

Exegesis of Ephesians 3:14-19

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Finished Translation of Ephesians 3:14-19

14 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father,¹

15 Out from whom every family in the heavens and on earth is named,

16 That according to the riches of his glory he might grant you to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit

17 in order that Christ may make home in your hearts through faith, you being rooted and grounded in love,

18 in order that you might be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth of the love of Christ²

19 and to know this love³ that surpasses knowledge, in order that you might be filled up⁴ to all the fullness of God.

Introduction and Difficulties of Passage

Ephesians 3:14-21 is the second of two prayers recorded in the epistle to the Ephesians by the author of this letter. Spoken in lofty language, the author makes bold requests from the Father concerning the operation of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the believers' lives. At the same time it describes how the process of the Christian life should operate as the believers mature and grow in Christ. Christ gaining a home within them closely corresponds to their comprehending the love that Christ has for them and subsequently overflows between the members of his body. The culmination of this process, as seen in this intercessory prayer-report, is that the church is filled up to the fullness of God to such an extent that it expresses God's very glory.

¹ Some manuscripts suggest the addition of the phrase “τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ”, “of our Lord Jesus Christ” after the word “Father” in verse 14. However, the older first order manuscripts do not have this addition. It was probably an addition from the same phrase in texts such as Ephesians 1:3. There is no explanation as to why a scribe would have omitted this additional phrase if it had been original, thus the shortest and oldest reading (found in the text) is to be preferred.

² The phrase ‘the love of Christ’ does not occur until verse 19 but is included here to make clear what the ‘dimensions’ are describing. See explanation in the body of the paper as to why this is the correct understanding.

³ The phrase ‘the love of Christ’ actually occurs here, but is instead put in verse 18 with a demonstrative pronoun pointing back to that love here. See footnote 2 for explanation.

⁴ A variant reading is found in verse 19, where some manuscripts read “πληρωθῆ”, (omitting -τε εἰς) thus causing this clause to mean, “that all the fullness of God might be filled up”, rather than what is included in the text which means, “that you might be filled up to all the fullness of God”. Even though this shorter variation is found in a few of the older texts, the longer reading (as found in the text) is well supported by both the Alexandrian and Western text types. The longer reading is the most difficult and thus probably represents the original text; the shorter text was presumably trying to avoid a reading that could prove difficult theologically, namely that the fullness of God could be contained in humans.

Structurally there are some decisions that need to be made when translating this passage. It is unclear how the content of this prayer is supposed to be understood as far as its structure is concerned. It is evident that verses 14-15 introduce the fact that the author is making a prayer and that verses 16-19 form the content of that prayer. What is not obvious is whether the prayer includes three different requests (each initiated by a Greek “*ἵνα* clause”) or whether the author is only making one request, the purpose and outcome of which proceed in the subsequent clauses. Is the author praying (1) that the Father “might grant you to be strengthened in your inner being” (v 16), (2) that “you might be able to comprehend ... and to know” the dimensions of the love of Christ (vv 18-19a), and (3) that “you might be filled up to all the fullness of God” (v 19b)? Or is the author only asking the Father that the believers be strengthened in their inner being (v 16), with the result that Christ makes home in their hearts, that they are strengthened to know the love of Christ, for the ultimate purpose that they are filled up to the fullness of God? There are groups of commentators that argue both sides of this issue. Although in the end it may make no functional difference to the ultimate meaning of the passage, it does affect what can be seen as the emphasis of the prayer and how the parts of the prayer are connected or dependent on one another.

There is also some confusion in verse 15 as to what is meant by the Greek phrase “*πάντα πατριά*” contained in the relative clause, which modifies ‘Father’ in verse 14. It could legitimately be translated “whole family” or “every family”. If it were understood as referring to “every family in heaven and on earth” then it would be addressing the prayer to God as the Father of all creation rather than as merely redeemer of the Christian family.⁵ However, if it

⁵ Cf. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Vol. 42 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 202-203; and cf. PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians*, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Victor Paul Furnish (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 89.

were seen as “the whole family in heaven and on earth” then it would represent God as the Father in a soteriological sense, as savior of his redeemed family, not as the father of all creation.⁶ Because the content of the prayer is the focus of this passage, understanding exactly what is meant by ‘Father’ or ‘family’ may not have a profound impact on the meaning and message of the prayer.

