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TRUE POWER: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS 3:14-21 AND ITS POWER FOR THE
BELIEVER

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Introduction

Everyone wants to experience change; we read dozens of books on managing our time, loving people, being happier, stopping their addictions, etc. Christians are no different. Yet, people are still the same. A glance at the news and our own lives reveals this much is true. Working with students and families, this is all too true. Parents want their kids to get along, serve one another, honor and serve Christ, stop saying back words, etc. What is their solution to these problems? Nike Christianity – “*Just do it!*” And yet, that does not seem to work. I believe we find an answer to this dilemma, how to impart change in our lives and the lives of those around us, in Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. This passage is not only of theological significance but of immense practical significance for the believer’s life. Paul lays out how the Christian can survive this life of temptation, heartache, pain, and trials, what can help the believer persevere to the end, and the prayer that Pastors and laypeople alike should be praying. More than that, Paul emphasizes the church’s central role in the believer’s life. This paper will examine the text, attempt to ring out as many gospel truths as possible and discuss the implications for the believer’s life.

A few preliminary comments should be made before moving forwards. First, all Scripture quotes of Ephesians 3:14-21 will be taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise stated. Secondly, the format of the paper is as follows: background on Ephesus and the flow of the text leading up to vv. 14-21, a brief discussion on v. 14-16a, 16b-17, 18-19, and 20-21, an application section where we seek to apply the text to our 21st-century context, and a conclusion. More emphasis will be placed on discussing the text with the prayer that with a proper understanding, an appropriate application can be had by all. Finally, my prayer is that the church would adopt Paul’s prayer as a model for its own – just as we recite and model prayers after the Lord’s Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, may we repeat and model prayer after Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21.

Background on Ephesus

Very little is known about Ephesus. In contrast with his other letters, Paul does not mention issues that prompted his writing. The only other references to the church in Ephesus are Revelation 2:1-7 and his letters to his companion Timothy. After both of these accounts, we are still left wondering what is happening in this city.

What is the purpose of this letter? Many suggestions have been made, yet there seems to be no consensus. Guy Prentiss Waters sees the purpose of Ephesians as Paul encouraging this church composed chiefly of gentiles that they indeed belong to the people of God despite those who say otherwise.¹ Douglas Moo seems to agree with those who see identity as the primary purpose of this letter – Paul is writing to affirm and sure up the identity of new converts in Ephesus.² Further, Markus Barth seems to suggest that there is a benefit to allowing ambiguity as it creates space to read the text for what it plainly says rather than seeking to fit it within a systematized category.³

¹ Waters, Guy P. “Ephesians.” In *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: A Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2016), 276-77.

² Moo, Douglas. *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 269-270.

³ Barth, Markus. *Ephesians 1-3*. The Anchor Bible. (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 57-58.

One key factor that must be discussed is the concept of letters in the ancient world. Letters were a common form of communication, but they were also a deeply personal form of communication. Additionally, letters possessed a particular structure, with a component of that structure being a disclosure formula.⁴ Disclosure formulas communicated the letter's purpose and were often in the phrase, "I want you to know..." "I urge/exhort you..." etc.⁵ Some argue that Paul uses this formula when writing his letters.⁶ A glance at Paul's letters reveals that he too used a disclosure formula in the majority of his letters (Gal. 1:11; 1 Thess. 2:1-5; 2 Thess. 2:1-2; Col. 2:1, etc.).⁷ So, when we come to the letter to the Ephesians, it is worth looking and seeing if we see a disclosure formula. When we survey Ephesians, we see Paul use a form of a disclosure formula in 4:1 when he says, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you..." It seems that the purpose for Paul's letter is seen in Ephesians 4:1-3, namely, that they would love one another and walk in unity and love because of the gospel that he has just explained to them in chapters 1-3. What are the implications of the disclosure formula? Two quick comments. First, it offers a plain and straightforward reading of the text and allows all people, both bible scholars and soccer moms, to know why Paul is writing this letter. Second, the disclosure formula paradigm guards us against seeing and concluding controversy when that might not have been the case. All in all, it helps us read the text faithfully.

The disclosure formula theory seems to be not only the most explicit and simplest way to read the text but is consistent with the historical context in which Paul wrote and consistent across his letters. Thus, what can we say about the purpose of Ephesians? If we follow the disclosure formula paradigm, then it seems that Paul's words in Ephesians 4:1-3 reveal why he is writing.

Leading up to Ephesians 3:14-21

What happens leading up to Ephesians 3:14-21? What is provided is not an exhaustive commentary on Ephesians' first three and a half chapters. Instead, what is provided is a basic outline and summary that will help us understand the context leading up to Paul's prayer. It is worth noting that in Ephesians 1-3, Paul is discussing the truths of the gospel before moving on to Christian conduct in Ephesians 4-6 – we could also say that Ephesians 1-3 are Gospel Indicatives and Ephesians 4-6 are Gospel Imperatives.⁸

There are many ways one could analyze Ephesians 1-3 and many details that can and should be explored. For the sake of time and space, we will paint with broad brushstrokes and use Guy Prentiss Waters's triune understanding of Ephesians 1-3.⁹ Fundamental for Waters is the triune nature of Ephesians 1-3; he argues that the language of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit permeate the first three chapters of this letter.¹⁰ We see God the Father as the

⁴ Weima, Jeffrey A.D. *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer: An Introduction to Epistolary Analysis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2016), 2-3.

⁵ Weima, 93-96.

⁶ Weima, 92-93.

