

“Praying for Inner Strength” | Ephesians 3:14-19
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(Discussion questions on page 7)

A few months ago, I was catching up with my dear friend from seminary, John. John has been leading a campus ministry at a university up in Vermont. It's hard work and in that soil growth does not come easy. We found ourselves talking about the pressure we feel at times to be successful in ministry—to see good numbers. And then he shared this story.

His family has a cabin out in Luray, VA, where their neighbor is a cattle farmer. Due to some challenges he needed to transform his property from Agnus beef to a Christmas Tree farm. One November my friend was at the cabin just as this process started. In 5 days, they planted 7,800 Christmas trees on 20 acres of land. My friend said, “It was a sight to behold. If we saw something like this in a church, we’d call it a revival. Something is happening here!”

One year later he returned to the cabin. Do you know what he saw? Every tree had died, save one or two. What happened?

He said “the only way you can plant 7,800 Christmas trees in 5 days is if you hardly plant them at all. A palm shovel deep. Trees planted so shallow that they couldn’t even survive a Virginia winter.”

He told me he went for a walk through the now-desolate Christmas tree farm and God challenged him. God asked him what kind of pastor he wanted to be? One who planted Christmas trees...or juniper trees.

Juniper trees are evergreens that live in the desert. They don’t appear that big—a mature, 50-year-old juniper might only be five feet tall—but that’s because so much of the tree’s mass is hidden underground. Junipers are able to stay green and healthy in the desert because they have an incredibly strong tap root that can almost bore into the rock, digging deep to find the living water down below. The juniper can live in a harsh climate, because they are strong in the places where it matters.

When we come upon Paul in Ephesians 3:14-19, he is praying for just this for the Ephesians—for strength where it matters, for deeper roots, that they, verse 17, would be “rooted and grounded” (3:17). Paul is pleading with God that these Christians not be shallow nor weak—but strong and enduring like the Juniper.

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. (3:14-16)

His prayer is a call to inward maturity, and shows where true strength comes from, and how it is formed. We can see this by following the three features of the prayer: **(1) The Inner Being; (2) The Indwelling Man; (3) The Root and Foundation of Love.**

I. The Inner Being

If you go to a physical therapist, they will help you strengthen your **body**. A dietitian may you strengthen your **immune system**. A counselor works on strengthening your **mind**. What part of the person does Paul see as needing strengthening? We get our answer in verse 16.

Directing his prayer to God the Father (vv 14-15), Paul's first request comes 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** (3:16)

Paul prays for a strengthening not of our body nor mind—but of our inner being. What does this entail?

Paul clarifies what he means in verse 17, with a phrase that elaborates upon verse 16. So, being “strengthened with power through God’s Spirit in your inner being” is further explained in verse 17 when Paul says, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.” So, inner being means the **heart**.

In Scripture, the heart, or inner being, refers to the deepest part of us. It is the place where our motives, passions, thoughts, dispositions emerge and congregate. The heart is our control center, with more influence over who we are than our body or mind. Solomon says the heart’s purposes are “deep waters” (Prov 20:5); Jeremiah cautions “**the heart is deceitful** above all things ... who can know it?” (Jer 17:9). Here, Paul is telling us that this mysterious control center deep within us, is the key to being strong.

Before asking how the heart is strengthened, let’s be sure we appreciate this part of us. How well do you know your heart? What is the condition of it this morning?

The heart and attitude

One way I have found helpful to consider my own heart is through the modern concept of attitude. The term attitude was first used in the 16-17th centuries in art. It referred to the posture of a body in a picture or sculpture. More recently, however, it has come to refer to the disposition of the mind or emotions—our inner posture.

Used now, attitude is a habituated tendency, a default position, to be inclined in a certain way towards God or people or the word. Our attitude is the posture of our heart. It is shaped by fears, resentments, lusts and desires. Our attitude impacts how we come to think about things; it shapes our opinions and actions even before reason does.

And our attitude—our inner being—can be shaped by things that have happened to us long ago, and abiding dispositions we scarcely notice.

Let me give you an example of this. Imagine a person who has been deeply wounded by someone close to them in their past—someone who was supposed to care for them. This wound festers. As they grow older, it also mingles with a growing sense of self-righteousness and pride. Soon, without realizing it, their default heart posture—their *inner being* or *attitude*—is one of *being critical* and *subtly angry*. A sense of guardedness comes off as indifference.

