

## Our Able God

### Ephesians 3:20, 21

<sup>20</sup>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, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

This is a familiar passage, but perhaps, not always for the noblest of reasons. Let's say some nutty preacher gets the idea that he wants to motivate a modest-sized congregation to envision and construct a 10,000 seat auditorium, or start a college, or build a medical center. This, and Matthew 17:20 about moving mountains with mustard seed faith are Biblical staples for cheering such projects along.

But, as we work our way systematically through Ephesians, I hope you are beginning to see that these words have a context, and a very meaningful one. They are not really about conceiving, believing and receiving whatever hair-brained scheme some leader might envision. They are about our ability to work God's plan, not as some man envisions it, but as God has made it known to the church.

Thus far, in Ephesians, Paul has described God's plan for His creation: "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (chapter 1:10). He has written of the resources of God to bring this work to pass and to empower His people to be a part of it. He has identified the church as the venue for unveiling God's eternal mystery and the voice for declaring it, which is the creation of one new race of people, a Christian race based on faith, not lineage, drawn from every tribe, race and nation of man.

In view of all this, Paul broke into a prayer that is recorded in chapter 3:14-21 and that was read for you a few moments ago. Our text, verses 20, 21, is simply the doxology that concludes that prayer. Now, I have butchered the continuity of this series on Ephesians because originally, I did not intend to preach a series. I just wanted to touch on a few highlights here and there. But, as I was reminded of how rich the whole epistle is, I eventually decided to give treatment to the whole book. To make a long story short, I recently preached the main body of this prayer, verses 14-19, on May 30.

Rather than go back and revisit large portions of Paul's prayer, let me just review what I saw as its outstanding petitions. Paul prayed that his readers might be able to believe, take in and live according to all that is rightfully theirs in Christ. This prayer appears right before Paul gets down to the practicalities of how we are to live out these remarkable truths, Paul prayed that every Christian:

**I. ... May Be Empowered in the Strength of the Spirit**

**II. ... May Be Enraptured by the Love of Christ**

**III. ... May Be Expanded by the Fullness of God**

Paul prayed that God might help us to see. An 83-year old bachelor told his nephew that he was finally tying the knot. The nephew asked if he was marrying the woman because she was beautiful. That wasn't it. As the nephew probed further, he asked about the woman's cooking skills, her personality and whether she was rich. None of these were factors according to the old man. The nephew finally asked, "Uncle, if she's not beautiful, witty, a great cook or rich, then why, at age 83, are you marrying her?" With a wink he said, "Because she can drive at night!"

It is time to get down to the business of living according to our high calling in Christ. Accordingly, in the next chapter, Paul begins, "As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (chapter 4:1). The Christian finds himself faced with the challenge of how he is going to accomplish such a lofty calling as to "live worthy" of his place in the eternal plan of God.

Is there divine help for overcoming our sins? Is there divine help for our living together in such a way that the church will present herself on earth as God sees her in heaven - as one new man in Christ, members of one body under the Lordship of Christ and walls in one holy temple aligned by Christ, the chief cornerstone. Is there divine help for the church to be the messenger of God's redemption story and the showcase of His redemptive miracle? Can we be the church that exists in the God's mind? With God's help, we can, and that, my friend, is the proper context for our text this morning:

<sup>20</sup>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, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

This is the real story of these verses. When it comes to living lives worthy of our calling, we are not alone. We are not at the mercy of our weak, human resources. We have been empowered from on high. God works in us and through us. He did not call us to a task, only to walk away. His presence with us is the essential "missing link" between God's expressed will and man's feeble will-power.

God's grace lets us begin again. Through His cross and Resurrection, Jesus destroyed sin's grip on our lives. Christ has made available to us every spiritual resource we need to serve God and others. But, to draw on these resources, our hearts must become dwelling places for Jesus, or as Paul prayed in verse 17, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." As our hearts become more of a home for Jesus, and not just a stopover when we are feeling needy, we will realize more of God's ableness at work in our lives and to be the believers and the church God wants us to be.