⁷ Weima, 92-93. Disclosure formulas are not *that* simple, for Weima make it clear that they can serve multiple uses including transitioning thoughts. But what is clear is that when writing a letter in the ancient world, you would make it apparent why you wrote even if because you had the opportunity to as is the case with the letter to the Colossians. For a full discussion on this, see specifically chapter four of Weima's book.

⁸ Waters, 277-280.

⁹ Other great resources for a more detailed outline are Douglas J. Moo's book *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament*.

¹⁰ Waters, 277.

“source of the believer’s salvation” and from whom blessings proceeds.¹¹ God the Father is also the one who purposed salvation, which Paul highlights as coming from God’s love for his people (2:4).¹² Because of this love, the Father’s goal is that by grace, he might “show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (2:7).¹³ How is this accomplished? God the Son is the one who accomplishes and secures salvation.¹⁴ Christ comes and not only completes the work of redemption for whom the Father has chosen in eternity past but also is the one from whom the benefits of salvation proceed.¹⁵ How this comes to the believer is through their union with Christ, which is explicitly highlighted in chapter one (1:3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 13).¹⁶ Through this union, Christians are, as Waters points out, “brought near to God (2:13) and engrafted into his body (2:14-16). In the body... the wall between Jew and Gentile has been broken down (2:14), and the barrier between the sinner and God has been revoked (2:16). This reality... is no small part of the ‘mystery of Christ’ that Paul now proclaims (3:4-5).”¹⁷ These truths are applied to the believer by the work of the Holy Spirit present in their lives.¹⁸ The Spirit not only applies the work of redemption but is described as that power inside the believer which matures and preserves and strengthens the believer.¹⁹

Having this triune understanding of Ephesians 1-3 is helpful as we come to Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 because we see why Paul can pray in the manner he does. He has a big view of God, who plans, accomplishes, applies, and preserves redemption because of his *love*. It should not surprise us, then, that Paul prays that the Ephesians might begin to experience this love because a love like that, which he’ll describe in spatial terms, is transformative.

Father – v. 14-16

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 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...

Paul begins this section by stating, “For this reason....” Some theologians argue that Paul is resuming a prayer he started at the beginning of chapter 3 before he was sidetracked into discussing the mystery of the gospel in vv. 2-13.²⁰ Others see Paul not resuming a prayer but deliberately building upon his previous discussion and uses this phrase to remind the reader of his comments at the beginning of chapter 3 and the end of chapter 2.²¹ Regardless of these two positions, one can affirm that all of what Paul has discussed so far, spiritual blessings in Christ, salvation by grace, unity in Christ, and the revelation of the mysterious gospel, gives him ample reason to bow and pray.

¹¹ Waters, 277.

¹² Waters, 277-78.

¹³ Waters, 278.

¹⁴ Waters, 278.

¹⁵ Waters, 278.

¹⁶ Waters, 278.

¹⁷ Waters, 278.

¹⁸ Waters, 279.

¹⁹ Waters, 279.

²⁰ Thielman, Frank. *Ephesians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2010). 226; Bruce, F.F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. Eerdmans Classic Biblical Commentaries ed. 2020. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co). 324.

²¹ Barth, 327; Cohick, Lynn H. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), 227.

Interestingly, Paul comments that he is bowing on his knees. Although there were norms and customs, there was no commanded way to pray. Prayer usually occurs standing up or in a similar posture.²² It was not customary to kneel in prayer, although it occurs a handful of times in the Old Testament (1 Chr 29:20; 2 Chr. 29:29; Ps. 95:6; Ezra 9:5; Dan. 6:10). So why give this specific detail about kneeling? Paul is communicating with this phrase not only the fact that he is praying, which this is a description of, but the *intensity* of his prayer. What will proceed is highly important, so much so that Paul is on his knees.²³ Paul understands the magnitude of what he is about to ask and its implications for his beloved friends in Ephesus.

Paul then makes the startling claim that he is praying to the “Father.” Who is the Father to which Paul is referring? It is the Father he has mentioned previously (Eph. 1:2, 3, 17; 2:18) and the one who adopted both Jew and Gentile, as mentioned in chapter 1:5 and following. But we must ask, how should we understand Paul’s use of Father? Some see Paul as making a reference to God as the Father of the whole world and the one whom all other families find their origin.²⁴ Still, others see “Father” used to describe God’s intimate relationship with his people accomplished by Christ and applied by the Spirit.²⁵ In his letters, Paul seems to use Father in specific familial terms rather than using it to describe God as the author and giver of life. This is especially the case in Ephesians, where Paul uses Father to describe God’s act of adoption, making us heirs, being a member of his household, and having the access reserved for a son.²⁶ It is worth noting that throughout scripture, God is described as a Father of the world, of Israel, of Jesus Christ, and Christians.²⁷ Yet the Pauline corpus does not use Father in those former ways, but in the latter –describing the relationship between God and his redeemed people.²⁸

This understanding of Father helps us interpret the next section of this passage, where Paul states, “¹⁵ *from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named....*” Some might interpret and understand Paul to be expressing a truth about God, namely that all living things both in heaven and on earth have their origin and life in him. Without the sovereign work of God sustaining the world, all that we see around us would cease to exist. Psalm 145:16-17, Psalm 36:6, and Colossian 1:16 are verses that get the same point across – all creation finds its origin and life in God. However, this understanding cannot be correct if Paul uses Father in redemptive, adoptive, and familial terms. Paul is not making a general statement about God as the source of all things; rather, Paul is communicating that he is praying to the Father who adopted and redeemed his people. Looking at the work of Paul Zell, we see a way of understanding this passage that is consistent with the context of the passage and the first three chapters of Ephesians.

