**Praying for Spiritual Strength**

Text: Ephesians 3:14-21

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** 2 Corinthians 4:1-18; Ephesians 3:13-21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 173, 181, 119:41-48, 184, 525

**Series:** Ephesians (#14)

**Occasion:** Week 4 of Alert Level 4 lockdown due to COVID-19

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul continues his intercessory prayer, begun in the first verse of chapter 3, petitioning God that He would grant inner spiritual strength to the Ephesian believers so that they would know the vast extent of Christ’s love in order to be filled with Him and then concluding by giving praise to God for His power at work in His people resulting in everlasting glory for Him.

**Proposition:** Spiritual strength comes by knowing the love of Christ.

**Introduction**

We saw in the last sermon in this series from the book of Ephesians how the Apostle Paul branched off on a digression or ‘side-track’ in verses 2-12 of chapter 3, writing there about the mystery of the gospel. In verse 13 He returns to his own situation: “*So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory*”. The single Greek word ‘lose heart’ means to become discouraged, to grow weary, to become tired. It expresses the idea of becoming exhausted or fainthearted in view of a trial or difficulty. We might say today that someone who ‘loses heart’ feels like ‘throwing in the towel’. Those who ‘lose heart’ generally become sad, discouraged and/or depressed being no longer interested in key parts of their life and work because these are not unfolding as they had expected and desired.

The Apostle Paul does not want the Ephesian Christians to lose heart over his imprisonment – which was a direct result of his proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. Somewhat similarly, I do not want you to lose heart over what is happening to you and to others as a result of the current pandemic and ‘lockdown’ here in New Zealand.

What was Paul’s response to his concern for the Ephesian church? Prayer! You can see it in our text – He continues the intercessory prayer begun in 1:15-19. Look at verse 14: “*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father*”. Because he does not want his brothers and sisters to whom he is writing to be discouraged, he prays fervently on his knees. We see this posture of prayer adopted in Scripture for example: by Ezra as he confesses sin on behalf of Israel (Ezra 9:5); by Stephen as he is martyred, pleading that the Lord would not hold the sin of his executioners against them (Acts 7:60); by Christ, the garden of Gethsemane, when He prayed "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*" (Luke 22:42).

Kneeling for prayer is often associated with humility and urgency. This was Paul’s posture as he prayed for spiritual strength for the Ephesian Christians so that they would not lose heart. Notice that He prays ‘*before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named*’. God is the Creator of all life on earth, of every people group. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:3) who has adopted children, like us brothers and sisters, to be part of His own family. Let’s now look at the content of this prayer under three headings:

1. Spiritual strength is a glorious gift of God
2. Spiritual strength is knowing the love of God
3. Spiritual strength glorifies God in the church
4. **Spiritual strength is a gift of God to the Christian**

If you’ve read A.A. Milne’s stories featuring Winnie-the-pooh you will have ‘met’ Tigger, the energetic fictional tiger who famously said: “*The wonderful thing about Tiggers, is Tiggers are wonderful things. Their tops are made out of rubber, their bottoms are made out of springs. They’re bouncy, trouncy, flouncy, pouncy*”. Tigger was always ‘bouncing’ around in the Hundred Acre Wood. We are all familiar with rubber. It is used to make vehicle tyres, pencil erasers, balloons and many other everyday items. Rubber has the quality of ‘material resilience’. It returns to its usual shape after being bent, stretched or pressed.

In the human realm, resilience is the ‘capacity to recover quickly from difficulties’. Resilient Christians have ‘spiritual, mental and emotional bounce’, they do not readily ‘lose heart’, and when they do become discouraged by circumstances in their lives, they quickly return to how they were before those events. The key to this deep-rooted ‘heart resilience’ is spiritual strength, and it is for this that the Apostle Paul prays. You can see this in verse 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*”.

This is a prayer for fortitude, for spiritual resilience; expressed in the words ‘strengthened with power’. The Greek word translated ‘strengthened’ here means to be empowered, to be increased in vigour. This verb is in the passive; this strengthening does not arise firstly from within a person but is obtained as a gift from God. For example, when Martin Luther was summoned to Worms in 1521 to recant his 95 theses he prayed "“*May the Lord Jesus strengthen me*.” He knew that he would need to be resilient in the face of the intense pressure he was about to come under and the temptation to avoid persecution by denying the truth of Scripture. The Greek word translated ‘power’ is the term from which we get our English words ‘dynamic’ and ‘dynamite’. The sense of this word is energy which produces activity.

