

By God's Strength

Ephesians 3:14-21

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



When I was a kid, my cousin Marty took me sport fishing off the coast of Miami. Marty was an experienced fisherman and had even caught a record-breaking marlin. Marty was in his 40s and was a character. He picked us up from the airport in his big white Cadillac with the AC blasting so cold it felt like winter. Everywhere we went, he wore the exact same thing, boat shoes, a baseball cap, linen shorts, and no shirt. In fact, he only wore a shirt when whatever restaurant or business he went into forced him. The morning we set off to go fishing, I was filled with excitement, though I had no idea what to expect. Marty, moving around the boat with a practiced ease, prepared the lines and bait while I watched, eager to catch something big. The ocean stretched out endlessly, and we drifted, waiting for the first sign of a bite. Hours passed, but my line remained untouched. Despite my growing impatience, Marty didn't seem the least bit concerned. He moved through the motions calmly, as if the slow pace was just part of the experience. Spoiler alert, I caught nothing. Well, that's not totally true. I caught a buoy! My brother, however, caught a king mackerel that almost pulled him off the boat if Marty hadn't caught him in time!

That day, I learned an important lesson about sport fishing. When you have a really big fish on the line, you actually have to put the boat in reverse. See, while the fishing rods, reels, and tackle are all designed for these big fish, you can't just reel one in without some assistance from your captain. Otherwise, the fish is strong enough to pull you off the boat, bend the hook out of its mouth, or snap the line. Even the strongest angler needs the captain to back up the boat to help reel in the fish. This helps us to understand a reality of the Christian life, **that God's strength makes the Christian life possible**. This truth is something that Paul knew personally, and he prayed fervently for over the Ephesian believers. So often, on our best and most eager days, we set out under our own strength to be faithful and resilient. Then something happens, and we find ourselves wondering if we can even carry on. The whole time, God is more than willing to supply our needed strength. Like an angler trying to reel in a record-sized fish, we need someone to back up the boat and help us. Paul knows and understands that is God. And he's experienced God's provision of strength time and time again. So, now he tells the Ephesian believers and us the same truth, **God's strength makes the Christian life possible**.

1. Strengthened

- a. Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus for the second time.
 - i. Paul told the Ephesians that he regularly prays for them and praises God for their faithfulness in 1:15-16.
 - ii. Paul's second prayer should cause us to sit up a little bit and focus not just on the content of his prayer, but on his physical posture and what it means.
- b. **Kneeling in prayer... Things are serious. (A truth from Paul's life.)**
 - i. Kneeling for prayer, though it has become a regular Christian attitude, was formerly an expression of deep emotion or earnestness, and on that basis we must understand Paul's words here. Solomon knelt at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8:54); Stephen at the time of his martyrdom (Acts 7:60); Peter at the death-bed of Dorcas (Acts 9:40); Paul at the time of his farewells on his last journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:36; 21:5); our Lord himself in his agony in Gethsemane (Luke 22:41).¹
 - ii. **For Paul to kneel in prayer over them meant he knew the weight of what they were going through and what strength they needed to continue.** And what does Paul pray for? He prays that they would be strengthened with power through God's Spirit, rooted and grounded in love, that they would be able to comprehend the love of Christ, and that they would give God glory.
 - 1. **Remember,** Paul has already commended them on their faithfulness while living in a tough place to be faithful. So, his prayer here isn't that they would become faithful, it is that they would be strengthened to remain faithful.
 - iii. **The weight of Paul's posture** helps us to understand the seriousness of his request for God to meet them with the strength that they will need in order to carry on faithfully.
 - 1. This isn't some secondary prayer or a "if you could, Lord" for Paul. This is a desperate plea for the Lord to do what only God can do.
- c. **The fact that God gives us the strength to live the Christian life is a gift of grace.**
 - i. Grace – This is the unmerited favor of God that is extended towards humanity. God's grace is extended in many forms both before we are saved and after.
 - ii. Let's consider how God strengthening us is a gift of grace.
 - 1. God revealed himself to us through his Son and his Word. – Grace
 - 2. God saved us not by our works but by his Son's work on the cross. – Grace
 - a. As if this wasn't all enough, God's grace continues.
 - 3. God seals and indwells us with the Holy Spirit. – Grace
 - 4. God gives us the strength to live the Christian life. – Grace
 - a. **He doesn't have to do any of this, but we need him to do all of it.**
 - b. The qualification of the name 'Father' has been added to strengthen faith for prayer. The reminder of his resources now has the same purpose. Yet again this letter speaks of *the riches* of God (see on 1:7), and the preposition is significant. Paul does not pray merely that God will give 'out of the treasures of his glory' (neb), but *according to* them (cf. Phil. 4:19). **He gives without limit because he himself is infinitely greater**