Zell points out that most exegetes and translations read “as every family.”²⁹ “[W]hen it modifies a singular noun without the article, the adjective *πᾶς* is ‘each’ or ‘every’; that in such a circumstance *πᾶς* has a distributive sense,” so the argument goes, which has the support of A.T.

²² Thielman, 227.

²³ Cohick, 228

²⁴ Cohick, 228.

²⁵ Thielman, 227.

²⁶ Thielman, 227.

²⁷ Daane, James. “The Fatherhood of God.” *The Reformed Journal* 9, no. 8 (September 1959): 3-4.

²⁸ Bowes, William B. “The Fatherhood of God in Scripture: Theology, Gendered Language, Points of Reference, and Implication.” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 12, no. 2 (July 2020): 24-25.

²⁹ Zell, Paul E, “Ephesians 3:15: All Fatherhood? Every Family? The Whole Family?” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 280.

Robertson.³⁰ Thus, this means that every family is named from God. Yet, it is unclear what this means – does it refer to individual Christian families or congregations, or perhaps it simply harkens back to Genesis 1-2, where the naming references our coming from the same parents.³¹ Yet, Zell points out that nowhere in Paul or any other apostolic writing is God referred to as the “who ‘names’ every family on earth.”³² These options, however, leave us unsatisfied.

Relying on the work of Nigel Turner and C.F.D. Moule, Zell offers a different translation that fits within the broader context of Ephesians and within the specific context of Ephesians 3:14-21. Rather than seeing $\pi\alpha\varsigma$ as always translating to “each” or “every,” he sees that A.T. Robertson is not as insistent on this as we might think, and the work of Turner and Moule confirms this development. Rather than being translated “each” or “every,” $\pi\alpha\varsigma$, when before an anarthrous noun, can be translated as “all, the whole of.”³³ Zell cites multiple examples in both the Old and New Testament where this is the case and concludes that Ephesians 3:15 may read “the heavenly Father’s ‘whole family.’”³⁴ This alone is not sufficient to conclude that Eph. 3:15 should be read in this way, but once we see the context of Ephesians 3:15, we are led to conclude with Zell that “whole family” is a more accurate translation. Notice from the beginning of the chapter that the church is described as God’s family. Closely related to this is the unity of the one family and their access to God through the same means, faith in Jesus.³⁵ As seen below, the backdrop for Paul’s prayer in vv. 14-21 is the end of chapter 2, leading into chapter 3 – the gentiles have been included in the family of God by faith in Jesus which is precisely how the Jews are included in the family of God.³⁶ This context, coupled with the new understanding of $\pi\alpha\varsigma$ and its translations, leads us to conclude that Paul is not referring to God as the father from whom all peoples, both inside the covenant and outside the covenant, derive their name. Instead, we see that God is the father from whom the whole family, those inside the covenant, with their difference, derive their name.

How does this change our reading of the text? When we consider the implications of God as the Father of the “whole family,” we see that Paul is making a comment not only on the familial relationship we have with God but that *everyone* has that relationship with God – Jew and Gentile, men and women, slaves and free, etc. Thielman makes this same point, “... the expression must refer to people groups, and especially to Jews and Gentiles.”³⁷ To put it in modern language – republican and democrat, married and single, Ph.D. and high school dropout, seasoned saint and child in the pew, the one who walked with Jesus eighty-five years and the person who walked with Jesus one year, all of them have God as Father in equal terms. The whole family calls God Father.

Rooted and Grounded in love – 16-17

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, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love...

³⁰ Zell, 280-281.

³¹ Zell, 281.

³² Zell, 282.

³³ Zell, 283.

³⁴ Zell, 283.

³⁵ Zell, 284.

³⁶ Zell, 285.

³⁷ Thielman, 227.

Paul now begins to explain the content of his prayer. This section begins with a *iva* clause which some see as separating Paul's prayer into three requests. As we will see, however, these clauses function not as separating three different petitions but as progressively unfolding one unifying plea; in other words, a petition that builds upon itself.³⁸ Thus, this first *iva* clause indicates the primary thing that Paul is praying for. It is the thing so important to Paul that he is petitioning the Lord in such a way that communicates the intensity of his request. What is such a request? Paul first petitions to God's rich glory. Riches and wealth are a prominent theme in Ephesians, occurring numerous times, including Paul's prayer in chapter 1.³⁹ Paul connects riches with God's glory, which "reflects who God is, rich in grace and mercy, full of love for all peoples."⁴⁰ Paul first asks that God would delve into his deep wealth of glory and begin to give it to his people. This is striking because Paul admits that it is God who gives strength and power. Often, we seek strength and power from within, but even the power that comes from within first comes from God's gracious giving. Thus, Paul asks that God give, and continue to give, to his people out of the vast wealth of his glory.

Paul continues and asks that God would grant the Ephesians strength and power through the ministry of the Spirit. This ministering ought to go down to the core of each human, the "inner being." Many translations refer to the "inner being" as the "interior life of the person."⁴¹ More than this, this strengthening would seep into every aspect of the life of a believer – cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, etc.⁴² This giving of the Spirit, whose job is to make "the presence and power of the risen Christ real to those whom he indwells..." affects all of life.⁴³ What is the result of this strengthening with power by the Spirit? Christ dwelling and "taking up residence" in the heart of the Ephesians through faith.⁴⁴ Paul links verses 16 and 17a in such a way as to communicate that the result of God giving strength through the power of the Spirit is Christ dwelling and taking up residence in the life of the believer. This means that the strength coming to the believer by the power of Spirit is the dwelling of Christ in the inner being.⁴⁵

