

# The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis  
LESSON LVIII : PAUL'S PRAYER AND DOXOLOGY (3:14-21)

*For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (Eph 3:14-21 KJV)*

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph 3:14-21 NIV)*

*For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in the heavens and on earth is named, that He may give to you, according to the riches of His glory, with might to be strengthened through His Spirit, in regard to the inner man, that the Christ may dwell through the faith in your hearts, in love having been rooted and founded, that ye may be in strength to comprehend, with all the saints, what [is] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, to know also the love of the Christ that is exceeding the knowledge, that ye may be filled — to all the fulness of God; and to Him who is able above all things to do exceeding abundantly what we ask or think, according to the power that is working in us, to Him [is] the glory in the assembly in Christ Jesus, to all the generations of the age of the ages. Amen. (Eph 3:14-21 Young's Literal Translation)*

## PAUL'S PRAYER

### PAUL STARTS TO PRAY FOR HIS READERS BUT DIGRESSES:

<sup>1</sup> *For this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you the Gentiles ...*

### PAUL RETURNS TO HIS PRAYER:

<sup>14</sup> *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,*

### PAUL SETS FORTH HIS PRAYER WITH THREE REQUESTS FOR HIS READERS, THE FIRST BEING FOR GOD TO GRANT THEM SOMETHING:

<sup>16</sup> *in order that (hina) he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory,*

**INFINITIVE CLAUSE #1 (an infinitive is a verbal noun, a verb not restrained by number or person)**

*to be strengthened (infinitive) with power through his Spirit in your inner being,*

**INFINITIVE CLAUSE #2**

<sup>17</sup> *and that Christ may dwell (infinitive) in your hearts through faith —*

**TWO PERFECT PASSIVE PARTICIPIAL FORMS (a participle is a verbal adjective):**

*being rooted and grounded in love,*

### PAUL'S SECOND REQUEST ALSO HAS TO DO WITH STRENGTHENING BUT USES A DIFFERENT WORD THAN ABOVE:

<sup>18</sup> *in order that (hina) you may be able, may be empowered*

**INFINITIVE CLAUSE #1**

*to comprehend (infinitive) with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,*

**INFINITIVE CLAUSE #2**

<sup>19</sup> *and to know (infinitive) the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,*

## PAUL'S THIRD REQUEST FORMS A CLIMAX TO HIS PRAYER:

in order that (*hina*) you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

## PAUL'S DOXOLOGY (a liturgical formula of praise to God)

### PAUL BEGINS WITH THE MENTION OF THE ONE TO WHOM GLORY IS ASCRIBED ...

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,

**BUT HIS ELABORATION ON THE POWER OF GOD BECOMES LENGTHY ENOUGH THAT PAUL FINDS IT NECESSARY TO BEGIN THE DOXOLOGY AGAIN WITH THE REPETITION OF THE ONE TO WHOM THE PRAISE IS ADDRESSED:**

<sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the congregation and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

## PAUL'S FIRST PRAYER PETITION (vv. 16~17a)

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,

<sup>16</sup> in order that (*hina*) **he may grant you**, according to the riches of his glory,

**to be strengthened** with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

<sup>17</sup> and that Christ **may dwell** in your hearts through faith,

## PAUL'S SECOND PRAYER PETITION (vv. 17b~19a)

<sup>18</sup> in order that (*hina*) **you**, being rooted and grounded in love, **may be able, may be empowered**

**to comprehend** with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

<sup>19</sup> and **to know** the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,

## PAUL'S THIRD PRAYER PETITION (v. 19b)

in order that (*hina*) you may be filled — **to all the fullness of God**

**v. 19b** — **in order that ye may be filled — to all the fulness of God** — πληρωθητε εις παν το πληρωμα του θεου [plērōthēte eis pan to plērōma tou theou] — **BOLD PRAYER** — “This final clause [of Paul’s prayer] is both bold and climatic. In his vision for his readers nothing can exceed attaining to the divine fullness. Indeed J. A. Robinson could write, ‘No prayer that has ever been framed has uttered a bolder request. It is a noble example of [parrēsia], of freedom of speech, of that ‘boldness and access in confidence’ of which he has spoken above.’” [Lincoln, 215] The reference made by Joseph Armitage Robinson (1858-1933; Church of England; Dean of Westminster and Wells) is to Paul’s statement that we are to have ‘boldness’ in prayer. See lesson 52, chapter 3 verse 12.

