Residence

God offers believers strength by Christ dwelling in us.

Ephesians 3:14-21

Memory Verse: Ephesians 3:17

READ Ephesians 3:14-21, First Thoughts (p. 64), and Understand the Context (p. 64).

STUDY Ephesians 3:14-21, using Explore the Text on pages 65–69. As you study, reflect on the great gift God has given His children through the indwelling presence of Christ in us. For further insight, consult the Explore the Bible Adult Commentary (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).

PLAN the group time, working toward the goal of helping your group understand that they are to pray for the spiritual growth of others, are changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ, and are to honor God for demonstrating His majesty. Tailor the plans for your group using Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 70–71), More Ideas (p. 72), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible.

GROW with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

GATHER the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides; ☐ A pre-enlisted volunteer to present a mini-lecture on the commentary for Ephesians 3:16-19; and ☐ Pieces of scrap paper (at least one per person). Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ PACK ITEM 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys); and ☐ PACK ITEM 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus). Make copies of: ☐ PACK ITEM 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Sometimes, the simple presence of a friend makes all the difference. Most of us appreciate someone by our side when receiving serious medical test results or attending a legal proceeding for a family member. Strength to do the hard things in life can be found simply through a physical presence. “I’ll go with you, and we’ll face this together” may be some of the most precious words we ever hear.

(In PSG, p. 55) Recall a time when the physical presence of a friend helped you get through a challenging situation.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

Ephesians 2:11–3:13 focused on the glorious truth that, through His cross, Jesus created a new multi-cultural community of faith comprised of Jews and Gentiles. Based on that new reality, Paul offered a prayer for the Ephesian believers.

The apostle prayed to the Father to strengthen the Ephesian church. Paul’s prayers, as inspired Scripture, represent more than a model for how we should pray. They also reveal God’s plan for every church and every believer and, in this case, give a description of the new life brought into existence through Jesus Christ. This prayer represents clearly what it means to be made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5). Paul’s prayer requests on behalf of the Ephesians point to the indwelling of Christ in the life of the believer. The presence of Christ changes everything. With Him, a new life emerges for His glory.

Paul’s prayer in 3:14-21 serves as a bridge in the letter from the theological explanation of salvation and the blessings brought with it (chaps. 1–3) to the practical applications that this theology has in the daily lives of believers (chaps. 4–6). This is a pattern in Paul’s writings, not just in Ephesians but in other New Testament letters as well. At the beginning of Ephesians 4, there is the all-important conjunction “therefore” that marks the transition from doctrine to practice. This reminds us of that which distinguishes Christian faith from all other religions. It is God-centered, not sourced in what human beings can do to merit salvation. The lifestyle of a follower of Jesus is a reverent response to what God has already graciously done, not an attempt to reach God through human effort and right behavior.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

PETITIONED (EPH. 3:14-15)

VERSE 14
Paul began a prayer for the Ephesians in 3:1, when he said, “for this reason.” However, he put that prayer on hold to discuss the great mystery of how God brought the gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 2-11) and to marvel that God had used even his afflictions and trials to advance the gospel to them (vv. 12-13). He picked that prayer up again in verse 14 by repeating the phrase, for this reason. Does this phrase describe Paul’s digression in Ephesians 3:2-13 or does it go with what preceded it in 2:11-22? Some commentators believe that it describes the central idea of the passage in the second chapter—that God has brought near those who were once far, giving them peace with God. Since God brought Jew and Gentile together into one new humanity and gave them access to God, Paul was praying that God would strengthen the believer for participation in that work.

Other commentators believe that the reason for Paul’s prayer was the content of his digression in Ephesians 3:2-13—that God had granted Paul the right to participate in the great mystery of sharing the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Through his trials, Paul faithfully continued to serve the Lord. The purpose of the prayer in this case would be for the Gentile Christians who have been incorporated into God’s kingdom to experience their spiritual privileges to the fullest measure. The content of chapters 2 and 3 are so similar regarding the incorporation of Jews and Gentiles into the same body that the reason for Paul’s prayer could have been spiritual strength for those coming into the kingdom through Paul’s preaching.