At first glance, this might seem unimportant. We might look at this and think, "well, of course." But when we dig a little deeper and think about what Paul is trying to impress upon the Ephesians, we see the center of transformation – Christ. In these two verses, Paul lets his readers know that the source of their power, whatever they might possess, is Christ dwelling in them. Christ dwelling in our hearts is the spiritual strength needed to fight temptation, witness to our neighbors, love our wife and children, etc. There is a temptation for the believer to think that since they possess eternal salvation, they now must work and live under their strength – and pastors preaching this from the pulpit certainly do not help. But Paul's argument here, and in this whole section, is that Christ is the one who saves us *and* supplies us with the strength we need to live as pilgrims on this earth.⁴⁶ Commenting on this passage, R.C. Sproul states, "Christ should live, not at the periphery, but at the very center of their life."⁴⁷

³⁸ Thielman, 228.

³⁹ Cohick, 230.

⁴⁰ Cohick, 231.

⁴¹ Thielman, 230.

⁴² Cohick, 231.

⁴³ Bruce, 326.

⁴⁴ Bruce, 327.

⁴⁵ Cohick, 228-230.

⁴⁶ Bruce, 327.

⁴⁷ Sproul, R.C. *The Purpose of God: An exposition of Ephesians*. Focus on the Bible Commentary Series. (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1994), 85. Logos Bible Software.

Nonetheless, Paul continues moving forward with his prayer and talks about being “rooted and grounded in love.” This phrase has caused many headaches over the centuries and resulted in some saying they do not know how to interpret this.⁴⁸ Frank Thielman, however, helps us here. Thielman argues that this phrase should be considered an “independent, parenthetical interjection.” Thus, Paul is emphatically yelling, “You are rooted and founded in love!”⁴⁹ Thielman gives two reasons for this reading of the text. First, Paul does this elsewhere in his letter, most notably in 2 Corinthians 8:19-20; 9:11; and 9:13. Secondly, this outburst is similar to that at the beginning of his Ephesian letter in 2:5.⁵⁰ These two reasons, coupled with the lack of plausibility regarding other views, give us good reason to see this phrase as an interjection.⁵¹ Relatively uncontroversial here that the love here is not human love for one another, although John Calvin thought so, as Thielman points out.⁵² What ought to be affirmed also is that the love here is not a love any human can muster for one another or God or Christ; instead, this love is that which God has for those who are in Christ – a love displayed in the work of redemption by the triune God.⁵³ We must not think this love bestowed to believers is without purpose. On the contrary, God bestows and makes known His love so that believers might imitate this love toward one another.⁵⁴

Before moving on, we must ask why Paul uses the words “rooted” and “grounded?” The result of what we briefly discuss is being “rooted” and “grounded,” two terms that communicate the same thing – stability. These two terms speak of a stable foundation, and what foundation could be more stable than knowing the one who created all things and might enjoy anything for all eternity chose, in love, sinners like us?⁵⁵ Nothing!

The Big Big Big Big love of Christ – v. 18-19

¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Just when we believe that Paul has finished digging into the richness of Christ, he continues searching and comes to the conclusion of his prayer.

We come to a word in Greek, *iva*, which some scholars see as indicating a new thought or petition in Paul’s prayer. This phrase occurs in vv. 16, 18, and 19b, and some suggest that these *iva*’s function as petition indicators in Paul’s prayer.⁵⁶ This view is problematic, however, as Thielman points out. The *iva* that occurs in v.18 is unlike the one that occurs before it because the infinitives that it contains, to grasp and to know, are linked together, whereas, in v. 16-17, the infinitives are not connected by a conjunction.⁵⁷ Additionally, Thielman points out that upon hearing this letter read aloud, the Ephesians would have been confused and struggling to

⁴⁸ Cohick, 232.

⁴⁹ Thielman, 232.

⁵⁰ Thielman, 232. See footnote 8.

⁵¹ For other conclusions, see Thielman, 231-232.

⁵² Thielman, 233.

⁵³ Thielman, 233.

⁵⁴ Bruce, 327.

⁵⁵ Cohick, 233.

⁵⁶ Merkle, Benjamin L. Gen. Editors Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough. *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Ephesians*. (Nashville: B&H Academic), 2016, 104, 107, 108.

⁵⁷ Thielman, 233.

understand why Paul wrote in this way. If Paul wanted his audience to see v. 18 as starting a new petition, he would not have written the way he did.⁵⁸ Thus, rather than beginning a whole new petition, Paul continues the train of thought he has already started.

Paul prays that they might have the strength to comprehend something, but this is not a simple comprehension. Instead, Paul is praying that God would grant the Ephesians a supernatural strength and ability to grasp and comprehend, both in mind and spirit, this thing that Paul is referring to.⁵⁹ What exactly is this something Paul is praying they comprehend? Before Paul gets there, he takes a quick detour to explain how good this thing is. From every angle presented, this something is big, immense, glorious, as high, deep, wide, and long as anything could go. But what is it that Paul is referring to? A few suggestions have been made.⁶⁰ We will only briefly comment on three proposals. First, some believe this is in reference to Christ's love stated in v. 19a. Calvin argues this in his commentary on Ephesians.⁶¹ Merkle, likewise, says that this is the best option given.⁶² Second, Thielman points out that some ancient theologians saw Paul referring to the divine plan set forth by God.⁶³ Cohick suggests that Paul is being deliberately vague to allow the Ephesians breathing room to "contemplate God's salvation plan..."⁶⁴ While these views are plausible and undoubtedly biblically faithful, we are left unsatisfied. The third view, proposed again by Thielman, seeks to marry the previous two views within the larger context of Ephesians and Paul's argument thus far. Thielman suggests that we adopt a view that is indeed old and historical but is slightly different from the previous two views. This view sees what Paul is referring to as God's love grounded in the context of God's divine plan of redemption and wisdom.⁶⁵ Scholars connect typical language surrounding dimensions and God's wisdom and Paul's same use of this language in Ephesians 3:10. However, they cannot escape the immediate context of Christ's love that Paul repeatedly refers to. The advantage of this view, according to Thielman, is that it recognizes the broader culture, the context of Ephesians, as well as the Pauline corpus; and it acknowledges that the seemingly primary concern of Paul is communicating Christ's love.

