Residence

God offers believers strength by Christ dwelling in us.

Late in 2017, news media from around the world went into overdrive with the British royal family’s announcement that Prince Harry, sixth in the line of succession to the throne, was engaged to marry Meghan Markle, an American actress. The couple’s wedding date was set for May 19, 2018. Entertainment media representatives were abuzz with speculation about what the big day would include.

Like most Americans, Miss Markle knew few details about the British royal family before she met and began dating the young prince. She acknowledged that she had a steep learning curve when it came to royal traditions and protocols. And while the royal family affirmed Prince Harry’s engagement and sincerely welcomed his bride-to-be, the fact remained that Meghan was neither a British citizen at the time nor a member of any royal family. In at least those two respects, she was an outsider. However, her upcoming marriage to the prince would change everything. She would take on a new life, new citizenship, new responsibilities, a new residence, and a new future. She would become an adopted member of the British royal family.

In a more eternally significant way, followers of Christ experience a similar radical transformation. Apart from Christ, people are truly outsiders to God’s family. Unbelievers are spiritually dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1), are “excluded from the citizenship of Israel … without hope and without God in the world” (2:12). That all changes, however, when sinners come to faith in Christ. Believers become “fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household” (2:19). In Christ—the Prince of peace and King of kings—we receive eternal life, new citizenship in heaven, a new purpose for living in the here and now, and a new royal inheritance reserved in the life to come.

In this session, we will focus on a remarkable prayer that Paul wrote and placed in the middle of Ephesians at the conclusion of his doctrinal section (chaps. 1–3). As such, the prayer guides us into a mountaintop experience with the Triune God. With Paul we can learn to “kneel before the Father” (3:14) in worship, “be strengthened with power … through his Spirit” (3:16), and “know Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge” (3:19).
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

This session marks the final study in passages of Ephesians that focus primarily on theological and doctrinal matters (chaps. 1–3). Paul used the first three chapters of his epistle to lay a solid theological foundation for the subsequent chapters’ emphasis on Christian living (chaps. 4–6). Like most of Paul’s epistles to churches, Ephesians follows a basic two-part outline: right beliefs (good doctrine) provide the basis for right behavior (good works).

Let’s review the theological themes that Paul has emphasized thus far:

• The blessings of salvation—Through Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross, God chose to provide salvation for sinners. Those who believe in Jesus have been chosen, redeemed, and sealed by God (1:1-14).

• Prayer for enlightenment—Paul prayed for the recipients of his letter to understand that God helps believers comprehend the riches and greatness of His calling (1:15-23).

• Made alive in Christ—Salvation comes by grace through faith apart from good works. We who were once dead have been made alive in Christ by God’s grace (2:1-10).

• The peace Jesus brings—Gentile believers were once without hope and separated from God. Now God has brought all believers near Him through Christ. Previous barriers between believers are gone (2:11-22).

• God’s revealed mystery—God’s new entity, the church, was a mystery not revealed before but is now made known. Believers are to proclaim the mystery of the church (3:1-13).

In 3:14-21, Paul recorded a second prayer for the recipients of the letter. (The first recorded prayer is in 1:15-23.) Let us take note of a couple of background matters regarding the second prayer. First, it serves as a culmination of Paul’s effort to build a theological case for the church as God’s new covenant people (unifying Jewish and Gentile believers in one body). The apostle’s concluding prayer in the section was meant to capture not only the minds but also the hearts of the Ephesian believers (and us). Paul wanted believers to experience right theology, not just study it.

Second, the prayer in 3:14-21 effectively serves as a template or model for passionate intercessory prayer by believers today. Consider three parts of the prayer. First is the preface (3:14-15), in which Paul expressed his intention to entreat the Father. Second is the petition itself (3:16-19), in which Paul poured out his deepest concerns for the Ephesian believers. Third is the praise Paul offered (3:20-21), a glorious outpouring to God for His glory to be fully on display throughout eternal ages.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

PETITIONED (Eph. 3:14-15)

Paul prefaced his prayer by declaring that he was making his petition to the Father, the One from whom all other families receive their name.

VERSE 14

For this reason I kneel before the Father

The words for this reason connect with 3:1 in that Paul actually introduced his prayer in that verse. At 3:2, however, the apostle decided to interject an extended explanation of God’s grace in using him (“the least of all the saints,” 3:8) to reveal the mystery of the church. In Christ, both Jewish and Gentile believers received “boldness and confident access” (3:12) to the Father not only in salvation but also in matters such as worship and prayer. Thus, Paul laid a wonderful foundation for the prayer he was about to record.

