

Granted Strength

Ephesians 3:14-19 | Bryce Beale | Dec. 10, 2017

There is, I think, for most of us a sense that we should be more than we are.

We recognize the disparity between, on the one hand, Christ crying out to the darkness on Golgotha as if to summon the earthquake that followed, then giving the infernal serpent the deathblow he deserves, bursting from the grave by the power of his indestructible life with the keys to death and hades in hand, and ascending into a tranquil sky to be received by clouds and celebratory angels on his coronation day; and, on the other hand, the mundane distractions we entertain while singing about all of this on Sunday morning.

We see the distance between, on the one hand, the hope we claim of eternal, painless bliss in the presence of our soul's Originator and Satisfaction, a never-ending vacation to the celestial shores that we say are the culmination of all human longings; and on the other hand, how much more exciting the smell of a new car is to us than all of this.

We are much like the farmer in Norfolk, England who found a bent metal object in his field, and used it for several years as a doorstep. He intended to discard the doorstep, but his friend encouraged him to have it analyzed by an archaeologist instead; and so doing, he found it to be one of only six ceremonial daggers of its kind, three and a half thousand years old, and worth \$60,000.¹

We have found the treasure buried in a field, but instead of selling all we have to buy that field, we have used the treasure as a doorstep!

And a degree of guilt pricks us like a bur in our sock, each time we pass through the door and see that dagger put to such poor use, the gospel of Jesus Christ so far from the center of our day to day lives. Every so often you awaken before dawn and, there on your bed, the brevity of your life hits you, and you regret that you are so much less than you should be; you regret that, as one evangelist put it, you know more than you are.

But what can you do?

Now let me ask it again, but in another tone: *What can you do?*

¹ "Norfolk museum acquires Bronze Age dirk used as doorstep," The History Blog, <http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/33542> (Nov. 24, 2014; accessed Dec. 9, 2017).

You may have resigned yourself to the disparity between what you know and what you are—but Scripture does not resign you to that disparity. I find no trace of fatalism in the teachings of Jesus or in the letters of Paul; instead I find again and again this appeal: “Forward!” What can you do? What *must* you do? For if there is a gap between what you are and what you should be, then you must do something.

I pray that this message, by the grace of God, would be as uncomfortable and as helpful as the chime or buzz that awakens you from sleep each morning. I pray it would be like the voice of Jesus that interrupted three times the sleep of his disciples in Gethsemane.

For we are going to look starkly in the face of that question, “What can you do?”, not as men and women who have surrendered to our lukewarm plateaus, but as Christians, as those who intend to prove our life the way all other living organisms do—by growth.

May God help us.

EPHESIANS 3:14-19

If you want to take the next step in your walk with Christ, to progress in your progressive sanctification, to awaken that Christ may shine on you, what can you do?

Paul prays

Paul wants all these things for his readers, and what does he do: “For this reason [that is, because God has saved you, and made me your servant] I bow my knees before the Father...”

Paul prays.

Our primary interest in this text is *what* Paul prays, and we will turn to that soon; but to answer our question, we must pause a moment to consider prayer itself.

Paul desires for his readers what we desire for ourselves: growth. And so he does what? He prays. Why? How do prayer and progress relate?

You will find something of the answer in the way Paul speaks of prayer in this verse: “I bow my knees.”

We know that prayer may be performed in many postures; in the Bible men and women pray sometimes standing, sometimes lying face down, sometimes on their knees; some pray looking to the sky, while others look downward; some lift their hands, but not always. So why does Paul bow his knees to pray in this instance?

Because beggars beg from their knees.

Jesus in his earthly life was approached by a man who fell to his knees before him, begging, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly.”² Why should he fall to his knees? Why not simply stand and ask?

Because when our desperation grows so loud that we can no longer hear the silly suggestions of our pride, we fall down and plead. We stand and speak to someone our equal; we kneel before our benefactor. When we have all we need, we stand; when someone else has all we need, we kneel.

Now, there is a way of living life that is much like standing. There is, in fact, a way of praying that is much like standing.

Look into the temple grounds and you will see the prayer of a standing heart. “God, I thank you,” prays the Pharisee, “that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”³

The Pharisee prays, but he does not beg. What would he need to beg for? He is not going to grovel; he has more decency, more self-respect than that. And what does he have to beg *for*? He can say like the Laodicean church, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.”⁴

He already has his reward.

But see beside him the tax collector, kneeling in his heart, beating his chest and averting his eyes from heaven. He begs, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” And he receives mercy. Make no mistake, we bow our knees like Paul “before the Father,” and that makes us more than mere beggars—for we are children. But children too are free of the subtleties of pride that come with the passing of the years; their sense of self does not often stop them from appealing to their parents for what they want.

So, to our first question—if we mean to move forward into the rich joy God intends for us, it will require prayer. But not prayer in itself, for there are prayers that mean no more than the breath that makes them. No, if we would grow, we must first kneel. We must petition God with a beggar’s heart, with a desperation that defies our standing pride.

God’s hand is not so short that it cannot sanctify, but our pride has made a division between what we are and what we should be.

So, as we move now into what Paul prays for the Ephesians, and what we must seek for ourselves, know that before all else we must get to

² Matt. 17:14-15 (ESV).

³ Luke 18:11-12.

⁴ Rev. 3:17.

our knees, off our proud feet; for God is opposed to the proud and will not offer them assistance, but he gives grace to the humble.

What Paul prays

Having humbled ourselves, then, what must we seek? What do we do now? That is answered in Paul's prayer—he desires the Ephesians' growth, so what does he seek for them?

Strengthened

See the beginning of his prayer, from verse 14: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”

We do not wonder that Paul is on his knees, for he is asking something very bold of God. He is asking, first, for strengthening, but see what kind of strengthening he wants for the Ephesian believers.

It is a strengthening “according to the riches of [God's] glory.” And how rich is God's glory, you ask? Well, we behold the fringe of his majesty in Paul's description of God just before: “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.”

This is not an easy description to understand, but I think its meaning is clarified by the Greek in which it was originally written; for in Greek the words “Father” and “family” are very similar words. A “family” or tribe traces its roots back to its forefather, and Paul here appears to be saying that all families, the nations spread abroad the world, and all classifications of angels—a subject far beyond our grasp—find their origin in God. He is the Creator, the source of all conscious beings that have ever been and that are. He is in some sense the forefather of all.⁵

And so our suspicions are confirmed—namely, that there should not, that there need not be so great a distance between what we know and what we are. We are asking for ourselves nothing short of the apostle's prayer, and his prayer is for strength according to the rich glory of the Originator of all men and angels.

At this point there will be the temptation to lower your expectations. “Yes, I want to grow,” you may say, “but I don't want to exaggerate how God will grow me. It is progressive sanctification, after all, so just a little at a time. I have been so long stagnate in my walk with the Lord; I must

⁵ See Paul's approval of the Greek poet's claim, “For we are indeed [God's] offspring,” in Acts 17:28. Believers are children of God in a special way and so they call God Father in a special way; but in a more general way, God is the father of all people.

trudge along laden with my unbreakable habits of sin, with my meager sense of spiritual things, and then just barely slip into heaven, hopefully unnoticed.”

Such expectations would be reasonable if, say, you were praying for yourself to be strengthened “according to the poverty of your own weakness.” Or if you were praying for strength “according to the pages of a self-help book,” or “according to the typical way you’ve grown in the past.” Then by all means, trudge along.

But if our prayer is to match Paul’s and we dare ask of heaven’s King to strengthen us “according to the riches of his glory,” we do him a dishonor to think his storehouse empty of all but dust and unfulfilled hopes. In King Solomon’s day silver was not counted valuable because there was so much of it in the land, and I tell you, something greater than Solomon is here. The King of kings, the Source of monarchs, sits in glory before the eyes of our faith, and we fall on our knees before him to make our petition for growth.

