

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Power for Knowledge Ephesians 3:17b-19

Intro: We have begun looking at Paul's prayer for the Ephesian believers that closes out the theological/ doctrinal half of this letter. The remainder of the letter will be Paul's exhortation to put this theology into practice. So, before Paul launches into the practical application of truth, he offers up a petition to the Lord to pour out His power on these believers in preparation for this. It's one thing to learn theological truth and quite another thing to understand it to the point that you order your life according to it. That's Paul's heart for these and all believers and so he humbles himself before the Lord and prays. Yet, even in his prayer we are able to learn valuable truths to improve our spiritual walks.

The first thing we noticed is that Paul prays for power for these Christians; a power that is mediated by the Holy Spirit and concentrated on changing the inner being. Paul's intention for this power is that it would enable the Ephesians to live holy lives so that, as Christ dwells in their hearts, His dwelling place would more and more reflect His character and not so much that of the previous owners. We have an illustration of this in Genesis when the Lord tells Abraham he will have a son. The Lord Himself came down and visited Abraham's tent and He brought 2 angels. They came to his tent, talked with Abraham and even ate a meal with him. They felt very much at home because Abraham was a man of faith and obedience.

These 3 heavenly guests had another task. They were going to investigate the sins of Sodom because God had determined to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot, Abraham's nephew, was a believer living in Sodom and God wanted to warn him to get out before the judgment could fall. But the Lord Himself didn't go to Sodom. He sent the 2 angels. Apparently, the Lord didn't feel at home in Lot's house the way He felt at home in Abraham's tent. Peter tells us that while Lot was righteous, he allowed himself to be oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked. He tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds. Holiness is not legalism, holiness is also not optional. The Lord desires to see it in the Christian's life and so Paul prays for it. But power for holiness is not all that Paul prays for. There is a further need for

power to be seen in the believer's life (17b-19).

17b – This is the 2nd petition of Paul's prayer. While this is also a prayer for power, in this case, the power of God in our lives operates a little differently. Its purpose is to enable us to grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love. Of course, Paul doesn't mean to suggest that his readers have never known God's love for them in Christ Jesus. Far from it: he knows they are believers and as such they have been rooted and grounded in love. Paul understands that salvation itself utterly depends on God's sovereign love. He says as much in the opening statement of this letter (1:3-4). Small wonder, then, that he thinks of Christians as those who have been rooted and grounded in love.

As encouraging as this phrase is meant to be, it's still a bit of a mixed metaphor. The word rooted is a botanical term that is meant to compare the believer to a plant that is rooted in the love of God while grounded is an architectural reference that compares the believer to a building that has been established on love as a foundation. This may be less than perfect English usage, but it is good theology. In the first case, love is pictured as something that nourishes us (which it obviously does), and, in the second case, it is pictured as a solid foundation (which it is). The tree must get its roots deep in the soil if it's to have both nourishment and stability and the Christian must have their spiritual roots deep in the love of God. As far as foundations go, if you don't go deep, you can't build high.

The trials of life not only test the depth of our faith but also the depth of our experience with the love of God. The storm that blows reveals the strength of the roots. Jesus told the parable of the 2 builders, one of whom didn't go deep enough with his foundation and all his efforts came to ruin in the storm..

18 – The remarkable fact about this prayer is that although Paul's readers are clearly Christians, he assumes that they do not adequately appreciate the love of Christ. He now wants them to have power to grasp just how great the love of Christ is. This is not a prayer that we might love Christ more (though that's certainly a good thing to pray for). Rather, this is a prayer that we might better grasp the scope of Christ's love for us.

This cannot be just an intellectual exercise. Paul isn't asking that his readers

might become better able to articulate the greatness of God's love in Jesus Christ or to grasp with the intellect alone how significant God's love is in the plan of redemption. He's asking God that they may have the power to grasp the dimensions of that love in their experience. This, by necessity, would include intellectual knowledge but it cannot be limited to that alone.

Paul prays that they would be able to comprehend the dimensions of Christ's love. The English words *comprehend* and *apprehend* both derive from the Latin word *prehendere* which means to grasp. We say a monkey or a possum has a prehensile tail; a tail that's able to grab a tree limb and hold on to it. The word *comprehend* carries the idea of mentally grasping something; while *apprehend* suggests physically laying hold of something for yourself. In other words, it's possible to understand something but not really make it your own. Paul's concern here is that Christians would lay hold of the vast expanses of Christ's love for us. In fact, he wants us all to be able to understand together as a body, every dimension of the love of Christ.

