

BECOMING A PEOPLE OF GRACE

STUDY ELEVEN

Paul on His Knees . . . Again

Ephesians 3:14–21

For those who feel distant from God, I want you to understand that the One who knows you the best loves you the most. You can't do anything to make Him love you less. Isn't that a great thought? You can relax in love like that. It's the most comfortable place in the world to be.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

CAN you recall a time when you felt discouraged? Perhaps you had been gliding smoothly through life when someone criticized or mistreated you, and, suddenly, the wind went out of your sails. Your morale drooped, your spirit sagged, and you may have even wanted to give up. Paul identified this down-in-the-dumps feeling as “to lose heart.”

Concerned that his Ephesian friends had dipped into discouragement, Paul begged them, “please don't lose heart” (Ephesians 3:13). That's so like Paul, isn't it? *He* was the one suffering unfairly. And yet, he worried about the Ephesians losing heart. Why? Perhaps they blamed themselves for Paul's problems. After all, Paul was defending *their* rights as Gentiles to share in God's blessing. And the whole trouble started when a rumor spread that Paul had taken Trophimus, a Gentile believer from Ephesus, into the inner courts of the temple (Acts 21:27–30). So, it's understandable that the Ephesians might feel responsible for their champion being in chains.

As an antidote for their discouragement, Paul administered first a dose of *perspective*. God appointed Paul to deliver His message to the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:1–13). It was a calling of love worth suffering for, and the Ephesians “should feel honored,” not discouraged (3:13). Second was a dose of *prayer*, which we'll examine in this study. Paul prayed that God would bolster his discouraged friends with strength, love, understanding, and filling.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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Ephesians 3:14–21

Paul’s prayer closes the doctrinal portion of Ephesians and forms a bookend with his first prayer in 1:15–23. In the first, Paul prayed for divine illumination; and in this prayer, he prayed for divine enablement. One of the most eloquent prayers in Scripture, Paul’s inspired words pull us out of our pit and lead us into the heights of glory where we find relief and true joy.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Discouragement is a common malady and can come upon us without warning. Have you lost heart lately? If so, the Scriptures invite you to “Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you” (1 Peter 5:7), and “tell God what you need” (Philippians 4:6).

Use the space below to express your thoughts and feelings to the Lord. And then, after each point, take a moment to pray Paul’s prayer for yourself as you study Ephesians 3:14–21.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

One glimpse of God’s glory can chase away any gloom. Paul had just recalled God’s revelation of His “mysterious plan” to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to Himself as “part of the same body” in Christ (Ephesians 3:3, 6). The plan shimmered with the splendor of God, His amazing grace, and His world-embracing love. No wonder Paul fell to his knees:

When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. (3:14–15)

The context of Paul’s prayer was his own joyful, awestruck reverence. More than anything, Paul yearned to share with others his experience with God. He wanted the Ephesian church members to not just look at God’s goodness as one might view the ocean but to dive into it and let it wash over them. Feel Paul’s heartbeat as you read *Ephesians 3:16–21*, imagining him praying this prayer for you.



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Observation: Four Requests and a Benediction

In the observation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we look for main points, marked by verbs, such as, “I pray” and “may you have” and transitions, such as, “then” and “so.”¹ A closer look at Paul’s prayer reveals four main requests and closes with a benediction.

To Be Strengthened with Power—Ephesians 3:16–17a

Because discouragement often weakens people to the point of giving up, Paul initially prayed that God will strengthen his readers. Use your skills of observation as you read closely the following verses. Note the request, resources, kind of strength, result, and our response; and write what you discover in the space below.

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. (Ephesians 3:16–17)

Did you observe that Paul calls upon each member of the Trinity in his prayer? He prayed to the Father, who is the “Creator of everything in heaven and on earth” (3:15). Based on verses 16 and 17, what roles do the Holy Spirit and the Son have in our spiritual life?



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Pause right now to pray for the Father to empower you through the Spirit and invite Christ to make His home in your heart.

When Christ is at home in your life, down deep within your being, you are strengthened.
—Chuck Swindoll

To Be Rooted and Grounded in God’s Love—Ephesians 3:17b

Not only can God’s Spirit strengthen us, His love can stabilize us. Paul prayed that our “roots will grow down into God’s love and keep [us] strong” (Ephesians 3:17). Our emotions can sway erratically and sometimes snap in a storm, can’t they? Reflect on Paul’s metaphor of roots and write down what he is communicating about how God’s love can help us weather hardships emotionally.

