

For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

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, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)

Pray for God's Power

“I just can't take it anymore.” Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said it? If you have, it was probably because you were tired and frustrated and you just wanted something to stop, right? Maybe your boss was being a real jerk. Maybe you had been sick and even in the hospital for a long time. Maybe your marriage was going downhill or you were fighting every day with your kids or your parents were driving you crazy and you said, “I just can't take it anymore.” Well, what if you had to take it some more after you said that? What would happen? Would you die? Would you have a stroke or a nervous breakdown? Almost certainly not. When we say those things, we usually mean that we're exhausted and we don't think we have the inner strength to face whatever “it” is.

St. Paul understood our need for inner strength. He wrote the words we have before us today because he was concerned about how much the Christians in Ephesus could take. He understood that the real threat to facing more than we can stand is not that we will die, rather it's that we will give up. We will give up on God and stop trusting his promises. We will give up on life and curl into a ball and stay there. So in the book of Ephesians, he told those Christians that he was praying that God would give them strength. That's what the word “power” really means in this text. We can echo his prayer today, for ourselves and the Christians we know and love. My friends, **pray for God's power.**

I.

Why did the Ephesians need God's power? The answer is Paul himself. In the verse right before our text, he says, **“I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.”** Paul was under house arrest in Rome, chained and waiting for a trial, when he wrote this letter. But notice that he says that his sufferings were “for them.” What did he mean by that? Paul was arrested because he was so prominent as a missionary. He had traveled throughout the Roman world preaching the good news about Jesus and he had made a lot of enemies in the process. He was in prison for bringing the gospel to people like the Ephesians. And Paul was concerned that they would blame themselves, as if it were their fault that people hated the gospel and tormented gospel preachers.

Paul was also concerned that they would begin to doubt God's promises. Most of them came to faith because Paul showed up in their town one day and started preaching there. The mission was so successful that Paul spent more time in Ephesus than in any other place he served and he got very close to these Christians. But what would happen to the faith of people who joined his church because they heard the wonderful promises of God and then the man who shared those promises with them wound up in prison? Paul was worried that their sadness and their concern for him would make them ask if God really was in charge. He was worried about how much mileage the devil might get out of all this.

Does that sound familiar? Who do you know who is suffering? Who do you know who has been wrestling with a terrible illness or has suffered a tremendous loss? Who do you know who seems like they're on the edge of losing it? If you are in some way responsible for that situation, how do you feel? Even if it's not your fault, don't you fear for the faith of that person? Doesn't their pain test your faith? We ask ourselves, “What is God doing? Why is he letting this suffering go on?” If we keep going down that road, we can seriously undermine our own faith.

Paul understood that when you love someone, their pain can challenge your faith. So he prayed. He said, **“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being...”** God, the source of all life, the Father of all people and especially of us believers, was the only person who could rescue the faith of Paul’s friends. So Paul asked that God would strengthen them with his power in their inner being. What does he mean by “inner being”? I imagine that some people would take that as your inner life or even as your soul. But that’s not the point. Rather, Paul is talking about the new man God gives us when he gives us faith. Each of us is born an unbeliever. Our natural state is to rebel against God and to run away from him. But when God gives us faith, he recreates us. He puts a believer, the new man, the inner being, inside us. That believer loves God. That believer trusts in what his Lord is doing.

But unfortunately, on this side of heaven, even after God gives us the new man, we still have the old man, the old unbeliever we were born with. The stronger that unbeliever gets, the harder it is for us to trust in God. When we face hurts and sorrows, when our faith is tested by the pain we see in people we love, the believer has to be strong enough to overcome the challenge to our faith. How does he get stronger? God makes him stronger. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts. He comes “with power,” as Paul says, to strengthen that new man. But what does that mean? It does not mean that God hits us with a lightning bolt from heaven and zap! we’re superchristians! God built his power into the gospel, the message about Jesus. When we hear the gospel, the Holy Spirit strengthens that inner man so that he can fight against the sinful nature inside us. God strengthens our faith.