When their feet hit the floor in the morning, their heart is already in a posture of agitation or resentment and they scarcely realize it.

The condition of our hearts, our inner being, dynamically impacts spiritual strength and stability. A sick heart makes for a weak man just as shallow roots make for a vulnerable tree.

That is the first point to take away from Paul's prayer. It is not enough for his readers to be taught doctrine; they must also have an inward transformation—healing and strengthening of their inner being.

This begs a question for us in terms of how we pray. When you pray for a friend, or loved one, or for yourself, are you asking God to do this deep work? Or are you mainly praying for external growth—blessings in work, or school, or relationships.

Aware now of the part of us that must be strengthened, we see as we move into verse 17-19 *how strengthening of the inner person place*. This begins with the indwelling man.

II. The Indwelling Man

As noted, verse 17 elaborates what is happening in verse 16. To be “strengthened with power through God's Spirit in your inner being” entails, verse 17, “Christ dwelling in your hearts through faith.” So, the *Spirit in your inner being* and *Christ dwelling in your heart* capture the same idea:¹ God's presence coming to take residence in the believer.

The first key to strengthening, then, is Christ coming to indwell your heart.

Before we explore how this is, let us clear up a possible cause for confusion. How can Paul pray for a Christian to be indwelt by Christ if the very definition of being a Christian is having Christ in your heart?

Paul writes in Romans 8, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom 8:9). Meaning, they are not a Christian. So, if to be a Christian means you already have the Spirit of Christ in you, then what does it mean for Paul to go on praying for Christians that “Christ may dwell in your hearts”?

He means that Christ would come to claim more and more territory in your heart. Not only to be a visitor, but homeowner—remodeling and redecoration to his own liking.

You can be in an official relationship, or union with someone, and still seek to make it deeper. The husband and wife who have been married one week are officially married—one in God's eyes. But they will spend a lifetime moving deeper into that relationship. So too with our relationship with Christ.

It is as Paul prays for the Galatians,

¹ See the similar pairing for Spirit and Christ indwelling in Romans 8, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Rom 8:9-10).

my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! (Gal 4:19).

Even as we have Christ, we spend our lives being transformed more and more by his indwelling presence.

Imagine that your heart—your inner being—is like a house with many rooms. Your life up to meeting Christ has been spent filling these rooms with things and memories. There are drawers and closets packed with things you have even forgotten about. Part of this house may even feel haunted to you—by the ghosts of many hopes, of many dear memories, many errors, many sorrows and regrets. But this house and these rooms—this is the real *you*.

When you become a Christian, you invite Jesus Christ to come live here. But maybe at first you only give him the keys to a few rooms—the rooms you really want help with. But there are entire wings, floors, basements, that you won't dare let him touch.

Paul is praying that his Christian friends would have faith to invite Jesus into every nook and cranny of their inner being. Their childhood memories; their teenage years; their relationships with parents or siblings. The places shaping their disposition and attitudes and beliefs and postures to the world.

How do we do this?

Indwelling by Faith

I think a clue lies in the phrase “by faith.” Paul says, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

When we think of the phrase “by faith,” we at first may think of our belief in Jesus—meaning, our mental decision to trust that He is the Son of God, did die for our sins, and will return to claim his kingdom. But this is not all the faith means.

Faith also means a daily **trust** and **surrender** to Jesus. Faith means turning over every area of my life—even if little by little—to His care and authority. Faith means trusting him to come into my life more deeply and to have more control over it.

So let us ask ourselves some questions.

First, who or what indwells us? Whose voices do we invite into the different rooms in our house. We can subtly, almost imperceptibly, have Christ in our foyer but an ideology, or false dream, inhabiting the living rooms and dining rooms of our hearts. Through music or movies or literature or others, we can be inviting poison into our hearts. To switch metaphors, the ill-health of the heart is like rot in the trunk of the tree.

Second, what rooms in your heart might Jesus be knocking to enter? Remember the verse from Revelation, where Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

Pray with a Christian friend that these doors would be opened to Christ, the light of Christ would shine into these rooms, that the Jesus himself would come to take more and more residence inside you.

This all takes time. But joyful is the man or woman whose heart looks more and more like a house renovation that Jesus is undertaking.