In light of God’s marvelous work in bringing together Jews and Gentiles, Paul decided to kneel in prayer. Standing was the more prominent posture in prayer among the Jews, but kneeling was also part of their experience as well. The act of kneeling represented humility and reverent worship. (See Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11,13.)

For Paul, prayer was not formality or ritualistic incantation. Rather, he prayed before the Father. The preposition before implied a face-to-face or intimate encounter. Following Jesus’ pattern in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9), Paul addressed his concern to the Father. If both Jew and Gentile had been gathered into the same family, it is significant that Paul addressed his prayer to the Father of both those who are near and those who were once far off from God. In light of the fact that God had brought together one new family, Paul prayed to the Patriarch of that family.

VERSE 15
As Paul began his prayer for strength for all Christians, Jew and Gentile, he acknowledged that God was the Father of every family in heaven and on earth. This could be a reference to all families in the past and present, or it could be a reference to all created beings—earthly and angelic. Either way, the emphasis is on the dominion of God over every created being as well as every social institution. No person or family exists outside of the role
of God’s dominion. He has authority over the Jews and over the Gentiles. As God brought them into one new family, He continued to have authority over them.

The idea that God named every family is again an emphasis of His sovereignty and dominion. As the Creator who created the powers in heaven and people on earth, God is the One who gave them life and strength. He brought them into existence as they were and placed them in their roles in relationship to His overall purposes of creation. Then He named them. In the Old Testament, naming something expressed the dominion of one being over another. When God created Adam, He did something important: “he created them male and female. When they were created, he blessed them and called them mankind” (Gen. 5:2). Adam named the animals and had dominion over them: “The man gave names to all the livestock, to the birds of the sky, and to every wild animal” (Gen. 2:20). Isaiah 40:26 illustrated this point: “Look up and see! Who created these? He brings out the stars by number and calls all of them by name. Because of his great power and strength, none of them is missing.”

As Paul addressed his prayer to the Father, he spoke to the One who was not merely the Father of the Jews, but the Father of every family He had created. Surely this God would hear Paul’s petition and strengthen His children.

What are some of the prayer requests you are bringing to God on behalf of your church?

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**VERSE 16**

16 I pray that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit.

**INDWELLED** *( Eph. 3:16-19)*

**VERSE 16**

Paul’s prayer began with a request that God would provide for believers to be strengthened with power. In Ephesians 1:19, Paul used three words to describe God’s great power toward us who believe. In Old Testament contexts, strength was often associated with people seeking God’s power to work in their lives. When David was in an extremely difficult position, he “found strength in the LORD his God” (1 Sam. 30:6). Ezra the priest declared, “So I took courage because I was strengthened by the hand of the LORD my God” (Ezra 7:28). Paul was praying for the Ephesians to have the hand of God upon their lives, giving them strength and power to do what He had called them to do.

This strengthening of the believer takes place through his Spirit. God’s Spirit comes to reside within the life of the believer (Eph. 1:13-14). Also, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to build a new dwelling made up of both Jews and Gentiles (2:22). The Holy Spirit is also the one who revealed the great mystery of Jews and Gentiles being coheirs and members of the same body (3:5). The Spirit is actively at work from the time of salvation, but
Paul prayed that the Spirit would also strengthen the Ephesians believers in their new faith.

Paul prayed also that God would strengthen them by the Spirit according to the riches of his glory. He had already spoken of these riches in Ephesians 2:4,7. Salvation opens the treasure of God’s riches to the believer, and He has given these riches to us by grace. Paul also had spoken of God’s glory in Ephesians 1:6,17, where he described the greatness of God’s mercy and attributes as Father. God had a storehouse of riches to lavish upon the Ephesians who had turned to Christ, and Paul prayed for God to strengthen them by His Spirit according to those riches.

