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To God Be the Glory

Ephesians 3:20-21

Intro: Studying the Bible is a kaleidoscopic experience. The lessons we learn from it and the experiences we have through it are multiple. At times God's Word humbles us, making us conscious of our sin and failure. At other times it thrills us as we think of all God has done in Christ for our salvation. Some Bible passages instruct us. Some rebuke us. Some stir us up to great action while others challenge and encourage us to good works. In some passages we seem to gain a glimpse into hell. In others, a window is opened into eternity as we enter into the throne room of the Father Himself.

This is the case as we come to the closing verses of [ch3](#). They are a great doxology, perhaps the greatest in the Bible. It is fitting that it occurs at the end of Paul's prayer because it not only is the glorious conclusion to his prayer for the Ephesians but it brings to a logical end all that Paul has been saying in his letter so far. Paul began the letter by speaking of the glory of God's plan of salvation from both God's perspective ([ch1](#)) and the believer's perspective ([ch2](#)). He then speaks at length of the Gentiles place in God's eternal plan, how they are gloriously blessed in their salvation and that through their new-found unity with Jewish believers, together as the church, they become an object lesson to teach the angelic hosts the correctness of God's way, revealing His manifold wisdom.

In light of all this truth, Paul enters into intercessory prayer for the believers in Ephesus as indicated by his statement in [3:14](#): for this reason. God's declared purpose in creating this new unity, this new humanity is revealed in [2:21-22](#). So Paul prays to that end. In other words, Paul's prayer is completely in line with God's purposes. These purposes provide a reason for Paul to advance these particular petitions to his God. And, of course, as Paul approaches God with his petitions, he reminds himself that the God he addresses is his heavenly Father.

Some may assume that Paul is merely comparing God to a familial image that everyone would readily understand. We all have fathers so we can see how God can be like a father to His children. That's not what Paul is doing

here. In fact, he's doing the opposite. The fatherhood of God is the inherent idea from which all families find their source. In other words, fatherhood is not a human concept imputed to God; fatherhood comes from God. He is the perfect example of fatherhood from which all human fatherhood is derived from. He is the original Father.

Now, as the original Father, we must understand, as Paul does, that God is not just a powerful Father with unlimited resources to provide for our needs but equally important, He is a good Father, a generous Father; He knows how to give good gifts to His children and, what's more, He desires to! Paul dares to approach this God with his requests because he knows God to be a good God, a heavenly Father. Thus, the nature and character of God become for Paul the fundamental reason for entering into intercessory prayer.

This realization is also critically important for our own prayer lives as believers. The more we reflect on the kind of God who is there; the kind of God who has disclosed Himself in Scripture and in the life of Jesus Christ, the kind of God who has revealed His plans and purposes for His own family (household), the kind of God who hears and answers prayer – the more we will be encouraged to pray. Prayerlessness is oftentimes and index of our ignorance of God. Real knowledge of God not only teaches us what to pray for but provides a powerful incentive to pray.

And so Paul prays. Not for material blessings or accelerated church growth or even for power to advance the gospel in the region. No, Paul prays for God's power to be mediated by God's Spirit in the inner beings of these Ephesian Christians so that they would be empowered to live holy lives and grow into spiritual maturity. Paul terminology in this last petition seems to reach a height beyond which neither reason nor imagination can go: that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (19b). This is beyond comprehension; we can't even begin to imagine how we can be filled with God's own fullness. Here we stand on the edge of the infinite. And yet, Paul doesn't draw back or temper his expectations. He has prayed that God will do something we can't even imagine; and now, having exhausted his ability to speak and write along that line, he bursts out in praise to the only God who can answer his prayer...

20 – What an amazing doxology! It's as glorious to the mind as it is uplifting

to the soul! The terminology employed by Paul is beautiful but it wasn't just meant to encourage us; it was also meant to inform us! Every word; every term speaks to a specific aspect or attribute of God and as such, it is a literary staircase that ascends into His glory. A verse of this scope and grandeur deserves our careful consideration.

1) The first thing the apostle says about God is so simple that it often goes unnoticed and yet, so profound that it alone separates God from all other wannabe gods. Paul says that God is able to do something. The Greek word for do means "to make, cause, effect, bring about, accomplish, perform, provide, or create." It points to God as a worker, which means that He is neither idle, nor inactive, nor dead.

What a contrast then between this God, the true God, and the so-called gods of the heathen! In Isaiah's day the people of Israel had fallen away from the worship of the true God and were worshiping idols, and God gave Isaiah words for that situation. He described the idols. They are, he said, nothing but pieces of lumber carved up by the worshiper. They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand (44:18). God calls an idol just a block of wood (19). He issues this challenge in Isa 41:21-24. According to these verses, the proof of the true God's existence is that He is able to do things. The idols can do nothing, not even evil.

We saw this visibly illustrated in Elijah's god-contest on top of Mt Carmel and it was graphically illustrated to Israel throughout her history in the Promise Land. Whether it was Baal of the Canaanites, Dagon of the Philistines, Molech of the Moabites or the golden calves of Jeroboam; no matter which false god was popular at the time, they were all characterized by their inherent inability to do something, anything! Only God can do because only God is God.