One phrase we skipped over that is vital to our discussion is the phrase, "with all the saints." Who are the "saints" Paul is referring to? Many theologians believe Paul refers to all Christians – that all saints have access to this type of knowledge.⁶⁶ F.F. Bruce understands Paul to be speaking in communal terms; Christians experience this power and strength of knowledge through community rather than isolation.⁶⁷ Thielman connects "saints" back to the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into one people; that is, as Thielman puts it, "the vast extent of Christ's love, then, is best comprehended 'with all the saints,' in all their social variety."⁶⁸ Bruce and Thielman's suggestions seem to be most favorable as it fits within Paul's recent discussion of

⁵⁸ Thielman, 233.

⁵⁹ Thielman, 234.

⁶⁰ See Thielman, 234-235.

⁶¹ Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries*. Vol. 21, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. Translated by Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 265.

⁶² Merkle, 107.

⁶³ Thielman, 235.

⁶⁴ Cohick, 234.

⁶⁵ Thielman, 236.

⁶⁶ Calvin, 234.

⁶⁷ Bruce, 329.

⁶⁸ Thielman, 237.

reconciliation between Jew and Gentile in Ephesians 2 and 3 and his emphasis on the necessity of each group in the overall plan of salvation.

How should we understand this text? There are advantages to all views presented. Calvin and Merkle give a clear, plain reading of the text, whereas Thielman offers a slightly more complex and nuanced reading. Cohick is correct to say that the divine plan is indeed complex and mysterious and thus wide, long, deep, and high. Thielman gives us a robust understanding of the use of language, Paul's argument thus far, and the immediate context of vv. 14-21. Thielman offers what appears to be the best understanding of this text: "after the syntactical built up by the list of the four measurements and their mission object, we finally learn what Paul wants God to enable his readers to grasp. He wants them to know the vast extent of Christ's love for them... yet like the mystery (vv. 3-5), they could not understand the massive magnitude of Christ's love apart from God's revelation of it to them. This is the revelation for which Paul prays."⁶⁹

What is the result of all of this? "[T]hat you may be filled with all the fullness of God." This final phrase of this section begins with our last *vα* clause, which has led some to conclude that this is Paul's final petition, which acts as a summary of his prayer.⁷⁰ Thielman views this as the result of what Paul has prayed for thus far, namely, that the outcome of knowing the love of Christ in such a way would lead to being filled to the fullness of God.⁷¹ Whether this is seen as a summary, result, or goal, the question that must be asked and investigated is, "what does it mean to be filled with/to the fullness of God?" Some have sought to answer these questions specifically, while others have avoided the conversation altogether. Thielman sees this fullness as maturity, the Ephesians becoming "all that God created them to be."⁷² Cohick considers this as the filling up of God's love in the believer's lives.⁷³ One view seems favorable and is worth looking at some length.

Robert Foster sheds insight on the possible meaning of this phrase by drawing upon the Jewish background of filling, connecting Paul's prayer to his discussion in 2:19-22, and Paul's references to Christ's filling the hearts of believers in v. 17. He concludes that this "fullness of God" is none other than God's glory that would reside in the hearts of Ephesians and acts, in one way, as a confirmation of their election.⁷⁴ Foster begins with surveying the immediate context of 3:14-21 and concludes that the context which ought to inform the reader and not be overlooked is not 3:2-13, although he admits this does indeed inform the prayer, but 2:19-22.⁷⁵ Why is this? He gives three reasons. First, the repetition of "For this reason" links Paul's prayer with the end of chapter two.⁷⁶ His logic is this – If the phrase "For this reason" in 3:14 is linked to that in 3:1, and if the phrase "for this reason" in 3:1 is connected to Paul's discussion in chapter 2, then it would follow that the prayer picked up on in 3:14 is *really* connected with chapter 2, and specifically the end. Second, Foster sees a description of blessings followed by a prayer structure in Ephesians – this is evident in chapters 1:3-14 (blessings) and 1:15-23 (prayer). With the description of the blessings of Gentiles being brought into the covenant (2:1-22), we should

⁶⁹ Thielman, 237.

⁷⁰ Merkle, 108. Cohick, 235, Foster, R.L. 89.

⁷¹ Thielman, 238.

⁷² Thielman, 238. Here, Thielman also draws on the work of O'Brian.

⁷³ Cohick, 235.

⁷⁴ Foster, L. Robert. "A temple in the Lord Filled to the Fullness of God": Context and Intertextuality (Eph. 3:19). *Novum Testamentum* 49 (2007) 85-96.

⁷⁵ Foster, 87.

