

## HOW TO PRAY FOR SPIRITUAL MATURITY EPHESIANS 3:14-21 SERMON

Today we resume our study in the book of Ephesians. Pastor Richard last preached from Ephesians on November 29! He spoke about the mystery of Christ which the Holy Spirit revealed to the apostles and prophets. The mystery of Christ is this: that the gospel of Jesus God made provision for Gentiles and Jews to be fellow heirs, members of the same body of Christ!

Paul began the passage I read this morning with a prayer. He prayed for God's strength and presence in the Ephesian Christian's lives. We can model our prayers after Paul's prayer. When we pray for others or ourselves we too can pray for **God 's strength and presence to be increasing in our lives.** As God's strength and presence grows in our lives, we mature spiritually.

Many of us fail to realize that we can take practical steps to grow spiritually! Craig Larson, a **Christianity Today** author shared this story about himself: *On my desk I like to display, on a bookstand, the kind of gift books you put on a coffee table-those filled with professional photos of nature or tourist destinations. My current book is called **America's Spectacular National Parks.** For several days I have had the book open to a photo of the Grand Teton Mountains, an extra-wide photo that filled not only the left page, but crossed the fold and took half of the page on the right. It is a majestic display of deep blue sky; rugged, gray, snow-capped mountains and a calm lake in the foreground. This morning I decided to turn the page to the next photo and as I did I discovered that I had missed something important. The right page of the Grand Tetons photo was an extra-long page folded over, covering part of the Grand Tetons. So, when I opened it up, it not only revealed what was covered but added another eight inches to the Grand Tetons photo. In other words, when I opened the fold, I added some 16 inches to the width of the photo. Wow. The Grand Tetons became even grander! The Christian life has unfolding moments like that, when we discover there is more to God and his kingdom than we knew, more to his purpose for us than we imagined.*

Praying the kind of prayer that Paul prayed for the Ephesians will help us discover more to the Christian life than we imagined! So, let's do it! Let's pray for **God's strength and presence to be increasing in our lives!**

How's your prayer life today? Active or inactive? Perhaps you pray only in times of crisis. You only pray when you or a loved one has a serious health concern, or a serious financial matter or some other critical issue.

Sally and I have three children and four grandchildren. We love it when one of them contacts us, either through texting or skyping or email. We enjoy hearing about their lives, seeing them, connecting with them. This kind of contact builds our relationship with them, it helps it grow!

We'd feel bad if the only time our kids contacted us was in an emergency or crisis. If they only contacted us in a time of crisis, we'd wonder: what do they really think of us? Is our only function to help bail them out of a crisis?

The same holds true with God! I want to challenge those of you who might simply *use* God to only help you in times of crises or emergencies. God can and will help you with your crises and emergencies but He wants to spend casual time with you, getting to know you and love you!

The text in Ephesians teaches us that when we pray for God's strength and presence in our lives, we should:

**1. Pray for increasing strength from the Holy Spirit's power!** Look in your Bible in vs.16 **“that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being”**. Note the phrase, “may grant you to be strengthened with power”. The Greek language includes several words for “strength”. The word used in this verse means, “forceful” Paul uses the same exact word in Eph 6:10 where he admonishes us to **“be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might”**. In that instance, Paul means utilizing God's strength to counteract the Evil One and his devious ways.

In our present verse, **Eph 3:16** Paul adds the word, “power” or *dunamis* in the original text. I've told you before that we get the English word, “dynamite” from this Greek word for power. Both the strength and the power come from the Holy Spirit, not from us! Paul's not describing some kind of self-generated power or strength; He's praying that God would give us His strength and power in increasing measure!

We humans have a propensity to depend on ourselves when difficulties erupt in life. We remember past experiences, recall what we know of similar difficulties, we brainstorm possible scenarios of how best to handle the problem. Our pride and self-sufficiency become dominant. Often, when others offer to help us, we thank them for their concern but explain that it's not that big a deal and we can handle the problem.

Paul's prayer in vs.16 counters this way of dealing with the issues that we face in life. Rather than depend on our own experience, knowledge and intellect Paul asks God in his prayer to manifest his power through His Spirit in our inner being. This can only happen when we submit to the Spirit's presence and power in our lives.

Jay Kesler once explained two ways of handling pressure. One is illustrated by the bathysphere, the miniature submarine used to explore the ocean in places so deep that the water pressure would crush a conventional submarine like an aluminum can. Bathyspheres compensate with plate steel several inches thick which keeps the water out but also makes them heavy and hard to maneuver. Inside their cramped!

When these craft descend to the ocean floor they find they're not alone. When their lights are turned on and you look through the tiny, thick plate glass windows, what do you see? Fish! These fish cope with extreme pressure in an entirely different way. They don't build thick skins; they remain supple and free. They compensate for the outside pressure through equal and opposite pressure inside themselves.

Christians, likewise, don't have to be hard and thick-skinned- as long as they appropriate God's power within to equal the pressure without. Let me say that again: Christians, likewise, don't

have to be hard and thick-skinned- as long as they appropriate God's power within to equal the pressure without.