2) The second thing Paul says about God is that He is able to do what we ask. This means that the ability of God to work is not just related to His own concerns and interests but actually extends to the concerns and interests of His people; His children. This is an important statement about prayer.

Most of us are probably pretty cautious in our prayers, unless we've learned to pray through a lifetime of growing in the discipline of prayer. So often we

hold back in asking, afraid of embarrassing either God or ourselves. But that's not the kind of prayer God commands in the Bible. Granted, we often do pray wrongly. James says as much in his epistle ([Jam 4:3](#)). But for every verse that warns us about wrong prayers there are others which by example and precept teach us to pray frequently and with confidence ([1 John 3:21-22](#)). This is a great prayer promise. It says that (1) if we're praying with a clear conscience, that is, if we're being honest and open before God, and (2) if we're doing what God has commanded us to do in His Word, and (3) if we're seeking to please God in every way possible, then we can know that we will receive what we ask of God. We can know, as Paul says, that God "is able to (and will) do . . . [what] we ask."

What about our thoughts? Have you ever had the experience of thinking about something you would like to ask God for, but not asking Him because you weren't really confident that the thing was God's will for you? There are things we pray for with great confidence. We know it is God's will for us to conquer sin, to understand His Word, to draw near to Him, and many such things. There are other things we would like to see happen—the type of things God blesses and would please Him—but we don't always pray for them, because we have no real confidence that God wants to do them in our lives or that He wants to do them now. So we hold back, only thinking about them and only occasionally mentioning them as possibilities in our prayers.

The rightness or wrongness of this is difficult to determine. It may be wrong. We should probably be much bolder in what we pray for. But whether that's the case or not, it surely is a comfort to come to a verse like this and read that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think. This assures us that God is able to do those things that we only think about but are afraid to ask for. I can ask for a lot and I can imagine a lot but I can't ask or think beyond the scope of God's ability to answer and provide and that truth is a great comfort to me.

Paul's doxology would have been great if he had stopped at this point, for it would be wonderful to know that God is able to do what we think (or imagine) as well as what we ask for. But at this point we're only halfway up this great ascending staircase. The next thing Paul tells us is that God is able to do all we can ask or think. It's not a question of God being only 50% or even 99% able. God is able to do . . . all that we ask or imagine,

according to His power that is already at work within us.

It's God's ability to do all we can ask or imagine that encourages us to stretch forward spiritually and ask for more. God doesn't take our request and then ask us if we can get by with less, "just for now." "What do you need to hold you over?" Paul says that God isn't like that. He doesn't give us half of what we ask for (if we ask rightly), but all. Indeed, it's His divine ability to give all we ask or imagine that encourages us to come with some pretty big petitions. Think of every good thing you've ever experienced – God can do that. Imagine good things beyond your experience – God can do that. Now, if possible, try to imagine good things that are even beyond your ability to name – God can do that too! In fact, not only can God do that, He can go above and beyond that!

Paul amplifies his doxology to say that God is able to do even more than all we might ask or imagine. Is that not your experience with God? Have you not found it to be true that whatever you ask of God (assuming you ask rightly and not with wrong motives), God always has something bigger and greater for you—something more than you asked for? It's generally something different, something you would not have anticipated.

This is exactly the testimony of many of the great characters of the Bible. God called Abraham when he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans. He told him that He would make him into a great nation, that He would bless him and that He would make him to be a source of blessing to others. We don't know how much of that Abraham understood at first. Eventually he probably came to see that the blessing to others would come as a result of the work of the promised Messiah who would come through him. But maybe at the beginning he just thought about having a large family which would eventually become a nation similar to those around it. Through most of his life his prayers would have focused on his lack of even one son, and he would have repeatedly asked God to give him children.

How did God answer? We know that God did eventually give him a son, born to him and Sarah in their old age. And we know that Abraham had other children after that—[Gen 25:2](#) lists six—and that Abraham's immediate clan grew substantially so that, at the time of the battle against the four kings of the East, Abraham was able to muster 318 trained men of war to pursue them.

But that's only the most obvious of Abraham's initial blessings. In Abraham's case the "much more" would have included the fact that Isaac, the son of promise, became a type of Jesus Christ and was used to teach Abraham about the future work of Christ, and that the nation promised to Abraham was not limited to his natural descendants, the Jews, but included the entire family of God collected from among all nations throughout all human history. These are those who've become as numerous as the stars of the heaven and as the sand...on the seashore" ([Gen 22:17](#)).

Certainly Abraham would testify that God is able to do more than we can ever ask or think.

Moses could say the same thing. God told Moses that he was going to cause Pharaoh to let the people of Israel leave Egypt, where they had been slaves for 400 yrs. Moses didn't want to go. He had tried and failed once before and didn't want to fail again. But when God insisted and when He showed Moses that He would work miracles through him, Moses went.