⁷⁶ Foster, 87.

expect, given Paul's established paradigm, a prayer to follow.⁷⁷ Thirdly, Foster points the reader to two Greek words whose roots are used only twice in the letter –κατοικητήριον/κατοικέω and θεμέλιος/θεμελιόω.⁷⁸

Next, Foster surveys Jewish literature in hopes of understanding the connection between **πλήρωμα** and the temple. Foster first looks at the building of the tabernacle by Moses in Exodus and the construction of the temple by Solomon in 2 Chronicles – for his purposes, the tabernacle and temple function in the same way. It is important that in each story, once the construction is complete and the ark of the covenant is brought in, the glory of YHWH fills the temple, and no one, including Moses, can enter.⁷⁹ Continuing, Foster then looks at a reverse account, namely in Ezekiel, where the glory of the YHWH is seen fleeing the temple due to Israel's sin. However, the story does not stop there; Ezekiel's vision in 43:1-12 shows him that there is coming a time when the glory of YHWH will once again enter the temple and fill it.⁸⁰ For Foster, this is extremely helpful and worth quoting him fully. He says,

The author envisions this Gentile church as now enjoying the benefits of the covenants of promise, so that they become a dwelling place of God, a temple built upon the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the cornerstone. He prays that this temple of the community of Ephesus will find itself filled to the fullness of God, just as the glory of God filled the tabernacle and temple in the days of Moses.⁸¹

Finally, Foster moves to evidence within Ephesians 3:14-21 to bolster his point; he sees three pieces of evidence. First, Paul seems to be making the point that he wants Christ to dwell in the hearts of the Ephesians and uses a Greek word that connects this thought with his last thought regarding the Ephesians being built up “into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” In addition to this, he also connects his wish of them being rooted and grounded in love with them being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”⁸² Secondly, Foster sees a connection between the phrase breadth, length, height, and depth and the description of the altar in Ezekiel's vision in Ezekiel 43. Foster concludes, “If the author does refer to the dimensions of the altar as a metaphor for the love of Christ, then perhaps the author intends to point to ‘the sacrificial love’ of Christ in his death.”⁸³ Thirdly, Foster looks to the doxology of vv. 20-21 and the reality that God finds his glory in the Church just as he used to find it in the temple or tabernacle. Again, it is worth quoting him at length. “This reference to glory ties the whole first half of Ephesians together, as several times in the blessings rehearsed in chapter one, the writer mentions the blessings given to the [Church] were meant ‘for the praise of his glory’ (1:6,12,14). The praise of his glory where? In the [Church], which is his dwelling place, the place which his fullness fills fully.”⁸⁴ Foster ends with the question, “so what is the fullness of God” although he tips his hand throughout. Naturally, we conclude that for Foster, the fullness of God is his glory.

One final question we must ask is, why does this matter? Foster answers that question by pointing out three implications that this view has for the text. First, Foster points out that God's filling of a place with his glory serves as a confirmation or “legitimization of the sanctuary in

⁷⁷ Foster, 87.

⁷⁸ Foster, 87-88.

⁷⁹ Foster, 90.

⁸⁰ Foster, 90-91.

⁸¹ Foster, 91.

⁸² Foster, 91-92.

⁸³ Foster, 92.

⁸⁴ Foster, 93.

question as the place where his presence dwells, where people might legitimately encounter God.”⁸⁵ According to Foster, this legitimization would have encouraged this predominantly gentile church that they indeed were included in the covenant family.⁸⁶ Second, this theme of temple filling is present in the whole letter, not just one part. For Foster, the Ephesians should “view themselves as a dwelling place of God (2:22) even more they ought to understand that God intends this to fulfill the promise of his glory dwelling in the New Temple recorded in Ezekiel 43, a promise which they, as a community, experience.”⁸⁷ Couple with this, Foster points out that included with this view is a “call to action.” The Ephesians should not only see themselves not only being built up passively but that they have an active role in the building, as Paul later states in Ephesians 4.⁸⁸ Thirdly, this reading helps the believer understand the tie between Ephesians 1 and 3. Foster quotes Peter O’Brien, who concludes that Paul is referring to God’s “divine presence and manifestation of the ‘Shekinah’ of later Judaism” and himself states, “If the author of Ephesians viewed *pleroma* in terms of glory in 1:23, then the use in both 1:23 and 3:19 remains consonant with the Jewish Scripture, which views God’s glory as *both* filling the whole earth (and heaven) as well as specifically filling the sanctuary of God.”⁸⁹

Praise God for his Great Love – v. 20-21

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Paul ends his prayer with a doxological praise about God and thus ends his prayer and thought thus far in his letter. This is the end of the first half of Paul’s letter and marks the transition from Gospel truths to Gospel dos.⁹⁰ Doxologies are common in Pauline literature and typically make the closing of a thought, section, or book; doxologies were also a common practice in Jewish and synagogue worship services and became a regular practice in the early church. Other Pauline doxologies can be found in Rom. 11:36; 16:25-27; Gal. 1:5; Phil. 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 2 Tim 4:18.⁹¹ More than indicating the end of a thought, section, or book, doxologies serve to praise God and point the worshiper or reader to the reality of God’s love, grace, and work amongst his people. Doxologies also orient their hearts towards the triune God who accomplishes this work. Thus, Paul is not only ending his prayer, but offering a final reminder to the Ephesians of God’s love, grace, and work amongst them and that it is the triune God who accomplishes this work. But what exactly does this doxology point us to? This doxology points us to three things 1) God’s power is greater than we can imagine, 2) believers possess a sample of this power, 3) God is glorified in the church and Jesus because the two are unified.

First, God’s power is greater than we can imagine. It is easy to see that the Ephesians might have been skeptical that God could accomplish all that Paul asks for; Paul asks for quite a bit. He asks that the Ephesians have the eyes of their hearts shown the hope they can possess, the inheritance waiting for them in the heavenly realms, and the vast power of God at their disposal (Eph. 1:18-19). Add that to his prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19, and we have a big request from Paul. So, in his doxological prayer in v. 20, Paul affirms that God can do far more than he’s asked for; in fact, Paul combines two adverbs, the adverb

⁸⁵ Foster, 94.