The means by which this gracious gift of powerful spiritual strength comes to the believer is through the Holy Spirit, who is Himself God’s gift and who confirms God’s ownership of each of His adopted children (Eph 1:13). The Holy Spirit’s first work in the believer is to make a new creation in Christ through His supernatural work of regenerating people like you and me who were once ‘*dead in our trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1) to be ‘*alive together with Christ*’ (Eph 2:4). It is by His Spirit that Christ dwells in the heart of the individual believer by faith as Paul writes in verse 17. The experience of the indwelling Spirit and of the indwelling Christ is the same experience. It is by this spiritual means, Brothers and Sisters, that Christ never leaves nor forsakes us and fulfils His comforting Word “*I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matt 28:20).

Notice that Paul’s prayer is for this powerful strength to be manifested in the ‘inner being’ of the Ephesian believers. The ‘inner being’ is the essential core of a person, elsewhere in Scripture referred to as the ‘heart’ (e.g. Gen 6:5; Prov 3:1-5; Mark 7:21). Our ‘inner being’ encompasses our mind, our conscience, our will and our affections.

The effects of the God’s gift of spiritual strength to His child include:

1. **A steadier mind** which can more readily keep focus on the truths, promises, comforts and assurances of Scripture. To be able to ‘think God’s thoughts after Him’ (quoting the German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler) is the product of a spiritually strengthened mind.
2. **A sharper conscience** which navigates the challenges of temptation and enables a more consistent pattern of holiness in life.
3. **A more focussed will** which powerfully determines to follow the pattern of our Saviour.
4. **A greater affection** for Christ which increasingly delights in His glorious person, faithful work and wise commandments.

It is true for all people that out of our inner being flow all of our thoughts, words, and actions, as Jesus explains in Matt 15:18-20. If you are strong within the core of your being as a result of God’s gift of being strengthened with power, then you are truly resilient. Paul expressed this transforming reality when he wrote to the Corinthians: “*So we do not lose heart.* *Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day*” (2 Cor 4:16).

Brothers and Sisters, do not be discouraged, grow weary or lose heart, pray for others and for yourself that God may grant them and you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your innermost being. In this way they and you will grow in knowledge of the love of Christ, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Spiritual strength is knowing the love of Christ**

Almost all of us, with the exception of the very young, have some knowledge of geometry. We know that a squareis a two-dimensional shape with four equal sides and four equal angles. For example, the top surface of the altar in the Tabernacle which God instructed Moses to make was a square (Exodus 27:1) *{as was the subsequent altar in the Jerusalem Temple (2 Chron 4:1)}.* We know that a cube is a three-dimensional object with six square faces. For example, the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple was cubic (2 Chron 3:8). *{Likely also in the Tabernacle – although some assumptions from Ex 26 are necessary as the cubic space is not explicitly stated}.*

You likely know about squares and cubes, but what about a ‘tesseract’? A tesseract is a ‘four-dimensional analogue of a cube’. If you’ve seen any of the Marvel superhero movies (and I am not recommending here that you do!), you will have come across a tesseract. There’s also one in the movie ‘Interstellar’ in which an attempt is made to visually represent the fourth dimension of time in three-dimensional space.

In our text, Paul is using a four-dimensional image – a tesseract if you will. His prayer for the Ephesian saints is that they may be granted by God “*the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the* ***breath and length and height and depth*** *and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*” (Eph 3:18-19). There have been many suggestions as to exactly what Paul is referring to with these four dimensions; some see a connection to the Temple construction, either in the Old Testament physical building or in the New Testament spiritual image (e.g. Eph 2:21). What these words certainly do convey is something of the enormity and incomprehensibility of the love of Christ which ‘surpasses knowledge’.

This does not mean that we cannot understand the great love of Jesus, however, we can never fully comprehend His love entirely. His love (agape) is unconditional: not depending on any quality in the person loved such as their appearance or character. His love is sacrificial: it gives so much of the Lover that this love hurts. His love is willing: it is not forced. It is not an act of mere obligation, but of humble, noble, devotion.

Paul prays that the Ephesian believers may be ‘*rooted and grounded in love*’ (v17). Living plants are secured to the ground by their roots and through these structures water and nutrients provide sustenance. The metaphor of the root is found in many places in Scripture. For example, “ *the root of the righteous will never be moved*” (Prov 12:3b). When the sower in the parable which Jesus taught went out to sow some “*seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away*” (Matt 13:5-6).

The word ‘grounded’ means to be established on a firm base. This also is a familiar Biblical metaphor. For example, it is used in the parable of the wise man’s house which did not fall because it was founded on the rock (Matt 7:25); Also in describing the New Jerusalem – “*as city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God*” (Heb 11:10). Both the words ‘rooted’ and ‘grounded’ are in a verb tense in the original Greek language which conveys a continuous action.

Paul is praying that his brothers and sisters in the Lord would be permanently and strongly secured in the love of Christ as He dwells in their hearts by faith and that they would have the strength to comprehend, together with all their fellow saints, the enormity of His love. To grasp the extent of Christ’s love is to ‘*be filled with all the fullness of God*’. To be filled with the fullness of God is to be filled with Christ, in whom *‘the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily*’ (Col 2:9).