You might be terrible at math but right here, Paul provides us with some spiritual geometry that we should endeavor to make ourselves familiar with because this knowledge possesses both present and eternal ramifications. Paul's statement at the end of [v18](#) means that the love of Christ has dimensions and those dimensions can be measured. Too many people consider Christ's love to be merely a formal theory, a sentimental belief or a theological concept that floats way up in the ether. Paul didn't see it that way at all. To him, the love of Christ was a tangible, substantial, measurable fact. Paul had considered the love of Christ back and forth and up and down and it was evidently real to him and he is praying that it would become real to all his readers.

What are these measurable dimensions? The love of Jesus has width. You can see how wide a river is by noticing how much it covers over. The river of Christ's love is so wide it covers over all of my sin. It is so wide it covers over all of the circumstances in my life so that all things work together for the good. When I begin to doubt His forgiveness or His providence, I am narrowing the mighty river of Christ's love in my life. Still, the width of Christ's love isn't limited to my salvation or spiritual walk. His love is as wide as the world ([Jn 3:16](#)). There will be more in heaven than we expect to see, and more from every tongue, tribe, nation and people!

The love of Jesus has length. When considering the length of Christ's love you should ask yourself these questions: When did Christ's love for me begin? When will it end? The answers to these questions actually measure the length of Christ's love. If you say He loved you from birth, you would be wrong. The Bible teaches that He loved us and chose us in His love before the foundation of the world (1:4). Even before the universe was created, He knew you and loved you and had determined to come to this earth and die for you and me. Jer 31:3 also tells us that His love for you will never end. I'll grant you that eternity is immeasurable but we can measure Christ's love by it.

The love of Christ has depth. Phil 2:7-8 tells us how deep the love of Christ goes. You can't go lower than the death of the cross and that's how deep the love of Jesus is for us. The love of Christ has height. To understand the height of Christ's love, ask yourself, "How high does it lift me?" As Paul has already said in 2:6, Christ's love lifts me to heavenly places where I'm seated with Him right now. This is my present spiritual position and will one day be my permanent physical position.

While it's true that we can't exhaust the love of Christ by our knowledge, we can nevertheless know this love truly. It's the same with the knowledge of God generally. We can't know God exhaustively, but we can know Him truly. So although, in the same way, we cannot know all of Christ's love for us, we can know that what we perceive as Christ's love is truly love. The love of Christ that we know at the beginning of our Christian life is the same love that we will know (though more fully) at the end. We're to grow in our awareness of that love through the routine hardships, sufferings, and persecutions of life.

In the last century, when Napoleon's armies opened a prison that had been used by the Spanish Inquisition they found the remains of a prisoner in an underground dungeon who had been incarcerated for his faith. The body had decayed long before. Only a chain fastened around an anklebone cried out his confinement. But this prisoner, long since dead, had left a witness. On the wall of his small, dismal cell this faithful soldier of Christ had scratched a rough cross with four words surrounding it in Spanish. Above the cross was the Spanish word for height. Below it was the word for depth. To the left was the word width; to the right, the word length. Clearly this

prisoner wanted to testify to the surpassing greatness of the love of Christ, realized even in his suffering.

To come to any understanding of the dimensions of Christ's love, we must come to the cross. It was on the cross that Christ demonstrated His love for us in that, while we were still sinners, He died for us. The cross pointed in 4 ways, essentially in every direction because the love of Christ is wide enough to include every person; long enough to last through all of eternity; deep enough to reach the worst sinner and high enough to take us to heaven. Paul's prayer is that we might grasp these dimensions and that we might grasp them in our experience with Christ...

19a – The first half of this verse contains both a petition and a paradox. This petition may seem redundant to v18 but its not. There, Paul prayed that the Christians at Ephesus might grasp the full dimensions of the love of Christ; that they might understand it. Here he prays that they might know it in the full biblical sense of that word. The chief idea is experience. The paradox is that Paul wanted them to experience the love of Christ, which in its fullest extent surpasses human knowledge – he wants them to know the unknowable and the only way to do that is by experience.

Paul's writing about something we can know. He's not talking about some uncontrolled mysticism. This isn't a matter of speculation, guesswork, emotions or feelings. This is something to know but how do we come to know it? Clearly, the first place we discover the love of Christ for us is in the Scriptures. This is where we learn what He has done for us and why He has done it. A genuine and deep perception of the love of Christ rarely comes to those who fail to spend time in God's Word.

Still, an understanding of Christ's love can be triggered by tragedy – some unexpected bereavement or prolonged suffering of some sort. When we suffer, we are often compelled to pause and reflect on Christ's love for sinners and rebels like us. We serve a Lord who suffered in our place and learned obedience (**Heb 5:8**) by the things that He suffered. In the midst of our sufferings the distractions of this world that capture so much of our attention tend to fade away and eternal things begin to assume their rightful place in our priorities. It's during these times of distress and suffering that we come to know what it means to confess that God's love is as limitless and as endless as eternity.