Paul’s earnestness in prayer shines through in the Greek verb rendered I kneel. The usual posture of prayer for Jewish men was to stand with their arms raised upward (Matt. 6:5; Luke 18:11,13). To prostrate oneself in prayer was an expression of great humility and intensity—as when Solomon prayed to the Lord at the dedication of the temple and as Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (1 Kings 8:54; Luke 22:41). Some Christians today kneel as a regular posture in their private praying.

The apostle addressed his prayer to the Father. He had already called God “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” and then later “the Father” to whom believing Jews and Gentiles now have equal access (1:3; 2:18). Here in 3:14, Paul set the stage for a full-fledged trinitarian understanding of prayer.

VERSE 15

from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

Paul expanded his declaration of God as Father. He went beyond previous descriptions of God as the loving Father of Jesus and as the heavenly Father of Jewish and Gentile believers united in His new community. Paul declared that God’s fatherhood extends to every family in heaven and on earth. Bible students have struggled to understand exactly what Paul meant.

First, it should be noted that in the original language of the New Testament, the terms for “father” and “family” are more closely related in form than English Bible translations indicate. The Greek term rendered family can be literally translated as “a father-headed group.”
Second, many Bible students have understood Paul to be making a statement about God’s general fatherhood as Creator over all creation. Genesis 1 declares that God created various types (families) of creatures—birds, fish, land animals, humanity. Thus, Paul may have been pointing to God’s inherent sovereignty over all of His creation. If this understanding is correct, then Paul’s reference to families in heaven points to the existence of heavenly beings such as angels and other rulers and authorities “in the heavens” (1:20; 3:10).

An alternate view suggests that Paul’s reference to every family referred to local Christian congregations. Proponents of this view point out that, in Ephesians, Paul consistently used the term church to refer to the worldwide body of believers and probably chose the word family to point to a Christian fellowship in a particular location. If this view is correct, then the Father’s family in heaven could refer to believers who already had died and are in Christ’s care as they await the resurrection in the end time.

In either of these two views, (I lean toward the view that Paul was referring to God’s fatherhood as the Creator of all), there is one further magnificent aspect to God as Father that Paul identified. God is the source and supreme example of the very idea of fatherhood. God the Father conceived of the idea of family. He defined its nature, purpose, and organization. In this regard, He has in effect named every family (“from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,” NIV).

So then, Paul considered the relationship between God’s fatherhood and father-headed families neither as an analogy nor as a psychological projection. Instead, God’s fatherhood stands first. All other expressions of fatherhood and family are derived from God, because He is eternally “God the Father.” Today, we can strengthen other believers by praying for them to our heavenly Father, just as Paul prayed for the Ephesians.

EXPLORE FURTHER
Read the article titled “Kneel” on page 977 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How do you react to Paul’s declaration that he literally knelt as he prayed for the Ephesians? At what times or for what situations have you been motivated to kneel in prayer?

INDWELLED (Eph. 3:16-19)
Paul prayed that believers would gain spiritual strength, deeper faith, and abundant love. These qualities come from Christ’s indwelling presence.
VERSE 16

I pray that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit,

The words I pray have been supplied in most English Bible translations to clarify that Paul began to express the substance of his prayer in this verse. His aspirations for the Ephesian believers’ spiritual growth rose higher and higher. Paul offered four petitions, each petition building on the previous one until he boldly asked that his fellow believers might know God fully.

Paul’s first petition was for God to grant believers the strength they needed to thrive in their faith. He used several phrases to expound the gift of strength. First, the strength would be granted according to the riches of God’s glory. Paul had previously described “the riches of [God’s] grace” (2:7), emphasizing that all the priceless blessings of salvation come to believers as a demonstration of grace, not from merit or payment for good works. God’s storehouse of strength for His people is limitless.

Second, God graciously strengthens His people with power. Previously, Paul had told the Ephesians that his ministry as an apostle and gospel herald was given to him “by the working of [God’s] power” (3:7). That same divine power is available to every believer. Thus, Paul prayed that the Christians in Ephesus might likewise receive God’s strengthening power. The verb rendered strengthened means “made capable of achieving something desirable.”

Third, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be strengthened in their inner being (“inner man,” KJV). Proverbs 4:23 exhorts the people of God to “guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.” Paul recognized the truth of that proverb, and it was essentially what he prayed for the believers in Ephesus. Even more than physical strength, Christians need spiritual strength that has been tempered in the crucible of endurance (see 1 Tim. 4:8).

Fourth, Paul knew that for believers to be strengthened spiritually, it would happen through the Spirit. Spiritual strength for faithful Christian living is provided through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Here is Paul’s reference to the third Person of the Trinity. In Romans 8:9, Paul declared that “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him.” Thus, the Spirit is present in believers and is ready and willing to empower them to live for God.

