

Ephesians 3:20-21

Introduction

We've had a number of grand finales so far in the book of Ephesians. We've had a lot of long sentences that build, and build, and build until it feels that our minds and hearts will burst if anything more is said. I think of the string of spiritual blessings in Ephesians 1:3-14 (202 word sentence). I think of Paul's prayer of thanksgiving, and intercession, and praise in Ephesians 1:15-23 (169 word sentence). I think of Paul's description of how God saved us who were dead in trespasses and sins by making us alive together with Christ in Ephesians 2:1-7 (124 word sentence). I think of how Paul celebrates the fact that every Christian is God's workmanship – a new creation in Christ Jesus (2:8-10). I think of Paul's reminder of who we once were as Gentiles, and how we've been brought near in Christ Jesus as a part of His new creation called the Church (2:11-22). I think of Paul's personal celebration of God's grace to him in the midst of his imprisonment – and how since his sufferings mean our glory, we ought never to lose heart or be discouraged (3:1-13; 189 word sentence).

Each one of these sections has built to its own wonderful conclusion. And yet at the same time, each one of these sections has laid a foundation for the one that comes after. So in some sense the first three chapters have been building, and building, and building to a *single* magnificent conclusion. We might already feel like we've reached that conclusion after Paul prayed this one-sentence prayer of 86 words (3:14-19):

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—You have been rooted and grounded in love(!)—that you may prevail to lay hold of, together with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God.”

How could there possibly be anything more for Paul to say? And yet Paul does have one more thing to say. It's only now that Paul finally reaches the grand finale of all grand finales beyond which it's literally not possible to build any higher. This is what the first three chapters have been leading to all along.

Paul has just prayed that we might prevail to lay hold of what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth. We know this is infinite breadth, unbounded length, immeasurable height, and unfathomable depth. These are the “deep things” *of God* – the very “limits” *of the Almighty*.

- ✓ Job 11:7-9 — “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is ***higher than heaven***—what can you do? ***Deeper than Sheol***—what can you know? Its measure is ***longer than the earth*** and ***broader than the sea***.
- ✓ Romans 11:33 — Oh, the ***depth*** of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How ***unsearchable*** are his judgments and how ***inscrutable*** his ways!

Paul has just prayed that by actually laying hold of what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth of the deep things of God, we may know the love of Christ *that surpasses knowledge*. The love of Christ that Paul has already spoken of with phrases like these: “Every spiritual blessing” (1:3), “the glory of His grace” (1:6), “freely bestowed” (1:6), “riches of His grace” (1:7), “lavished upon us” (1:8), “the riches of the glory of His inheritance” (1:18), “rich in mercy” (2:4), “the great love with which He loved us” (2:4), “exceeding riches of His grace” (2:7), “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8).

Paul has just prayed that by laying hold of what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth of the deep things of God, we may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, *so that we may be filled to all the fullness of God* – so that we may be wholly perfected in Christ’s love; so that we may be perfected in the very image of Deity – of God Himself.

I like how Thielman says it:

“When Paul prays for his readers, his requests are not small. The goal of his prayer is that his readers... will eventually comprehend what is humanly impossible to understand and that this understanding will lead them to become all that God has created them to be.”

Some other commentators have this to say:

“[Paul] has just petitioned the Father for spiritual blessings of extraordinary value, including the request that they might be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God... ‘No prayer that has ever been framed has uttered a bolder request.’” (O’Brien; quoting Armitage Robinson)

Can you agree with that statement? Is there no prayer in all the history of the world that has ever uttered a bolder, and even a more impossible request? What is it that Paul prays for here? Not for physical health and wealth (Paul says that “our *outer* man is decaying”; 2 Cor. 4:16), but for the ability in our inner man to comprehend the spiritual life and riches we’ve already been given so that we might know the inexpressible joys of *being* the perfect image and likeness of God. Could anything in all the world be more ludicrously impossible – that *we* should be filled up to all the fullness of God – that *we* should be perfected as the image bearers of Deity? So O’Brien asks: “Has the apostle, then, ‘gone over the top’?” And another commentator asks: “Has Paul sought *too much* from God for his fellow-believers—praying that they may be filled up to the level of the divine fullness?” These are the questions that Paul answers now with resounding triumph in this closing sentence. And yet even here, his answer is bigger and bolder than anything we would have ever expected. Maybe we should have. But we wouldn’t have. Here at the end of chapter three, Paul breaks out into doxology – an ascription of praise, and honor, and glory to God:

I. “Now to Him who is powerful to do far beyond all things...”

Every English translation says, “now to Him who is *able*...”, and of course, that’s accurate. But the Greek verb is *dynamai*, and in just a moment Paul will speak of the *power* (the *dynamis*) that is mightily working in us. The problem with “able” is that we lose the play on words in the Greek (cf. O’Brien; Lincoln). And I think we also lose some of the full strength of the Greek

word. On the other hand, the problem with powerful is that it's an adjective, so we need to think of it here as a verb! "Now to Him who is *powerful* to do *far beyond* all things..." The Greek word here is *hyper*, and it means "more than, to a greater degree than, beyond" (LN), "excelling, surpassing, over and above" (Hoehner). Now to Him who is *powerful* to do *far beyond... what?* – "Far beyond ***all things***." And now suddenly, Paul breaks off into nearly untranslatable Greek (cf. Thielman), and calls up the rarest of Greek words in what is literally a desperate attempt to say something that's impossible to say.

