

To Him Who is Able

Ephesians 3:20-21

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*Now to him who is able to do
far more abundantly than all that we ask or think,
according to the power at work within us,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
– Ephesians 3:20-21, ESV*

Introduction: Praise and Prayer, Prayer and Praise

As we come to end of chapter 3, we're clearly reaching the end of the first half of Ephesians. Paul definitely concludes the first half of the letter and begins the second half with the opening of chapter 4, which we'll look at next week: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Bible scholars have long noted the sharp contrast between the first half of Ephesians and its second half. This contrast has been described in many ways:

- The first half is doctrinal, while the second half is practical.
- The first half is focused on the Gospel itself, while the second half is focused on the application of the Gospel to life.
- The first half is theological, while the second half is more behavioral, more moral and ethical.
- The first half is indicative, while the second half is imperative.

And yet, I think the real character of the first half of the letter is short-changed by these descriptions. The overall movement of the first half of Ephesians is from praise to prayer to

Gospel theology to the theology of the church to prayer and back to praise. In this way, I think the first half of Ephesians is profoundly worshipful, especially in the first chapter, which moves from praise to prayer and then in the second half of chapter 3 which moves us back through prayer to praise.

The rhythm of the first half of Ephesians should be the rhythm of our worship, too. From praise to prayer to doctrine to the application of doctrine to the life of the church and then back through prayer to praise again. Thus, our worship of God begins and ends in doxology, in praise to God.

Look with me at 1:3 again: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”*

And now at 3:20-21: *“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” – Ephesians 3:20-21, ESV*

Blessing God is how this letter opens and glorifying God is how the first half ends.

I. Who is Being Praised

Let's look more closely now at how Paul praises God. The focus here in verses 20-21 is on the all-surpassing power of God, the God “who is able to do” is the God who is glorified “in the church and in Christ Jesus.” The focus is on God's power probably because of the lofty prayer that Paul just offered. He just prayed that we as Christians would “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God.” That's a lofty prayer, the loftiest and most ambitious prayer imaginable.

So how does Paul have any assurance that his prayer will be answered? His assurance is not found in his own ability to pray well or in the Ephesians' ability to live well. No, his confidence rests securely in the God who is able.

A. Him Who is Able to Do Far More Abundantly

And so Paul describes the ability of God with two superlative expressions. Very literally, Paul says, "Now to Him who is able abundantly beyond all to do far more than we ask or think." God is able abundantly beyond all to do far more. One superlative is applied to God's ability and the other to His actual doing. God is surpassing in His ability and surpassing in His action.

The longer I live as a Christian, the more convinced I am that the very heart of our struggle in the Christian life is a struggle to really believe what we say we believe. If we really believed that God was as great, as truly all-powerful and good and wise and holy and loving and faithful as we say we believe, we would have more peace, more joy, more patience and more ready obedience. But we're still tempted to believe that maybe God isn't quite so great, maybe He's not quite so good, maybe He doesn't love us quite so much, maybe sin really isn't that bad, maybe God's holding out on us, maybe we can sneak behind God's back just this one more time, because maybe sin is what we really need after all.

But Paul doesn't want us to hedge our bets or vacillate in our faith. He wants our prayers – and his own prayers, too, for that matter – to be anchored in a strong faith in a powerful God, a God who is able abundantly beyond all to do far more than all that we ask or think.

B. Than All that We Ask or Think

"Far more than all that we ask" – Our prayer lives are so anemic sometimes. We ask weakly for small things, when God would have us ask boldly for large things that accord with His will and then He wants to answer far more than all that we ask.

Of course, God is not encouraging to ask for new Ferraris and a mansion in Malibu like some hucksters on TV might encourage us to do. He's not even encouraging us to pray for a milder version of our best life now, full of self-esteem and success-oriented self-talk. He wants us to be kingdom-minded and to pray bold kingdom-minded prayers – prayers that God might strengthen us in our inner selves so that Christ may dwell more and more in our hearts by faith and that we might have power, together with all the saints, to grasp the height and depth, the length and breadth, to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge and to be filled with the fullness of God.

