

# *Grounded in Love*

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 27, 2003  
Sermon Background Study

## Scripture Passage

*Ephesians 3:14-21 (NRSV)*

<sup>14</sup>For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup>and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup>I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup>and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup>Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

*In today's study, we'll take a verse-by-verse look at this prayer and doxology from Ephesians.*

*"For this reason I bow my knees . . ." (v. 14)*

Jews generally did not kneel to pray. For example, in one of Jesus' parables about prayer, the Pharisee and the tax collector pray while standing. Kneeling to pray, such as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane or Stephen did as he faced his martyrdom (Acts 7), conveyed a special earnestness and zeal. Thus, here Paul<sup>1</sup> wishes to impress upon the Ephesians<sup>2</sup> the depth of his sincerity in the prayer that is our scripture passage today . . . a prayer that he is offering to God on behalf of the Ephesians, an intercessory prayer.<sup>3</sup>

But what is the "reason" for this prayer? Why is Paul, at least figuratively, falling to his knees to pray for the Ephesians? Verse 14 resumes a thought that Paul began in 3:1 but interrupted with a digression into the nature of his ministry to the Gentiles (3:1-13). But now, having set out the privileges of his Gentile readers as a result of God's grace, Paul will pray for their complete experience of God.<sup>4</sup>

Paul addresses God as "Father," the one from whom all families in heaven and earth derive their name (v. 15). Paul's phrasing underscores the importance of names and naming in the Bible. In the creation accounts, when God allows Adam to name the animals

### The Prayers of Paul

Most of Paul's NT writings are correspondence: real letters written to real people about real problems and situations. Yet, these letters are suffused with numerous prayers.

Sometimes, Paul offers up a simple prayer of thanksgiving, such as his thanks for the "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" of the Christians in Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:2-3). Other times, like in today's passage, Paul petitions God on the behalf of others. For example, Paul prays for the spiritual growth of another Christian, Philemon: "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." (Philemon, v.6)

<sup>1</sup>Opinion is divided as to whether Paul himself actually wrote this letter. Some scholars believe that it was written in Paul's name by one of his followers. At a minimum, if Paul wrote the letter he gave his "secretary" a lot of leeway, for the style of the letter is markedly different from the letters all agree were penned by Paul. Regardless of whether Paul personally crafted this letter, the church has always held that it conveys Paul's teachings and thus, in this study, I refer to the author as Paul.

<sup>2</sup>It may surprise you that we can't even be sure that the letter was written to the Christians in Ephesus. The reference "to Ephesus" in the first verse of the letter is missing in the oldest manuscripts! Nonetheless, the church held that this letter contains the authentic and trustworthy teachings of Paul.

<sup>3</sup>An intercessory prayer is nothing more than a prayer we make in favor of another person . . . we are interceding on their behalf.

<sup>4</sup> From A.T. Lincoln's commentary on Ephesians in the *Word Biblical Commentary*. 1998.

(Genesis 2:20) it is an expression of humanity's dominion over (and responsibility for!) them. In Isaiah 40:26, God names the stars, showing that he is their Creator and Lord. Thus, in his address to God, Paul reminds us that God is not only the Father as Redeemer through his son Jesus Christ, but God is also Father as Creator. Though families can take many forms, Paul acknowledges here that families are the basic structure of human existence and are part of God's created order. Families are their truest expression of God's good creation when they are rooted in the love of God and one another.