There is limited time available during this sermon to explore the multi-dimensional glories of the ‘tesseract’ of Christ’s love, but we can briefly note that the love of Christ refers to:

1. The love of Jesus for God’s people: “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11).
2. The love of believers for their Saviour: “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19).
3. The love of Christians for one another; “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*." (John 13:34-35).

The gift of spiritual strength from the Lord enables us to be able to grasp more firmly the great love of Christ: Firstly, His sacrificial love for us as the protecting, providing Good Shepherd. Secondly, that our love for Him is a reflecting back of His love for us. Thirdly, that out of the overflow of His great love for us, we are enabled to love others with the love with which we are loved.

We all need the God-given strength to know, together with all the saints, this multi-dimensional love of Christ, especially at times like this when our roots and foundation are tested by the effects of widespread uncertainty about health, wealth and prosperity. This is especially a time of extensive, pervasive fear in our nation, and around the world. Remember and believe fellow saints, that “*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love*” (1 John 4:18).

Friend, if you do not know the love of Christ, then your life is neither rooted nor grounded in stability, certainty, hope and peace. Friend, you need to know the love of Jesus Christ. Contact me or someone from our church and we will pray for you that God would enable you to comprehend this amazing love and thereby have your fears cast out by Christ’s perfect love. Friend, come to Christ and be part of His body, the church, through which the glory, majesty, splendour and power of God is made known to this fearful, anxious, troubled, exhausted world which lacks the spiritual resilience to survive the death which comes to all people (Heb 9:23). This brings us to our 3rd and final point:

1. **Spiritual strength glorifies God in the church**

There’s a public health official whose name most people didn’t know a month ago: Dr Ashley Bloomfield. He is the chief executive of the Ministry of Health and New Zealand’s Director General of Health. His no nonsense, informative, responsive and compassionate delivery of information about the spread and containment of the COVID-19 virus has impressed many. One writer has said: “*I think he just epitomises something quite wholesome; he’s not political, he’s got a neutrality about him. He is a very appealing kind of guy. He’s very calm, and he’s very measured*” (Anna Connell).

The widespread response from New Zealand is appreciation and thankfulness for the very good work which he is doing. So far, he has been honoured with a Wellington-based fashion boutique selling “The Ashley Bloomfield hand towel” produced with a picture of his reassuring face. There is also a rap song written about him (if that is an honour!), and talk of a knighthood in the future. The point is that our general response, to someone who serves us well by providing us with critical knowledge so that we can be safer, is one of heartfelt thankfulness and praise.

Bible scholar, pastor and author Steven Lawson express this truth with respect to the One who gives, in an infinitely greater way, spiritual strength in these words: “*Biblical truth ignites hearts and enflames lives with a fervent, passionate love for God. The more truth about God one learns and personally applies, the more clearly he or she will see, submit to, and worship the Lord” … A Word-filled church will be a worshiping church*."[[1]](#footnote-1).

At the end of this first half of his letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul bursts out in exuberant worship: “*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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen*” (Eph 3:20-21). These words are termed a ‘doxology’ from the Greek word doxa meaning ‘glory’. Here God is glorified for his gracious generosity in abundantly answering prayer.

The Apostle Paul had himself been strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit in his inner being to comprehend the greatness of the love of Christ and thereby to be filled with the fullness of God. So, he is not writing about theoretical theological truth in this letter, but personal heartfelt experience which is grounded in practical theological truth. He was someone into whose inner being God had given ‘*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*’ (2 Cor 4:6).

Together with fellow saints, he had been ‘afflicted in every way’, ‘perplexed’, ‘persecuted’ and ‘struck down’ (2 Cor 4:8-9). Yet he could say in the spiritual strength which He had received as a gift from God, in the comprehension of the great Love of Christ, as He gave glory to God: “*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal*” (2 Cor 4:16-18).

I understand that there are plenty of reasons why many of us could lose heart at a time like this. There is a lot of sad and sobering news that could easily lead us to become discouraged, to grow weary, to become tired and even to consider ‘throwing in the towel’. Yet, the love of Christ leads us to a very different outcome; to spiritual resilience so that we can have spiritual, mental and emotional ‘bounce’ and thereby not loose heart.

Brothers and sisters as we pray for one another that we may be individually strengthened with power in our innermost selves, we collectively, as a church, glorify God the Giver. We also glorify Christ Jesus, whose great love we comprehend more and more, a love which is patient and kind; does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. Does not insist on its own way; is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. We glorify the Saviour for His ‘multi-dimensional’ expansive love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. His is a love never ends (from 1 Cor 13:4-8).

“*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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen*” (Eph 3:20-21).

1. Bibliotheca Sacra. Vol. 158, page 214. April-June 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)