**FULLNESS OF GOD** — “[The ‘fullness’] in all NT usage, it maintains the idea of the result of filling as fullness, completeness, entirety... [W]hen it was used with the corresponding verb [‘to be filled’], as here, it normally has the idea of ‘completeness, the absence of any [gap or missing part].” [Hoehner, 490] “Paul now expresses in one word what he meant by the various dimensions. He who has Christ has everything necessary for being made perfect in God; for this is the meaning of the phrase, the fullness of God. Men do certainly imagine that they have entire completeness in themselves, but it is only when their pride is swelled with empty trifles.” [Calvin, Ephesians] “It is a favourite word with Paul. Thus he speaks of the *fulness* of the Gentiles, Ro 11:25; the *fulness* of time, Ga 4:4; the *fulness* of him that filleth all in all, Eph 1:23; the *fulness* of Christ, Eph 4:13; the *fulness* of the Godhead in Christ, Col 1:19; 2:9. It means here, ‘that you may have the richest measures of Divine consolation and of the Divine Presence; that you may partake of the entire enjoyment of God in the most ample measure in which he bestows his favours on his people.’” [Barne’s Notes on NT]

**MEDIATED THROUGH CHRIST** — “The fullness of God, which is best explained as his presence and power, his life and rule, immanent in his creation, has been mediated to believers through Christ, in whom the fullness was present bodily.” [Lincoln, 214] “*Fulness of God is the fulness which God imparts through the dwelling of Christ in the heart; Christ, in whom the Father was pleased that all the*



*fulness should dwell (Col 1:19), and in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead (Col 2:9).” [Wuest, 90f]*

**TO BE FILLED ‘TOWARDS, UNTO’ THE FULNESS OF GOD** — *“The ultimate purpose of the prayer is the filling of believers; since there is no explicit statement saying with what they are to be filled this must be deduced from the context. The answer would be simple if we could give εἰς [eis] the meaning ‘with’ as do AV, RSV, REB and many other translations, but this would rob the preposition of its true value.... What fills believers will be the same as that which fills God or that with which God fills .... Col 2.9 provides the closest parallel to our passage but differs in that it is not said here as there that ‘all the fullness of God’ dwells in believers. Instead εἰς [eis] suggests a movement towards all the fullness of God. There is a goal which has not yet been attained (this is a prayer) and the goal is to be filled with what distinguishes God.” [Best, 347f]* *“In 1:23 the Church was said to be the fullness of Christ who fills the cosmos in every respect. Here, however, it is the fullness of God himself which is in view, and the prayer is that believers should attain to that fullness. εἰς [eis] 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.” [Lincoln, 214]* Note how the translations handle this verse:

*‘that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God’ (Geneva, KJV, RSV, NKJV, ESV)*

*‘that ye might be fulfilled with all manner of fulnes which commeth of God’ (Tyndale NT)*

*‘that ye may be filled — to all the fulness of God’ (YLT); ‘that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God’ (RV, ASV)*

*‘that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God’ (NASV)*

*‘that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God’ (NIV)*

Others who agree the normal sense of the preposition should be retained:

**Harold Hoehner** — *“The preposition εἰς [eis] indicates movement toward a goal and thus could be translated ‘up to the level of’ or ‘to the measure of’ (NIV) or ‘filled unto’ (RV, ASV) or; as we have translated it, ‘filled up to’ (NASB). This implies that believers will never be filled as God is filled but should move toward that goal.” [Hoehner, 490]*