II. "Now to Him who is powerful to do far beyond [*hyper*] all things *hyperekperissou*"

At some point, words fail even the Apostle Paul – and this seems to be one of those places. Lincoln says: "[Paul's] own rhetorical ability is stretched to [the] breaking point as he attempts to express his vision. He gropes for the highest form of comparison available and finds the very rare compound [word], *hyperekperissou*." People even have a hard time finding words to describe this word. Some have called it a "supersuperlative" (Bruce). Remember the word *hyper* that Paul has already used? It means, "excelling, surpassing, over and above, far beyond." Well, now Paul puts *hyper* **together** with *ekperissou*, a word that means "very great, excessive, extremely, surpassing, all the more, much greater." (LN)

How do you translate *hyperekperissou* into English when Paul has already said *hyper*? In fact, now we need to rethink how we've already started to translate if we're really going to convey what Paul is saying. I found six different options from various translations and commentators: "Beyond everything, very far in excess of" (Hoehner); "beyond everything, infinitely more" (Thielman); "infinitely more abundantly" (Lincoln); "super-abundantly above" (Hendriksen); "far more abundantly beyond" (NASB; cf. NRSV; ESV; Bruce); "exceedingly abundantly above" (NKJV). The problem here is to translate in only a few words the full strength and meaning of the Greek when even the Greek was being taxed to its very limits. So I've chosen a combination of the New American Standard and the New King James: "Now to Him who is powerful to do ***exceedingly abundantly far beyond*** all things" – and even then I feel like I haven't done it justice. At the end of the day, every attempt we make is a failure. I wonder if that's how even Paul felt when he spoke out loud these Greek words: *hyper... hyperekperissou!*

III. "Now to him who is powerful to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all things that we ask or think..."

When Paul asked that we might prevail to lay hold of what is the breadth, and length, and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we might be filled up to all the fullness of God Himself, was he asking too much? "*To the contrary,*" he says, "I can *only, always ask far too little*." We can only and always ask of God far *too little*. And that's because we pray to the God who can do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all things that we ask or think. Let's think of it this way: God is powerful to do what we *ask* in prayer. God is powerful to do what we fail to ask, but only *imagine*. God is powerful to do ***all things*** that we might ever *ask* or *imagine*. God is powerful to do ***far beyond*** all things that we might *ask* or *imagine*. God is powerful to do ***abundantly far beyond*** all things that we might *ask* or *imagine*. God is powerful to do ***exceedingly abundantly far beyond*** all things that we might ever *ask* or even ever *imagine*. (cf. Lincoln; Hendriksen)

“[God’s] capacity for giving far exceeds his people’s capacity for asking—or even imagining.” (Bruce)

“Neither the boldest human prayer nor the greatest power of human imagination could circumscribe God’s ability to act.” (Lincoln)

“Whatever expectations we form of Divine blessings, the infinite goodness of God will exceed all our wishes and all our thoughts” (Calvin).

When Charles Hodge finished reflecting on Paul’s prayer in verses 14-19 and then came to this closing doxology, he wrote this:

“Paul’s prayer [has] apparently reached a height beyond which neither faith, nor hope, nor even imagination could go, and yet he is not satisfied. Much still lay in the future. God was able to do not only what he had asked, but infinitely more than Paul knew how either to ask or think. Having exhausted all the forms of prayer, he casts himself on God’s infinitude, in full confidence that God can and will do all that omnipotence itself can effect. His power, not our prayers nor our highest conceptions, is the measure of the apostle’s anticipations and desires.”

What is the measure of your anticipations and desires? Or maybe we need to ask first: **Do** we anticipate? **Do** we desire? Do we long to be filled with all the fullness of God? Do we long to be perfected in His image as we prevail lay hold of the breadth, and length, and height, and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge? But then dare we to anticipate even **more** than this? God is powerful to do not only what we have asked, but infinitely more than we know how either to ask or think. What are the things that we worry about? What are the doubts that we have? Why are we so filled with unbelief? Why are we not daily filled with unspeakable joy?

“Now to him who is powerful [dynamai] to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all things that we ask or think...”

IV. “according to the power [dynamis] that is mightily working [energeo] in us”

Paul reminds us here that he’s not *just* talking about *potential* and *possibilities*. We don’t have to wonder whether the God who is powerful to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all things that we ask or think *will actually do* in us and for us exceedingly abundantly beyond all things that we ask or think! Paul reminds us now that God’s power is **already** mightily working *in* us.

Paul said in verse seven:

“I was made a servant [of the Gospel] according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the mighty working [energeia] of his power [dynamis].”

Paul wrote in chapter one (1:17-21):

“[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him... that you may know... what is the exceeding [*hyperballo*] greatness of His power [*dynamis*] **toward us who believe**, according to the mighty working [*energeia*] of the strength of His might that He mightily worked [*energeo*] in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places far above [*hyperano*] all rule and authority and power [*dynamis*] and dominion.”