The other difficulty in this passage is regarding the ‘dimensions’ that are described in verse 18. The verse mentions the ‘breadth and length and height and depth’, but does not immediately state the object to which these dimensions refer. Regardless of the various theories that have been brought forth as to what these dimensions refer, the Greek conjunction ‘τε’ in verse 19 makes clear that it is the dimensions of the ‘love of Christ’ which are in view.

Historical Situation and Literary Context

The letter of Ephesians was most likely written in the later half of the first century C.E., at a time when the Christian Church was starting to emerge as a social force in the Greco-Roman world. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to remind the believers about the significance of the salvation that God had provided them in Christ. Furthermore the letter served to enlighten them concerning the importance of the church in God’s administration (3:8). The church must keep the unity between all its constituents, Jew and Gentile, in order for there to be a proper testimony of God’s saving work in Christ. The second half of the letter addresses how Christians should live, both in their private lives and in relationship with others, since in that day, as in ours, human society and unseen spiritual forces (3:10) can only see God’s glory through proper human living.

The book of Ephesians fits the form of an ancient letter like many others found in the New Testament. It opens by mentioning the sender, the apostle Paul, and the intended recipients,

⁶ Cf. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 490; and cf. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Ephesians*, Volume of *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 168.

the saints in Ephesus (1:1). Like many other of Paul's letters, this greeting is expanded to include references to Paul's apostolic authority (cf. 1 Cor 1:1, Col 1:1). Ancient Greek letters normally followed the greeting with "a brief thanksgiving or a wish for the health of the recipients."⁷ Paul's letters usually expanded this into a special thanksgiving for the faith of the believers. In Ephesians this thanksgiving is expanded into a lengthy blessing and a prayer-report on behalf of the recipients.

In contrast to other Pauline letters, there appears to be no immediate problem or critical situation needing to be addressed in Ephesus. In fact, there are a number of elements found in this letter that have caused some scholars to question whether or not it was Paul himself who wrote the letter or whether it was written by one of his disciples after his death. Although the letter states that it was written by Paul (1:1), it also says that the author has "heard" of the believer's faith and love (1:15). Since Paul had spent considerable time in Ephesus (Acts 19:1,10), some feel that he could not have written this statement. However, the letter was most likely written late in Paul's life while he was in prison (6:20), some years after he had been there. Thus indeed he had continued to hear of their faith and love. Some of the differences can also be explained by the fact that this was probably an encyclical letter written by Paul (or a close associate) near the end of his life, addressed to a number of different churches in Asia Minor. It is beyond the scope of this essay to thoroughly explore the question of Pauline authorship, as it does not make a profound impact on the meaning of the passage in question.

An outline of Ephesians reveals two distinct sections of the letter. The first half of the letter, through chapter 3, forms an extended blessing and reminder to the believers of all that God had done on their behalf to accomplish salvation for them in Christ. This section includes two different prayers that function both as prayers to God and reports to the believers (1:15-23; 3:14-

⁷ PHEME PERKINS, 36.

21). This first half of the letter also spends time to remind the Gentile believers of God's work of salvation for them (2:1-10), of their unity with the Jewish believers (2:11-22), and the importance that this one church has in revealing God's purpose to the universe (3:8-12). After being encouraged and reminded of their blessed position in Christ, the second half of the letter, starting from chapter 4, contains mostly parenthetic material, exhorting the believers how they should live as Christians. It is interesting to note that whereas there is almost no imperative tense verbs used in the first half of the letter, the second half is filled with verbal commands, instructing the believers how to live and to "walk worthy" of their calling (4:1).