I might be tempted to think my message this morning too good to be true, a mere exaggeration, if not for the fact that I am tempted to think the same of Paul’s prayer in our text.

Notice in verse 16 that he wishes his readers to be “strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”

If you are in Christ, the Spirit of God already indwells you. Paul is not praying for the Spirit to enter the Ephesians, for he has entered them already. He is praying that the Spirit who lives within them would give them strength to grow.

One pastor has illustrated this thought in this way: Imagine that I had an encounter with God where he entered my body in order to give me the ability to play basketball. When you saw me on the court, what would you expect from me? You would expect my ability to play the game to be far greater than it was before. You would expect me to be sinking three-point shots and shutting down the opposition.⁶

What if I had an encounter with God where he entered my body in order to give me the ability to grow? What if God entered my body in order to cut off an addiction to pornography? What if he entered my body to help me tame my sarcasm, or to enable me to love a difficult family member?

What if God himself were to enter you and apply his own power against whatever habitual sin besets you? What chance would that sin have to

⁶ Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2009), 32.

stand against the Consuming Fire of Sinai? How holy would you be if God himself made it his task to make you holy?

That and more of that is what Paul prays for, and that is what we must pray for ourselves.

To believe

But maybe you have prayed, and the sin remains. What then? You pray, and when you open your eyes, you are on the same desert plateau you were on when you began your prayer, with no end in sight.

We have seen that Paul is praying for strength, and in my explanation I have added the words, “to grow—strength to grow.” This is true, and it has served our purposes so far. But it is not the way Paul words his prayer. So let us be more specific, let us adjust our focus.

If we want to grow, and if after humbling ourselves before God, descending to our knees, and pleading for his strength, we find ourselves still stuck, it may be that our focus is off.

See why Paul prays for strength, beginning in verse 17: “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...”

“Christ already dwells in my heart,” you may say. And if you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, you are right. But Paul is speaking of another, richer kind of dwelling, a solidified residence that happens “through faith.” So if Paul is praying for strength so that Christ may dwell in this way within us, and if Christ dwells in this way within us through faith, then we may rightly say Paul is praying for strength *to believe*. He is asking for God to strengthen these believers by growing their faith.

But even here we are not specific enough. Why does this faith lead to a more complete dwelling of Christ in the heart? He explains in the verses that follow—the strength of faith that we wish God to give us is a strength “to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth”—that is, to comprehend how massive this three-dimensional object of our faith is. And that object is mentioned right afterward, “and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” This object, so large that it extends out into space far beyond what we can ever hope to see with mortal eyes, is the love of Christ.

Paul’s prayer in brief, then, is that God would strengthen the Ephesians to believe, not just anything, but specifically, the love of Christ.

This is a prayer for growth—notice that in the middle of it he adds, “you, being rooted and grounded in love.” In other words, if God answers this prayer you will be at a place where love for others is a fixed habit; you will have grown in love.

But here the prayer surprises us—for your love, your maturity, your growth is noted, but it is noted almost in passing. For it is overshadowed by another love, and Paul’s concern is much more with this second love than with the first.

When Paul wants his readers to make progress in the Christian life, he does not pray first that they would love, but rather that they would be strengthened to really believe that they are loved, and loved beyond what they can think.

Look at Eve in the garden—at that time there was no distance between what Eve was and what Eve was supposed to be. What began to separate the two? It was not first a lapse in her love, but a lapse in her faith in God’s love. The devil knew exactly where to drive the wedge, and so he hissed as his first words, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”⁷ Surely the devil knew God did not say these words, but now they are planted in Eve’s mind. The devil turns her eyes away from all the trees God has provided, and centers her attention on the one he has not.

And when she corrects him, he retorts, “You will not surely die, for God knows...” what? God knows that eating this fruit would make you happy, but God, who evidently does not love you, does not want you to be happy.

What if the reason you have seen so little progress in your recent history, the reason you are bored by Sunday morning worship and not as stirred by your quiet time as you used to be, is that underneath the Christian verbiage you have learned to recite, you are not really convinced that Christ loves you very much.