**Peter O’Brien** — *“Paul’s prayer to the Father reaches its climax in this final, summarizing request. As believers are strengthened inwardly through God’s Spirit when Christ dwells in their hearts through faith and they know in a personal way more of the immeasurable love of Christ, so they will be ‘filled to the measure of all the fulness of God’. (A similar thought is expressed in Ephesians 4:13, where the divinely intended purpose for God’s people is their attaining ‘to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’.) It is God who infills them, as the divine passive of the verb indicates, while his dynamic activity clearly has a movement towards a specific goal in view, namely, all the fulness of God. The genitive ‘of God’ is subjective and thus refers to God in all his perfection, including his presence, life, and power. That fulness or perfection is the standard or level to which they are to be filled (hence the NIV’s ‘to the measure of all the fullness of God’), and thus is may also imply that they are filled with this fulness.” [O’Brien, 265]*

**Charles Hodge** — *“The words, εἰς πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ θεοῦ [eis pan to plērōma tou theou], are not properly translated, ‘with all the fulness of God,’ but ‘unto the complete fulness of God.’ That is the standard which is to be reached.” [Hodge, 133]*

**Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset & David Brown Commentary** — *“[R]ather, as Greek, ‘filled even unto all the fulness of God’ (this is the grand goal), that is, filled, each according to your capacity, with the divine wisdom, knowledge, and love; ‘even as God is full,’ and as Christ who dwells in your hearts, hath ‘all the fulness of the Godhead dwelling in Him bodily’ (Col 2:9).” [JFB, Commentary on Whole Bible]*

**Marvin R. Vincent** — *“With is better rendered unto, to the measure or standard of.” [Vincent, Word Studies in NT]*

**THE GOAL OF BELIEVERS – PRESENTLY UNATTAINABLE BUT OUR ULTIMATE REALITY** — *“The ‘fulness of God’ is that excellence,’ says Chrysostom, ‘of which God himself is full.’ The expression is then parallel to that in Matt. v. 48, ‘Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.’ And the truth presented is the same substantially as that in Eph. iv. 13, ‘Until we all come ... unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ;’ and 1 Cor. xiii. 12, ‘Then shall I know even as also I am known.’ Absolute perfection is the standard to which the believer is to attain. He is predestinated to be conformed to the image of the Son of God, Rom. viii. 29. He is to be perfect as man, as God is perfect as God; and the perfection of man consists in his being full of God, — God dwelling in him, so as absolutely to control all his cognitions, feelings, and outward actions.... We are to grow to the stature of Christ; to be perfect as our Father is perfect; to be filled unto the measure of the fulness of God. When we are thus filled, the distance between us and God will still be infinite. This is the culminating point of the apostle’s prayer. He prays that they may be strengthened in order to comprehend the infinite love of Christ; and that they might comprehend the love of Christ, in order that they might be filled unto the measure of God’s fulness.” [Hodge, 133ff]* *“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.... [Paul believed] that Christians are to be fully conformed to the image of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29). 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 (cf 1 Cor 15:28).” [Lincoln, 214f]*