VERSE 17
Paul prayed that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. The emphasis in this verse is the continual presence of Christ’s indwelling after a person believes in Christ. Certainly Jesus takes residence in a person’s heart when he or she trusts Christ for salvation (John 14:23). This is not a question of whether He will abandon those who lack faith after their conversion experience. Rather, Paul was praying that Christ would continue to dwell as the reigning resident of one’s heart.

Having Christ as resident ruler of the heart meant that they would be rooted and firmly established in love. When Christ indwells believers, He grounds their lives in love. Paul used an agricultural and an architectural word to demonstrate the foundation of love in a believer’s life. He prayed that their love would be like a tree that had deep roots in the soil of love. Then he prayed that their love would be like a secure building that rested on a solid foundation. Paul did not pray only for power for believers. Absolute power can corrupt a lesser being than God. Instead, Paul prayed for both power and love. With Christ living inside believers, we have access both to the power of God and the love of God. Paul prayed for strengthening in both of these areas.

The salvation experience is not the end but the beginning of a person’s life with God.

VERSE 18
Having prayed for the believer to be rooted and grounded in the love of God, Paul further described that love in his prayer. Even though Christ indwells a believer at salvation, that Christian always has more to discover of the dimensions of God’s love. The salvation experience is not the end but the beginning of a person’s life with God. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would comprehend all the dimensions of God’s love. He listed four dimensions.

First, Paul prayed that they would understand the length and width, height and depth of God’s love. These were the terms usually associated with any three-dimensional object such as the ark of the covenant (Ex. 37:1-2) or Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 6:2-3). By using these dimensional terms, Paul was indicating that love was something as real as the ark of the covenant or Solomon’s temple. Love is a nebulous term, hard to define...
and even harder to embrace. But in Paul’s way of thinking, the love of God was a concrete object that could be known and embraced by those who are indwelt by Christ.

VERSE 19

Having expressed a desire for the Ephesians to comprehend the dimensions of God’s love, Paul reminded them that the fullness of Christ’s love surpasses knowledge. Even those who have experienced Christ’s love in salvation still have more of His love to discover. By praying for them to know that which surpasses knowledge, Paul was praying that they would continue to learn and experience more of Christ’s love as they were growing in their faith through the presence of the indwelling Christ.

To summarize his prayer, Paul prayed that they would be filled with all the fullness of God. The inner strength of the Holy Spirit is a gift that leads to a fuller knowledge of the love of God. Knowledge and experience of God’s love leads to love, and love leads the believer to the fullness of God. Those who love God want to please Him and live the way He desires. As the believer grows and experiences the effects of the indwelling Christ, he should be progressing toward complete maturity in his relationship with God. This is a pursuit that will continue until the believer stands before God (1 John 3:2).

(In PSG, p. 61) How does grasping the depth of Christ’s love bring power to the life of a believer? How does the love of Christ change a person from the inside out?

VERSES 20-21

Paul ended his prayer with a word of praise declaring God’s majesty and the demonstration of that majesty in the church and in Christ. Like his prayer, this doxology focused on the matchless power of God. It also serves as a bridge in the letter from the theological explanation of salvation and the blessings brought with it (chaps. 1–3) to the practical applications that this theology has in the daily lives of believers (chaps. 4–6).

Paul began the doxology by giving praise to the one who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us — to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
The source of this unimaginable activity of God was the power that works in us. The power of the indwelling Spirit mentioned in Paul’s prayer was the same power that could do more than Paul even imagined. As believers yield to the Spirit, God can do a work in them that is better than anyone can imagine.

**God does not do His work in the church for other people to take the credit.**

God does not do His work in the church for other people to take the credit. He did these things for His glory. Though several New Testament doxologies speak of Christ Jesus bringing glory to the Father (Rom. 16:27; Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11), this is the only doxology that explicitly refers to the church as the medium of God’s glory. Both Jesus and His church magnify the gracious and loving characteristics of our God. Jesus does so completely, but the church does so as it grows in strength and power through the presence of the indwelling Christ.

How does the church bring glory to God? For starters, it magnifies the grace of God evidenced in the cross (Eph. 1:7). It demonstrates the reality of God’s raising us from death to life (2:1-10). The church also displays how God could take two totally different groups of people, Jews and Gentiles, and form them into one new dwelling for His Spirit (2:14-16). Every time people look at the church, they should be led to glorify God for His amazing work that defies explanation or imagination. Had He only forgiven sin, this would have been enough to cause people to marvel. But He did more. As people look at the church, they should be looking at a living work of art made by God’s hand.

The glory of God in the church and in Jesus Christ is unending. It will be to all generations, forever and ever. The glory of God in Christ and His church is not confined to one generation. It is not part of a cultural movement or period in history. The church is a timeless trophy of God’s redemptive activity through all ages and generations. As the church responds to God’s power, love, and saving grace, it will continue to bring Him glory until time is no more.

Paul’s doxology ended with Amen, a transliteration of the Hebrew word that served as a word of agreement or validity. Paul hoped that all would agree that the church was a marvelous mystery made up of both Jew and Gentile who were not perfect but were forgiven. They were also in the process of being transformed to the fullness of God. As they yielded to the Spirit’s indwelling work in their lives, they were being transformed day by day into a temple that would bring glory to God.

**How would you like to see God strengthen the believers in your church? What if He does something better?**
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

CHALLENGE: As the group arrives, give each person a piece of scrap paper and instruct them to write down the name of their favorite TV or movie friendship. Once everyone has written something down, collect the pieces of paper. Read them aloud one at a time and try to guess who gave which response. Ask: Why are these relationships so memorable?

EXPLAIN: It’s hard to think of a movie or TV show that doesn’t include a pair of close friends. That’s because camaraderie is woven into our souls by a God who created us for community and interpersonal relationship. The most important relationship we will ever have is our friendship with God, and that is made possible through faith in Jesus.

REVIEW: Discuss key points from Understand the Context on page 56 of the PSG. Direct the group to Pack Item 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys) and Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus) to remind them of the location and context for this letter.

TRANSITION: Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in today’s text helps us better understand the implications of Jesus’ indwelling presence in our daily lives.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: As you read aloud Ephesians 3:14-15, encourage the group to visualize Paul’s posture as he wrote these words.

EXPLAIN: Verse 14 begins with a phrase that links Paul’s words in this section of his letter with his description of the Ephesians in chapter 2—the unified body of Christ. Everything that follows through verse 21 is part of Paul’s prayer for this group of Christians.

INSTRUCT: Distribute copies of Pack Item 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians). Review the verses in Ephesians that reference the Trinity. Highlight that Ephesians 3:14-19 begins with Paul’s reference to the Father, whom he petitioned in verse 14. Ask: How did Paul describe God the Father in these verses?

SUMMARIZE: Using the information on these verses in the PSG (p. 57), briefly summarize Paul’s description of the Father and the family of God. Propose that Paul wanted his readers to see themselves as intimately connected to one another through their relationship with God.

DISCUSS: Comment that Paul’s prayers reveal much insight into his relationship with God and his love for others. Then ask: How might a person’s prayer requests for others reveal the requester’s understanding of God? How might a person’s understanding of God impact how they pray for the spiritual growth of others? (PSG, p. 57)

TRANSITION: After reminding readers of their identities within God’s family, Paul made his specific petitions to God on behalf of the Ephesians.

READ: Invite one person from the group to read Ephesians 3:16-19, while the others listen for Paul’s four prayers for the Ephesians.
STATE: Call attention to this statement from the PSG (p. 58): Paul “shared with the Ephesians four specific requests of his prayer for them: spiritual strength, abiding faith, awareness of God’s love, and the fullness of God.”

MINI-LECTURE: Invite a pre-enlisted volunteer to present a mini-lecture on the commentary for verses 16-19 (PSG, pp. 58–60). Guide them to pay attention to the main idea behind each of Paul’s four prayer requests.

OBSERVE: Call attention to Pack Item 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians). Paul began his prayer by kneeling before the Father, one Person of the Trinity. In these verses he mentioned the other two Persons—the Son and the Spirit.

ASK: What is the connection between being strengthened by the Holy Spirit and Christ indwelling a believer? How are they similar? How are they different? (PSG, p. 59)

STATE: Believers are changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ. Christ’s love within us aids our spiritual growth and helps us persevere in our relationship with Him. Consider Paul’s description of Christ’s love in another of his letters. Read Romans 8:38-39.

ASK: How does grasping the depth of Christ’s love bring power to the life of a believer? How does the love of Christ change a person from the inside out? (PSG, p. 61)

TRANSITION: Following his heartfelt and intentional prayer for the Ephesians, Paul closed by declaring God’s majesty and the demonstration of that majesty in the church and in Christ.

READ: As a group, read Ephesians 3:20-21 aloud.

EXPLAIN: These two verses are often referred to as a doxology, which simply means a short statement or hymn of praise to God. They are the only appropriate endings to a prayer that reflects on the great truth of Jesus’ indwelling power in the lives of His people. These verses also bring the first section of Ephesians to a close as Paul prepared to help his readers apply what he had just taught them.

ASK: In our heads, we know that God is limitless in His power, but that message can be more difficult to apply to our hearts. Briefly discuss this group of questions from the PSG (p. 61): How do people place limits on God in their prayers? What kinds of limits might they place on God? How do these limits compare to the way Paul described God?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

SUMMARIZE: Direct the group to review Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. Instruct them to summarize in their own words why God is worthy of our honor and praise.

REVIEW: Direct the group to read in unison the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 63). Lead them to answer the first question set: As a group, spend time evaluating the systematic plan your small group has in place to pray specifically for the spiritual growth of one another. What might the group do to strengthen the plan? Invite volunteers to share their responses when finished and record insights on a board.

CLOSE: Before you close in prayer, remind the group that they are changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ. Call for them to commit to taking an active role in fostering one another’s spiritual growth and connection to Jesus. Use the doxology from Ephesians 3:20-21 as your closing prayer.
PRACTICE

• Spend time praying by name for your group members, focusing your prayers on their spiritual growth and responsiveness to Christ’s indwelling presence.

• Journal your thoughts as you reflect on the following question set from In My Context (PSG, p. 63): To what can you point in your life that indicates you equally value the development of your inner being along with the outward person?

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention activity, begin by reading the paragraph on page 55 of the PSG. Invite volunteers to share their responses to the question: Recall a time when the physical presence of a friend helped you get through a challenging situation.

To transition, say: In the same way that we gain strength to face challenging situations by the mere presence of a good friend, Jesus strengthens us to grow in faith and persevere in the struggles of life by being present with us always. Grasping that truth is at the heart of Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in today’s text.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• For additional insight into Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-15, draw attention to the Key Doctrine—God the Father (PSG, p. 58). Discuss how this doctrinal statement informs the way we pray.

• To supplement discussion of Ephesians 3:16-19, point out that Paul gave a visual image to aid his readers (v. 18). Guide the group to reflect on this question: What metaphor or mental image would you use to describe God’s love for you? Instruct them to take a few minutes to draw a picture or write a poem that captures their thoughts.

• For further study of the doxology in Ephesians 3:20-21, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 62).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Explain that the mission of the church as a whole and each individual believer is to honor God and glorify Him in all generations on all corners of the earth. Call for quiet reflection on the questions from page 63 of the PSG: How is Christ being glorified “in all generations” through your ministry? What adjustments need to be made to bring honor to God to a greater degree? Challenge the group to discuss these questions with their spouse or a trusted friend this week.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Listen to “In Christ Alone (My Hope Is Found),” by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend.