

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This past week, we have watched and listened, horrified by the earthquake in Haiti. The loss of human life, the suffering, the sheer scope of the destruction. It's truly a tragedy. We are struck by the raw statistics. Rough estimates say 100,000 -150,000 people lost their lives in that earth quake. That's half the population of Omaha... dead. 1/3 of Haiti's 9,000,000 million people are in need of aid. Just staggering. We are also struck and touched at the individual stories. A Haitian man living in America was interviewed. He tried for two days to contact his mother in Haiti by cell phone, but couldn't get through. Finally, to his amazement, she answered! But she was trapped inside her house with no way to get out. She told her son she was dying. And then the connection was lost. His mother was dug out a day later, but it was too late. She succumbed to her injuries and died. These stories break our hearts.

Our hearts go out to these people who are suffering so greatly. I don't know about you, but this tragedy has really gotten me thinking. And my thoughts keep going back to how fragile and weak we human beings are. For all our accomplishments and all of our wisdom, we are powerless to stop an earthquake... and even unable to predict one with any degree of accuracy. And the response to the earthquake is also painfully limited. Rescuers don't have the equipment they need to free those who are trapped. Relief workers are unable to get food and water to where it needs to be. We human beings are weak and limited.

Other circumstances in life remind us of the same thing. Whether it happens to you or a loved one, these things remind us of our weakness, the frailty of life, and our inability to control what happens around us. Unexpectedly losing your job, being diagnosed with cancer, the sudden heart attack, the sudden huge expense that wipes out savings or puts us in debt, a sudden argument or disagreement with someone close to us that does huge damage to a previously good relationship.

Sometimes as we look at the human condition... sometimes our own condition, a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness might come over us. What can give us courage and strength at time like that? What can we say to someone who is overwhelmed? What do we need to hear when we are overwhelmed? Our message from God today says, "**Be strong with God's power.**"

Have you ever heard or said, "I'll pray for you." In the lesson before us today, we hear Paul say those very words. But while we tend to keep it pretty generic – we don't often say *what* we will pray for others – the apostle Paul gets very specific about what he's praying for. Listen again to his words in Ephesians 3:14-21. And ask yourself. Would it be possible to pray this prayer for the people in Haiti? Can you pray this prayer for a friend or loved one who suffering? Is this a prayer you could pray, applying it to yourself when you are feeling weak, vulnerable or are suffering? Listen:

14 I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

The Christians in Ephesus were very dear to Paul. Although Paul rarely stayed long at any one place in his missionary travels, Paul **did** stay at Ephesus for about three years. In that time, he made many close friends. Paul had also suffered for the sake of the gospel while in Ephesus. Now he writes to them and informs them of what he is praying to God for on their behalf. And, he tells them what he is praying for them.

Paul wrote: "I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name." We can use two words to describe Paul's prayer – **bold** and **humble**. Paul bended his knee before God... Paul knew his place. He was a mortal man coming to the almighty God. He was humble. Yet Paul was also very bold in his request. As we see from the content of his prayer, he asks God for many great things! He could be bold because he was speaking to his **Father**. In fact, the very meaning of the word "father" is derived from God! Every good characteristic which defines a father is epitomized in our heavenly Father. Paul addressed God as "Father" because Jesus Christ had taken away all of Paul's sins. Paul knew that he was God's own dear child. Paul knew God would listen to his every word which he spoke on behalf of the Ephesians. Thank God that because of his amazing grace, he also permits us to approach him just as freely!

Paul then reveals the content of his prayer for the Ephesians. He asks God to give the Ephesians a gift. And not just a small gift! With great courage, Paul asks God to give a gift "out of his (God's) glorious riches". God's glory has no limits. It is rich beyond imagination. Paul asks for a gift out of God's glorious riches. He's asking God to give the Ephesians the very best! Now... what kind of gift does Paul ask for? His request is three-fold.

First Paul says, " he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being ". Think of all of the worldly, physical blessings Paul could have asked God to give the Ephesians. Yet Paul asks for something totally different. He asks God to strengthen them by his spirit in their *inner man*. From Paul's other writings, we know that the inner man is the believing nature created in us by God when he called us to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. In us there are two natures... an old sinful nature, and this new creation which is holy like God. Paul's prayer is that the old sinful nature might be conquered. And that the new man would be strengthened mightily. This doesn't happen by the will power of man, but by the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit works on the inner man with the gospel, something wonderful happens in increasing measure. There is growth in faith, and in holy living. This is Paul's first wish for the Ephesians.

Paul's second wish is this: "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." What does it mean to have Christ dwell in our hearts? It means Christ lives and rules in us by faith. When we pray "Your Kingdom come" in the Lord's prayer, we are asking for God to dwell and rule in our hearts through faith. That's where he establishes his kingdom... in the hearts of people. It means being totally centered on Christ. It means trusting in Christ for forgiveness... rejoicing in Christ in all circumstances... being motivated by Christ to show love in all we think, say or do. When Christ dwells in our hearts by faith, he is the center of our being and the focus of our lives. Paul wishes this wonderful blessing for the Ephesians.

