

# **THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS**

## **(LESSON THIRTY-FIVE)**

**“KNOWING THE LOVE OF CHRIST”**

**EPHESIANS 3:14-21**

*14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,*

*15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,*

*16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;*

*17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,*

*18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;*

*19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.*

*20 Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,*

*21 Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

In our last **Lesson**, we started to look at Paul’s prayer, on behalf of the believers in Ephesus, recorded in chapter 3, verses **14-21**. We noted that

this is the second of the two prayers of Paul recorded in the letter. In the first prayer, recorded in chapter 1, verses 15-23, Paul's emphasis is on **enlightenment**. In the second prayer, his emphasis is on **enablement** and **application**.

In verses 16-19, we have the substance of Paul's prayer to God for the saints in Ephesus:

*16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;*

*17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,*

*18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;*

*19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.*

Paul made four requests of God for the saints in his prayer. The four requests are for **strength**, **stability**, **apprehension**, and **fullness**. We stated that these were not to be considered as four isolated petitions, but as four parts of a whole, which directly relate to each other. One request leads into the next one, and so on. He prays that their "*inner man*" might receive spiritual strength, which will, in turn, lead to a deeper experience with Christ. This deeper experience will enable them to "*comprehend*" God's great love for them, which will result in their being "*filled with all the fullness of God.*"

The first request that Paul made on behalf of the believers is for **strength**. He prays That God would grant them, "*according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man.*"

We observed that Paul did not pray for the Holy Spirit's **presence** in the lives of the believers in Ephesus, because he was writing to persons who

were already saved. Instead he prayed for the **power** of the Holy Spirit to be operative in their lives, for many of them were not living overcoming lives. We noted that the **presence** of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer is the **evidence** of his or her salvation. But the **power** of the Holy Spirit is what enables him or her to live a consistently victorious life. We emphasized the point that the power of the Holy Spirit is the **only** resource that we have for Christian living today.

It is the power of the Holy Spirit operating in our lives that will enable us to be “*strengthened with might...in the inner man.*” This strengthening is to take effect by means of the power imparted by the Spirit of God in the “*inner man.*” The “*inner man*” means the spiritual core of the saved person where God lives and works. The outer man is perishing, but the inner man is being renewed. Paul makes this point in **2 Corinthians 4:16**. He writes, “*For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.*”

The second petition that Paul made for the believers in Ephesus is for **stability**. In verse **17** he writes, “*That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love.*” We said that Paul uses three words to convey his idea of spiritual stability. The words are “*dwell*,” “*rooted*,” and “*grounded*.”

The word “*dwell*” is the translation of the Greek word which means “to settle down and be at home.” The expanded translation is; “that Christ might finally settle down and feel completely at home in your hearts.” Christ was already resident in the hearts of the Ephesian believers, for Paul addressed them as “*saints*” in chapter **1** verse **1**. What Paul desired was for the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and feel at home in the hearts of the Ephesian believers.

The words “*rooted*” and “*grounded*” clearly indicate that the Christian must be stabilized. If there is to be power and stability in the Christian life, there must be depth. Our spiritual roots must go down deep into the love of Christ, and our spiritual foundation must rest securely on the bedrock of His love.

Being rooted and grounded are the result of the strengthening by the Holy Spirit in the inner man and the settling down of the Lord Jesus and His feeling at home in the believer's heart. Brothers and sisters, it is "*in love*" that we must be rooted and grounded, not in law. This love is the love of God with which the Holy Spirit floods the heart of the believer. The more the believer yields to the influence of the Holy Spirit, the more the Holy Spirit floods his or her heart with love.

What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit empower the inner man? It means that our spiritual faculties are controlled by God, and that we are exercising them and growing in the Word. It is only when we yield to the Spirit and let Him control the inner man that we succeed in living to the glory of God. It is critical for us to understand that the work of the Holy Spirit in the "*inner man*," is a work that He effects through means. He uses these means to fulfill His purpose of having Christ dwell in our hearts by faith.

The means that God has appointed to be used by the Holy Spirit to fulfill His purpose in our lives, are the ministry of the Word, prayer, Bible reading and fellowship. If we do not consistently engage in these spiritual activities, we will not be strengthened with might in the "*inner man*." If we are not strengthened with might in the "*inner man*," Christ will not "settle down and feel completely at home in your hearts," and we will not be "*rooted and grounded in love*."

The third petition that Paul made for the believers in Ephesus is for **apprehension**. In verse **18 and 19**, he explains that when a believer is strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit in the inner man, and, as a result, has Christ dwelling in his or her heart through faith, and thus has become rooted and grounded in love, he or she will be able "*to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.*"

The word "*comprehend*" conveys to most of us the idea of "understand." But the Greek word translated "*comprehend*," has a stronger meaning. The Greek word is **katalambanó:** (**kat-al-am-ban'**-

**o)** which means “to lay hold of so as to make one’s own, to seize, to take possession of.” It means to apprehend.

The English words “comprehend” and “apprehend” both stem from a Latin word **“prehendere”** which means “to grasp.” We say that a monkey has a “prehensile tail.” That means that the monkey’s tail is able to grasp a tree limb and hold on. Our word “comprehend” carries the idea of mentally grasping something; while “apprehend” suggests laying hold of it for yourself. In other words, it is possible for us to understand something without having a grasp of the full implications of that thing. We may understand what it means intellectually without ever really making it our own and benefitting practically from the knowledge.

Brothers and sisters, if we are honest we will have to admit that this is very often our experience as it relates to biblical truth. We are learning about the Doctrines of Grace and it is likely that the majority of us have grasped the information intellectually. We have comprehended or understood mentally what we have heard, but we have not laid hold of the doctrines to make them our own. We have not seized them and taken possession of them. We have not apprehended. And because we have not apprehended, the word preached has not profited us in any meaningful way. This is exactly why Paul prays so sincerely and earnestly for the believers in Ephesus. He prays that the saints might apprehend, not merely comprehend.

In **Joshua 1:1-5**, we read the following:

*1 Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying,*

*2 Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.*

*3 Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses.*

*4 From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast.*

*5 There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.*

Brothers and sisters, God had already given the land of Canaan to Joshua and the children of Israel. He informed them of the specific details of their borders and He assured them of His presence and support, thus guaranteeing their success. But they would not fully realize the reality of their promised possession without obedience to God's call to step out.

In **Ephesians**1 verse 3, Paul informed us that God had blessed us with "*all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*" Has the sole of our feet trodden on all of these spiritual blessings? They are ours, but have we possessed them? We have comprehended them but have we apprehended them?

The words "may be able," are the translation of a Greek word which means "to be eminently able, to have strength enough, to be quite able to do, to be in full strength, to be fully able." This compound word is one of the strongest Greek words for strength and signifies one completely capable of doing or experiencing something. Paul prays that the saints would receive from God the divine enablement to fully attain the objective of apprehending.

What does Paul want the Ephesian believers, and us, to apprehend? What is it that he wants us to lay hold of so as to make it our own? What does he desire for us to seize and take possession of? It is "*the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.*"

Brothers and sisters, it is important for us to bear in mind that what we are dealing with here, is not our love for Christ and our fellow believers, but with His love for us.

Paul uses terms that suggest vastness. He speaks of “*the breadth, and length, and depth, and height.*” Perhaps as he wrote these words, he was still thinking about what he had written at the end of chapter 2. There he had described the Church as “*a holy temple in the Lord,*” in which God takes up His abode and in which He dwells. As he contemplated the vastness of the Church as a great and ever expanding temple, he may have felt it to be a good way of describing the love of Christ to His people. In other words, the love of Christ for His people may be likened unto the breadth, length, depth and height of such a great building.

What is certain is that Paul was certainly concerned to bring out the enormity of the love of Christ for His people.

Regarding the words “*the breadth, and length, and depth, and height,*” **Expositor’s Bible Commentary** makes the following remarks: “The apostle is simply telling us that the love of Christ...is too large to be confined by any geometrical measurements. It is wide enough to reach the whole world and beyond...It is long enough to stretch from eternity to eternity...It is high enough to raise both Gentiles and Jews to heavenly places in Christ Jesus...It is deep enough to rescue people from sin’s degradation and even from the grip of Satan himself...The love of Christ is the love he has for the church as a united body and for those who trust in him as individuals.”

Brothers and sisters, for us to “*comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge,*” is not something that we can do in our own strength. We must have God’s power. And, we will not achieve this goal if we are not experiencing God’s power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ is coming to dwell in our hearts through faith.

**D. A. Carson** has observed that the remarkable thing about this prayer is that Paul assumes that even though he is writing to persons who are already saved, they do not have an adequate appreciation of the love of Christ. **David Martyn Lloyd-Jones** said that, “Our chief defect as Christians is that we fail to realize Christ’s love to us.” Beloved, as I survey the Church today, I believe that his assessment is spot on. Paul does not pray that the believers in Ephesus might love Christ more. Rather, Paul is praying that they might better grasp Christ’s immense love for them. Paul is praying that those who have already experienced the love of Christ, might come to experience it at ever-deepening levels.

Every genuine child of God knows the love of Christ in some way, but we do not all know it to the same extent. As we are exposed to the Doctrines of Grace, we begin to understand the depth of our sinfulness and how helpless and hopeless we are apart from God’s grace. And yet, at the same time, we are discovering how deeply and unreservedly we are loved! As we go deeper and deeper into the love of Jesus Christ, we realize that He loves us in spite of all our failures and our sins.

Paul’s desire is that the believers in Ephesus may be able to apprehend the vast dimensions of the love of Christ “*with all the saints.*” The words “*with all saints*” indicate that this spiritual capacity is not limited to a few select saints, but is the common property of all those saints who are the recipients of the strengthening in the “*inner man,*” of the Holy Spirit. But Paul is saying something more here which is of the utmost importance for every believer to recognize.

The words, “*with all the saints,*” indicate that the outworking or expression of Christ’s love, comes to us through other believers. In other words, we will never apprehend, we will never experience “*what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge,*” as individuals! We will only apprehend it as the Body of Christ!

Brothers and sisters, we grow in love when another believer demonstrates the love of Christ to us during a season of trial, temptation

and failure. We grow in Christ's love when we have to work through relational difficulties with another believer. We grow in the love of Christ when we extend love to believers who we find difficult to love, remembering that God loves us even though we are still unlovable. Any love that is merely theoretical and has not been forged in the fires of real life relationships is not tested. Genuine love must be worked out with people. That requires that we grow in forbearance, patience, kindness, and forgiveness. It requires all of the people of God, for every one of them to grasp all of the love of Christ.

I am of the view that Paul uses the phrase, "*the breadth, and length, and depth, and height,*" to indicate that our apprehension of the love of Christ for us, is a never-ending process, because it is not possible for us to know it exhaustively. Paul emphasizes this in verse **19**. He says, "*And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.*" This is a deliberate paradox. We **can** know something of His great love, and it is a definite knowledge, not just speculation. And our knowledge of our Lord's love for us should always be increasing as we interact with Him and with each other. But, in another sense we can never know it completely, because it is unfathomable. We will never come to the place where we will know all that there is to know of the love of Christ for us. No matter how much we have experienced of the love of Christ, there are oceans of love in the great heart of God that we have not yet known.

**Frances J. "Fanny" Crosby** wrote,

*"There are depths of love that I cannot know  
Till I cross the narrow sea;  
There are heights of joy that I may not reach  
Till I rest in peace with Thee."*

But I believe that even in eternity, our knowledge of the love of Christ for us will be increasing! "*The love of Christ which passeth knowledge*" parallels "*the unsearchable riches of Christ*" which Paul spoke of in **Ephesians 3:8**. Brothers and sisters, we are so rich in Christ that our riches cannot be calculated even with the most sophisticated computer.

Again we must be careful to note that Paul's request is not that the believers might love Christ more, as important as that is, but rather that they might understand in an experiential way the love of Christ for them. He is not referring to their knowing as simply a mental exercise or simple intellectual reflection. Paul wants them to be empowered so as to grasp the dimensions of that love in their own experience.

The fourth petition that Paul made for the believers in Ephesus is for **fullness**. Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus that they "*might be filled with all the fulness of God.*" **Warren Wiersbe**, in commenting on this phrase made the following remark. "It is said that nature abhors a vacuum. This explains why air or water will automatically flow into an empty place. The divine nature abhors a vacuum. God wants us to experience His fullness."