This is how Paul prays our inner person would be strengthened—by Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith. And adds another way the strengthening happens as he goes on, “being rooted and grounded in love.”

III. Roots and Foundation of Love

Verses 18-19 are about the individual’s experience of the love of God in Christ. And Paul uses some of his most beautiful language to describe this,

being rooted and grounded in love,¹⁸ may you have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Let’s start where Paul concludes, with being “filled with all the fullness of God” (v 19). What I think Paul means here is that we would experience every aspect of God that is humanly possible. What he says about the vastness of Christ’s love leading up to this explains what this infilling entails.

Paul is praying that we would “have strength to comprehend” and “to grasp” “the breadth and length and height and depth—the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (vv 18-19). **The fullness of God is all that God is for us in Jesus Christ.** In Jesus Christ, we experience the depths of God’s love.

The love of Christ is God’s gift of himself: Christ is God in the flesh, God with us; Christ is God becoming our sympathetic high priest, acquainted with our sorrows; Christ is the image within which God made us; Christ is God extending to us the most unusual, peculiar, sweet form of his love. We read of this love in 2:4-5,

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (2:4-5).

God’s great love (2:4) is explained in verse 5 as the “grace by which we have been saved.” Grace is love in its unmerited, unexpected form. And being filled with the fullness of God, then, is the ongoing and increasing experience of God’s radical grace flowing through more and more parts of your heart.

Two things to pay attention to at this point of the prayer:

First, Paul is dealing here with *experiential Christianity*. Grasping this scale of love is something that must happen in the heart, not merely the mind.

Jonathan Edwards was a pastor in the seventeen hundreds and a brilliant thinker and writer. But in his diary, he speaks of times not just of thought, but direct experience of God:

Once as I rode out into the woods for my health in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love and meek, gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ ... with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour;

There is also the story of Blaise Pascal—the French mathematician and genius from a century earlier. Himself a man of faith, when he died at age 39 the following note was found sown into the lining of his jacket, which had been kept there for eight years:

Monday, November 23, 1654, from about 10:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.

FIRE.

*God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
not of the philosophers and of the scholars.*

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

Thy God shall be my God.

*Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God.
He is to be found only by the ways taught in the Gospel.*

Greatness of the human soul.

*Righteous Father, the world hath not known thee,
but I have known thee.*

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

We don't all have experiences like this—at least not this intense. But over time, we can have an increasing experience of the love of God toward us, for us, in us.

Second, Paul's focus on the love of God reminds us that nothing makes a man or woman stronger than being loved by God. As is the case in the human realm, where being loved by our parents is the most important foundation we can have—so too in the spiritual; it is our Father's love, poured out through Jesus Christ, that makes us "rooted and grounded."

To know that God loves you—despite anything you have ever done against him, or done wrong; despite all your secret sins and shameful thoughts. He *loves* you. Nothing makes a man or woman stronger than knowing, and experiencing, this love.

I would like to close with another passage from Paul. Not a prayer. But I believe the biographical note that lies behind the way he is praying for the Ephesians; the way he is praying through them, for us:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20).

This dying with Christ, this being taken over by Christ, this love of Christ, this made the apostle—though not impressive physically, though often beaten down and weak—a tree well planted, “rooted and grounded in love”—a tree that bore its fruit, in season and out. A Juniper tree.

Small Group Questions:

Read Ephesians 3:14-19.

1. Paul is praying for strengthening (v 16). What comes to your mind when you think of something or someone that is “strong”? What comes to mind when you think of someone or something that is weak?
2. Paul says this strengthening happens in the “inner person” (v 16) or “heart” (v 17). How would you describe your inner person or heart right now? What is your default attitude when you head out into the day?
3. In verse 17, Paul prays that Christ would dwell in our hearts. If we imagine our hearts like a house with many rooms, is Christ dwelling in your foyer or throughout the house? What rooms might find Christ standing and knocking to enter? Is there a part of your life or past you would like to prayerfully ask Jesus to come dwell in?
4. Paul closes his prayer by asking that we might grasp and know the extraordinary love of Jesus Christ. How have you experienced God’s love, and not just in theory. What do you think helps or hinders these experiences?
5. Can you recall a time when God’s love made you stronger?
6. How can we help each other experience God’s love?