Ephesians 3:14-21 comprises the second prayer-report in the letter and acts as the climax of the blessing section before the author moves on to exhorting the believers how to live. It culminates in asking that the believers would be strengthened to the point of having a complete knowledge of the love of Christ and experience the fullness of God (vv 18-19). This prayer assumes a confident stance and portrays the bold expectancy of an answer since the author prays to the one who is able to do beyond what they ask or even think (v 20). This boldness also comes from knowing that its answer will bring glory to God, both in the church and in Christ Jesus (v 21). The doxology (vv 20-21) would require further explanation and is thus outside the scope of this paper, which only deals with the contents of the prayer-report and its opening remarks.

The prayer itself is most closely related to the material in the end of chapter 2. In 3:1 the author starts with the words, "Τούτου χάριν", "For this reason", and prepares to launch into a prayer for the Gentiles based on the facts that have just been presented in chapter 2, namely that the one church Christ created, including both Jew and Gentile, must further be built together and grow into the proper dwelling place of God (2:14-22). However, Paul first presents some parenthetical material concerning his care for the Gentiles. He expounds on his important role in

bringing the gospel to them, and thus highlights their indebtedness to him. With that freshly in mind, he returns to the prayer he intended to start in 3:1, and prays for what is needed in order for this mature church to be a proper testimony of God on the earth.

The Meaning of Ephesians 3:14-19

An Overview of the Passage

Ephesians 3:14-21 comprises the second prayer-report in the letter. Verses 14-15 provide the introduction to the prayer, verses 16-19 relate the content of the prayer, and verses 20-21 comprise a doxology that culminates the prayer and thus concludes the first half of the letter. The overall content of the prayer is that the believers would be inwardly strengthened by the Holy Spirit so that Christ would settle down in their hearts and permeate their whole being. Christ thus making home in the believers' hearts would enable them to be firmly grounded in his love and even to know that love which is beyond human knowledge. They would not only know Christ's great love for them as individuals, but would know it in the context of a church life. This knowing the love of Christ with all the saints would thus enable them to be filled up to God's full measure and enable the church to be the testimony of God, a conduit that gives him glory.

Details of the Prayer – The Opening (vv 14-15)

It was rather customary in the New Testament to stand while one prayed (cf. Mark 11:25, Luke 18:11). Kneeling in prayer was usually done in the Bible when there was deep concern or emotion involved (cf. 2 Chron 6:13; Ezra 9:5; Luke 22:41; Acts 9:40). Paul's kneeling posture in verse 14 departs from the casual standing position. This suggests both a deep attitude of reverence to God the Father and a real concern for the welfare of those for whom he fervently prays.

As mentioned above, the relative clause in verse 15 is somewhat ambiguous. It describes in what sense the author is using the word 'father' (v 14). The phrase “*πάσα πατριά*” can be

translated as “every family” or “the whole family”. The father is surely the father of the whole family of those who have a part in Christ’s salvation. The only other time the word ‘father’ is used in Ephesians referring to God is in the preceding section (2:18) and refers to God as the father of all saved people. Furthermore, because the prayer is mainly concerned with believers being built up in love with one another, this would also cause one to understand the ‘father’ as the ‘father of the whole saved family of Christians’. One would then understand the phrase ‘in the heavens and on earth’ as believers who have died and are now with the Lord in heaven and those who are still alive on the earth.

However, in the verses just preceding this section the author talks about the beginning of the ages and God’s creation (3:9) and about God’s eternal purpose being made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (3:10). This thus sets the context for God being father not only of those who are his children by salvation, but as father over all of creation. Those ‘in the heavens’ could thus be understood as families of angelic powers. Due to this proximity of the universal description of God, my translation reflects this understanding since it would encompass God as being both the father of all creation and the father of all those who are saved. The fact that the author leaves this ambiguous and calls him father of those both ‘in the heavens and on earth’ would cause the readers to realize that his fatherhood and lordship would encompass something much bigger than themselves, including the entire universe.

