

"Meekness" means "having strength under control." It must not be confused with weakness. The weak person yields because he is helpless and can do nothing else. The meek person yields, in spite of his own superior strength, because he seeks the well-being of the other man.

with patience—"Patience" is literally "having a long mind or temper." When people blow up over every petty annoyance, unity becomes impossible. The best way to lengthen the fuse on you temper is to remember how much God has to overlook and forgive in your own life! (See Eph. 4:32.)

forbearing one another in love—"Forbearing" means "putting up with." If the Father has made you a part of the same family I'm in, then I have to "put up with" you. Moreover, I must do more than merely tolerate you—I must forbear you "in love."

Notice the logical progression of these four steps toward "walking worthy" of the calling:

1. Be humble-minded.