⁸⁶ Foster, 94-95.

⁸⁷ Foster, 95.

⁸⁸ Foster, 95.

⁸⁹ Forster, 96.

⁹⁰ Merkle, 109.

⁹¹ Bruce, 330.

hyper and the Greek adverb “immeasurably more,” to communicate the belief that God can do infinitely more than what Paul has asked for; Paul has asked merely for the tip of the iceberg.⁹²

Secondly, believers possess a power that is a sample of God's power. V. 20b states, “according to the power at work within us,” but what exactly is this work within us? Paul makes it clear throughout his letter that the power at work within the believer’s life is the Holy Spirit, and thus it is the Spirit that is the power that is at work in the life of the believer.⁹³ How can we know this? First, we see this throughout the letter, and Thielman is helpful here. Paul refers to a power in his first prayer in 1:19, which is a power given to those who believe. Later, we learn that this power comes from the Holy Spirit working in the “inner being” (3:16).⁹⁴ Secondly, the now “power” is joined with a participle that means “working.” A passive participle would be confusing here and leave us concluding that this power is a force yet to be discussed by Paul. If this participle is middle, it would point to the Holy Spirit as the power discussed here.⁹⁵ Thus, we can conclude from these two points that it is the Holy Spirit that Paul is referring to.

Thirdly, God’s glory is found in the church and Christ. We should not conclude that the church and Christ are on the same level as if, somehow, we are equally glorious as Christ with all our imperfections and sins. Instead, we should see Paul glorifying God in the church because the church is the manifestation of God’s excellent divine plan and love and grace.⁹⁶ The reason Christ and the church are placed next to each other in this doxology is their close union expressed thus far in the chapter. As Thielman states, “the church is Christ’s body, and God has given Christ... to the church (1:22-23). Christ is the one ‘in’ whom the church exists as people at peace with itself and with God (2:13-22; 3:6), and God put into effect ‘in Christ Jesus our Lord’ his place to make this beautifully complex wisdom known through the church (3:10).”⁹⁷

It is worth noting that Paul does not say that God is glorified in the life of the believer and Christ, or the life of a small group and Christ, or a mega-church and Christ. Instead, Paul states that God is glorified in *the* church and Christ; the church in all its various shapes, sizes, forms, make-up, ministries, etc., is what God is glorified in. Thus, the church plays a central role in Pauline literature, in his letter to Ephesus, and particularly in this prayer. The church is central to Paul not only because it is in the context of “all the saints” that we experience the magnitude of God’s love, but it is in the church that God is glorified. The gathered and scattered people of God reveal the glory of God who has reconciled them back to himself through the sacrifice of his only begotten Son and the regeneration that comes through the Holy Spirit. As James Blevins helpfully states, “Thus the concluding verse of the chapter reminds us of the great stress which has been placed on the church...”⁹⁸

Implications for the Believer

What bearing does this have on the life of the believer? Men and women, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, people who have lost children and people who have lost parents, and more need assurance, hope, comfort, and power to continue pursuing godliness and love God and their neighbor. In short, believers in the 21st century need the same thing that the Ephesians needed; circumstances differ and change, but the core is still the same – the fruit might be different, but the roots aren’t. In this section, I hope to tease out some implications of this passage. The question of “so what?” is what I hope to answer.

⁹² Cohick, 236.

⁹³ Thielman, 243.

⁹⁴ Thielman, 243.

⁹⁵ Cohick, 236.

⁹⁶ Bruce, 331.

⁹⁷ Thielman, 244.

⁹⁸ Blevins, James L. “The church’s great ministry: Ephesians 3.” *Review & Expositor* 76, no. 4 (Fall 1979):

First, what we love is ultimately what drives us. Why do professional athletes train for hours, stick to strict diets, wake up early and go to bed late, travel across the country, and spend months away from their families? Because of love. Some love the game, others love the acclaim, others love being the best – but we can boil it down to love. Why does an average man continue to golf while being bad at it? Because he loves it! Bryan Chapel makes this point clear. In his commentary on Ephesians, Chapel tells the story of when he realized that it is love that drives humans. He preached on overcoming addiction and provided plenty of points, resources, and biblical evidence, yet one gentleman came up to him and kindly let him know, “It won’t work.”⁹⁹ I would have been just as startled, but this fellow believer tells Chapel that he works with businessmen faced with daily temptation. No amount of self-control or willpower will ever keep them from abstaining from whatever vices come their way. Instead, “people do precisely what they love, and until they have a greater love for the things of God than the things of this world, they will not be able to stop.”¹⁰⁰ As Chapel thinks through this statement, he realizes the truthfulness of such a claim and how this radically changes the way he and others minister. He says,

This means that the ultimate goal (the *telos*, purpose or aim) of my preaching, or of my parenting, or of my own personal devotions suddenly becomes quite plain. I must ignite, cultivate, spark, renew, demonstrate, broadcast, signify, magnify, and preach *love* for the God of our redemption... Without love there will be no power to do what love requires. Only an overwhelming affection for him will produce an overcoming power to defeat sin. Love is power.¹⁰¹

What produces more love within the believer than the indicatives (or truths) of the gospel? What can prompt their love for God than remembering that “...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us?” (Rom. 5:8). What can produce more love in the believer’s life than to know and experience and be a member of God’s grand plan to redeem and unite all things? Ephesians 3:14-21 is Paul praying that the Ephesians might experience and feel in their bones God’s big love for them, and in turn, that will produce a love for Christ which drives us to wage war willingly and continually on the flesh and the devil.