Details of the Prayer – Its Content (vv 16-19)

Strengthened in the Inner Being (v 16)

The specific request of the prayer, indicated by the Greek “*ἵνα* clause” in verse 16, is that God the Father would grant the believers to be strengthened in their inner being by the Holy Spirit. The ‘inner being’ mentioned here represents the center of a person’s being, with their basic intelligence and will, where the Spirit does his renewing work (Eph 4:23; Rom 12:2). It

refers to the part of a person that has been made spiritually alive as mentioned in Ephesians 2:5. This is in contrast to a person's 'outer being' (2 Cor 4:16), such as their physical body and sinful flesh (Rom 7:22), which is in a state of constant decay.

The writer asks that the Holy Spirit would strengthen them with power. It is interesting to note that in verses 16 and 18 the author uses forms of three of the same words used for power in chapter one. In 1:19 the author refers to God as having attributes of power, might, and strength. Here these same Greek words are spoken of as a gift given to the believers. (Cf. 3:16 "κραταιωθῆναι/strengthened", "δυνάμει/with power", and v 18 "ἐξισχύσητε/be able").

Christ Making Home in Their Hearts (v 17)

Being strengthened in their inner being is closely related to the next clause which talks about Christ making home in their hearts (v 17). It seems that the request to strengthen the believers in their inner being is for the intended result that Christ would make home in the their hearts. "The Spirit's strengthening us in the inner man produces the result that Christ dwells in our hearts".⁸ The verb translated 'make home' ("κατοικῆσαι") means for someone to settle down and dwell somewhere long-term.⁹ Christ settling down in the believers' hearts is different than the accomplished fact of the believers being made alive with Christ (Eph 2:5). It represents a further process of experientially being conformed to Christ. "Christ takes possession of us in ever greater degree".¹⁰ Some have suggested that these two clauses are synonymous, simply two different ways of talking about the same process of the believer being strengthened. Although grammatically both 'strengthen' ("κραταιωθῆναι") and 'make home' ("κατοικῆσαι") are two infinitives that follow the verb 'give' ("δῶ"), the second infinitive could just as easily represent a

⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, 494.

⁹ Frederick William Danker, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed, s.v. "κατοικέω" (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, 494.

purpose clause and does not necessarily function parallel to the first one. It does not appear that the infinitive, ‘to make home’, is supposed to function as an equivalent phrase ‘to be strengthened’. The author is asking firstly that God would cause the believers to be strengthened by the Spirit, with the result that indeed Christ would settle down and make home in the their hearts. These are two separate yet closely related actions in the believers, one involving the Spirit and other Christ.

Closely connected with Christ making home in a believer’s heart is the person being rooted and grounded in love. In Greek these phrases seem to balance one another, with the phrases ‘in your hearts’ and ‘in love’ placed next to and thus complementing each other. Part and parcel with Christ making home in a person’s heart will be the fact that their life will be rooted like a plant firmly fixed in the soil of love and be like a building with its foundation on the ground of love. This love most likely refers to both knowing the love that Christ has for them (Eph 5:2, 25) and also having in their heart that same love for Christ (Eph 6:24) and for other people (Eph 1:15; 4:2,16). It is a mistake to draw a sharp distinction here and try to assert that this love is either Christ’s love for the believers, their love for him, or their love for one another. The context of this passage and the whole of Ephesians would argue for both kinds of love.

The two participles ‘rooted’ (“ῥριζωμένοι”) and ‘grounded’ (“τεθεμελιωμένοι”) (v 17b) are probably best taken as temporal adverbial participles modifying the verbal idea in ‘Christ making home’. These participles in the perfect tense indicate that the firm position of a person in whom Christ has settled down will be that of being steadfastly established in Christ’s love. In contrast to this, many translation take this as a temporal or causal clause modifying the following “*ἵνα* clause”. However, it would be very unusual for a participle to be placed before *ἵνα* and yet modify the verb in the following *ἵνα* clause.