You are persuaded that you have seen the edges of his love—yes, he loves you, but with a width and length and height and depth that you can measure. Maybe he loves you with a love the size of a small cardboard box. It used to be a big cardboard box, but that was before you failed him so many times; after that the serpent helped you reshape his love into this smaller, more realistic form.

And when you pray, this dull, small box sits in the corner of the room, not much noticed because there’s not much to notice about it. It is a fact, but it is a boring fact.

⁷ Gen. 3:1.

When you get into your new car this box is on the floorboard of the backseat; yes, Christ loves you, but not in a way more interesting than the sound of your engine, or the smell of the interior.

At work the box is underneath your desk somewhere, and at home it sits on the corner of your countertop. The dimensions of Christ's love seem to be about 10 by 6 by 4 inches.

"The love of Christ," Paul elsewhere writes, "controls us."⁸ But if it is a small love, it has very little control. "We love," says John, "because he first loved us."⁹ But if he first loved us with a little love, then we will love others with the same.

It is hard to trade away our pleasures that the Bible calls sin when we are offered only this small box in their stead; what use is that to us? And it is difficult, when we are called to risk in the name of Christ, to sell all we have and follow Christ, to put our lives on the line, to invest our lives in the weak and needy, and we are told, "Shhh, don't be afraid," as we are handed this little box.

A little love of Christ is like a little gasoline, and it will only get us so far. Perhaps the pattering of your spiritual engine is an indicator that you have comprehended too little of the love of Christ.

This then must be our prayer before all others—Almighty God, by your Spirit within me give me the strength to comprehend how massive the love of Christ is!

Enable me to see the love within that heart that knew my name before the world was formed. Let me hear the echoes of that eternal counsel, in which the Son of God agreed to sacrifice himself for me when I was as yet only an idea in the divine mind. Yet even then you loved me. How long this love must be, stretching back into the infinite history that preceded earth! All that time, you loved me.

Give power to my inner man to believe that love compelled you, O Christ, when the fullness of time had come. When you reached out your immortal hand to touch the poison of our million mortal pains, when you left the sunshine of heaven and plunged into our miry darkness, help me believe you did it in love for me. Let me see the depth of love!

And when I see your silhouette crucified against a midnight sky, your breaths coming in labored, your blood draining from a hundred wounds, let me see its height, and let me hear and believe your words: "Greater

⁸ 2 Cor. 5:14.

⁹ 1 Jn. 4:19.

love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”¹⁰

I do not know what more Christ could have done to assure us of his love. He snatched us from the rim of hell by suffering hell for us on the cross. He craves our presence with him now, like a close and generous friend who cannot wait for us to be with him.

Brothers and sisters, pray to God that he would unleash his power against the eyes of your heart, to force them open so they may see the love of Christ as it truly is. Have the humility to believe that you have been quite wrong about the dimensions of his love; whatever you have imagined that love to be, you have been quite wrong about it, for it surpasses knowledge. Plead that you may become less wrong in your estimation of it.

For if God should answer that prayer, as he is delighted to do, then the conclusion to Paul’s prayer will no doubt prove true in your life: “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

What Eve lost in the garden, God aims to restore. The wedge between what we are and what God means for us to be, the distance between our sense of emptiness and the fullness of God with which he intends to fill us, that gap God can close. And it will be a process, do not mistake me, but neither let that thought divert you from the fact that processes proceed. Progressive sanctification progresses.

You are not doomed to endure all your life the sinful habits that you hate. I don’t believe in such fatalism, for Scripture does not believe in it. Christ loves you too much to leave you ensnared in these miseries, and he is too jealous a Savior to abandon you to his competition.

You see the pathway to growth, the way to a richer and deeper communion with Christ, there, through humble pleadings for God to reveal the heart of Christ to you. You see the direction set by Scripture for you to walk if you are serious about seeing transformation in your life.

So then, what are you going to do?

¹⁰ John 15:13.