And his third prayer and wish for the Ephesians is contained in the phrase "I pray that you... may be... rooted and established in love". Paul doesn't specify if he's talking about

the love of the Ephesian Christians, or the love of Christ. But since in these verses he's been talking all about Christ, we can assume his prayer is that they be firmly rooted and founded in Christ's love. These are vivid pictures in those two words! Think of a tree with deep roots. Such a tree does not fall over in a bad storm. A faith with roots deep in Christ's love is also strong and will not fall. A faith whose foundation is on Christ's love is also one that will not fall even in life's greatest trials.

Dear Christians, my prayer for you today as you may be feeling like a weak, vulnerable human being, is the same prayer Paul had for the Ephesians. I come before our Heavenly Father to ask him to do something great for you. May God strengthen your inner man that you may grow in faith and in your lives of service to God. May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith. May you continue to be rooted and founded in Christ's love. And may these things happen more and more as you regularly gather together here around word and sacrament. Here you are encouraged and you correct one another in God's truth. Here you will unite your hearts and voices in praise to God.

I pray these things so that some very important results are achieved. As Paul says, that you "may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ," When talking about the love of Christ, Paul has trouble finding human words to describe it. It's so big and complex and awesome, you can spend a life time exploring it's width, length, depth and height. In his prayer, Paul even asks God for the impossible... that the Ephesians can comprehend that which is beyond comprehension... the love of Christ. Attempting to understand the love of Christ isn't an individual endeavor. Paul says we grow in this understanding "with all the saints." We **work together** in our goal of discovering the greatness of Christ's love!

Let's pause for a moment and think about that love which is beyond comprehension. We so often speak of Christ's love for us, that we are in danger of not even **attempting** to comprehend it. This would be an unfortunate mistake, for understanding Christ's love for us is the very essence of faith, love, hope and joy. It's the essence of the Christian religion.

To begin to comprehend Christ's love, we must first comprehend how **unlovable** we are. Think about this question: Are we in any way deserving of Christ's love? Our first reaction is to think, "Well, maybe a little bit." We naturally underestimate the awfulness of sin. We think our sins aren't so bad. We tend to think that our minor offenses are easily forgiven. Friends... the Bible tells us that this is not true! The reality is that **every** sin is an offense to God. Even by committing a little sin, we say to God, "I choose **my** way, not **your** way! I believe that I am right in this action, and you, God, are wrong. Your will is not supreme! I am the master of my own destiny and I will do as I see fit." Sin is lawlessness and rebellion. Sin is the opposite of obedience. It demonstrates the opposite of love. Sin is opposition to almighty God. God hates sin... **all** sin. He is disgusted by it, and will not share eternal life with anyone who is dirtied by sin.

So, how did God respond to our sins? In righteous justice, God could have sent us to hell as soon as we were born. Already at birth we deserved separation from him. But God is love. God's love is wider and longer and deeper and higher than we can even imagine. Instead of punishing us sinners, he found a way to rescue us. He sent his dearly loved Son, Jesus Christ, into this world. He became flesh and lived among us. He experienced all the hardships of life, yet he never sinned. And in an act of love which is beyond our understanding, Jesus suffered terribly, and gave up his life for his enemies.

And the final result we shoot for? As Paul writes, “that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” In Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians he asks God for the biggest gift imaginable... that the Ephesians would be completely filled with God! He doesn’t want them to have a spark of God in them. He doesn’t even want them to simply experience God’s goodness. His prayer for them is that the entire fullness of God would fill them.

Now, doesn’t this speak to the weakness and vulnerability we sometimes feel? Doesn’t this give us words to say and something to pray for, for the people in Haiti, and for friends and loved ones who suffer or struggle? Yes, we are weak. We need to be made strong. How? It’s through Christ Jesus. The more we know his love, the stronger our faith becomes, the more he lives in side us, the more we are filled with the fullness of God, and the more his almighty, unlimited power works in us and through us. Strength and power are not found within ourselves and our personal reserves of strength. No, strength and power are found in God alone, and that power is yours by faith.

When Paul considers these great gifts of God and the incomprehensible love of Christ, he is moved to praise God. The closing verses of our text read: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen”

Paul had asked some amazing things of God in his prayer for the Ephesians. Perhaps the Ephesians may have begun to wonder... would God grant his prayer? Would God be **able** to do all Paul asked? Indeed He can and He does! Paul’s prayer is not simply directed “to Him who does what we ask.” Rather, Paul says, “**To Him who does immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.**” Not only can God do all the things Paul asked of him, but he can do far, far more... even more than we can imagine!

To such an all powerful God with incomprehensible love for us, we give endless praise and glory. God does receive “glory in the church and in Christ Jesus.” Both in the church which is the object of God’s grace, and in Christ Jesus who is the agent who established God’s grace, God is glorified. God be glorified through out all generations forever and ever! May God always be glorified in this church too.

Touched by the human suffering and weakness we see in Haiti, in the lives of others, and in our own lives, we prayer. But pray for what? Pray for strength which can be found in only one place: in God through Jesus Christ. Pray that all may know Christ’s immeasurable love, and know it better and better. Pray that all might find a Christian church where this love can be explored every more deeply. Pray that we all might be filled to the measure of the all the fullness of God. He is able to do immeasurable more than all we ask or even imagine. So to him be glory “**throughout all generations, forever and ever!**” Amen.