Paul wants us to grasp something of the limitless dimensions of Christ's love, to know this love that surpasses knowledge, so he prays that we might have God's power to be able to take this step. But why? Why does he think this is so important? He tells us in the 2nd half of v19...

19b – To put it simply, Paul wants us to have the power to grasp the love of Christ so that we might become mature!

This phrase is just Paul's way of saying: to be all that God wants you to be or to be spiritually mature. Paul will say this again in another way in **4:12-13**. Christ is the standard. Elsewhere God says, "Be perfect for I am perfect" or "Be holy for I am holy"; now here He's saying in effect, "Be mature; be complete as I am mature and complete."

Do you see the stunning implication? Paul assumes that we cannot be as spiritually mature as we ought to be unless we receive power from God to enable us to grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love. We may think we're properly mature Christians because of our theology, our education, our time put in at church (years of experience) or our traditions; but Paul knows better. He knows we can't be as mature as we ought to be until we know this love that surpasses knowledge. That's why he prays as he does here; so that we will become mature!

We might not readily make the connection here but all we need to do is look to the dismal state of our society today. It has been shown that unless a child is reared in a home where love and discipline surround their every step, that child will not attain emotional maturity. That explains how seemingly grown adults dissolve into screaming, blubbering children when they don't get their way. Countless studies have shown that a girl reared without a strong, loving father rarely learns how to properly give and receive love. Inevitably, it breeds trouble in her own marriage. With the massive breakdown of the nuclear family so widespread in our country, we have only begun to reap the whirlwind. I fear it's going to get much worse before it gets better.

For a human being to grow to full emotional and relational maturity, the stability of a loving and disciplined home is an indispensable component. The same is true in the spiritual arena. Just as a human can't develop into a mature person without the structure of disciplined love in the home, so also

a Christian who doesn't grow in the experience of Christ's love won't grow to full spiritual maturity. Sadly, while we're not deprived of His love, too often we, like the prodigal son, run from His love, with similar results: wretched immaturity, poor relationships, destroyed trust and a failed sense of spiritual reality.

It takes nothing less than the power of God to enable us to grasp the love of Christ. Part of our inherent selfishness is seen in the fact that we are so independent minded that we really don't want to get so close to God that we feel dependent on Him, swamped by His love. Yes, we want to experience God's power but it's so that we can be in control. Paul is praying for power so that we will be controlled by God Himself. Our deep, pathetic self-centeredness is exactly why it takes the power of God to transform us, if we are to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and grow to the level of spiritual maturity the Scriptures lay out before us.

It's a wonderful thing to be able to revel in the love of Christ! To recognize that love in your experience, to live in the warmth of that love give your life new meaning and purpose. Relationships with other believers take on new depths. Fellowship becomes more precious. Forgiving others becomes 2nd nature because we have been forgiven so much. The world may despise us but that doesn't matter because God loves us! How can trouble, sorrow or bereavement drive us to despair when we can say, with Paul, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" ([Rom 8:35a](#)). Our conversations, thoughts, actions, reactions; our relationships, goals and values – are all transformed if we would only live in the self-conscious enjoyment of the love of Christ. Our testimony comes alive as we grow up spiritually.

Of course, Paul isn't advocating a Lone Ranger Christianity here, as if he's only interested in the maturity of the individual Christian. Far from it because his pray is that we may be able to comprehend the love of Christ with all the saints. Paul intends for the whole people of God to understand the whole love of God. In fact, it's hard to imagine any individual Christian truly growing in spiritual maturity would still be unconcerned about fellow believers. It's ridiculous to assume that a genuine, deepening grasp of the love of Christ could remain completely private. Paul wants the entire church to grow this way and he prays exactly to this end.

Paul will conclude his pray with a wonderful and encouraging doxology but

what can we surmise about the God that we serve from Paul's prayer so far? It should be obvious to us that God is far more interested in our holiness than in our comfort. God delights more readily in the integrity and purity of His church than in the material well-being of its members. God reveals Himself more clearly to those who enjoy and obey Him than to those whose faith revolves around good jobs, nice homes and reasonable health.

God is far more committed to building a corporate "temple" which accurately reflects His character and in which His Spirit dwells than He is in preserving our reputations. God is more disposed to display His grace than to flatter our intelligence or fulfill our desire for entertainment. God is more deeply committed to stretching our faith than our popularity. He prefers that His people live in gratitude and holy joy rather than pushy self-reliance and glitzy happiness. He wants us to pursue daily death, not self-fulfillment because one leads to death while the other leads to life.

The essential values of the gospel, the things that Paul prays for, should characterize our own lives. They should become the basis of our prayer lives. What a wonderful comfort and marvelous boost to faith to know that we are praying in line with the declared will of the almighty God! 😊