"*The fullness of God*" probably refers to the perfection of which God Himself is full. Paul is literally praying that we will attain to spiritual perfection, having all of God's perfection to fill us to overflowing. As our capacity to receive His perfection grows, He keeps filling us again and again with Himself! The idea of fullness implies total dominance or control, so that God perfectly controls our minds, our emotions, and our wills. **Dr. John MacArthur** comments that Paul's prayer is that we might be "so strong spiritually, so compelled by divine love, that one is totally dominated by the Lord with nothing left of self"

Is it really possible for us to ever attain such perfection in this life? It is very doubtful that we will, but we must always bear in mind that God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son, according to **Romans 8:29**, and we know God will accomplish His purpose for all of His elect. As John tells us in **1 John 3:2**, "*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*"

In one sense, the Christian is already complete in Christ. In **Colossians 2:8-10**, Paul writes,

*8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*

*9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*

*10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.*

Positionally, we are complete in Him, but practically, we enjoy only what we apprehend by faith. The resources are there. All we need do is accept them and enjoy them.

The means of our being “*filled with all the fulness of God*,” is the Holy Spirit. In **Ephesians 5:18** Paul writes, “*And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.*” The measure of our fullness is God Himself! Unfortunately, many of us use the wrong measurements in examining our spiritual lives. We like to measure ourselves among ourselves. But Paul tells us that the measure is Christ. When we are filled with His fullness, then we have reached the limit.

Paul is praying that all of God would dominate all that we are. The Greek word translated “*filled*” means “to be filled to the brim.” If you fill a glass of water to the brim, there is no room for anything else. When we are emptied of sin and self and filled up with the fullness of God, then we will begin to understand what satisfaction is all about.

After contemplating such a marvelous spiritual experience, it is no wonder Paul bursts forth in a doxology in verses **20** and **21**. He says, “*Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*”

Paul seems to use every word possible to convey to us the vastness of God’s power as found in Jesus Christ. The words “*exceeding abundantly*

*above all*" is a superlative of superlatives in force. It speaks of the ability of God to do something; that ability to do something has a potential power that is more than enough; that potential power is exhaustless, and then some more power added on top of that. Thus, Paul says that God is able to do superabundantly above and beyond what we ask or think, and then some more on top of that. In other words, the power of Christ, like the love of Christ, is beyond human understanding or measurement. And this is just the kind of power you and I need if we are to walk and war in victory.

The words "*according to the power that worketh in us,*" is a reference to the operation of the Holy Spirit in His work of sanctification in the "*inner man.*" God is able to do for us and answer our prayers according to the efficiency, richness, and power of the working of the Spirit in our lives. The richness of the Holy Spirit working in our lives is determined by the surrender of the believer to the Holy Spirit. In a sense, it is the believer who determines what God is able to do for him. In His inherent ability, there is no limit to what God can do in and through the believer. But the believer limits the working of God in and through him by the degree of his or her surrender to the Spirit.

It is very important for us to bear in mind that Paul speaks of God's ability and power here in the context of verses **14-21**. Let us read the verses again, so that we will not be tempted, like so many others to take Paul's words out of context.

*14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,*

*15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,*

*16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;*

*17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,*

*18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;*

*19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.*

Paul is not speaking here about the believer's ability to do exploits for Him. He is not speaking about talking in tongues, rebuking demons, "blooding-up" people, kicking over benches, or shouting "hallelujahs." He is not even speaking primarily about healings and miracles and such things. He is informing the believers in Ephesus that God is willing and able to do for them, far more than he had prayed about or even thought about, and that if they yielded to the influence of the Holy Spirit, they would experience in their "inner man" far more than he or they could ask or think!

Paul says, "*Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*" The words, "*unto him*" refer to God the Father. He is to receive glory in the Church. The Church is the domain in which God ought to receive glory. And the Church can only give God glory "*by Christ Jesus.*" The way the church glorifies God is by simply providing an arena in which the work of Jesus Christ can take effect. It is my prayer that we at **The Grace Workshop Ministries** will commit and consecrate ourselves to providing an arena in which the work of Jesus Christ can take effect.