He wants us to pray for the Gospel to grow and advance and bear fruit in the world among the nations, even as it is now. He wants us to pray that He would make us living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to Him, which is our reasonable worship. He wants us to pray for His kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth – in Forest Hill, in Maryland, in America, among the nations – on the whole earth, even as it is in heaven.

He wants us to pray big, bold, biblical kingdom-minded prayers. And He wants to then show us how He is able far above all to do abundantly above all that we ask or think. You cannot out-pray God and you cannot out-think God, if your thoughts and prayers are kingdom-minded. And if they're not – if they are prayers for creature comforts, for personal advancement and self-glory – then you're not actually praying for more than God wants for you. You're praying for less, far less.

It would seem that Paul would agree with what C.S. Lewis said in "The Weight of Glory":

"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

C. According to the Power at Work within Us

And how does God do abundantly more than all that we ask or think? He does it “according to the Power at work within us.” This is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Of all the things I’ve ever read about the Trinity, one of the most helpful is definitely Chapter 13 of Book I of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where Calvin distinguishes between the persons of the Trinity in this way:

1. "To the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things."
2. "To the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things."
3. "To the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity."

And so God the Father is the fountain and wellspring, the origin and beginning of all divine activity. He is the One who decrees. The Son is the wisdom of God, the LOGOS of God, the order of God. He is the One who accomplishes and fulfills the decrees. The Holy Spirit is the power of God, the One who actually brings the work of God into reality. He is the One who applies the fulfillment of the purposes of God.

So, the Power at work within us is the very Power of God, the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. This is an awesome thought and it should humble and thrill us at the same time. This is why we are often used by God to be the answer to other people’s prayer requests and even to be part of the answer of our own prayer requests. It is not that God is not answering. On the contrary, God chooses to answer through the power of His Holy Spirit working in and through His people. If you are filled with the Power of God, then you are an instrument in the Redeemer’s hands, to be a vessel to apply the work of God.

II. Where and How He is Being Praised

So this is the God who is being praised: he is the One who is able far above all to do abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the Power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. It is to this God that all glory belongs. This God is worthy to be glorified. But where and how is He glorified?

Paul says “*to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus.*” Now Paul is not saying that God is glorified in two different places, in the church and in Christ Jesus, as though these were two different ways God was glorified. No, the church is the place or the sphere where God is glorified, and Jesus is the means, the way, the One through whom God is glorified in the church.

A. In the Church

People who say they love Jesus but can't stand the church are showing that they don't truly understand either Jesus or the church. The church is the Bride of Christ, and if you told me that you like me but can't stand my bride, our friendship would probably come to an abrupt end. The church is the visible kingdom of God on earth. If you told a King that you liked Him okay but you didn't care for His kingdom at all, He would probably gladly see that you are escorted out of His kingdom.

Now I'm not saying that the visible, local church is always what it should be and that every visible, local church is glorifying God in Jesus Christ. Sadly, that's just not true. I wish it were. But the church universal, the world-wide Bride of Christ is the place where God is glorified, and the only connection we can have to that universal church is through a local, visible church.

Those of us who have been blessed to be called to leadership in a local church have a high and holy calling, for we are to be used of God to ensure that the local church we shepherd is a place where God is glorified in Jesus Christ, as a local expression of the kingdom of

God. Of course, we do not do this perfectly, but the power of God, the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, can and does empower us to worship Jesus in Spirit and in truth, to proclaim His Gospel clearly and accurately, to demonstrate His love and to reach out with the light of His truth into a world of darkness all around us.

When the Holy Spirit works within the members of the church of Jesus Christ, the church becomes a place that is not perfect but is real, not sinless but filled with truth lived out in love, not flawless but sincerely God-honoring and Christ-proclaiming.