Comprehending the Love of Christ With All the Saints (v 18-19a)

The next clause (v 18) is “that you might be able to comprehend”, which is a second “*ὡς* clause” in the Greek text (besides the one in v 16). As mentioned above, it is unclear whether this is meant to represent the author’s second request in prayer or whether it should be treated as a purpose clause, the intended result of the believers being strengthened and Christ making home in their hearts. Most modern Bible versions (i.e. NIV, NRSV, NASB) translate it as a further request. Although this type of translation reads more smoothly for the reader of English, it could just as easily be understood as a purpose clause. Because of the close connection and dependence upon the preceding clauses, it is probably best understood as a purpose clause rather than a second, further request. However, this connection with the preceding material makes it clear that even if this is a ‘further request’, it is intimately tied to the foregoing part of the prayer. Even the well-respected expert on Ephesians, Andrew Lincoln, who asserts that this is an additional request in the prayer, says, “This second major request presupposes and builds upon the first. The empowering or enabling ... necessary for comprehension is the sort which comes from being strengthened by the Spirit, indwelt by Christ, and rooted and grounded in love”.¹¹ Thus functionally it may make no real difference whether it is treated as a purpose clause or a second request of the prayer; the meaning would virtually be the same. My translation treats it as a purpose clause in an effort to preserve the close connection seen in the original language.

The author thus prays that the believers may be strong enough to comprehend the dimensions of the love of Christ (v 18). However, he does not explicitly mention the ‘love of Christ’ when he refers to the ‘breadth and length and height and depth’. It may seem that there is no substance to which these dimensions relate. Because of this, some have espoused various theories as to what these dimensions refer. Some have understood this as the dimensions of the

¹¹ Andrew T. Lincoln, 207-208.

‘cosmological Christ’ or even of the ‘wisdom of God’. However, the uncommon use of the Greek conjunction ‘τε’ starting verse 19 makes it clear that it is the dimensions of the ‘love of Christ’ which are in view. Unlike the normal Greek coordinate conjunction (‘καί’) that often joins words or clauses that are sequential and unrelated, the conjunction ‘τε’ is a “marker of connection between coordinate nonsequential items” and “thus connects single concepts”.¹² The author can postpone mentioning the ‘love of Christ’ until he also mentions that we are to both “comprehend” its dimensions and to “know” this love. Furthermore, this is the only item that makes sense from the clause’s preceding and following contexts. It is absolutely speculative and unnatural to try to impose some other object to which these dimensions refer.

The love of Christ is to be comprehended “with all the saints” (v 18). The saints refer to the believers in the church (Eph 1:1, 15, 18; 2:19; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18). The author is not just praying that each person would have an individual understanding of Christ’s love, but a corporate love that is known in the midst of the body of Christ, the church (Eph 1:15; 3:21; 4:16). It is only in the properly functioning church that an individual can know the depth of Christ’s love for them. This phrase removes the love of Christ from a pure theoretical arena; it must be grasped and known practically in the midst of a church life. It is knowing Christ’s love for them with the other members of his body and having Christ’s love in their hearts toward the other members.

Not only are the believers to comprehend the love of Christ, but they are to know this love, which is described in what appears to be a paradoxical manner. They are to know the “love that surpasses knowledge”. Christ’s love surpasses knowledge in the sense that humans can never fully understand the full extent of the love of the Son of God. His love, which caused him

¹² Frederick William Danker, s.v. “τε”.

to give up his own life for them (Eph 5:2), is beyond human comprehension. And yet, as this prayer reveals, they can know this love in their experience and with other members of his body.

This passage seems to imply that there is another aspect in which this love “surpasses knowledge”. The underlying emphasis and stated outcome of this prayer is that the believers would know this love in a corporate way, in the church “with all the saints”. This implies that believers should love one another in the same way that Christ does, going beyond the knowledge he has about their faults and imperfections. The believers’ love for one another should not be conditioned upon only knowing each other superficially, but encompass loving one another despite knowing about their defects and flaws.