Would you like to pray this part of Paul’s prayer for emotional stability as you endure today’s storm?



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Just as you would find in a tree the deep roots that give it stability and in great structures a fine, solid foundation that give it stability, so love does that for all of us. —Chuck Swindoll

To Comprehend the Immensity of Christ’s Love—Ephesians 3:18–19a

In this section, Paul prays that we will be able to comprehend something that “surpasses knowledge”—which is a paradox (Ephesians 3:19 NASB). How can we know something we can’t know? We’ll explore the meaning of this paradox later, but for now, observe these lines in Paul’s prayer. What does Paul pray we comprehend? How is this request different than the previous request? What language does Paul use to describe something that is far-reaching?

May [you] be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. (3:18–19 NASB)

Would you like to pray that you can grasp, at least as much as is humanly possible, the wonders of Christ’s love for you and those you love?

I think of the shape of the cross when I read these words. Christ’s love is broad enough to cover whomever, long enough to go beyond any barrier, deep enough to touch any need, and high enough to take us all to glory. —Chuck Swindoll



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To Fill Us with God’s Fullness—Ephesians 3:19b

Paul’s final request was an amazing one: “That you may be filled up to all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19b NASB).

Here is the same verse in the Amplified Bible, which defines key words to aid our comprehension. After reading it, write down in your own words what Paul prayed.

That you may be filled up [throughout your being] to all the fullness of God [so that you may have the richest experience of God’s presence in your lives, completely filled and flooded with God Himself].
(3:19 AMP)

Now use the pronoun “I” to pray this request for yourself. And then pray it again using the names of others for whom you wish to pray.

I pray that you will have the essence of God washing over you. And when you do, there will be relational intimacy with God—a kind of intimacy not even known between husbands and wives. It’s deep, unmeasured, boundless. —Chuck Swindoll



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Interpretation: Knowing the Unknowable

Let's go back to Paul's paradoxical request "to comprehend . . . and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18–19 NASB). Read this part of Ephesians 3:19 in the following two versions and then write down what you think Paul means.

May you have the power to understand. . . . May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. (3:18–19 NLT)

And may you . . . be fully capable of comprehending . . . and [that you may come] to know [practically, through personal experience] the love of Christ which far surpasses [mere] knowledge [without experience]. (3:17–19 AMP)

As you might imagine, there are various ways to interpret Paul's interplay between "comprehend," "know," and "knowledge." He may be contrasting personal experience (*comprehend* and *know*) with mere knowledge about Christ's love (*knowledge*).

For example, to really comprehend the ocean, we can't just view it from the shore; we must splash around in its waves and experience it personally. Paul prayed that we would feel Christ's love in our hearts not just know about it with our intellect. But even through personal experience, we can't fully comprehend something so vast!

Perhaps Paul's point is that we as humans can know only so much about Christ's love, but what we can grasp is enough to keep us grasping for more. Certainly, we will spend eternity joyfully exploring its depths!



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Correlation: What Can Separate Us from God’s Love?

Paul’s admiration of “how wide, how long, how high, and how deep” is Christ’s love (Ephesians 3:18) reminds us of something he wrote about God’s love in Romans. Compare Ephesians 3:18 with *Romans 8:37–39* in the New American Standard Bible, and write down what additional insights you discover about the “love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39 NASB).



Application: The Answer to Discouragement

Paul’s prayer can encourage you no matter what situation you’re in. When you’ve lost your inner strength and motivation, remember that God wants to empower you (Ephesians 3:16). When you feel uncared for, root yourself in God’s love for you (3:17). When your brain is fogged and you can’t recall the doctrines of your faith, meditate on the all-embracing love of Jesus (3:18). And when you lose your way and feel empty spiritually, ask God to fill you with the bounty of His presence (3:19).

What a great prayer to meditate on and memorize! Chuck offers this simple formula that sums up Paul’s prayer in a nutshell:

- Claim God’s strength.
- Remember that you’re loved.
- Seek His fullness.



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Which part of the formula do you need most today?

We've prayed for God's strength, love, understanding, and filling. All that remains is the benediction in Ephesians 3:20–21, Paul's grand finale of praise.



A FINAL PRAYER

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:20–21)

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