The power that God worked in Christ is the same power that God worked in Paul, and that He is **now** working in us whom He has made alive together with Christ, and raised up together with Christ, and seated together with Christ in the heavenly places (2:5-6; cf. 3:16). The God who is **powerful** to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all that we ask or think has already caused this **power** to be **mightily at work** within each and every one of us in whom Christ is even now dwelling through His Spirit (cf. 3:16).

“**Now to him** who is powerful to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all things that we ask or think, according to the power that is mightily working in us...”

V. “to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus”

Paul is summing up in just a few words now all of the themes that have occupied his mind and heart throughout the first three chapters of Ephesians. It’s through the **church** as God’s new creation that His manifold wisdom and power is now being made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (3:10-11; cf. 2:14-15). And yet the church is God’s new creation **in Christ** (2:15), the one whom God has given as head over all things to the church, which is Christ’s body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (1:22). It’s **in the church** that God is working out His plan for the fullness of the times to unite all things **in Christ**, things in heaven and things on earth, **in Him** (1:10).

These are the great themes that have occupied Paul’s mind and heart throughout the first three chapters. And now he gathers all of this up into one resounding exclamation of inexpressible praise and worship: “Now to him who is powerful to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all things that we ask or think, according to the power that is mightily working in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus...”

VI. “unto all the generations of the age of the ages. Amen.”

Let’s start with the very last word. “Amen” is an expression of faith (I agree!/I believe!) and so especially here it’s really an expression of worship. Paul’s last word is his final glad surrender to all that he’s just been writing about. But it’s also an invitation for us to join with him in this same joyful response of worship and praise.

- ✓ Psalm 106:48 (cf. 1 Chron. 16:36) — Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! **And let all the people say**, “Amen!”
- ✓ Nehemiah 8:6 — Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, **and all the people answered**, “Amen, Amen.”

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 1:20 — For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ Jesus]. That is why it is through him that *we utter our Amen* to God for his glory.

So at the end of this message, I invite you all to utter, out loud, your own Amen to God for his glory.

In the Greek, there are many different ways of saying “forever.” Peter says:

- ✓ 1 Peter 1:25 — The word of the Lord endures *unto the age*.

That means “forever.” Paul writes:

- ✓ Romans 11:36 (cf. 16:27; 1:25; 9:5; 2 Cor. 11:31) — To him be glory *unto the ages* [plural]. Amen.

But then very often, Paul waxes even more eloquent:

- ✓ 1 Timothy 1:17 (cf. Jude 25, “unto all the ages”) — Now to the King *of the ages*, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory *unto the ages of the ages*. Amen.

“The ages of the ages” isn’t any longer than “the ages” or even just “the age.” At the end of the day, they all mean the same thing. In the Old Testament, there was another way of expressing the idea of “forever.” It was Nebuchadnezzar who said:

- ✓ Daniel 4:34 (LXX; cf. Psalm 9:6[10:6]; 84:5[85:5]) — His kingdom [is] *from generation to generation*.

And in Isaiah we read:

- ✓ Isaiah 51:8 (LXX; cf. Joel 2:2; 3:20) — My salvation will be *unto generations of generations*.

But it’s only *here* in Ephesians, only here in all of the Scriptures, that all three of these expressions for eternity are combined into one: “*unto all the generations of the age of the ages*.” Hodge translates like this: “unto all the generations of an eternity of ages.”

Why at just this moment does Paul want to express the idea of *forever* as it had never been expressed before, and would never again be expressed in all of Scripture? *Why* is Paul so zealous to say “forever” with as many words as he can possibly find? Because it is only “forever,” it is only “all the generations of an eternity of ages,” that will allow enough “time” for the praising and worshiping of the One who will be showing in all of these “coming ages the exceeding riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7). *Why* is Paul so zealous to say “forever” with as many words as he can possibly find? Because it’s only “forever” that will be long enough for God’s praises to be sung. I could tell that even the driest commentators were moved by these verses, but maybe none more than the one who wrote these words:

“Forever and ever the members of the Father’s Family ascribe praise and honor to their Maker-Redeemer, whose love, supported by the illimitable power which raised Christ from the dead, will lift their hearts to higher and higher plateaus of inexpressible delight and reverent gratitude. Arrived in glory, their minds unobscured by sin, [they] advance from one pinnacle of spiritual discovery to the next, and then to the next, in an ever ascending series. Their wills, then fully delivered from all the enslaving shackles of willfulness, and invigorated with a constantly growing supply of power, find more and more avenues of rewarding expression. In brief, the salvation in store for God’s children resembles the Healing Waters of Ezekiel’s vision (47:1-5), which, though when one enters them they are ankle-deep, soon become knee-deep, then come up to the loins, and are finally impassable except by swimming. And because of this constant progress in bliss, the answering progress in praise to God also never ceases, for

‘When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we’d first begun.’”

(John Newton)

(Hendriksen)

“Now to him who is powerful to do exceedingly abundantly far beyond all things that we ask or think, according to the power that is mightily working in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations of the age of the ages—”

“Amen.”