Let us pray for God's power to manifest itself within us, to be increasing within us so we can manage the myriad struggles and difficulties of life! Further, Paul tells us:

**2. Pray for Christ's presence to increase!** Look in the next verse, vs.17 **"so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith-that you being rooted and grounded in love"**. Note that all four of these admonitions include the word "may": "may grant you", "may dwell in your hearts", "may have strength to comprehend", "may be filled". In vs.17 Paul prays that Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith. The word for "dwell" in the original text means "to make one's home, to be at home".

I know many of you enjoy watching home repair shows on television such as "Fixer Upper". It's amazing how homes in significant disrepair can be transformed into beautiful, showcase homes! Chip and Joanna Gaines and others like them work hard to update, repair and transform dilapidated homes into homes of beauty. But it takes effort, hard work, lots of sweat and time to achieve the transformation!

Paul prayed that Christ would dwell, or make his home in our hearts through faith. Many years ago one of my seminary professors, Dr. Robert Munger wrote a little booklet entitled, **My Heart Christ's Home**. These verses in Ephesians chapter 3 were the basis of that booklet. In the booklet, Dr. Munger walks us through various rooms in a typical home and explains how Christ wants to dwell in every room of our heart or home.

Here's the question we must face; does Christ dwell in my heart? How would you answer that question? If he doesn't truly dwell in your heart, why? What's preventing Christ from dwelling in your heart? Is it your pride, self-sufficiency, stubbornness or disbelief?

Pray for Christ's presence in your heart! Jesus wants to enter every room of your home or heart and take up residence! Open your heart to him by faith! When we pray for Christ's strength and presence in our lives we:

**3. Pray for strength to understand the dimensions and knowledge of Christ's love.** I love this next verse, vs.18, **"may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breath and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge"**.

Paul used a word in the original text for "strength" in this verse that's different than the one he used earlier in vs.16. The word in vs.16 for strength means "forceful". This word for strength in vs.18 means, "full strength"; it's a compound word. Many people are fighting colds right now and when you have a cold you might be able to go to work but you're not at full strength; you're probably more tired and don't feel very well. Paul prayed that we would be at full strength to comprehend the various dimensions of Christ's love. To grasp the various dimensions of Christ's love we need to be at full strength! To do our best work, we must be at full strength, right?

What do we need to be at full strength to do? **“To comprehend with all the saints what is the breath and length and height and depth”**. He’s referring to the love of Christ! The word “comprehend” means “to grasp with the mind, to lay hold of effectively”. So, Paul gave a rectangular measure of love; the breath, length, height and depth of Christ’s love, further, Paul prays that this full strength comprehension or understanding would help us **“know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”**. What an interesting paradox! Paul prayed that we would know something, namely the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge! To know the love of Christ involves being known by Christ.

Remember, Paul’s praying for Christians in Ephesus, men and women who have confessed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He’s praying for their spiritual growth and maturity. He models a great prayer for us! We too want to pray for our own spiritual maturity as well as others. Part of spiritual growth involves knowing Christ’s love in a more powerful and expansive way.

*Arthur Burns, a Jewish economist of great influence in Washington during the tenure of several Presidents including President Eisenhower, Nixon and Ford was once asked to pray at a gathering of evangelical politicians. Stunning his hosts, he prayed, “Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ. And Lord, finally I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ”.*

Arthur Burns expressed in the final part of this prayer what Paul prayed for Christians in Ephesians, chapter 3:19. May the Lord increase our knowledge and experience of the love of Christ!! Finally, when we pray for **God’s strength and presence to be increasing in our lives** we:

**4. Pray to be filled with the fullness of God.** Look in the final phrase in vs.19 **“that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”**. Before we get into this verse let me say that this prayer of Paul from vs.16-19 includes *many* purpose clauses. If we take all these purpose clauses as a group, we see that the overarching purpose of Paul’s prayer is for spiritual maturity; Paul wants God’s strength and presence to be increasing in the lives of the Ephesian Christians! God wants the same for all of us today! When God’s strength and presence increases in our lives this results in great spiritual growth! We should want this for ourselves and our Christian family members and friends too!

What does Paul mean when he wrote of the “fullness of God”? Look over to **Ephesians 4:12-13**. In this passage Paul describes the purpose of spiritual gifts: **“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”**. In these two verses the **“fullness of Christ”** appears to be the summit or apex of our maturity as Christians. When we use our spiritual gifts for the body of Christ we can grow and help the church achieve the “fullness of Christ”.

So when Paul prays in vs.19 that, **“you may be filled with all the fullness of God”** he’s praying that we would reach the summit of Christian maturity.

So, is God's strength and presence increasing in your life today or is it stagnant or non-existent? Paul provides some practical steps to help God's strength and presence increase in our lives: first, we pray for increasing strength from the Holy Spirit's power, second, we pray for Christ's presence to increase in our lives, third, we pray for strength to understand the dimensions and knowledge of Christ's love and finally, we pray to be filled with the fullness of God. When we you take these steps in your prayer lives you will grow spiritually!

It's only appropriate that we conclude the message this morning with prayer. I want the elders and prayer team people to get up and be available for prayer around the perimeter of the building. Please feel free to get up and have one of these church leaders pray for you or a loved one or situation, or whatever. I have oil if you would like to be anointed with oil. Please come up for prayer!