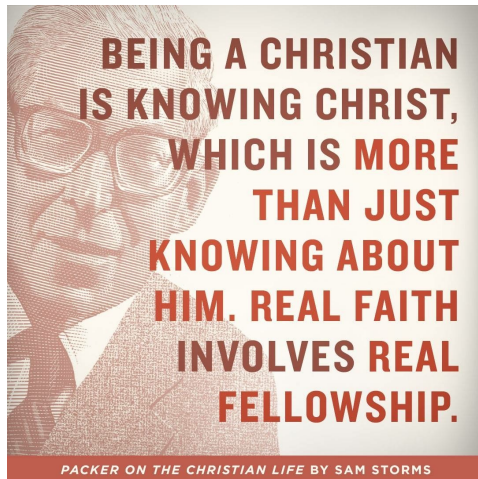
**“Blessed are they that hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.’ He that hungereth, let him hunger more; and he that desireth, let him still more abundantly desire; for all that he can desire he shall fully obtain.”** [Bernard; quoted in Calvin, Ephesians] “According to Ephesians 1:23, the church as Christ’s body *already* shares in his fullness. Yet Paul now prays that the readers might be filled to the measure of all the plenitude of God. How are we to explain this apparent contradiction? The tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ is part of the New Testament’s, and in particular Paul’s, eschatological perspective. Because of their union with the resurrected and exalted Christ in whom the fullness of deity resides, God’s people, the church, possess the divine fullness. According to Colossians 1:19; 2:9 the divine fullness is perfectly found in Christ, and from him believers have already come to fullness of life (cf. 2:10). Paul’s predominantly Gentile readers have already been united with Christ in his death, resurrection, and exaltation (Eph. 2:5,6). Yet they are still to walk in newness of life, and need to attain to this fullness (4:13; cf. 5:18). ***They are to become what they already are.*** Divine enabling is essential for them (3:19) in the midst of the tension as they live between the two ages, and being filled by the Spirit is an important means in the process (5:18). When the apostle desires that his readers may be strengthened through the Spirit and experience the effects of Christ’s indwelling so that they may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God, he is praying that they may ‘be all that God wants them to be’, that is, spiritually mature. Since God himself, Christ himself, is the standard, then this means being perfect as he is perfect, being holy as he is holy.” [O’Brien, 265f] ***“J. Wilbur Chapman often told of the testimony given by a certain man in one of his meetings:***

***‘I got off at the Pennsylvania depot as a tramp, and for a year I begged on the streets for a living. One day I touched a man on the shoulder and said, “Hey, mister, can you give me a dime?” As soon as I saw his face I was shocked to see that it was my own father. I said, “Father, Father, do you know me?” Throwing his arms around me and with tears in his eyes, he said, “Oh, my son, at last I’ve found you! I’ve found you. You want a dime? Everything I have is yours.” Think of it. I was a tramp. I stood begging my own father for ten cents, when for eighteen years he had been looking for me to give me all that he had.’***

***That is a small picture of what God wants to do for His children. His supreme goal in bringing us to Himself is to make us like Himself by filling us with Himself, with all that He is and has.”*** [MacArthur, 111] “By knowing the love of Christ, and only so, is it possible to be filled up to the measure of God’s own fullness. This, one may say, is the language of the hyperbole: how can the finite reach the infinite? But the Christ whose love is to be known is the Christ in whom ‘all the fullness of deity resides’ and in whom his people have found their fullness (Col 2:9-10). By the knowledge of his love, and only so, may they hope to attain to the divine fullness — insofar as that attainment is possible for created beings.... To know the love of Christ is to know Christ himself, in ever widening experience, and to have his outgoing and self-denying love reproduced in oneself. It could not be otherwise, if he dwells in his people and they in him.” [Bruce, 329]