Filled Up to the Fullness of God (v 19b)

The climax and stated final result of this prayer-report is that the believers “might be filled up to all the fullness of God” (v 19b). This is the intended outcome of all that has been requested in the prayer. Such a lofty finale leads up to the elevated language in the doxology that ends the first section of Ephesians (vv 20-21). Lincoln says it well concerning this section: “The last part of his prayer is climactic also in moving from the thought of the love of Christ to that of the fullness of God as the goal of salvation. Once the love of Christ has mediated that which God has in store for humanity, the ultimate focus of attention can be on God himself.”¹³

Being filled up to all the fullness of God is not the same as being filled ‘with’ all God’s fullness as the content with which the church is filled. How could any human vessel contain the fullness of all that God is? Nor is it being filled ‘unto’ his fullness in the sense of being filled with God up to the limit of the fullness that he has in himself. Again, no human container could be filled to the extent of that exalted measure. But it means to be filled up to all the measure of God’s fullness that he has for the church. The church should be filled up with all of the life,

¹³ Andrew T. Lincoln, 215.

power, and love that God wants to pour out on his people. It is similar to the statement in Ephesians 4:13 which indicates that the church should attain such unity and knowledge of Christ until it becomes “a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”.¹⁴ This statement furthermore reveals that although the church already is the fullness of Christ (Eph 1:23), at the same time it is the goal toward which the church is moving.

As mentioned above, some commentators understand this to be the third request of the prayer. However most Bible translators have understood this to be a purpose or result clause, indicating the intended outcome of the foregoing requests (e.g. NRSV, NIV, NASB, NAB, KJV). The phrase is closely related to what has just been prayed and makes more sense when treated as a purpose clause. However, even the major contender for the ‘third request’ position states that “By the time the third $\Upsilon\nu\alpha$ clause has been reached, the prayer has gathered rhetorical momentum, and the final request becomes the climatic one.”¹⁵ Thus either position would emphasize the fact this prayer reports that being strengthened by the Spirit, Christ making home in the heart, and knowing the love of Christ are for the intended outcome of being filled up to the fullness of God. It is only as the church reaches this goal that there can be glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus (v21).

Application

The Christian church in America today suffers from the disease of individualism. People typically go to a church for an hour or so each week, assuming they can find one that suits their style and schedule. Many will continue to go as long as they feel they are getting some benefit from the preaching, the music, or the social interaction. This attitude is depicted in the words from a song that I learned in my childhood, “Me and Jesus got our own thing goin’ . Me and

¹⁴ New King James Version Bible, copyright © 1988 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.; used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, 197.

Jesus got it all worked out. Me and Jesus got our own thing goin'. I don't need anybody to tell me what its all about." Although there is some truth in this song that addresses the fact that a person understands the gospel and has believed in Christ for salvation, this is surely not the kind of language that is contained in the words of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21.

The language throughout this prayer is plural in form indicating the importance of the corporate church life. He prays that Christ may make home in their hearts (plural) (v 17) and that they (plural) might be able to comprehend the love of Christ with all the saints (v 18). Christ's knowledge-surpassing love not only refers to his love for each person individually, but his love in his members directed toward each other in the body of Christ (v 19a). It is only by knowing this love in a corporate way that ultimately enables the church to be filled up to all the fullness of God (v 19b). God's intention is that he would get glory through this corporate expression of the church (3:21; cf. 3:10).

Christians today need to recognize the importance that God places on having a corporate expression of his body on the earth. We should not only think of 'going to church' as merely a place to meet our own needs and thus only attend if we feel we are profiting from it. We must also realize the importance of the church from God's perspective. As this happens, we will learn to treasure relationships of love with other believers. As we learn God's love for us in Christ we will learn that same love for other members of his body, a love that surpasses the knowledge we have about them.

The real test of whether Christ is actually making home in our hearts is whether we progressively come to know his love toward us and toward one another. As we come to know this love with all the members of his body, the church will mature in the stature of Christ and can

be filled up to the full measure that God has planned for it. The church can then ultimately be the means by which God is glorified on this earth.

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