B. In Christ Jesus

And since it is in Christ Jesus that God is glorified, the measure of how well a church is glorifying God is how much Christ is centrally exalted and proclaimed. Jesus Christ is the One who has accomplished the purposes of God in His birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession and imminent return:

- He is the One who has fulfilled all righteousness by keeping the Law perfectly for us.
- He is the One who offered satisfaction for our sins in His own willing offering of Himself in our place on the cross.
- He is the One who has conquered sin and death and brought eternal life to light in His victorious resurrection on the Third Day.
- He is the One who has ascended into heaven and who sits at the right hand of the Majesty on High, ever living to make intercession for us.
- He is the One who brings His kingdom into our midst through the Holy Spirit as His Gospel is proclaimed, and He is exalted as King of kings and Lord of lords in our worship.
- He is the One who will come again soon to take us to Himself forever and bring a final end to all sin, wickedness, rebellion, death, pain, sorrow, loss, sickness and loneliness in His eternal Kingdom in the new heavens and on the new earth.

It is Jesus who has done, is doing and will do all of these things. We have done nothing but respond to Him, which he has enabled us to do by His grace. Therefore, God is glorified in the church in Christ Jesus and in no other way.

III. How Long He is Praised

So, we have seen the God who is glorified and we have seen where and how He is glorified. We have just one last thing to consider: How long will He be glorified?

We could translate this last section of verse 21 in two different ways. Most literally, Paul writes, “to all the generations of the age of the ages, Amen.” Or even more literally, “to all the generations of the eon of the eons, Amen.”

Now we could understand this expression two ways, one is that it’s just a very flowery way of saying forever, for age after age after age. The King James Version renders it this way, poetically saying, “*unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*”

A. Throughout All Generations

But most modern translations have seen “the generations” as a reference to generations of believers, so the ESV says “*throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*”

This makes good sense, not only of the expression Paul uses here but also of the context, which has Paul thinking of the church, the family of God, and of God as the Father. So we have a reference here to generation-upon-generation within the family of God, the household of faith. Think about how wonderful and encouraging it is to know how enduring the glory of God in the church is:

- God was glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus when the Apostle Paul took the Gospel around the Roman world 2,000 years ago.
- God was glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus when Augustine wrote his *Confessions* and *The City of God* 1,600 years ago.
- God was glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus when Bernard of Clairvaux wrote “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” and “Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee” 900 years ago.
- God was glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses challenging corruption in the church to the door in Wittenberg 500 years ago.
- God was glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus when John Knox cried out to God, “Give me Scotland or I die!” and brought Reformation to Scotland, founding the Presbyterian Church 450 years ago.
- God was glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus when George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards preached the Gospel and a movement of revival and reformation known as The Great Awakening spread across the American colonies 275 years ago.
- God was glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus when J. Gresham Machen and others left Princeton Theological Seminary and founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, to call the church and the seminary back to the Scriptures and to the glory of God in Christ Jesus 87 years ago.

And for as long as the sun and moon endure and the earth continues to turn on its axis, God will be glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus.

B. Forever and Ever

But even after Christ returns and puts an end to this creation and ushers in the new heavens and the new earth, God will glorified in His family in Christ Jesus, forever and ever.

Conclusion: Before We Can Obey

It is fitting that the first half of the letter to the Ephesians should end with this stirring doxology of glory to God. (By the way, doxology literally means, “word of glory” or “glorifying word.”) In a very real sense, we cannot be prepared to turn the page to the second half of this letter until our hearts and minds have followed Paul to these heights. Until we have praised God and prayed to know Him better, until we have understood the Gospel of our salvation that brings us from death to life and brings the church together as the household of God, until we have prayed for the fullness of God and have exalted in the glory of the God who is Able – until we have reached this glorious pinnacle, we will not be ready to hear what Paul has to say next.

So let me encourage you this afternoon, this evening and this week to re-read and pray through these first three chapters of Ephesians before we proceed together next week. I know we have our Bible reading plan in the Gospels, and it is fitting that we will read about the death and resurrection of Jesus in Luke 23-24 and then dive into the marvelous Gospel of John this week, too.

Because before we can obey, we must believe. Before we can respond to the grace of God empowered by the Holy Spirit, we must first receive the grace of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Before we can walk worthy of the calling we have received, we must receive the calling and be overwhelmed with the grace and glory of our calling in Christ Jesus.