## **I. Our God Who Is Able (20a)**

<sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine ...

### **A. God Is Able to Accomplish His Will in Us**

God is able to do whatever He wills to do in the lives of those He calls. As I hinted earlier, this passage has been shamelessly exploited to whip up support for whatever great thing some leader may wish to accomplish. There is nothing at all wrong with wanting to do great things for God, but we always need to be sure that before we bite off the grandiose, we are being obedient in the little things that God has actually demanded. Sometimes, the great cause bitten off that *might* be God's will is nothing more than a great distraction from attending to the little things that absolutely *are* God's will.

Obedience, holiness, unity, brotherly love – these can be much harder to achieve than building a building or raising great sums of money. Sometimes, we call on God's ableness to accomplish something that we envision that we ought to do. But, not everything done in the Name of the Kingdom has much to do with the mission of the Kingdom. Men come up with their own plans, and then, call upon God's powerful ableness to pull it off and to pay for it. If we cannot link our brainstorm to the eternal purpose of God for His church, we need to rethink our brainstorm.

## B. God Is Limitlessly Able

"Immeasurably," in verse 20, is a root meaning "abundance" with two prefixes tacked on that intensify the root as if Paul coined the word on the fly. Literally, Paul praises a God Who can do "super-over-abundantly" more than we could ever "ask or imagine." This word for "ask" emphasizes inequality, such as when a subject approaches a king with a request. Paul is directing his readers to thoughts of the infinity of God's resources that are available to His people. God is willing to give to us more of Himself than we would ever dare to ask for, or than we could even imagine if we were to dare to ask.

In God's mind, we can each be fruitful citizens of Christ's Kingdom. Perhaps, because of baggage you carry from past or present struggles with sin, that fruitful Christian life seems like too much for which to "ask or imagine." Nevertheless, we can live in this world, to some extent, as God envisions us living out eternity – as holy and obedient children. In God's mind, the church has no barriers that divide people. Seem a tad idealistic? God is able, so let unity reign in the church "on earth as it is in heaven." The task of taking the gospel to a lost world seems enormous, but heaven's resources for the church are untraceable. Alone, we are not equal to the task. "Now to him who *IS* able..."

## C. God's Divine Will Governs Man's Prayer

Jesus promised to give His disciples whatever they asked for "in His Name" or "according to His will." We will always fail in prayer when our causes are not in harmony with God's plan, but sometimes, we get ahead of ourselves. Our uncertainty about the will of God in a matter causes us to pray generic, small and safe prayers so as not to be disappointed. When we do not know God's will, prayer is the best way to find out, so you may as well go for it. Praying safe accomplishes little. James wrote, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2). God will never defy the character of His Name, no matter what we ask for, but when we are devoted to His will, there is nothing too great to ask of God.

You remember the story of *The Prodigal Son*. He demanded his inheritance before his father was even dead. That was bad form in those days. Of course, he squandered everything on just the dumbest things. After a time of tending a foreigner's pigs and longing to eat their leftovers, he faced his own stupidity. It was hoping against hope to think that he could ever be restored to his position as a son of the owner of a great estate, so he rehearsed a proposition that his Father might go for:

... <sup>18</sup>I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' – Luke 15:18, 19

He never got that whole speech out of his mouth before his father ran to him, embraced him and restored him. It seems that he underestimated his father's love for him. Maybe, that's what we do when we pray small. Shoot for the stars in prayer and trust that God's answer will always be perfect for His purposes and for you. Let us especially be ambitious when we pray for God's resources in our work as the church, for His resources are untraceable and His riches are virtually untapped.

## II. Our God Who Works in Us (20b)

<sup>20</sup>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 ...*

### A. The Growth of the Individual Believer Is Aided by the Holy Spirit

The indwelling Holy Spirit is a promise to all who come to Jesus in faith. Because the Spirit is God's gift of Himself to abide within the believer, He becomes the seal and the down payment of God's promises as they pertain to our eternal hope. Jesus taught that the Spirit applies the things of Jesus to the disciple. When we sin, the Spirit stirs our consciences and leads us to repentance. When we are tested, He reminds us of the words and promises of Jesus so that we are strengthened for the battle. There are times when we feel absolutely shackled to our sins. It is the Holy Spirit that reminds us of the supreme adequacy of the blood of Jesus that was shed for sin. The Spirit is also described as abiding in the church, and it is through that community that individuals are prospered the most.

### B. The Growth of the Body of Christ Is Aided by the Holy Spirit

Chapter four teaches that some people in the church are specially gifted as equippers to prepare all the people for works of service. Preparation implies that there is some purpose in a mature Christian community. We don't simply climb out of baptismal waters, each to scatter off in our own direction and to do our own thing. We are called to build the whole. We are called to maintain the unity of the Spirit. We are called to live as God's light in this world by demonstrating a unity that cannot be explained by a mere common interest here or there. We exist to make Christ known in the world.

Whether we will bear witness for Christ as a faith community with a purpose or simply come across as individuals stumbling through life depends on whether or not we surrender to the Holy Spirit. To surrender to the Spirit will result in spiritual demeanor, called fruit in Galatians 5:22, 23 and described as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Individuals and communities yielded to the Spirit bear such fruit, and, wherever such fruit is borne in this chaotic and divided world, God's people shine forth as the light of the world.

Any community of faith that is not surrendered to the Spirit cannot bear such fruit. It will not be God's city on a hill, and no amount of human activity will compensate. If, in a time of crisis, God's people are as "wiggled-out" as the typical heathen, then a typical heathen looking for answers in this life is not going to be drawn to God's people, for he will find nothing about them that is unique. When pressures cause a faith community to fly apart, we undermine our witness and grieve the Spirit. On the other hand, when God's people in this world are conspicuously affected by the serenity of God's promises, people tend to notice that. Alone, we are not able to live that way, so Paul praises God, saying, "Now to him who *is* able" ... "according to his power that is at work within us."

## III. Our God Who Alone Merits Praise (21)

<sup>20</sup>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, <sup>21</sup>*to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

## **A. The Father Has Always Been Glorified in Jesus**

Jesus glorified the Father through obedience. He prayed, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4). In Gethsemane, Jesus petitioned the Father for any plan other than the cross that might work. Still, He glorified the Father, praying, "... not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Then, He faced the cross. Jesus continues to glorify His Father as Mediator for His people and as Head over the church. It is a given that God is glorified in Christ Jesus.

## **B. The Challenge is that God Be Glorified in the Church**

In our own resources, we are not clever enough to accomplish that which results in God's glory. We are like the 75 convicts from the Saltillo prison in northern Mexico, who, in November, 1975, began tunneling their way out. On April 18, 1976, guided by pure genius, they tunneled up into the courtroom in which many of them had been sentenced. The judge returned all 75 to jail.

When Jesus gave His disciples their marching orders, He promised to be with them forever. He told them that only by the empowering of His presence could they go forward and bear fruit for the Kingdom: "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The divine presence is no longer a missing link. Christ's commissioning and the church's accomplishing no longer have to be strangers to one another.

Given all the things in this world that cause people to fight and divide, the only way that the church can glorify the Father is through obedience- just like Jesus. Singing praise songs will not do it. Studying worship will not cut it. Voicing adoration in prayer won't get I done. The church glorifies God and causes others to glorify Him when it reflects Jesus to the world. Jesus prayed for our unity because we reflect His Person to the world through our oneness. Jesus told us to love one another because that is how all men will know that we are His disciples. And, of course, we reflect the Person of Jesus Christ to the world by the grace and healing we extend to those who are broken by sin.

What do we tell the world about Jesus through our unity, through our mutual love and through our ownership of His redemptive work in the world? Can we glorify God better in this place than we do? After all, we are just people - sinful, ornery folk. It is easy to get surly. It's second nature to be selfish. But we can reflect Jesus to the world because He dwells with us by the Person of His Spirit.

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