Praying for Power
Ephesians 3:14-21

What do you call the play in football, when the quarterback throws the ball way down the field with only a few seconds left in the half or game, with little chance of anyone catching it? It’s called a Hail Mary. It's a desperation play.

The expression goes back at least to the 1930's, as famous Notre Dame players used it (Elmer Layden and Jim Crowley). Later, others began using the expression. Roger Staubach (a Roman Catholic) said regarding his touchdown pass to Drew Pearson in the 1975 play off game against the Vikings: "I closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary." Then there was the "Miracle in Miami." Doug Flutie of Boston College team beat Miami in 1984 on a famous 63 yard, last second Hail Mary. In 2002, UK was on the losing side of the "Bluegrass Miracle." QB Marcus Randall threw a bomb down the field with 2 seconds left for a game-winning touchdown in 2002. UK had already emptied the water cooler on the coach, and were tearing down the goal post! But the Hail Mary desperation pass beat them.

The hail Mary: When you have nothing else to do, then throw it deep and pray.

A lot of believers understand prayer something like this. They only pray when they have no other option. Oh, they may have some routine prayers that they pray – like at meal times, or on a Sunday - but when it comes to actually seeking God with desperation, they only do that when there is nothing else to do (if they even do it then). When they have exhausted all of their human wisdom, when they have worked through every possible strategy, and they are at the end of their rope – they close their eyes, throw it deep, and hope something good happens.

But this is a mistake. Why?

It's because the whole Christian life is supposed to be one of desperation.
Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." We are desperate for God's presence and power for fruit bearing.

- Prayer is supposed to be the **steering wheel**, but not the **spare tire**! (Corrie Tin Boom). It's not there for emergency only.

The **early church** seemed to recognize there desperation for God. They had no great human resources. They weren't influential. They weren't really strategic. No, they were desperate for the Spirit of God to work mightily. So we see them throughout the book of Acts praying.

- They prayed for God's power in order to speak the word with boldness in the face of opposition (4:29-31).
- The apostles said that they must be devoted to prayer, so the church selected some good men to care for the widows, in order to free them up to do so (Acts 6:4).
- The church prayed for Peter's release from prison, and it happened (Acts 12).

These are but a few of the examples. This church turned the world upside down.

What was essential for the early church has become supplemental for the contemporary church.

Why is this? Why aren't we desperate? I'm sure we could catalogue a list of reasons, but let me just give one:

Unfortunately, **We too often have a high view of self, and a low view of God.**

A lack of desperation shows that we don't think much of God's ability, and we think a whole lot of our own.

Instead, we should **remember how great God is** when we come to him, and we should remember how **much we need him**.

John Newton's captured the idea of praying to our great God:

Thou art coming to a King,  
Large petitions with thee bring;  
For his grace and pow'r are such,  
None can ever ask too much.
Ephesians 3:14-21
In Ephesians 3:14-21, we see Paul showing us what it is like to pray in view of God’s greatness, and our human need.

This section is a transitional section of the book. The first three chapters are about who we are in Christ. The next three chapters are about how we are to live. Both are essential for Christians. But you need more than knowledge of these things. Sandwiched in between these two sections is this prayer for power.

This is a good reminder for us. We must have God's power to do God's will. Let me make three points regarding our need to pray with a high view of God…

Since We Pray to the Sovereign Father…

1. PRAY WITH HUMILITY (3:14-16a)

The first thing to notice here is Paul's posture. He says, “For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father.” (14)

Kneeling was not common for the Jews. The typical position was one of standing, as you see today at the Wailing Wall.

Whenever someone is kneeling in prayer in the Bible, they are indicating deep humility and deep emotion before God.

I don’t want to suggest that this is the posture for prayer, for we have people praying in all kinds of postures in the Bible (my favorite way to pray is by walking), but I do want to emphasize the heart of the idea of "kneeling."

As we consider this posture, I think we can draw application about three things: (1) gratitude, (2) desperation, and (3) confidence.

A. Humble Gratitude

The context shows us that Paul is praying with humble gratitude to God. I draw this from "for this reason." We must ask, what prompted
**this prayer? What was the "reason?"** Paul began this prayer in verse 1 it seems, be he took a holy rabbit trail to talk about his calling. So, what proceeded 3:1?

Two chapters of God's amazing grace proceeded chapter three.

What prompted this prayer was gratitude for the grace of God. Paul was stunned at God's grace in saving sinners, individually, and at his grace in uniting them corporately.

**App:** When you reflect on the Father's grace - in calling you, adopting you, redeeming you and forgiving you through Christ, sealing you with the Spirit; the Father bringing you from death to life, raising you with Christ, seating you with Christ, making you part of his church - then it will cause you to bow before him in worship. So he says, "for this reason, I bow before the Father.

**Prayer is not a piñata.** It is not asking God for goodies. It begins and ends in worship. That's what Paul is doing here. He's worshiping.

Paul knew that God had taken the initiative to call sinners to himself, to form a people, and that made him fall to his knees.

When I was in fifth grade, I was playing basketball for the B Team (5-6 graders). But I never got in the game. I was a scrub. I didn't even have a matching uniform with the rest of the team! But then one evening I got a phone call from the A-Team coach (7-8 graders). He said that his point guard was sick, and he wanted me to play on the A-Team, as the starting guard. I went to that game, put on a brand new uniform, just like the rest of the team, and went out on to that court … for one reason: the coach called me! I wasn't that good. I think I scored two points. (I wore out the VHS tape by rewinding it so many times). *And you know what? I loved that coach.*

On an infinitely more important level, Paul loved God because he had called sinners to himself, dressed them in the robes of Christ, and said there are no second-class citizens. He made them part of his team. Because they were good? No. *Because he is good.*

When was the last time you bowed in humble gratitude to God?
The Psalmist said:

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
   let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
   and we are the people of his pasture,
   and the sheep of his hand.
Today, if you hear his voice (Psalm 95:6-7 ESV)

Let us kneel before the Lord God our maker, or as Paul says here “before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” (14b-15). Let us kneel before the one who is the Sovereign Father, over all, and worship him for his grace and glory.

**B. Humble Desperation**

Kneeling is also a sign of desperation. You come to realize that you are approaching the only one who can act on your behalf. From this, we see that Paul is not a cold theologian, who is busy writing sophisticated arguments for philosophers to consider. He is a deeply passionate leader.

We see him with Ephesians elders in Acts 20 shedding "tears" as he left them (19, 31, 37). In that context, we also see him kneeling in prayer. In v. 36. he kneels, prays, and weeps.

In Acts, Stephen falls to the ground in desperation and prays for his persecutors (Acts 7:60).

Why is Paul so passionate and desperate in 3:14? I think because he knows what the Ephesians need is something that can only come from God; namely: power.

Notice how he says that may God "grant you" to be strengthened (16) He knew this was a gift from God. So, he was desperate for God to answer.

When was the last time you bowed in humble desperation, pleading to God for his grace and power over something?

**C. Humble Confidence**
Finally, Paul's introduction here shows us that we should also come with confidence before God. We shouldn't come with arrogance thinking God owes us his blessings, but instead, we should come with humble confidence. How?

*We can pray with confidence because of our position in Christ.* Paul said in 2:18 that because of the reconciling work of Jesus, and our union with him, we have access to God. Then in chapter 3, he says that we have "boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him" (3:12).

*We can also pray with confidence because we are approaching our Father.*

Our Father is the **Sovereign father**. He has already mentioned "the Father of glory" (1:17), and will later say that he is "Father of all" (4:6). Here he says that "every family in heaven and on earth is named." This is an expression of his authority and rule over all.

Our Father is **rich**! Paul prays for God to answer, "according of the riches of his glory." God is majestic and omnipotent. And he is your Father!

Our Father is also **gracious**. Paul asks for God to "grant" the church strength. God loves to give good gifts to his children, particularly those things pertaining to the Spirit, not just material blessings - the Spirit's guidance and work (cf., Luke 11:11-13).

So pray with humility. Bow with gratitude to God, with desperation for God, and confidence in God.

2. **PRAY FOR GOD TO FILL YOU WITH HIS POWER AND LOVE (3:16-19)**

As we move to Paul's petitions, **two main requests emerge**: "love and power" (Carson, 182, see also Obrien). Verse 19b is considered "the third and climactic request, or the summarizing request in which the contents of the two preceding petitions are realized" (O'brien). Stott
points out that they are like a "staircase." We begin with the lead request "to be strengthened with power, then we move through the request (notice the "ths") until we reach the climax "to be filled with the fullness of God." (19b)

Notice the phrases about power and love in verses 16-19, and then peek into verse 20:

- "strengthened with power" (16)
- "rooted and grounded in love" (17b)
- "strength to comprehend [God's love]" (18)
- "to know the love of Christ"
- "filled with the fullness of God"
- "according to the power at work within us" (20)

It's also important to note that Paul is essentially praying for the readers to experience what he has just talked about in the previous chapters - Christ's supreme power, and God's great love toward sinners. We should remember that prayer and teaching always go together (Stott, 132). It's one thing to teach it or hear it; it's another to experience it.

Let's look at what Paul believed the Ephesians desperately needed (which is what we desperately need, also):

A. We need to be strengthened by the Spirit's power (16-17a)

Paul begins with a prayer for strength. Asking God to fill the strengthen the believers in the "inner man." This is where we need strength and power, on the inside. This is how we fight sin, proclaim the gospel with courage, and love people the way Christ has loved us.

Look at 2 Cor. 4:16. Paul says the outer man is perishing, but the inner man is being renewed. Our bodies may be wearing out. I played in a whiffle ball tournament last week, and I was sore for two days! But while our bodies are weakening, our inner man may be renewed by the Spirit.

Our culture places all of the importance on the outer person; but the bigger issue is the inner person (cf., 1 Sam 16:7; Prov. 31:30).

How’s your inner man? You know what I’m talking about if you are a Christian. There are times in which you feel spiritually strong and healthy. The allurements of sin are not enticing, and you are
delighting in Jesus. And there are times that your inner man is unhealthy.

It's easy to put on a front. It reminds me of a time that we went to a ball game, driving my friend Byron's truck. He told us that the gas gauge didn't work, but we forgot. We drove to the game, and just at the right time, we remembered that you have to check the odometer in order to know if you need gas. The gauge said full, but in reality, we were empty. This is an imperfect illustration of course, but let me ask you, do you feel spiritually depleted? Are you just pretending all is well?

Ask God to strengthen you by the Spirit.
This is a prayer! Pray this! Pray it desperately, humbly and confidently!

Why do we need to be strengthened by the Spirit in the inner man?
"so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (17)

These two petitions in vs 16-17 clearly belong together. Paul uses the language of the "inner man" (16) then "the heart" (17). He uses the language of the "strength of the Spirit" (16) and then of the "indwelling Christ" (17). Paul doesn't intend to separate the second and third person of the Trinity. To speak of the indwelling Christ, and the indwelling Spirit is to speak of the same thing (Stott, 135).

Christ dwells in our hearts by the Spirit.

It is indeed part of the "mystery," that Christ dwells in believers, not in a tabernacle or temple.

You might ask, "I thought Christ was already in my heart as a Christian." Yes. He is (John 14:15-17). But Paul is speaking about something more than just Christ dwelling in your heart.

Paul is talking about Christ ruling in your heart. Paul's choice of words for "dwelling" is important. He uses a strong word. He could use the word that means to "inhabit" but instead he uses the word that means to "settle down." It carries the idea of a "permanent resident" not a short-lived resident.
D.A. Carson points out this word choice of Paul's as well, and then illustrates the difference between a short-lived resident and a long-term resident. Carson says, when Christ takes up residence in a believer, it's like a couple who purchases a home that needs a lot of work, but overtime, they clean it up, repair it, and eventually say, “This house has been shaped to our needs and taste and I really feel comfortable.” He says,

When Christ by his Spirit takes up residence within us, he finds a moral equivalent to trash, black and silver wall paper, and a leaking roof. He sets about turning this residence into a place appropriate for him, a home for which he is comfortable.... When a person takes up long-term residence somewhere, their presence eventually characterizes that dwelling.... When Christ first moves into our lives, he finds us in bad repair. It takes a great deal of power to change us; and that is why Paul prays for power.... [He is] transforming us into a house that pervasively reflects his own character.” (Carson, Spiritual Reformation, 186-187).

Christ enters the heart of a Christian that he may live, abide and reign there. He enters our hearts we may reflect his character.

In Colossians he says, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ... Let the word of Christ dwell in your hearts” (Col. 3:15a, 16).

App: May the word of Christ, the presence of Christ, the peace of Christ rule in your heart by the Spirit. May he overcome your affections for other things, and purify you through and through so that you adore Christ alone and become like him.

B. We need power to grasp Christ's love (17b-19a)

Paul moves from talking about strength to love, but strength is still in view since we need God's power to understand the limitless dimensions of his love. Sure, the Ephesians knew of God's love. Paul is asking for them to know it better.
It is not a prayer that focuses on their love for Christ (though that is good thing for which to pray), but rather it is a prayer that they may know Christ's love for them!

**App:** Paul apparently thinks that they do not appreciate Christ's love as they should. I think the same could be said for us. When you do, you live a crucified life ("I have been crucified with Christ... who loved me and gave himself for me" [Gal 2:20]; "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" [Eph 5:2]).

And it is not a mere "intellectual appreciation" of the love of Christ that Paul is after. Carson says, "Paul is not asking that his readers might become more able to articulate the greatness of God's love in Christ Jesus or to grasp with the intellect alone how significant God's love is in the plan of redemption. He is asking God that they might have the power to grasp the dimensions of that love in their experience" (my emphasis, 191).

Our experience must be rooted in truth, and God's love is rooted in history, most magnificently at the cross, but that love is to be tasted. It is to be savored.

There are numerous verses that refer to the idea of experience (cf, Ps 73:25), like Peter says, "Though you have not seen him, you believe in him, and rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." (1:8).

*That's not mere head knowledge.*

Paul goes on to say that this love "surpasses knowledge." It is a love that is knowable, and explainable to a degree, yet it is to be experienced.

Let me point out two ditches to stay out of regarding experience:

- **Abuse:** There are some who base too much on experience. They don't filter experience through God's word. This leads to mysticism. This is dangerous. This can lead to heresy, and all kinds of problems. God's revelation is primary. Understand your experience through the lens of Scripture (which alone is perfect).
- **Avoidance:** But there are others - who are so afraid of the abuses of "experience" and the work of the Spirit - that they have their
own problem, that is, an *avoidance* of the Spirit and experience. They have a *cold, dead orthodoxy* as a result.

**Paul shows us what we need.** He has spent three chapters on God's truth. Now he says that he wants us to know it, to experience it. God's salvation, God's power and love, are to be known *and* experienced.

- **Many people have known right doctrine, but committed grave sins because they were not walking in the fullness of God's presence and love.** They were straight as a gun barrel, but just as empty.

Notice four aspects of love that we need to know in our minds and in our experience:

**i. Know that you are secured in his love (17b).**

Paul says “that you, being rooted and grounded in love” (17b).

Stott says, “Love is to be the soil in which their life is rooted; love is to be the foundation on which their life is built.” (136).

Paul says a similar thing in Col 2:6-7 - "be rooted and built up in him [Christ]” (*Col 2:7*).

**Build your life on the love of Christ.**

- **Let your roots go down into the love of Christ and draw strength from there.** Live moment by moment knowing you are loved by God. This love has come to you before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3-6). In love God has called you, and brought you to life (Eph 2:4).

Walk in that love and grace.

*Jesus said, "Abide in my love."* Walk in my love. Dwell in my love.

**ii. Know the limitless dimensions of his love (18)**

Next, Paul goes on to express his desire for the Ephesians to grasp something of the greatness of God's love. He uses the expressions:
“breadth and length, height and depth” (Rom 8:31-39). It’s difficult to understand precisely what Paul is getting at, but God’s love is certainly all of these!

- Scripture speaks of the breadth of God’s love in that he has included all races as part of his family; Jew and Gentile are one.
- Scripture speaks of his love being as long as eternity. ‘He has loved you with an everlasting love’ (Jer. 31:3)
- Scripture speaks of God’s love being higher than the heavens (Ps 103).
- Scripture speaks of his love in terms of depth in that God casts our sins at the bottom of the sea (Micah 7:19).

Could we with ink the ocean fill  
And were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill  
And every man a scribe by trade,  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the Ocean dry  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole  
Though stretched from sky to sky.

Notice that we should try to "comprehend it." But it takes God’s "strength" to do so! This love has been expounded beautifully in chapters 1-2.

Notice also that we should try to grasp it "with all the saints." All the saints – rich and poor, black and white, young and old – think on the love of Christ together. Discuss his love. Share stories of his love; study the Bible’s together.

This is another reference to the importance of the church. God intends to shape us through community, as we reflect on his gospel. We are not intended to live the Christian life in isolation.

iii. Know that this love surpasses knowledge (19a)

While we may comprehend his love a bit, we still need to know it by experience. Paul says it “surpasses knowledge.”

How do you experience God’s love?
Vertically:
• Marvel at God's love (Ch 1-2).
• Rest in God's forgiveness (4:32). I meet many people who cannot "forgive themselves." Listen, if God has forgiven you, you need to move on my friend. Bury it. It is clear that you are not finding your identity in Jesus Christ and the Gospel. You are living in a works based system that does nothing but enslave you.

Horizontally:
• We are to love the world - all races. In the church, we are to love each other regardless of socio-economic background (Eph 2:11-22).
• We are to forgive others because Christ has forgiven us (Eph 4:32).
• We must show God's love by putting up with difficult people, by patient, forbearing love (4:2-3). The same type of patient love that God has for us.

Receive his love on a daily basis. Give him your love daily. Love others out of that love.

i. **Know his love that you may be mature (3:19b)**

Paul culminates his prayer with this great phrase, "**filled with the fullness of God.**"

Paul is asking that they move know the love of God in Christ to the end that they might "**be all that God wants them to be**" or "**to be spiritually mature**" (Carson, 195).

Paul uses a similar expression in 4:13 to talk about spiritual maturity,

"**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.**"

As individuals we are to go on being filled with the Spirit of God (Eph 5:18), and as a church, although we are already filled with his fullness (Eph 1:23), we are to grow up into him, until we reach fullness (Eph 4:13-16).
God is growing us up into maturity in Christ, which means he is growing us up into the fullness of Christ.

In Colossians, Paul says that God’s fullness dwells in Christ, and we have come to fullness (Col 1:19, 2:9-10).

Jesus got at this idea when he prayed:

“That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26).

We can't be mature unless we know and experience the power and love of God in Christ.

You need the fullness of God’s love and power to be like Christ.

**App:** Each of us should seek the fullness of God’s power and love that we may love our neighbors, our church, our family, and this broken world.

Let me share with you a story from Francis Chan about a family who has allowed the roots to go deep into the love of Christ, and displayed the wonderful fruit of the Spirit.

He’s a Mechanic. She’s a hairdresser. They have been foster parents to thirty-two children and have adopted sixteen. Domingo and Irene are in their late fifties and currently have eleven children living with them, and they tell me they would take more if they could. Anyone who has children knows they could be doing this only by the Spirit’s power. Imagine the amount of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control it would take to pull this off.

Domingo and Irene take the command in James 1:27 (caring for orphans) more seriously than any other Americans I know. While other people their age are figuring out how to live most comfortably, they can’t stop thinking of the 500,000 kids in America who need parents. And while they see these kids as a huge blessing, they are also very open about the hardships they face daily. Perseverance has been key, especially years ago when one of their adopted sons hung himself in their closet. While their days are filled with joy, there have also been many times when they persevered by sheer obedience.
God has provided for them over and over again. One time they needed to build an addition onto their house so that they could take in more children. They didn’t have the money, so Irene prayed fervently. When she looked up from praying, the first thing she saw was a sign for a contractor. She immediately asked God, “is he the answer to my prayer?” Days later, one of the leaders in their church heard about their need and offered to build the addition for free. And you guessed it – he was the same contractor whose name Irene had seen on the sign.

One of the wonderful blessings they have enjoyed is watching their biological children follow in their footsteps. One of their sons has two biological and two adopted kids. Another son has three biological and three adopted kids. They live such extraordinary lives that CBS news ran a story on them. Even the secular world notices the unusual and supernatural love these two have shown to those in need.

For those who may think that Domingo and Irene have always been as gracious as they are today, let me share some insight from their past (I have permission). Irene has shared publicly about the early days in their marriage and the hatred she felt toward Domingo. He was abusive, and she prayed regularly that he would die. She even daydreamed about him driving off a cliff because of the pain he inflicted on her. Now she calls him the godliest man she knows. For anyone who thinks their own life or marriage is hopeless, remember Domingo and Irene. God loves to take people in the worst of situations and transform them by His Spirit.

What a hope-filled story. God loves to take people in the worst of situations and transform them by His Spirit.

Our story will be different from this, but let me challenge you to pray this prayer, and ask for God to do something amazing through you, by His Spirit, for the good of others and the glory of Christ.

**Challenge:** Pray this, this week, every morning. Pray for the strength of the Spirit, for Christ to rule your heart. Pray that you may be rooted and established in love, that you may know Christ’s love, and grow up into the fullness of God – into the likeness of Jesus.

This leads us to this doxology… Since we pray to the Sovereign Father…
3. **PRAY WITH GREAT EXPECTATIONS (3:20-21)**

Finally, Paul moves to his praise. He shows us the greatness of God. Notice the "what, why, and how" of this doxology.

**A. What?**

Paul says, **God is able (20a)!** Able to do what? Notice the descriptions...
- o To do more
- o To do far more
- o To do far more abundantly
- o To do far more abundantly than all we ask
- o To do far more abundantly than all we ask or think

**God can do more in 5 second than our 5 years.**
Do you believe that God is big?!

Do you believe he alone is the only Sovereign! He is the one who raised Jesus from the dead, and placed him as head over the church, and has put all things under his feet!

Get a vision of God that increases your faith in God's greatness. The best way to do this is to fill your mind with the word of God.

**B. How?**

How does God work beyond our imagination? Paul says it is "according to his power at work within us" (20b)

Think about the examples of this in the Bible. Think of his work in the life of Abraham, Moses, Gideon, David, Elijah (a man like us, James 5), Nehemiah, Isaiah, the Disciples, the church.

God is able to do extraordinary things through ordinary people by his power at work within them.

**C. Why? (21)**
Why does God do these things? Paul says it in verse 21. This should be the ultimate goal for our prayers for power and love:

*To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

God blesses his people for his glory.

Paul says, God desires his glory in the church and in Christ Jesus.

"God desires glory in the bride and in the bridegroom; in the community of peace, and in the Peacemaker" (Stott).

For how long?

Forever. Forever, God will be glorified for his power and love.

Forever God will be glorified by his people.

Forever, he will be glorified in Christ Jesus, the lamb who was slain.

Forever, he will be glorified in the Christ, who fell to his knees before the Father, in the garden of Gethsemane. The Christ who took the cup of wrath, that we may receive the cup of grace. The Christ who has reconciled us to the Father, and one another. The Christ who now dwells in our hearts, through faith by the Spirit.

To God be the glory forever.

**Conclusion**

- So, let's bow before the Father in humility – in humble gratitude, humble desperation, and in humble confidence.

- Let's ask our great Sovereign Father, for the fullness of his love and power.

- Let’s come in faith believing that He is able to do more than we can ask, think or imagine.