

The Book of Ephesians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Paul's Prayer for the Church's Strength

Ephesians 3:14–21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson is a prayer, and so its center of gravity is the formation of the inner life. The teacher should help the class notice what Paul does not pray for. He does not ask that these believers be made comfortable, prosperous, or free from trouble. He prays for inner strength through the Spirit, the indwelling of Christ, a grasp of Christ's love, and fullness in God. The aim is to reorder our own praying around these deep realities, so that we ask God less for the rearranging of our circumstances and more for the transforming of our hearts.

There is real doctrinal substance here as well. The prayer is thoroughly Trinitarian, the Father addressed, the Spirit strengthening, the Son indwelling, and it teaches the indwelling of Christ through faith, the security of being rooted in His love, and the goal of being filled with all the fullness of God. The teacher should help the class understand fullness rightly: not absorption into deity, and not sinless perfection in this life, but the presence and character of God increasingly filling and shaping the believer until Christ is formed in us. The closing doxology also locates God's glory in the church, which reinforces the high view of the church running through the letter.

Formationally, this passage invites students to take the condition of their inner life seriously and to pray bold, God-sized prayers. Paul ends by declaring that God can do far more than we ask or think. The aim is to leave students both searching their hearts honestly and lifting their hopes higher, confident that the limit is never in God's supply but only in our small asking.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 14 and 15 Paul bows his knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. What do Paul's posture and his way of addressing God reveal about how we should approach God in prayer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul says he bows his knees before the Father. Since standing was the usual posture for prayer, kneeling signals unusual intensity and reverence. The posture itself is a sermon: some prayers should bend us low. Paul's whole body expresses the earnestness of his heart.

He addresses God as Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. God is not a distant force but a Father, the source and pattern of all true family. To pray is to come to a Father who knows us and names us, which invites both reverence and intimacy.

Together these set the tone for Christian prayer: reverent, because we kneel before the great God; and intimate, because we come to a loving Father. Many believers lose one or the other, either casual familiarity without awe, or fearful distance without love.

Help the class hold both. We approach the throne of grace boldly (Hebrews 4:16), yet we never forget whose throne it is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reverence and intimacy held together in prayer
- Kneeling as an expression of earnestness
- God as Father, the source of all true family
- Approaching God with both awe and confidence

Discussion Prompts

- What do Paul's posture and address reveal about approaching God?
- Do you tend toward casual familiarity or fearful distance in prayer?
- How can reverence and intimacy live together in your praying?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul kneels in earnest, longing prayer for others. How would you describe the current state of your own prayer life, and what would it look like to pray with more of the earnestness Paul shows here?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites honest self-examination about prayer. Paul prays with kneeling intensity for people he loves. Most of us pray more thinly than that, hurried, distracted, focused mainly on our own needs.

Be gentle and encouraging here. The goal is not to heap guilt but to stir desire. A weak prayer life is not first a discipline problem but a relationship that has grown cool and can be warmed again.

Encourage one concrete step toward earnestness, perhaps a regular unhurried time, praying Scripture, or praying this very passage for others. Earnest prayer grows by practice, not by waiting to feel earnest.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest assessment of one's prayer life
- Earnestness as the fruit of love, not mere duty
- Warming a cooled relationship with God
- Practical steps toward deeper prayer

Discussion Prompts

- How would you honestly describe your prayer life right now?
- What has cooled or crowded out your praying?
- What is one step toward praying with more earnestness?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verse 16 Paul prays that God would strengthen them with power through His Spirit in their inner being. What kind of strength is Paul asking for, and why does he aim it at the inner being rather than at outward circumstances?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul prays that God would strengthen them with power through His Spirit in their inner being. The strength is supplied by the Holy Spirit and applied to the inner being, the hidden person of the heart where character, courage, and faith reside.

This is a striking request. We instinctively pray for our circumstances to improve; Paul prays for our interior to be fortified. He knows that a strong inner life can endure weak circumstances, but a weak inner life collapses even in comfort.

The strength comes according to the riches of His glory, an immense supply. God does not strengthen us out of His leftovers but out of His glory. The reservoir is inexhaustible; our weakness is no obstacle to it.