**IS IT LIMITED TO THE CONTEXT OF LOVE?** — Several commentators narrow the application to the love of God since this is the immediate context. ***“This taken abstractly and apart from the context might be the full total of either his attributes or the spiritual gifts which he imparts to believers. The context from v. 17 has however been that of love. The nature of God is love; his greatest spiritual gift is love. Probably then we should understand God as able to fill with that love which summarises his own being and to whose fullness [Paul’s] readers have not yet attained, but which in itself enables them to move towards their goal. This interpretation accords with 5:1 where believers are summoned to imitate God, again in a context of love. Their nature and God’s should coincide but this can only happen when God fills them with his love.”*** [Best, 348] “In 1:23 we concluded that the church was being filled with God’s moral excellence and power. In the present context to be filled up to God’s fullness is to know the love of Christ. The fullness of the Godhead is only in Christ, and only through him is a believer made complete (Col 2:9-10). Though in Christ this divine fullness ideally belongs to a believer, Paul prayed that it might be experientially realized in each one (cf. Eph 4:13). Experiencing God’s moral excellence, perfection, and power would result in love between Jewish and Gentile believers. Positionally they are one in Christ (2:11-3:13), experientially they are to love one another as one in him. Then Jesus’ statement that ‘all people will know that we are his disciples if we love one another’ (John 13:35) will ring true among the unconverted in the community. Before redemption real animosity existed between Jews and Gentiles and between these two groups and God. God’s redemptive work through his Son transformed them into his workmanship (Eph 2:1-10). God then took these redeemed Jews and Gentiles and made them into one body, creating a new person encompassing reconciliation between the two groups as well as a collective reconciliation to God (2:11-3:13). In other words, theologically the two former enemies are now one in Christ. However, more is involved than a theological reconciliation. There must be experiential reconciliation. Hence, Paul’s prayer in this context is that they may know the love of Christ and in knowing this they might be filled with God’s moral excellence, perfection, and power. It is, then, a combination of God’s righteousness and God’s love that must be experienced by believers. This prayer paves the way for the practical outworking of their position in Christ, which is outlined in chapters 4-6 of this letter.... ***Paul’s first prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-23) was offered in order that they might know God and his power. His second prayer, in the present context, is a plea for them to comprehend Christ’s love which, in turn, would cause them to love their fellow saints. This prayer is the climax of his discussion on the unification of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, thus, becoming one new person. Paul desired that what was true positionally would be true experientially in the lives of the Ephesian believers. This experiential knowledge of Christ’s love is not only for individual believers but it is to be applied to the corporate unity. Unity of Jewish and Gentile believers is evidence of God’s power. ‘A divided church, instead of being a sign of God’s conquering power in Christ, reflects the negative message of a victory by the forces of evil.’ The body of believers is to experience Christ’s love.”*** [Hoehner, 490f]

**THE GOAL OF TRUE RELIGION** — ***“It was to be with all the fullness of God; not with partial and stinted measures of his gracious presence, but with all which he ever bestows. Religion is not a name. It is not a matter of form. It is not a trifle. It***



PACKER ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE BY SAM STORMS

*is the richest, best gift of God to man. It ennobles our nature. It more clearly teaches us our true dignity than all the profound discoveries which men can make in science; for none of them will ever fill us with the ruiness of God. Religion is spiritual, elevating, pure, Godlike. We dwell with God; walk with God; live with God; commune with God; are like God. We become partakers of the Divine nature, (2 Pe 1:4;) in rank we are associated with angels; in happiness and purity we are associated with God....*

Let us seek to know more of the love of Christ in our redemption into understand more of the extent of that love which he evinced for us, Eph 3:16-19. It is worth our study. It will reward our efforts. There are few Christians — if there are any — who understand the richness and fulness of the gospel of Christ; few who have such elevated views as they might have, and should have, of the glory of that gospel. It is wonderful that they who profess to love the Lord Jesus do not study that system more, and desire more to know the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the love of Christ. True, it passes knowledge. We cannot hope fully to fathom it in this world. But we may know more of it than we do.

We may aspire to being filled with all the fulness of God. We may long for it; pant for it; strive for it; pray for it — and we shall not strive in vain. Though we shall not attain all we wish; though there will be an infinity beyond what we can understand in this world, yet there will be enough attained to reward all our efforts, and to fill us with love and joy and peace. The love of God our Saviour is indeed an illimitable ocean; but we may see enough of it in this world to lead us to adore and praise God with overflowing hearts.” [Barne’s Notes on NT] Contrast Albert Barne’s comments with Christianity in modern America. Salvation today is for many merely a ticket out of hell, ‘pray this prayer and you can live as you please.’ But true salvation will not let us go our own way. True salvation is a life-altering experience that begins our journey of being conformed to the image of Christ.