Jesus lived for us. Jesus died for us. He paid for all the sin and unbelief that we were born with. He died and he paid for the weakness in our faith that doesn’t cling to him when we need it most. He died and he paid for all that we are guilty of. Then he rose and he promised that all that sin is swept away. He rose and he promised that we will rise and live with him forever, in a new and better world, a world that has no sin or hardship. He ascended into heaven and he sits at God’s right hand, and he hears and answers every prayer that we send up to him. He will get us through every hardship of this life. He will give us the strength we need to endure the hurts we see around us. He will care for the people we love most when we pray for them this morning. All that is the gospel, the power of God.

Where does real strength come from? We don’t have it in ourselves. Our society tells us to reach deep down inside and find inner strength. But no one on earth can stand fast in their faith on the basis of their own strength. We need a better source. That source is God. Paul says that Christ will dwell in our hearts by faith. That’s the result of the Holy Spirit’s work. We aren’t in this alone. Our new man is not in the fight with the old man alone. Jesus lives in us. He fights for us in our own hearts. He answers our desperate prayer for strength, for ourselves and for those we love. He gives that strength through the gospel message. So we do need to keep coming to church and hearing about his love and his power. But when we hear that good news, there is no stopping what Christ will do. My friends, **pray for God’s power to strengthen the inner man.**

II.

When you have God working in your heart, you will have the answer to the rest of the prayer Paul offered. He said, **“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—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”** Paul says you need power to grasp God’s love. What does that mean? Well, how do we know how much God loves us? We can’t figure it out by weighing the good and bad in your life. Some people think that there’s more good in life than bad. But is that really true? I used to minister to a woman in her early seventies who lost a son when he was eight. Now, when I first met her, that child had been gone for forty years. One day, out of the blue, she brought it up in conversation. Understand, this woman was a very faithful Christian. She came to church and trusted in her Savior and believed that her son was in heaven. Yet, it was clear that even after all those years, she was never going to see losing her “little boy” as a blessing.

It was a blessing. God knows what he’s doing. But that doesn’t mean that we can see it or understand it in this life. We need God’s power to see how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ really is, especially when our faith is challenged by all the hurt around us. How do we get that power? “By being rooted and established in love,” Paul says. So does that mean that if we love people, we will come to trust God better?

Or is this the “pay it forward” philosophy? You know, do good to people and they will in turn do good to other people and little by little, this world will become a better place? No. Paul isn’t talking about our love here. He’s talking about the love Jesus had for us. To see how wide and long and high and deep that love is, we have to be rooted and grounded in that love.

In other words, the more we immerse our hearts and our minds in how much our Savior loves us, the more we will appreciate that love. Christ is the one and only Son of God. What was his life like before he came down to this earth? He ruled in heaven. The angels waited on his every whim. He had power to do all that he wanted to and he lived in perfect joy with his Father and the Holy Spirit. But because he loves us, he left all that behind to be born in a stable and raised in poverty. He grew up as a nobody. He was rejected by his own people. He spent three years walking from place to place so that he could preach for no salary and enrage the religious establishment of his day. Finally, he was arrested, falsely accused, and nailed to a cross where his Father in heaven poured hell itself out on him. He died there. He did all that for us. It wasn’t his sin that he was paying for. It was ours. Then he rose and conquered death and hell for us. He arranged for a ministry that would carry that gospel to the ends of the earth and that would endure for all time. He made sure that we had the Bible to study. And then in generation after generation, he kept that message alive. Again and again, the devil tried to stamp it out. Again and again, Christ preserved it. And then he gave it to you and to me.

The more we know his love, the more we are astounded by it. Paul says that his love surpasses knowledge. So we know the unknowable when we know the love of Christ. No one on this earth can find that love on their own. But through the gospel God gives it to us. We have it when all the world denies it. We have it when our lives hurt. We have it when we don’t understand what God is doing in the lives of people we love. We know that love is real because we know Christ.

So even when life hurts, Jesus’ promise is that he is working for our good. St. Paul says, “**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, for ever and ever! Amen.**” Think about the last situation that challenged your faith. Think about the last time you said, “I can’t take it anymore.” What did you ask God to do for you on that day? He has power to do more than that. He has power to solve problems in ways that we never thought of. He has power to rescue us from all that hurts us here. He hears and answers every one of our prayers. When you hear those promises, his power is at work in you. It strengthens us. It gives us the faith we need to grasp that he loves us even when we don’t understand how he’s working. My friends, **pray for God’s power to grasp his love.** God will hear that prayer. He will work through the gospel to give you that power. Amen.