¹ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 107.

than the measure of human minds; and the riches that he gives are of his very nature.²

- iii. If God doesn't strengthen them and us, we will flounder in the limits of our own willpower. Which, if you're like me, isn't consistent in any way, shape, or form.
 - 1. We will come to hear that God's strength and ability knows no limits, because God is not limited.
 - 2. So, the limitless God is capable and willing to strengthen us, but with what? → His love.

2. Rooted & Grounded

- a. **Strengthened for what?** → They are to be rooted and grounded in the love that they have experienced from God through Christ.
 - i. His presence means not only strength, but wisdom, inspiration, and above all love.³
 - ii. This can only happen as Christ dwells in their heart.
 - 1. This is an active presence. A willingness to be near to Jesus. God is willing to be near to them, they are to be present to God.
 - iii. **Paul was aware of a danger, especially in the churches of the Greek world, of a faith that depended simply on intellectual knowledge** (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22; Col. 2:18, 23; 1 Tim. 1:4; 6:4). This was the supreme weakness of Gnosticism. He is not so much arguing, however, against an approach to faith in Christ which is barren because it is merely intellectual. Rather he shows again and again that his own line of approach is totally different. He realized that 'true knowledge', the knowledge of God, 'is unattainable without love' (Scott). If there is no love, the Spirit of Christ is not present, and there can be no understanding. John 7:17 and 15:9–17 express this same fact by showing that understanding comes where there is obedience, which is the fruit of love. The impossibility of holding the faith of Christ without love is one of the great themes of 1 John.⁴
- b. **What kind of love is this?**
 - i. **This is the love of Christ** – Not the love we have for Christ, but the love that we have experienced through Christ. That is, the love that God has for us.
 - ii. **This love is not abstract or random.** – Paul tells the church in Corinth exactly what kind of love it is that they are filled with when they are in Christ. – 1 Cor. 13:4-8
 - 1. ⁴ **Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.⁵**
- c. **What is love?** - A central virtue in most ethical traditions, one that denotes an attitude toward another involving both an affection for and a deep commitment to the other. In the Christian tradition, love (especially agape) is an expression of the essential nature of God, the central

² Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 109.

³ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 110.

⁴ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 111.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 13:4–8.

characterization of the relationship between God and humans, and the chief virtue that is to characterize Christians in their relationships to God and one another, as shaped by the indwelling Holy Spirit. **The connection between love and God's own character gives rise to the Christian focus on love as the fundamental characteristic of Christian discipleship and hence of Christian ethics.**⁶

- i. **Love is rooted in the character of God.**
- ii. In fact, many philosophers and sociologists think of love as the primary or highest virtue of an ethically centered life.
 - 1. Consider the way we talk about care for the planet, the displaced, our political institutions, and even justice itself. All of these are paired with love as the central value. I.e., If you love this, then you will...
- iii. **Biblically** – Love is exclusively tied up with the character and nature of God.⁷
 - 1. **Benevolence, Grace, Mercy, Persistence**
 - a. When we think in terms of God's moral attributes, perhaps what comes first to mind is the cluster of attributes we are here classifying as love. Many regard it as the basic attribute, the very nature or definition of God. The basic dimensions of God's love to us are (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.
- d. **Paul's prayer and hope for the Ephesians.**
 - i. It isn't that they would merely have a passing or fleeting moment with God's love, it is that they would be rooted and grounded by it. That they would comprehend it not just in their heads but in their hearts and through their lives.

