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Ephesians 3:14-21

We Need Grace: Four Prayer Requests

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Let's start by reviewing the big-picture of the book of Ephesians.

Chapters 1-3 How God is gracious to us

Chapters 4-6 How we are to live-out grace

The first three chapters, **chapters 1-3**, don't include many **imperatives**, or **commands**. They don't tell us how to live as much as they tell us **what God has done for us**. The next three chapters, **chapters 4-6**, tell us how to respond to grace and are full of imperatives and commands. Grace in. Grace out.

Paul understands how **difficult** this is to **get** because he includes a **prayer** for the believers to **get it in chapter 1** and **again** today as he **wraps up chapter 3**. He is praying for us to **experience God's grace**—everything he has **just finished talking about**.

Have you ever put **a lot of work into a gift** and given it to someone with the hope that they would like it? That they would **receive it** as you **intended**? Maybe you've written a **letter** to your **husband** or **wife** and you hope that when they read it they will realize how much you've thought about them and **care** for them. Maybe you've spent a bunch of time **knitting a sweater** or **hat** for your husband (or your wife...), and you hope that when they open up their gift they will be happy with what you made. That's how **Monica** feels about me every **Christmas**. Maybe it's how **children** feel when they draw a **picture** or make a **craft** and bring it to their **parents**. If their parents looks at it and say, "You could have **done better**" and put it away, do you think the child will **want** to make them another picture or craft? We want people to receive the things we've **prepared** for them.

Paul has brought the Ephesians a **gift**. He's brought them the gift that **God** worked so hard to **prepare**—**grace**. And now he is praying they will **receive** God's grace. In the first three chapters of Ephesians God has given us his **grace**—*his love given to us without us having to do anything but believe in Jesus*. **Will** we receive what God has given or will we **put it away** because God could have made something **better**? It's better if you **earn** your salvation, because you'll feel more **accomplished**. It's better if God **doesn't** offer this grace to **everyone**, especially **bad people** who don't **deserve** it.

I know some of you probably **love to receive gifts**, but some of us can have a **hard time receiving gifts**. Instead of **seeing** the love and thought behind that **hand-painted pink and yellow ceramic bowl**, we see how it **doesn't match** with all the other dishes and how we'll have to find someplace to store it. That's like when we read Ephesians, and although we know we've received God's grace in chapters 1-3, what really **wears us down** is knowing we'll have to **live differently** because of it in chapters 4-6.

In order for us to be able to **receive** God's grace the way **he intends**, and for it to **change** us in a **positive way**, we need a **change of heart**. We need something **deep inside** of us to **move**. And that is **exactly** what Paul is praying for today. He is praying for **hearts** that can receive God's grace. That's the **same thing** we pray for. **We pray for hearts that can receive God's grace**. I don't know about you but I can **talk** and **talk** about **God's grace** and it **doesn't change** me **one bit**. But if God get's ahold of **my heart**, and **your heart**,

our hearts, then not only will we **appreciate** the gift of God's grace, we'll be able to **live differently** because of God's grace. Paul prays for **four prayer requests** in his prayer. The first is this...

1) We pray for inner strength through the Spirit. (v14-16)

Like the **Lord's prayer** Paul addresses our **Heavenly Father** and prays this in **Ephesians 3:16** "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being," (NIV®). Paul prays for the Ephesians to experience inner strength. This **Greek word** for strength (krataioo) is also found in the **Septuagint** (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in stories of **King David**.¹ Before David became **king while** he and his men were being hunted by **king Saul** the **Amalekites** attacked his **encampment** while he was away, **burned** it, and took captive the **women** and **children**. This news **completely wrecks** David and his men.

1 Sam 30:4 So David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep. (NIV®)

Have you ever **felt that way**? **Something happens** and you just **lose it**. You lose your **strength** to **believe**. You lose your **strength** to be a **good husband** or **wife** or **child**. You lose your strength to be a **good Christian**. This word is a **different** word for strength, but two verses later **our word appears** (krataioo).

1 Sam 30:6 David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God. (NIV®)

Sometimes we have to **lose our strength** so we can **find God's strength**. Jennie told me this week, "Everyone in our church is going through **something**." Everyone here has something that is **stressing** them out or they wish was **different**. And maybe you've been trying to **handle it**, but it just keeps getting **worse and worse**. What if like David God is allowing something bad to happen so that you can **find your strength in the Lord your God**? What if God wants us to get **weaker** before we can get **stronger**? What if we actually need to be weak in order to understand God's **grace**?

Have you ever started **working out** after not working out for a **long time**? The first couple days you **overdo it** and you're really **really sore**. **BC** ("before CrossFit"), I tried working out at **Best Fitness at Drum Hill**. The **personal trainer** must have thought I was in shape because he had me **running**, and doing **burpees**, and and **whipping a big rope** up and down. I almost **passed out** and and for the next couple days I was so **sore** Monica had to help me put on my **shirt** and I had to **drink out of a straw** because I couldn't lift my **arm** to my **face**. Despite all of that **pain**, it was still the first **step** in getting stronger. The trainer helped me see my weakness. The **Holy Spirit** helps us see our weakness so that he can fill us up with **God's strength**.

Do you know what David did next? He **asked** God what he should do. He **prayed**. And God **delivered him** and his **men** and their **wives** and **children** and he gave them **extra plunder** (1 Sam 30:16, 20). They came out **ahead**. We pray for **inner strength** to **grasp God's grace**, but sometimes that means he has to **take away** the strength we have. God would you give us the inner strength even if it means we first have to lose our own strength. First, *we pray for inner strength through the Spirit*.

2) We pray for Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith. (v17a)

Ephesians 3:17 in the NIV says, "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." But that makes verses 16 and 17 sound like **one long prayer request**. Although the two verses are **connected**, the *Exegetical Commentary* said to read the first half of verse 17 is its **own prayer request**. "I pray... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."²

Now the last verse, **verse 16**, talked about God’s “**glorious riches**” and this verse talks about Christ “**dwell[ing]**” in our hearts. Is there any place else in the Bible where it talks about **God’s glory** and a **dwelling**? When **Moses** built the **tabernacle** God’s glory came down in the form of a cloud and filled it. When king **Solomon** (David’s son) built the **temple** God’s glory came down in the form of a cloud and fill it. And now, Paul is praying that God’s **glory cloud** through the **Holy Spirit** would fill our hearts with **Christ**.

What do you fill your **heart** with? Have you ever filled your **gasoline tank** with the **wrong fuel**? Instead of filling your **sedan** up with **unleaded** you fill it up with **diesel**? Instead of giving you extra power what does it do? It doesn’t work. It can cause a lot of **damage**. The engine is designed to run on unleaded. God built us to **run on him**. We run on his Holy Spirit who is **centering** our hearts on Christ Jesus.³ We are **powered** as we think and dwell and **meditate** on Christ.

The Holy Spirit is like the **tech-crew** in the **theater department**. They dress up in **black** and their job is **not** to be seen. Instead they run the **sound** so the **actors** can be **heard** and they **shine** the **lights** so the actors are can be **seen**. Without the tech crew you could still have a play, but there would be much **less mystery** and **beauty**. You would watch the actors **move in and out of scene** and **set up props**. It would be **hollow**. The Holy Spirit **shines** his **light** on Jesus. The more we think of Christ the more we know the Spirit is present.

As the Holy Spirit **fosters** a love for Jesus in you, Jesus is dwelling in your heart through faith. One of the **signs** of **true Christianity** is a deep love for **Jesus himself**, for his work on the **cross**, and for him **saving** us from our **sins**. Do you love Jesus? Do you love Christ? That’s the Holy Spirit! As the Holy Spirit strengthens our hearts and a love for Christ fills our hearts it becomes possible to **appreciate God’s grace**. *First, we pray for inner strength through the Holy Spirit and second we pray for Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith.*

3) We pray that we would be rooted and grounded in love. (17b)

Paul’s **third prayer request** is in the second half of verse 17. **Ephesians 3:17b** says, “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,” (NIV®). Paul uses **two word pictures** to express what he is praying for (c.f., Col 2:6-7).⁴

The first is that of a **plant** or a **tree**. To be “**rooted**” in something is to **dive deep** into the **soil** and to **draw your life** from it. In the **gospels** **Jesus** tells the **parable** of **different soils** (Matthew 13:1-23). The **seed** the sower scatters is the **gospel** message—the **good news** that Jesus offers **forgiveness** and **eternal life** to any who will **confess** their sins and **believe** in him. He scatters some seed that doesn’t have any **roots**.

Matthew 13:5-6 Some [seeds] fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. (NIV®)

Jesus **explains** this parable to his disciples a few verses later.

Matthew 13:20-21 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. (NIV®)

A life **rooted in the gospel** won’t fall away when times get **tough**, and times are going to get tough. They are going to be **days** and **weeks** and maybe **months** when **grace feels far away**, but that’s what we need to have our roots deep in love—love for each other and love for God and his word and as the next verse shows us, deep in our understanding of God’s love for us. We want deep roots in God’s grace.

A **believer** who is rooted in **God’s grace** and **love won’t walk away** when the **storms come**. The NIV says “established,” which is another word for a “foundation.” A **house** with a good foundation won’t fall when the

Nor'easter comes. I also like the word “**grounded**” which appears in the ESV. A house that is grounded won't catch on fire when the **lightning strikes**. If you're **rooted in love** you won't walk away when your **church family hurts you** or the **leadership** does something you **don't like** or when **ministry** doesn't seem to be **going anywhere** or when something goes **terribly wrong** in your life. If you're **grounded in love**, you'll be able to **receive** God's grace and **extend it** to those around you **who really need it**.

As I was **writing** this part of my sermon I was **struggling to feel love for someone**. I was **upset** with him, so I called him on the **phone**, and we talked about our **issue**. As we ended the **conversation** I told him I **loved him** and he told me he **loved me**. The easiest thing to do when the going gets **tough** is to **turn away** from loving each other, but if we do that we actually **uproot** ourselves and become **ungrounded**. 3) *We pray that we would be rooted and grounded in love*. This naturally leads into the fourth prayer request.

4) We pray for our hearts to grasp the greatness of Christ's love. (v18-19)

Ephesians 3:17a, 18-19, “And I pray that you... may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, 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. (NIV®)

I've been reading *Ephesians For You* by **Richard Coekin** (a pastor in **London**) during this series. I want to share with you his explanation of what each of these descriptions of **Christ's love for us** means.⁵ Each point comes from Coekin and I've adapted his explanations.

“Wide” illustrates his *accepting love*.

Christ's love is for **Jew and Gentile, white, black, Hispanic, Asian rich, poor, middle-class, grade-A students or dropouts**, those struggling with **obvious sins** and those struggling with **hidden sins**. Christ's is available for anyone no matter what you've done or haven't done. Christ opens **wide his arms** and **embraces** anyone, no matter how broken. In our [Grace/Truth 1.0 study](#) one of the chapter's main points is “**acceptance precedes obedience**.” Christ accepts us, which **leads us to repentance**.

“Long” illustrates his *lasting love*.

There is nothing you **have done, can do, or will do** that can **separate** you from the **love of Christ** if your **one of his** (Rom 8:38-39). Paul already talked about how God “chose us in him before the creation of the world...” (Eph 1:4) Does that sound like there's any time you will ever be separated from his love?

“High” illustrates his *exalting love*.

Coekin points us **back to Ephesians 2:6-7** and God's promise to raise us up and **seat us with Christ** and then **pour out** “the **incomparable riches of his grace**” on us “in the **coming ages**.” **One day** we're going to **get** just how much **goodness** Christ has **in store** for us.

“Deep” illustrates his *sacrificial love*.

The **cross** is a **well**. The longer we look **into** this **cross-shaped well** the **deeper Christ's love appears**. It's at the cross that Jesus himself took on the full burden of God's **wrath** so that you and I, people who **aren't loving enough**, who aren't **gracious enough**, who choose **self** over others so that we could be **forgiven** and **saved**. Jesus took on the **opposite of grace** so that you and I could the **receive the grace** he deserves.

May we **grasp** how wide and long and high and deep Christ's love is for us. In v19 Paul says this love “surpasses knowledge.” It has to get **past our heads** and **into our hearts**. So what are our **four requests**?

- 1) *We pray for inner strength through the Spirit.*
- 2) *We pray for Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith.*
- 3) *We pray that we would be rooted and grounded in love.*
- 4) *We pray for our hearts to grasp the greatness of Christ's love.*

We pray for hearts that can experience God's grace. My heart in its **own capacity can't experience** God's grace. That's why Paul's prayer is so important. But although **I can't change my heart**, Christ can. Christ can help us "**get grace.**" We're **reminded of his power** in the closing two **verses, 20-21** that tell us there is **nothing our God cannot do.** I'm not going to read them now but we'll all **read them together** when I say the **benediction** at the end of the service. *But first, let me pray for hearts that can experience God's grace.*

If we truly believe God can change our hearts, then let's read the benediction together as a prayer.

Ephesians 3:20-21 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, forever and ever! Amen. (NIV®)

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.

¹ Clinton E. Arnold. *Ephesians* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on The New Testament series Book 10) (Kindle Locations 5573-5578). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

² Clinton E. Arnold. *Ephesians* (Kindle Locations 5610-5614).

³ Coekin, Richard. *Ephesians For You: For reading, for feeding, for leading* (God's Word For You) (Kindle Locations 1433-1435). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

⁴ **Colossians 2:6-7** So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (NIV®)

⁵ Coekin, Richard. *Ephesians For You* (Kindle Locations 1490-1516).