"In order that . . . he might grant you . . ." (v.16)

In his commentary on Ephesians, John Stott sees in Paul's prayer a staircase with four steps, whose key words are *strength*, *love*, *knowledge*, and *fullness*. Let's look at each:

- "Strengthened . . . with power" (v. 16)  
Sometimes Christians can have a little trouble seeing the Trinity in scripture, but Paul's simple prayer here is trinitarian – he asks the Father that the Christians might be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and indwelt by Jesus Christ. Of course, Paul is writing to Christians and he knows that they have already been born anew and empowered by God's Spirit. This business of "indwelling" is a matter of degree. Paul uses a word, *katoikeo* (*dwell*), which conveys permanent residence, not simply some sort of temporary lodging. It is as if he prays for Christ to settle in the hearts of these Christians.
- "Rooted and grounded in love" (v. 17)  
In the new humanity that is being created by Christ, love is the pre-eminent virtue. Paul prays that his readers will be able to reach across cultural or racial divides as members of God's family, ever rooted in and grounded in love. We can picture a young plant that sinks its roots ever deeper into the soil that gives it life and nourishment. In the same way, our roots are to be sunk ever-deeper into love – of God and one another.
- "To know the love of Christ" (v. 19)  
Paul now moves from our love to Christ's love, which, in truth surpasses our understanding. What sort of love must it be to endure a Roman cross? What kind of love must it be to allow one's son nailed to that cross for others? How can we comprehend this . . . the "breadth and length and height and depth" of such love? Little wonder then that Paul prays for comprehension so that we might truly know this love.
- "Filled with all the fullness of God" (v. 19)  
In this phrase, Paul means that we are to be filled up with all the fullness that God possesses. The Greek here conveys moving to a goal. Here again, as in so many places, we find the already/not yet perspective. Already, Paul's readers have been filled with the very Spirit of God, but yet, Paul prays that they move on toward fullness; indeed, toward wholeness and completeness and perfection.

#### Getting these studies on-line & early!

There are now more than 50(!) of these studies available online at the website of our Center for Christian Learning:  
[www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)

These studies are available at least a week before the sermon is preached. If you would like to get them early, you can get them on-line. There are two ways:

1. You can download a copy at the Center's website. Simply click on the button, "Sermon Background Studies," and you'll be taken to the right page.
2. The studies are also distributed by e-mail. To join the e-mail distribution list, simply send an e-mail to:  
[sa\\_studies-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:sa_studies-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).

#### A Doxology

A doxology is simply a formal expression of praise to God. Paul's letters are peppered with doxologies. At times, they seem to just burst out of him! Here, in the closing verses of this section, Paul praises God and gives glory to him for the gift of the power that is working in Paul and all Christians; namely, God's Holy Spirit. Paul knows that the prayers he has offered for his readers will not be in vain for God's Spirit empowers us to do and to be that which would otherwise be impossible.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Ephesians 1:15-22 Paul's prayer of thanks for wisdom and power.</p>	<p>Day 2 Ephesians 3:1-13 Paul's digression into the privileges God has given the Gentile Christians in Ephesus.</p>
<p>Day 3 Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul appeals for unity in the church.</p>	<p>Day 4 Ephesians 4:17-5:21 Paul reminds the Christians that those who have been "clothed with the new self" are called to changed lifestyles.</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 6:10-20 Staying strong in the Lord.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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**Scott Engle’s new SS class, *Something More*, is at 9:30!!**

We’ve begun a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class is led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies, and is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is plenty of time for questions and answers.

We meet in Room 4 of Piro Hall on the Garden Level of the new sanctuary.  
**Please join us next week!**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In this passage from Ephesians, Paul prays for others. When we pray for others, what do we typically pray for? Make a list of some things you’ve asked God to provide for others. It might include healing or protection or peace or even faith. Are there things we ought to be praying for, but don’t? Like what?
2. It is clear from Paul’s writings that he sincerely believes God’s Holy Spirit empowers and strengthens all Christians. Do you ever feel or experience this power? What might be some barriers to our empowerment by God? What could we do to be stronger in God?
3. Paul prays that Christ might dwell in the heart of the Christians. How remarkable! In the Greek, it means basically taking up residence, or making one’s abode. What do you think this actually means? Is it merely a feeling or is something larger and more concrete at work here?
4. I love Paul’s phrase, “filled with all the fullness of God.” What do you think he means? What is our role in being filled with such fullness? What challenge is Paul laying before the Ephesians . . . or us?