Secondly, what can comfort us and hold us when life knocks us down? God’s love for us. Jonathan Gibson was recently on Kevin DeYoung’s podcast *Life and Books and Everything*. During the discussion, Gibson recounts the story of his daughter’s death in the womb and the subsequent still-birth that followed. More than that, he recounts the car ride when his then three-year-old son kept asking why his sister was not coming home with them. As he was conversing with his son, he asked him, “what shape is the moon?” His son replied, “round.” “What does that mean?” Gibson asked. “That God is good.” replied his son. “God is good,” Gibson affirms.¹⁰² How can he affirm this in the midst of a situation that is too difficult to describe? I would argue that it is because Gibson has a keen awareness of God’s love for him, a love that is wider and deeper and higher and longer than he can understand. Does this make the situation any easier?

⁹⁹ Chapel, Bryan. *Ephesians*. Reformed Expository Commentary. (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 149. Logos Bible Software.

¹⁰⁰ Chapel, 150

¹⁰¹ Chapel, 151

¹⁰² DeYoung, Kevin. *Life and Books and Everything*, episode 59.
<https://open.spotify.com/show/1zfMfz7mHfzsgJZvcKsXTa>.

Certainly not. But a robust and rich understanding of God’s love for his children gives us comfort amid the storm.

The storms of life will undoubtedly blow against the believer. Difficulties and hardship will come, but the believer will also be tempted to believe lies and false teaching. The believer will be told that Christ does not truly love them because he allowed their parent to die of cancer, allowed them to get fired from their job, or let their covenant child leave the faith. James Blevins is helpful here; he says, “The Christian must have their roots in Christ’s love. A tree without deep roots is easily blown down by the wind or will be a prey to all kinds of diseases.”¹⁰³ How can we have comfort and security in the storm of life? The answer is quite simple and yet challenging for many – the love of Christ.

Thirdly, the church is central to Paul. In our 21st-century consumer culture, it is easy to miss the communal aspects of scripture, particularly Paul’s letters to the churches. There are parts of Paul’s letters that are individualistic, but we read Paul’s letters as if they were written to individuals rather than groups of people. As Dr. Paul Gardner expresses, “... we have seen that Paul’s prayer can be applied to the individual believer, but we must be aware that this is his prayer *for the church*.”¹⁰⁴ There is a unique role that the gathered people of God have in relation to one another. Commenting on the vast love of Christ described in v. 18b, Cynthia Jarvis states, “By ourselves, we cannot know the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love because it is a love that is revealed as we are gathered... Thus the communion of saints is not simply a community that, by word, proclaims that we are love: Its very existence *is* the way God loves us – together.”¹⁰⁵ While there might be problems with what Jarvis states, her central point that it is in the gathered people of God that we experience the depth of Christ’s love seems consistent with both the letter to the Ephesians and Paul’s larger corpus.

As someone in youth ministry, this point is particularly important. While trying to do effective youth ministry, it can become frustrating when parents prioritize sports, vacation, school, etc., over *church*, let alone youth gatherings. And yet, research and youth ministry veterans see that integrating youth into the church’s life is central to their faith. In other words, it is the community of God’s people, not camps, Christian schools, etc., that are key to faith. Something special happens when students are connected to the local body of believers. Writing a contribution to the book *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide*, Dave Wright explains why students must be integrated into the church. Alongside segregated worship not being a biblical concept, Wright gives implications that follow segregated worship: “Understanding the Gospel, Observing the Gospel, and Continuing in the Gospel.”¹⁰⁶ Wright states that some “unintended consequences” are “a limited view of the gospel,” a limited view of observing how the gospel changes people in all stages of life, and a limited view of the church as youth group, which in turn leads to students struggle continuing in the faith.¹⁰⁷ This has been my experience in youth ministry and is also confirmed by the research of David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock for Barna Research Group. Kinnaman and Matlock make this point in their research book *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon*. This book is a culmination of surveys given to young people with the question, “why did you stay in

¹⁰³ Blevins, 514.

¹⁰⁴ Gardner, Paul. *Ephesians: Grace and Joy in Christ*. Focus on the Bible Commentary Series. (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 84.

¹⁰⁵ Jarvis, Cynthia A. “Ephesians 3:14-21.” *Interpretation* 45 no. 3 (July 1991): 287.

¹⁰⁶ Wright, Dave. “Gathering God’s People: Generational Integration in Youth Ministry.” In *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide*, ed. Cameron Cole & Jon Nielson (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2016), 109.

¹⁰⁷ Wright, 109.

the church?” posed to them. In short, they see students being integrated into the church’s life. Intergenerational relationships within the local church are one of the five reasons young people stay in the church post-high-school graduation.¹⁰⁸

Bryan Chapel says this about Ephesians 3:14-21, “Paul says God’s love for his people is as long as eternity past, so wide as to include all nations, so high as to ring praises from angels in heaven, and so deep as to cancel the claims of hell on our soul. Knowledge of such magnitude grants more than comfort, assurance, and even more than joy. Knowledge of this magnitude is power!”¹⁰⁹ As men and women who seek to follow Jesus in this world, and as men and women whom God has called to shepherd his sheep in various capacities, may this be our prayer for ourselves and the Church. May we understand that comprehending and embracing this love leads to power and that power leads to change.

¹⁰⁸ Kinnaman, David & Matlock, Mark. *Faith For Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 124-142.

¹⁰⁹ Chapel, 149.

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