VERSE 17

and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love,
Next, Paul rephrased his first petition using different terms. Instead of referring to the “inner being” he referred to believers’ hearts. Instead of praying for the Spirit’s power, he prayed that Christ would dwell in believers. Here, Paul was not suggesting a strict separation between Christ’s dwelling in believers and the Spirit’s indwelling. To be precise, Christ dwells in the believer’s heart through the Spirit (Rom. 8:9-10).

What is especially noteworthy is that the Greek verb translated dwell in implies permanent residence, being completely at home rather than temporarily living in a place. Christ begins His residence in believers at the time of conversion, yet there is something more for believers to enjoy: the joyful understanding that He is fully at home in their lives. What is required of believers? Only that they continue to live the Christian life through faith, just as they began the Christian life by faith.

In the second half of Ephesians 3:17, Paul began his second petition. He prayed that God would grant believers the experience of His love. Again, he used several phrases to express more fully what this petition entails. Essentially, the goal of receiving inner strength as believers is for us to become better at loving God and loving one another.

First, Paul prayed that believers might be rooted … in love. The kind of love Paul mentioned is self-giving, Christlike love (Greek, agape [ah GAH pay]). One supernatural outcome of saving faith is the capacity to express genuine love. Paul drew upon an illustration from plant life. When a tree extends deep roots into good soil, it is more likely to withstand every stormy blast. As Christians grow spiritually in the fertile soil of God’s love, they develop deep roots, empowering the bearing of much fruit—showing genuine love to others in Jesus’ name.

Second, Paul asked that believers might be firmly established (“grounded,” KJV; ESV) in God’s love. The verb rendered established relates not to an agriculture context but to architecture. It depicts the constructing of a house on a strong foundation. In other words, love is the solid ground on which the Christian life must be built in order to withstand the storms of life. Jesus told a parable to this effect, commending the wisdom of a man who built his house on the rock rather than on sand (Matt. 7:24-27).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Consider the two verbs (rooted, firmly established) that Paul used to describe building a life on the foundation of God’s love. How can a believer continue to deepen his or her spiritual roots in the soil of God’s love? What evidence shows that a believer’s life is firmly established on God’s love?
VERSE 18

may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God’s love,

Paul’s third petition was for God to grant believers a fully formed, multidimensional comprehension of God’s love. The logic of Paul’s thinking was that once we as believers have been rooted and grounded in the experience of Christlike love, we will better be able to grasp its measureless extent. Again, the apostle used several phrases to express more fully what he meant.

• May be able to comprehend—The Greek verb rendered may be able refers to the ability or strength to achieve something. The verb translated comprehend means “realizing, understanding, or grasping something.” Paul wanted believers to move beyond mere intellectual knowledge to a deep and true spiritual knowledge.

• With all the saints—Christians can never grow spiritually as God intends in isolation, as solitary individuals. It is when all kinds of believers—Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, rich and poor—live, worship, and serve Christ in community that God’s love is on display at its best. A great diversity of believers in any church congregation provides a fertile ground for the blossoming of Christlike love!

• Length and width, height and depth—At the least, mentioning these dimensions points to the truth that God’s love is limitless and beyond measure. Nevertheless, I like to say that God’s love is long enough to last forever, wide enough to include all people groups, high enough to take us to heaven, and deep enough to reach the heart of the vilest sinner.

VERSE 19

and to know Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

The apostle continued his third petition by expressing the same idea with different words (just as he had done with the first petition in 3:16-17). In place of the phrase “may be able to comprehend,” Paul used the verb rendered to know. This verb represents the common Greek word for knowledge that was used frequently by the writers of the New Testament. However, Paul then expressed a petition for something that in a sense is an impossibility: to know Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge.

Christ’s love, in all its dimensions, is infinite and thus can never be completely grasped by our finite human minds. Love in its pure, infinite form has existed throughout eternity in the bond of love that unites the Triune Godhead. It was expressed in the act of creation, when the Son lovingly carried out the Father’s design for the universe (Col. 1:16). It was
on view when the Son took on human flesh in the incarnation. And it was displayed in amazing splendor in the Son’s willing sacrifice on the cross to provide salvation. We as believers can grow in our understanding of (and practice of) such love but we cannot fully comprehend it. Thus, when Paul wrote that such love surpasses knowledge, he did not mean that Christ’s love is unknowable but that it is so measureless that we cannot draw a line around it to contain it. It is limitless.

Paul had used the term translated surpasses on two previous occasions in his epistle. He had written of the “immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power” (1:19) and of the “immeasurable riches of his grace” (2:7). Here, the same term is applied to Christ’s love. God’s power, grace, and love are beyond measure, yet they have all been extended to believers in Christ. Further, just as surely as the riches of Christ are “incalculable” (3:8), so the love of Christ is immeasurably great and beyond full comprehension.