Help the class value inner strength. Much of the Christian life is won or lost in the inner being, long before it shows in outward action.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Inner strength supplied by the Spirit
- The inner being as the decisive battleground
- Strength drawn from the riches of God's glory
- Praying for fortified hearts, not just easier circumstances

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of strength is Paul praying for here?
- Why does he aim it at the inner being rather than outward circumstances?
- Why is a strong inner life so important for enduring hard times?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul prays for strength in the hidden, inner person. In what area of your inner life, your fears, habits, or weariness, do you most need God's strengthening power right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the prayer for inner strength personal. Invite students to name where their inner being is weak: a gripping fear, a recurring temptation, a deep weariness, a wavering faith. Naming it invites God's strengthening power into that exact place.

Remind them that this strength is the Spirit's gift, not self-generated grit. We do not strengthen ourselves; we ask, and we receive what God supplies. The Christian life is empowered from within by the Spirit, not powered by willpower alone.

Encourage them to pray Paul's prayer for themselves by name, asking the Spirit to strengthen them in the precise place of weakness, and to expect that God delights to answer such a request.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the place of inner weakness
- Strength as the Spirit's gift, not self-generated grit
- Praying Scripture for oneself
- Expecting God to strengthen the inner being

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most need God's strength in your inner life right now?
- How is the Spirit's strength different from mere willpower?
- How might you pray this prayer for yourself this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Verse 17 says the goal of this strengthening is that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. What does it mean for Christ to dwell, or settle down and be at home, in a believer's heart, and how does that happen through faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The goal of the strengthening is that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith (v. 17). The word translated dwell means to settle down and be at home, to take up permanent residence rather than to visit briefly. Paul prays that Christ would be thoroughly at home in them.

Christ already lives in every believer by His Spirit (Romans 8:9). So Paul is praying for something deeper than mere presence: that Christ would be welcomed into every room, that His residence would be settled, comfortable, and unhindered, ruling the whole house of the heart.

This happens through faith. As we trust Christ, open ourselves to Him, and submit to Him, He makes Himself increasingly at home. Faith is the door through which the indwelling Christ fills the house.

Help the class see the difference between Christ as a guest, kept to the front room, and Christ as the master of the house, at home throughout. Paul prays for the latter.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ dwelling, settling down and being at home, in the heart
- The difference between Christ as guest and Christ as master
- Faith as the means of the indwelling
- The whole heart opened to Christ's rule

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean for Christ to be at home in your heart, not just present?
- How does Christ come to be more at home through faith?
- Is Christ a guest in a front room of your life, or master of the house?

Question 6

Student Question:

If Christ is to be at home in your heart, there may be rooms you have kept closed to Him. What part of your life have you not yet opened to Christ, and what would it look like to welcome Him there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the image of Christ at home into specific terms. To be at home, a person must have access to the whole house. Many believers keep certain rooms locked, a relationship, a habit, an area of money, a corner of resentment.

Invite honest reflection on which room remains closed to Christ. Often it is the very area we are most ashamed of or most determined to control. Yet Christ cannot be at home where He is shut out.

Encourage a step of welcome rather than mere resolve. Opening a closed room means bringing it honestly to Christ in confession and surrender, inviting His presence and authority where we had kept Him out.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Locked rooms we keep closed to Christ
- Areas of shame or control as common closed doors
- Surrender and confession as the act of welcome
- Christ's lordship over every part of life

Discussion Prompts

- What part of your life have you not yet opened to Christ?
- Why do we tend to keep certain rooms closed to Him?
- What would welcoming Christ into that area look like?

Question 7

Student Question:

In verses 17 through 19 Paul prays that they would be rooted and grounded in love and able to comprehend the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. What does it mean to know a love that is beyond knowing, and why does Paul want them rooted in it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul prays that they would be rooted and grounded in love and have strength to comprehend the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (vv. 17-19). He mixes metaphors deliberately: rooted like a tree and grounded like a building, both images of stability drawn from a deep, settled love.

The love he wants them to grasp is the love of Christ, measured in four directions, its breadth and length and height and depth. The point of the measurements is that there is no end to them. Christ's love reaches every direction without limit.

Then comes the beautiful paradox: to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. We can truly know this love and never come to the end of it. Like the ocean, it can be experienced really yet never fully fathomed. Paul wants them to keep going deeper forever.

Help the class see why being rooted in love matters. A life anchored in the certainty of Christ's love can weather storms that uproot a life anchored in achievement, approval, or circumstance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being rooted and grounded in the love of Christ

- The boundless dimensions of Christ's love
- Knowing a love that surpasses knowledge
- Love as the anchor for a stable life

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to know a love that is beyond fully knowing?
- Why does Paul want believers rooted and grounded in love?
- How is a life anchored in Christ's love more stable than one anchored in achievement?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul wants believers anchored in the love of Christ. How does being secure in Christ's love actually change the way a person lives, and where do you tend to look for love and security apart from Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the security of Christ's love to daily life. A person convinced they are deeply loved lives differently: freer, kinder, braver, less driven by the approval of others. A person unsure of love lives anxiously, performing for acceptance.

Help students see where they seek love and security apart from Christ, in romance, success, the approval of others, possessions. These are not wrong in themselves, but they make crushing gods and unstable foundations.

Encourage them to return again and again to the settled love of Christ as their root. The more secure we are in His love, the less we demand from people and circumstances, and the more freely we can love others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Security in Christ's love shaping daily life
- Substitutes for love: approval, success, romance, possessions
- Freedom from performing for acceptance
- Loving others out of our own security in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- How does being secure in Christ's love change the way a person lives?
- Where do you tend to seek love and security apart from Christ?
- How might resting in His love free you to love others better?

Question 9

Student Question:

Verse 19 prays that you may be filled with all the fullness of God, and verses 20 and 21 give glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus. What does it mean to be filled with all the fullness of God, what does it not mean, and what does it tell us that God is glorified in the church throughout all generations?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the prayer, and the teacher should handle it with care. Paul prays that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (v. 19), and then bursts into a doxology giving God glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations (vv. 20–21). Both phrases need careful explanation.

To be filled with all the fullness of God does not mean we become divine, are absorbed into God, or lose our identity, and it does not mean we reach sinless perfection in this life. Scripture nowhere promises flawless perfection now (1 John 1:8). Rather, it means that the presence, character, and life of God increasingly fill and saturate the believer, so that we are conformed more and more to Christ, in whom all the fullness of God dwells (Colossians 2:9–10). It is the goal of being so filled with God's love, holiness, and power that His character is formed in us. It is a fullness we grow into, and will know completely only in glory.

Guard the class against two errors. One is to over-read the phrase into a claim of present perfection or some elite second blessing that lifts a Christian beyond struggle. The other is to under-read it into nothing at all. Paul really does pray that ordinary believers would be increasingly filled with God Himself, and we should desire it earnestly while remaining honest about the ongoing fight against sin.

The doxology then locates God's glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. This is striking. God has chosen to display His glory not only in Christ but in the church, the reconciled people of the previous chapters. The church is meant to be a theater of God's glory throughout all generations. This reinforces the letter's high view of the church and dignifies our participation in it.

Bring the two together. As believers are filled with the fullness of God, the church becomes radiant with His glory. Personal transformation and the glory of God in His church are not separate goals; the filling of individual hearts is how the church comes to display the glory of God to every generation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being filled with the fullness of God as growing Christlikeness, God's character filling us
- What it does not mean: becoming divine, absorption, or present sinless perfection (1 John 1:8)

- The fullness of God dwelling in Christ, into whom we are being conformed (Colossians 2:9–10)
- Desiring the fullness earnestly while remaining honest about the ongoing fight with sin
- God glorified in the church as a theater of His glory
- Personal transformation and the church's glory as one purpose

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean, and not mean, to be filled with all the fullness of God?
- How do we long for this fullness while staying honest about our struggles?
- What does it tell us that God is glorified in the church through all generations?

Question 10

Student Question:

Verses 20 and 21 say God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us. Looking back over this whole prayer, name one specific way the Lord is forming you through it, and one bold thing you sense God inviting you to ask Him for.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone rests on the doxology of verses 20 and 21: God is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us. Paul piles up words, far more abundantly than all, straining to say that God's ability outruns even our boldest requests and our largest imaginations.

Notice the measure of God's working: according to the power at work within us. The same resurrection power Paul described in chapter 1 is the standard. God does not act according to our weakness but according to His power already at work in His people.

Press for a personal response. Ask each student to name one way this prayer is forming them, perhaps a deeper inner life, a more welcomed Christ, a firmer security in His love, or a higher view of the church.

Then invite boldness. Since God can do more than we ask, our small praying, not His small power, is usually the limit. Ask each person to name one bold, God-sized thing they sense God inviting them to ask for, and to actually bring it to Him this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's ability exceeding our largest requests and imaginations
- God's working measured by His power at work in us
- Bold, God-sized prayer
- Our small asking, not God's supply, as the usual limit

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this prayer most needs to shape your heart this week?
- What bold thing do you sense God inviting you to ask Him for?
- How does knowing God can do more than you ask change the way you pray?