

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we are going to learn something from Scripture that is immensely practical. So to see if it's going to apply to you, let me ask a simple question: Do you ever get discouraged? I'm just asking in general. Maybe your discouragement comes from your career not being on the path you anticipated. ...struggling in school. ...someone you love is going through a very challenging time, and it breaks your heart to see them go through it. ...a series of setbacks, any one of which wouldn't be disheartening, but now you've had three, four or five things go wrong and it's wearing you down ...a relationship in your life is troubled, or broken, or filled with conflict.

We can get discouraged from any number of things. So again, do you ever get discouraged? Go ahead and raise your hands. Look around. Because I want you to see that you're not alone. If you do get discouraged, you'll learn something important today. If you don't, listen anyway and you'll be able to encourage someone who does.

Today we're going to listen to a prayer the apostle Paul prayed for a group of believers that lived in a city called Ephesus. He prayed to the heavenly Father for them because they too were discouraged. One reason for their discouragement is revealed in Ephesians 3:13: "**I ask you not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you.**" These believers came to know the truth of God and about his love and amazing rescue through Christ Jesus. And the way they came to know it was through the apostle Paul. He was like a spiritual father for them. He was the one who first brought them the amazing Good News of forgiveness and life through Jesus. They loved Paul deeply. But now Paul was in prison. He was bound in chains because of his preaching of Christ. This really had them down. They were losing heart.

So Paul said a prayer for them, and in that prayer, he reveals how they (and you too) can have strength and not be discouraged. So here is the prayer:

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

Pause briefly here and see where Paul directs our attention from the very start. If you will have courage and strength, you will first have to turn your attention to God. Paul does not offer to give it to them. He says he must kneel before the Father and ask him. And he is the powerful Father – every family current and past gets its name from him. He is the source of all human beings. So if God has a fix for our discouragement, the fix is real and it will absolutely work.

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.

There is so much here and I don't want you to miss it. What does Paul pray for them? First, note what he doesn't pray for! He doesn't pray for a change in their external circumstances! He doesn't pray that he might get out of prison so they would no longer be discouraged. That seems like it would be the most obvious solution to their discouragement. But that's not what he prays for. He instead prays that they may have strength in their inner being.

Is that how you usually pray? We don't, do we? Don't we usually pray for a change in the external circumstances? If your career is on the wrong path, don't you pray that you might find a new job or get the promotion? ...struggling in school – don't you pray that you get better grades? ...someone you love is going through a very challenging time, and it breaks your heart

to see them go through it – don't you pray that the challenging time be over? ...a series of setbacks, any one of which wouldn't be disheartening, but now you've had three, four or five things go wrong and it's wearing you down – don't you pray that your string of bad luck would end? ...a relationship in your life is troubled, or broken, or filled with conflict – don't you pray the relationship would be fixed?

But Paul does not pray at all about the external circumstances that were the source of their discouragement. Instead goes to the root of the matter – a lack of inner strength. If only the Ephesian Christians had more inner strength, they would be able to have peace, joy, calm and confidence no matter what kind of external circumstances came along. Finally, Jesus promised us that the external problems would always be there. "In this world there WILL be trouble" Jesus promised! But he also says, "Take heart, for I have overcome the world."

So I hate to break it to you, but the external troubling circumstances are not going to go away, at least not all of them and not for good... even if you pray for it... because Jesus said we will have trouble. I'm not saying it's a sin to pray for these things. But wouldn't a better prayer be for strength that would carry you through the current and all future troubling circumstances?

So where does the strength come from? Modern psychology says you need to look inside yourself, have faith in yourself, be confident in yourself. The world teaches you have an inherent inner strength you can draw from. But you know from experience this isn't true! Sooner or later we all hit a point where we tap out. The strength is gone. There are no more reserves within. So Paul's prayer is that our strength be given to us by God himself. The strength he gives pours out of his glorious and unending riches.

And the strength he gives is given to you on the inside so you have strength to deal with whatever is on the outside. "Wait, I thought you just said we aren't to look to our own inner strength!" Correct. But God himself can strengthen your inner being. 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.** Your inner being isn't strengthened by your own reserves, it's strengthened by the Father through the Spirit with Christ who dwells in your heart through faith.

That's worth repeating: Your inner being is strengthened by the Father through the Spirit with Christ who dwells in your heart through faith.

You don't have an inherent inner strength. The inner strength you need must grow and be developed by God himself as he works in you. And the way God works in you is through his Word, through baptism and through the Lord's Supper. These are the ways he pours his grace into your heart and strengthens your inner being. If you are only getting a brush of God's grace once a week for an hour on Sunday morning, how is your inner being going to strengthen and grow? We need so much more!

We need to be intentional in our plan to strengthen our inner being. I don't know about you, but for me, if something is going to happen, it absolutely has to be on my calendar. If you say, Pastor, we should talk some time. It will not happen if it's not on my calendar. And it has nothing to do with how much I like you... I'm just the kind of person that has to have it on the calendar to make it happen. So if strengthening our inner being is vitally important... and it is... doesn't it deserve a place on our calendars? What days and what times of day will you spend in the Word and prayer? Put it on the calendar. When are you going to spend time with fellow believers to talk about your challenges and needs, and to encourage each other? Put it on the calendar. When are you going to exercise your faith with works of service? Plan it and put it on

the calendar. If you are too busy to attend to your inner life, then you have no business complaining about your stress, discouragement or anxiety. I say this because I love you.

All of this to say that inner strength develops as we know and grow in the love the Christ. Know and grow. Know Christ's love. Grow in Christ's love. Listen:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, 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.

Pull the sentence apart. "**I pray that you may have power to grasp and know.**" The power to grasp and know comes from being **rooted and established in love** – God's love in Christ Jesus. If you drift from Christ, forgetting his Word and promises, you will lose your power to grasp and know. And what does he want you to grasp and know? The **love of Christ**. And what in particular do you need to grasp about the love of Christ? **How wide and long and high and deep** it is. What do you need to know? **This love that surpasses knowledge**. Paul wants you to know that which cannot be fully known: Christ's love. And what is the result? You will be **filled to the measure of all the fullness of God**. Can you image? What if your inner being was completely filled up with all the fullness of God? How often do you think you'd get discouraged if you were filled to the measure of all the fullness of God? How much anxiety would you have? How much sadness would you carry?

Oh, and he doesn't want you to make this journey into the depths of Christ's love. He wants you to make this journey **together with all the saints**.

The key to having this fullness of God in your inner being is knowing the love of Christ... its width and length and height and depth. Knowing it fully in every dimension! And to do that, all we need to regularly return to the cross of Christ to consider is love that is beyond understanding. Get away from the outward circumstances, and ponder his love. It's not enough to pick up our Bibles and plow through 3 or 4 chapters. We need to contemplate, meditate and consider the love of Christ. We need quiet time with the Lord to do this.

How wide is Christ's love? Revelation 5. Redeemed by his blood people of every tribe, language, people and nation. Isn't his love wide? Doesn't matter your race, gender, economic status, social status. His love is so wide it is for *all*.

How long is Christ's love? Hebrews: I will never leave you or forsake you. Christ will never let go of you. There is nothing you can do that will make God love you any less – his love is longer than that. There's nothing you can do to make him love you anymore... his love is longer than that. You can't run so far that eventually Christ's love runs out. It's longer than that!

How deep is Christ's love? Look how far Christ descended to get us. Philippians 2: Though equal with God, did not insist on continuing as equal, but made himself nothing, taking on our very nature to be our substitute and Savior. Though equal, he humbled himself for us! This is the very opposite of what Satan did... what Adam did. Though not equal with God, he exalted himself and tried to make himself equal with God. What depth Christ sunk to on our behalf to be born a human. What even deeper depths to suffer and die as a common criminal on a cross at the hands of the very people he created. All of this to redeem us and restore us to the Father. Us! As disobedient as we are! Contemplate his deep love.

How high is Christ's love? It's where he wants to take us. He is going to take us to himself in heavenly glory. We can't even imagine. But he wants us to be where he is. If you're in love, you can't truly enjoy it if your beloved is not with you. Watching a movie, at a party,

enjoying a painting... it's not the same without her. This is what Christ thinks of you. He wants you to be where he is. He wants you to have the glory he has. He will only be satisfied when you are with him.

Are you discouraged? The width of Christ's love means his love includes you. The length of his love means you can't outrun him... or even out-sin his grace. The depth of his love means he gave it all for you. The height of his love means he will make you as he is and bring you where he is.

Just thinking about these things moved Paul to break out in a word of praise to 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.

Friends, you can't handle your external circumstances yourself. They're bigger than you are. You can't control what happens in your life. And I assure you troubling times will come on you. The end to troubling times will come in heaven, but not before. But these troubling times will not overwhelm you or discourage you when you have strength in your inner being – strength given by God himself through the Holy Spirit as Christ himself resides in your heart by faith.

Let me give you something portable to take home. We can boil it all down to this: **Know. Grow. Go.** Know Jesus' love and grow in that knowledge. Know it from his word and sacraments and hear it from God's people. Know and grow in Christ's love. Then go. Go and live your life in a broken, sinful world. Go with confidence knowing wherever you are, Christ and his love are inside of you. Go and know that God cannot simply do what you ask. His power isn't even limited by what you imagine. He can do immeasurably more in line with the power that is at work within you. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen!