

Ephesians 3:14-21

“that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God”

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Messiah which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him *be* the glory in the [assembly] and in Messiah Yeshua to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

“For this reason...” (Ephesians 3:14), picks upon the previous statement made by Paul in Ephesians 3:1, after he has finished a short vignette: “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Messiah Yeshua for the sake of you Gentiles.”³⁶ We may say that Paul bows his knees before the Father, praying diligently for the *ekklesia* to be transformed into that “holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21). Or perhaps also in mind could be that Paul has no choice but to bow his knees before God when he considers the great universal purpose He has for reconciling Jewish and non-Jewish Believers as equals in one body—the “mystery of Messiah”—something he has just elaborated (Ephesians 3:4-10). While most First Century Jewish prayers were conducted standing (cf. Matthew 6:5; Luke 18:11, 13), many also were conducted in some kind of prostration (cf. 1 Kings 8:14, 22, 54; Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5). Just as Paul has discussed the Body of Messiah being a temple unto the Lord, so do we see how King Solomon prayed on his knees at the dedication of the First Temple:

“Solomon had finished praying this entire prayer and supplication to the LORD, he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread toward heaven” (1 Kings 8:54).

Paul makes a rather interesting statement about “the Father” (Ephesians 3:14), in Ephesians 3:16, stating that “from [Him] every family in heaven and earth derives its name.” Psalm 103:13 could very well be in view, “Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.” God the Father provides appropriate care for His children, but does expect proper obedience from them (2 Samuel 7:14).

Considering the cosmic reach of the reconciliation that Paul has just described (Ephesians 3:10), Bruce indicates the view that “In rabbinical thought the angels constitute the ‘family above,’ and men and women on earth—whether the people of Israel particularly or the human race as such—constitute the ‘family below.’”³⁷ O’Brien further elaborates, “Every family *in heaven* points to family groupings and classes of angels...good and rebellious alike, which owe their origin to God, while every family *on earth* speaks of family groupings and so of the basic structures of human relationships which owe their existence to him.”³⁸ There is definitely debate over what Paul specifically could be referring to with *pasa patria* (πᾶσα πατριὰ) or “every family.” Bruce takes the view that “family” is referring to local assemblies (“churches”) of Believers,³⁹ whereas others will consider it to be every single family on Earth, and others will yet consider it to only apply to families of Believers who recognize God as Father (Galatians 4:6).

³⁶ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.

³⁷ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 325.

³⁸ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 256.

³⁹ Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 325, fn#80.

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Strong support for the third view, that “every family” only concerns families that recognize God as Father, can be inferred from Paul’s comment that from Him such a family “takes its name” (NRSV) or “receives its character” (CJB). Here, we have to remember the multi-faceted usage of “name” in both Semitic and Hellenistic culture—either as *shem* or *onoma*—which would relate to a good reputation (Genesis 25:26; 1 Samuel 25:25).

Praying on his knees for his audience, Paul asks the Lord “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Ephesians 3:16, NIV). This being strengthened is specifically to take place in the *esō anthrōpōn* (ἔσω ἄνθρωπον), one’s “inner man” (NASU) or inner person, a person’s basic intelligence and will (cf. Romans 7:22). God’s Spirit was surely present inside of the Apostle Paul as he prayed for his audience, strengthening his inner self as he endured prison (Ephesians 3:1)—and now he wants the Spirit to rest on Ephesians’ readership.

The result of Paul’s prayers, and the Holy Spirit being given to his audience, was “that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love” (Ephesians 3:17, Good News Bible). One’s heart here is synonymous with one’s whole being, just as the Psalmist tells the Lord “You have put gladness in my heart” (Psalm 4:7). Ephesians 3:17 employs the verb *katoikeō* (κατοικέω), “to settle in, colonise” (LS),⁴⁰ which will in turn allow the Believers to be “established” (NIV), a theme seen in Paul’s writing (2:20-21; 1 Corinthians 6:6-12; Colossians 2:7). In the Tanach, specifically, being strengthened within oneself enabled a person to overcome sin (Psalm 119:11), and God was most certainly the source from which strength was to be found (Exodus 15:2; Jeremiah 16:19; Psalm 18:1-2; 27:1; 59:17; 119:28). Here, as a result of the Spirit’s working through Yeshua, the Father will be able to firmly root His people. Ephesians 3:14, 16, and 17 are an affirmation of the functions of God’s tri-unity, although it is not delivered in any kind of creedal formula.

The result of being firmly rooted in Messiah was to be quite significant for Paul’s audience. He wants them to “have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18, NIV). This *agapē* (ἀγάπη) love of Messiah is certainly a vast love for us to consider. Romans 8:35-39, written previously to this, elaborated,

“Who will separate us from the love of Messiah? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, ‘FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED [Psalm 44:22].’ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Messiah Yeshua our Lord.”

There are many passages in the Bible which, of course, talk about God’s great love and could be considered when contemplating what is in Paul’s mind when he composed Ephesians 3:18. Psalm 113 could very easily be in view:

“Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD. Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time forth and forever. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised. The LORD is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. Who is like the LORD our God, who is enthroned on high, who humbles Himself to behold *the things that are* in heaven and in the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make *them* sit with princes, with the princes of His people. He makes the barren woman abide in the house *as a joyful mother of children*. Praise the LORD!”

⁴⁰ LS, 423.

The Apostle John writes about how those who have truly experienced God’s love, also love others:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love... We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:7-8, 16).

As significant as the love of God is throughout the Scriptures, the categories listed in Ephesians 3:18—“the breadth and length and height and depth”—have certainly given rise to a great deal of speculation as to why Paul used these descriptions about it. There is a variety of literature that commentators have had to consider in determining the source of this vocabulary, which as Lincoln notes, includes “the OT, early Jewish literature, Hellenistic philosophy, Hermetic writings, magical papyri, and also later Christian authors.”⁴¹ Having these options available at their disposal, some think that the Apostle Paul may have used the designation “breadth and length and height and depth” to oppose various (proto-)Gnostic views present in Asia Minor, appropriating their own terminology and then turning it against them. Others have suggested that this is a veiled reference to either the dimensions of the Temple or of Yeshua’s cross somehow being connected to God’s love. And still, even others prefer not to speculate, taking it as a general description with no particular comparison. Wood further elaborates,

“It is unlikely that Paul intended any allusion to the measurements of the Jewish temple or the shape of the cross. The Stoics resorted to these terms to express the totality of the universe and the astrologers utilized them in their calculations... The apostle is simply telling us that the love of Christ, exemplified in his magnanimity to the Gentiles, is too large to be confined by any geometrical measurements.”⁴²

Lincoln also concurs,

“Valuable as such material is, it has not yet provided such clear parallels as to be decisive in the interpretation of this verse. Probably more determinative ultimately will be judgments about the context of the language here, and, in particular, the writer’s sequence of thought.”⁴³

Other comparisons have been suggested per the dimensions of Ephesians 3:18 to New Jerusalem. And while scholars may study similarities with the Qumran literature and/or various Gnostic works, we have to remember that Paul’s thought principally comes from the Tanach with the terms that he uses—in this case the Wisdom literature. The most significant parallel to consider with Ephesians 3:18 is Job 11:7-9, where Zophar the Naamathite asks Job, “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? *They are* high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea.” Some have also suggested a parallel with Sirach 1:3 in the Apocrypha, which similarly asks, “The height of heaven, the breadth of the earth, the abyss, and wisdom—who can search them out?”

Paul’s language describing the love of Messiah should make each of us pause for a moment, because that love was not only demonstrated by His sacrificial work on our behalf *but is also* manifested each day in the inner strengthening we are to have as Believers. It is to firmly root us, so we can have the faith and endurance to plow ahead on each new spiritual front in which we find ourselves (Ephesians 1:14).

Paul does not stop at the magnanimous love of Messiah just dwelling in the hearts of Believers. He also prays that his audience “know the love of Messiah which surpasses

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 208.

⁴² Wood, in *EXP*, 11:208.

⁴³ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 208.

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knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19, NASU). The verb *hyperballō* (ὑπερβάλλω) means "to attain a degree that extraordinarily exceeds a point on a scale of extent, go beyond, surpass, outdo" (BDAG).⁴⁴ Wood remarks that when one knows this kind of love, "the normal faculties of rational apprehension are incapable of functioning."⁴⁵ *This is by no means some kind of "surpassing knowledge" in some hidden, Gnostic context.* On the contrary, as O'Brien puts it, "it is so great that one can never know it fully. We can never plumb its depths or comprehend its magnitude. No matter how much we know the love of Christ, how fully we enter into his love for us, there is always more to know and experience."⁴⁶

While knowing the love of Messiah is truly something awesome for one to contemplate, the second half of Ephesians 3:19 can present a challenge if one does not read it carefully. The NIV renders it as "that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." The clause in question is *eis pan to plērōma tou Theou* (εἰς πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ θεοῦ). In his paralleling letter, Paul states that the fullness of the Deity/Godhead—to *plērōma tēs Theotētos* (τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος)—is only found in Yeshua (Colossians 2:9-10), but that is not the issue in Ephesians 3:19b. *Paul by no means thinks that his readers can be divine, or even semi-divine.* To his audience in Ephesians, he is writing about the knowledge and experience of one partaking of God's love, thus being filled up by Him in the process. This fullness is something that can be reached toward, as indicated by the preposition *eis* (εἰς) or "to," as a person matures in salvation and becomes more and more able to participate in who God is, possessing more of that surpassing knowledge of Him (cf. Ephesians 1:19-20).

Lincoln further elaborates, "it is the fullness of God himself which is in view, and the prayer is that believers should attain to that fullness. εἰς does not so much signify that with which one is filled, as it conveys movement toward a goal, a being filled up to the measure of God's fullness."⁴⁷ Paul will later describe this as "to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Messiah" (Ephesians 4:13). Our human imperfections and limitations prevent us from *ever* having the same kind of fullness as Yeshua the Messiah, being God Incarnate and Deity. Ross astutely observes for us,

"I can say with reasonable certainty that humans are not God, nor can we become God. No mere human can know absolutely everything about *any* aspect of the cosmos because people are confined to a limited proportion of the universe's time-space continuum. Thus, to gain a complete description and understanding of the universe is impossible. However, such limitations don't prevent those with curiosity from gathering adequate descriptions and understandings."⁴⁸

Paul may have understood Believers reaching toward God's fullness as them acquiring more and more understanding—as much as they could handle, at least—of His Creation and the greater universe. As Ecclesiastes 3:11 describes, "He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end." But Paul's main emphasis on the fullness of God being present within Believers undoubtedly regards being strengthened with the Spirit (Ephesians 3:16; 5:18). In saying this, he prepares his audience to hear his teaching on obedience as laid out in Ephesians chs. 4-6.

⁴⁴ BDAG, 1032.

⁴⁵ Wood, in *EXP*, 11:52.

⁴⁶ O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 264.

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 214.

⁴⁸ Hugh Ross, *Why the Universe Is the Way It Is* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 25.

Reaching toward God's fullness can only take place by a born again Believer being continually transformed by God's love. John 1:16 tells us, "For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace." The filling up of God that is to take place inside of us is *not* something any of us can do; the subjunctive aorist *plērōthēte* (πληρωθήτε) or "may be filled" is used by Paul in Ephesians 3:19b, which most commentators are agreed is a Divine passive. The NEB renders Ephesians 3:19b with "So that you attain to fullness of being, the fullness of God himself." O'Brien considers this to be "That fulness or perfection [as] the standard or level to which they are to be filled..."⁴⁹ What this is, more than anything else, is **all that God wants His people to be!** This will undoubtedly empower them for His tasks on Earth. Describing this will be a major part of the teaching that will follow in the epistle. As Lincoln summarizes all of this,

"As Believers are strengthened through the Spirit in the inner person, as they allow Christ to dwell in their hearts through faith, and as they know more of the love of Christ, so the process of being filled up to all the fullness of the life and power of God will take place."⁵⁰

How far this goes relates to how much we press into God as Believers, *and* how much of Himself He chooses to reveal. We go far in experiencing God's fullness if we can be mature men and women who are a united Body of Messiah, enabled to perform His tasks in the world. These are certainly things that today's Messianic movement needs to consider as it contemplates its next stage of development. Will we be a mature faith community that can partake of God's fullness manifested to the saints? Or will we be those who cannot partake of it because of human sin, innuendo, and various agendas blocking God's path to reveal more of Himself to us?

Having delivered a prayer in Ephesians ch. 3, Paul now closes with an appropriate benediction. He opens it by praising the Lord, declaring He "by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20, RSV). The adjective used to describe God's significant ability is *huperekperissou* (ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ), meaning "quite *beyond all measure*" (BDAG)⁵¹ or "*super-abundantly*" (LS).⁵² God has such unbelievable power, He is able to even exceed our expectations of Him!

As Ephesians ch. 3 closes, Ephesians 3:21 expresses Paul's further prayer that the *ekklēsia* issue the Father and the Son great glory. This is something that is to occur not just now, but to the assembly of faithful "forever and ever." His usage of *tou aiōnos tōn aiōnōn, amēn* (τοῦ αἰῶνος τῶν αἰῶνων, ἀμήν) is language principally derived from the Septuagint translation of Psalms (i.e., Psalm 119:90; 145:4, 13), a strong indication of the letter's Hebraic background. Praise for God is something that is to continue throughout eternity (1 Chronicles 16:36; Psalm 106:48).

⁴⁹ O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 265.

⁵⁰ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, pp 214-215.

⁵¹ BDAG, 1033.

⁵² LS, 835.