Paul’s fourth petition was for God to grant believers the experience of His fullness. This petition is actually the culmination of his requests for the Ephesian believers (and Christians today). The Greek term rendered fullness means “completeness.” Paul had previously stated that the church, Christ’s body, is “the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way” (1:23). He later declared that believers are to grow to maturity “with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (4:13). In 3:19, it is all the fullness of God that Paul noted.

God’s fullness, or perfection, is the goal toward which we as believers pray to be filled. Just as we are called to be holy as God is holy and to be perfect as God is perfect (1 Pet. 1:15-16; Matt. 5:48), so we are called to the fullness of God as He is full. This phrase likely points to the lifelong process of embracing and trusting the presence and power of God in our lives to an ever greater measure. We are to be filled in this way over time, just as it takes time for a large container to be filled. Later in the letter, Paul challenged the recipients of his letter to “be filled by the Spirit” (5:18). As believers, we seek to experience the power and guidance of Christ through the indwelling Spirit. It is through the Spirit’s enabling that we as Christians move toward enjoying all the fullness of God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Write a paraphrase of Ephesians 3:16-19 and reflect on the implications of Paul’s prayer petitions for your life. How intent are you in praying for a greater grasp of God’s love in your life? What evidence shows that you are being changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ?
**HONORED** (Eph. 3:20-21)

Paul concluded his prayer with a doxology in which he declared God’s majesty and noted that God’s majesty is demonstrated in the church and in Christ. Thus, the church brings glory to God forever.

**VERSE 20**

*Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us—*

Paul was daring and bold in the petitions he had made for believers. Yet Paul had supreme confidence that God could grant his petitions in ways that defied imagination. Further, Paul’s intercession culminated in praise. His petitions had reflected on the greatness of God; now he praised this great God.

Paul’s confidence in God’s response to prayer was expressed in careful steps. First, God is able to do. He is alive and powerful. He is not passive or inactive. This declaration stands in sharp contrast to the worship of lifeless idols previously practiced by the Gentile believers in Ephesus.

Second, God can do all that we ask. He listens to the prayers of His children and is willing to answer our requests.

Third, God can even do everything that we as His people are able to think. In fact, He knows our thoughts better than we do. Sometimes we imagine prayer requests that we never express aloud. He hears them nevertheless.

Fourth, God is able to do things above and beyond our petitions. His answers sometimes (and always can) greatly exceed what we ask for. The Greek word rendered above is the root of our English term hyper. Paul may have coined the word translated beyond. Together the two words imply a measure of “exceeding abundantly” (KJV) or “immeasurably more” (NIV).

Fifth, God answers our prayers according to the power that works in us. Paul was repeating the initial part of his petition that believers might be strengthened with power in their inner being (3:16). God’s power is already working in the believer’s heart through His Spirit.

**VERSE 21**

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

Bible students rightly call the conclusion to Paul’s prayer a doxology. The Greek word rendered glory is the basis for the first part of the word (Greek, doxa). Thus, the word doxology literally means “praise word” or “word of praise” to God. The first three chapters of Ephesians overflow with references to God’s glory, or magnificence:
• God’s saving of believers brings praise to the glory of His grace (1:6);
• Jewish believers who first put their hope in Jesus as the promised Messiah brought praise to God’s glory (1:12);
• The Spirit is the down payment on believers’ inheritance, bringing praise to God’s glory (1:14);
• God is characterized as the Father of glory (1:17);
• God has provided the riches of the glory of His inheritance for the saints (1:18); and
• God will give spiritual strength according to the riches of His glory (3:16).

Here at the end of the doctrinal section of the letter—and as the conclusion to an earnest prayer—Paul noted that glory is due to God to all generations.

While Paul previously implied that glory was an inherent attribute of God, he shifted the emphasis slightly in this doxology. He emphasized God’s worthiness to receive glory (in the sense of praise) from believers. To illustrate: a gorgeous snowcapped mountain range might be inherently magnificent yet at the same time be exulted over by those who stand at its base and view it. Similarly, those throughout history (forever and ever) who come to know God through Christ and stand before Him as His redeemed people cannot help but gush with praise over His inherent majesty.

Paul stated that the glory of God is expressed in two ways. First, it is declared in the church. As Paul explained in the first part of the letter, the church is the special community of faith through which God’s purposes are made evident. Second, Christ Jesus is the One in whom the glory of God is displayed in fullness. Together, the church and the Son—body and Head; bride and Bridegroom; redeemed and Redeemer—display His magnificence. The glory of God is most splendidly displayed in the faith-union of redeemed sinful humanity with the sinless Son.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Glory” on pages 647–648 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How important is it for believers to grasp that our ultimate purpose is to declare the glory of God eternally? What will you do during the coming week to express honor to God for demonstrating His majesty in Christ and through the church?