Moses never could have anticipated the full extent of the plagues that God would bring upon Egypt: turning the water to blood, the frogs, gnats, and flies, the plague on the livestock, the boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and eventually the death of the firstborn. He never could have anticipated the miracles of the Exodus: parting the Red Sea, destruction of Egyptian army, the cloud that accompanied the people during their years of wandering and protected them, the manna, the water from the rock, and other miracles. Moses never could have guessed that God would appear to him again and give him the law or that He'd work through him to give us the first 5 books of the Bible. Moses would've never even dreamed of these things but he now can testify that God is able to do more than we can ask or imagine.

David can testify of the same. God called him from following after the sheep and made him Israel's 1st great king. God protected and blessed David beyond his greatest dreams. At the end of his long and favored life God announced that through his descendant, the Messiah, his house and kingdom would be established forever. David's reply is a declaration of the glory and greatness of this God who is able to do over and above ([2 Sam 7:18-20, 22](#)).

Has this not been your experience also? Life may not have gone exactly as you would have planned it for yourself; you may have had many disappointments. But if you're really trying to obey God and follow after Him, can you not say that God's fulfillment of His promises toward you has been more than you've asked for? If you can't honestly say that it has in some way or another, would you like to see it? It all has to do with how close you're willing to draw near to God. The intimacy of your relationship with God and the subsequent power that's present in that relationship to bring the dual blessings of holiness and spiritual maturity is up to you! God is already there and waiting, He wants to see these blessings produced in your life but you must want to see them too; you must draw near to Him to see them

There's one more step in Paul's doxology in which he says that God is not only able to do more than all we can think but that He is able to do exceedingly abundantly more than we can contemplate. This combination of words here is another of Paul's personally coined words. It occurs only here and in [1 Thess 3:10](#) in all of Greek literature. It can be rendered "immeasurably" (NIV), "infinitely more" (PHILLIPS), "far more abundantly" (RSV), "exceeding abundantly beyond" (NASB), and so on.

How can this be? Even though Abraham, Moses, David, and others may not have anticipated the full measure of what God was going to do in their lives, what they experienced is measurable. It may take time, but it can be spelled out. Was Paul just getting carried away in this passage? Was he exaggerating for effect? Not really. After all, in the previous chapter, in a parallel passage, Paul wrote a similar statement ([2:6-7](#)) which shows that his thought is much the same in our text. Paul's not thinking of earthly blessings here. He's going beyond these to think of the blessings of God's inexhaustible kindness toward us through Christ in eternity. Since eternity is immeasurable, so also are the works that God will do for us in the life to come. In this sense the doxology ends the same way as the prayer ended in [19b](#), with reference to our being filled forever to the measure of all the fullness of God, which is immeasurable.

After a doxology like this we may be so overwhelmed by the promises implied in it that we find ourselves thinking that it cannot possibly apply to us—for others maybe but not for normal people like us. Paul doesn't allow this. He ties this truth down to our own experience by showing that the

power of God which is able to do these things is the same power that's already at work in all of God's children. It's "according to the power that works in us."

In other words, although we haven't realized the full extent of God's working—and never will, precisely because God is infinite in His workings—what we are yet to experience is nevertheless of the same substance as what we have already known, if we're genuine believers in Jesus Christ. Our salvation in Christ is a resurrection from the dead, for we were "dead in . . . trespasses and sins" ([Eph 2:1](#)), and it's precisely that resurrecting power of God that we're to go on experiencing. It's by that power and not by our own that these great promises are to be accomplished.

21 – As Paul concludes his doxology with a declaration of glory to God, it should also serve as a warning to God's people. It's sad to think that even this late in the prayer we may still stumble badly. But that's the case because it's possible to pray the correct way with incorrect motives. It's possible to ask for good things for bad reasons. We may honestly desire the power of God to operate in our lives so that we may become more holy and more spiritually mature and still distort these requests by imaging their fulfillment relates solely to us, as if the universe revolves around our own personal improvement.

The root of this sin is the kind of self-centeredness that desires to usurp God's rightful place in our hearts. How tragic it is when our prayers for good things still leave us thinking of ourselves first; still thinking of God's will only in terms of its immediate effect on ourselves, still longing for blessings simply so that we will be blessed. We may have improved on the quality of what we ask for but do we bring these petitions before God with the ultimate goal that God might be glorified by them being in our lives? A sure sign of spiritual maturity is when God becomes so central to all of our thoughts and pursuits (& prayers) that we can't imagine asking for anything without consciously desiring that the answer would bring glory to God. This is only right and proper for as the power to accomplish this only comes from God so to the glory for its accomplishment must go to God.

This is Paul's vision in these last verses. He prays that there might be glory for God, both in the church – as it progressively obeys God and pleases Him and makes Him the center of its existence, and also in Christ Jesus, as

He is lifted up and exemplified by the church in her every thought, word and deed. When the church understands and walks in God's eternal purpose, God will be glorified and the church will fulfill its important duty of simply glorifying God. 😊