3. Comprehend

- a. To emphasize this rooting and grounding Paul expands his language in his prayer that they might also comprehend (in every conceivable way) the sufficiency of Christ's love.
 - i. **The word translated *may have power* (Gk. *exischysēte*) and also the verb *comprehend* (*katalabesthai*), meaning 'an earnest grasping', suggest the difficulty of the task envisaged, simply because it is no mere intellectual feat, but a matter of practical experience, a living together in love which is inevitably costly.** We are not intended to give detailed meanings to *the breadth and length and height and depth*; rather we are to feel with heart and mind and intuition the 'many dimensions' of love, and work to weave that love into all the fabric of life.⁸
- b. The challenge that with this comprehending and being rooted and grounded, is that it doesn't happen outside of the context of life.
 - i. This is one of the mysteries of suffering on this side of heaven. We don't want to go through hard things. And we shouldn't get it mixed up, Go is not causing our hard things. He is a giver of good gifts (Jam. 1:17). **One of the good gifts of God is that he is able to work good even from our suffering. One of those "goods" that gets worked out from our suffering is this rooting, grounding, and comprehending of God's love.**
- c. Again, this is something that Paul knows intimately and personally.

⁶ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72.

⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 266.

⁸ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 111.

- i. To truly comprehend the love of God, you must experience it in the highs and lows of life.
- ii. Here is how Paul will say it to the church in Philippi. (Phil. 4:11-13)
 - 1. **¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**
- iii. **The truth is that when we dwell with Jesus in seasons of plenty and seasons of lack, as Paul says, we experience the depth of God's love in ways that we could never imagine.**
 - 1. When we hear Paul's words we should see the face of someone who has been through it. They've walked through the tough stuff of life and understand what they are talking about. It isn't the face of the slick-dressed charlatan who is trying to sell us an idea.
- d. And just when we are about to say, "Paul, this is a really nice idea, but it is too much." he will tell us that nothing is too much for the limitless God. And it is God's power that is at work within us. And for that reason, when we walk faithfully and we ask for strength, it gives God glory.

4. Glory

- a. **How do we give God glory with our lives?**
 - i. **We give God glory when we purposely dwell with him and obey him.**
 - 1. This is the substance of Paul's prayer.
 - ii. This means that we give God glory when we organize our lives around him and his rightful position and place as the center.
 - 1. This doesn't establish his rightful position. He has always existed in it. Remember, Paul has already told us that he is sovereign, supreme, above all things, and over all things in chapter one.
 - 2. So, when we worship God and align our lives with him at the center it acknowledges something that is eternally true.
 - iii. This means that we give God glory in the way we live, think, speak, and in our posture towards him.
 - 1. The very action of praying and asking for strength is a action that gives God glory.
 - 2. Obedience is God's love language, and we are motivated to obey out of our restored relationship with God.
- b. **Questions for daily examen:**
 - i. **Where did I see God today?**
 - 1. Big ways and small.
 - ii. **How did I miss God?**
 - 1. Opportunities and busyness?
 - iii. **What do I need from God tomorrow?**
 - 1. Prayers for strength to be faithful and present.
- c. **These questions help us take steps of purposeful responsiveness.**

- i. Again we might feel like the Ephesians apparently did, that they were asking God for too much. But Paul reassures them, it is impossible to ask God for too much. His capacity for giving far exceeds his people's capacity for asking—or even imagining.⁹
- ii. We need God to back the boat up for us, to help us, and not only is he willing, but he is more than able for anything we could need.
- iii. The theologian Kent Hughes talks about the purposeful responsiveness that is reflected in a posture of prayer that seeks out God's help.
 - 1. "We have learned that there are three things we must put on our prayer list: 1) prayer for an *inner strengthening* so as to enhance our capacity to hold what he has for us, 2) prayer for *love* so our practical lives will be rooted in love and so we will further understand and experience his unfathomable love, and, 3) prayer for ever-growing *fullness* in this life and in eternity. If we pray this list, there is ample cause for optimism because of the Scriptural promise in 1 John 5:14, 15 — "This is the assurance we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us — whatever we ask — we know that we have what we asked of him." Our optimism comes because Paul's Ephesian prayer is God's revealed will. Therefore, if we pray for its three grand emphases, we will receive them!¹⁰
- iv. **Engaging with God through these questions positions us to actively dwell with God, know more and more the love of Christ, and follow him obediently in our lives.**

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 330.

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 119.