

EMPOWERED UNITY FOR GOD'S GLORY

A Sermon on Ephesians 3:20–21

Jason S. DeRouchie, PhD

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Introduction

The prophet Habakkuk declared: “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab 3:17–18). The apostle Paul, too, asserted:

I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this [trial] will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Phil 1:18–21)

For guests, we as a body find ourselves this morning in an unexpected season of loss and heartache. This week a pastor was dismissed from his post. We ask this morning, What does God want for us, and how should we respond? Habakkuk said, “If all divine discipline pours down upon me, yet I will rejoice in Yahweh.” Paul said, “I will rejoice, knowing that my deliverance will culminate in Christ’s honor.”

In this season of loss, may we remember “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (Eph 1:3). Let your souls take deep comfort knowing that the God who “made us alive together with Christ” has “put all things under his feet ... for the church” (1:22) and is, in this very season of grief and uncertainty working “all things according to the counsel of his will” (1:11). Let your heart begin to soar in hope and adoration, knowing that Christ is still at the Father’s right hand “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (1:21) and that in him God will “unite all things” (1:10), fixing what is broken, righting all wrongs, and bringing order out of chaos. The hope for our church today is Jesus, through whom we have been adopted as children of God (1:5), no longer “children of wrath” (2:3).

Today we have come to the climax of the first half of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in 3:20–21; here the first three chapters peak in praise. To this point, Paul has urged the church toward unity in Jesus; as he summarizes the call in 4:3, the church needs “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Sometimes unity is only possible through discipline, as the church calls straying members back into the fold and clearly signals what it means to follow

Jesus. This unity does not mean everyone is the same, for there are Jews and non-Jews and many body parts with different functions and giftings. Yet the unity is centered on Jesus, not following patterns of sin associated with “the course of this world” (2:2) but living out the “good works” that “God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (2:10). This unity is grounded in God’s love toward us in Christ and is characterized by our love for others. God’s “great love” moved him to save us (2:4), and Paul prays that we will know Christ’s love that “surpasses knowledge” (3:17) and that makes possible the gospel (3:7–10). Later he will charge us to speak “the truth in love” (4:15) and to “walk in love, as Christ loved us” (5:2). Having called the church to unity in Jesus, Paul pauses to stand in awe of a God who is all powerful and, therefore, able to enable what he commands.

Knowing the toilsome terrain we have had to journey as a body, I didn’t have to go elsewhere to find a text that would speak to our hearts, and I sense God’s kindness to our body this week, letting us simply progress to the next verses in our series that place us at a pinnacle of praise and open for us amazing vistas of veneration. Look at 3:20–21: “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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. My sermon today has three parts: (1) the God worthy of glory; (2) the meaning of “to God be glory”; and (3) the agents and extent of glory. I truly hope that wherever you are at in your walk with God that you would this day find great comfort and confidence in our God who is more than able to provide your every need and satisfy your deepest longings. Pray with me....

The God Worthy of Glory (3:20)

We open considering the God worthy of glory. Paul directs his climactic praise “to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” The term translated *who is able* is the participle form related to the noun “power” later in the verse. I translate the whole: “Now to him *who is powerful* beyond all to do more than ever what we ask or think, according to the *power* working within us.” Who is the one worthy of glory? He is the one powerful beyond all.

Paul speaks of this power earlier back in 1:19–21. There he prays that we may know “what is the immeasurable greatness of [God’s] *power* toward us who believe” (1:19). He then adds it was this “great might” of God that erupted into the world as molten mercy when God raised Jesus from the dead and enthroned him at God’s right hand “far above all rule and authority and *power* and dominion” (2:20–21). The power God worked in Christ renders Jesus far superior to all other powers, and that identical divine authoritative energy Paul now says in 3:20 is “at work within us” (3:20). The same power that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in

you who believe, and no other power can compare. The implications of this in our pursuit of life and holiness are massive.

In your weakness, remember that you have a God who is supremely strong—“powerful beyond all.” You may feel condemned, but if you are in Jesus the powerful God has defeated the prince of the power of the air and declared “by grace you have been saved” (2:5), making you no longer a child of wrath (2:3). Indeed, “we have redemption through [Christ’s] blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (1:7). You may be afraid, but the one who “works all things according to the counsel of his will” is with you and for you. “In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” (1:5) and sealed us “with the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13). This makes the church God’s temple—the very “dwelling place for God” (2:21–22). As a Christian, wherever you go and whatever you face, God is with you, so you need not fear. You may feel sin’s hold on you is too great and that you are overcome by discontentment or lust, anger or doubt, worry or insecurity. Yet Jesus died not only to free you from sin’s penalty but to release you from sin’s power. “We are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (2:10). The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is working in us, moving us to walk in newness of life without pride or prejudice, enabling us to forgive as we have been forgiven, and giving us hope beyond what would ever be possible on our own. Jesus is greater than all the powers of darkness, and Paul would have us stand in awe of the God who is supremely powerful.

The apostle adds a specific angle to our God’s super-capability. He notes that he is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” The term behind *far more abundantly* is the highest form of comparison possible in Greek; it’s a super-superlative (cf. Dan 3:22; 1 Thess 3:10; 5:13). Your most extravagant request, and every dream of your wildest imagination cannot compare to what is possible with God. As Jeremiah declares, “Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you” (Jer 32:17; cf. Gen 18:14; Job 42:2; Mark 9:23; 10:27; 14:36; Luke 1:37).

As I look out on this body, I can imagine a day when we have dozens of missionary units on the field and several support teams at home holding their ropes, when God has raised up multiple new pastors from our midst and sent them with hundreds of former members to plant churches. I picture a day when the babies in this room are parents discipling their own children, when present college students are leaders in the home, church, and community, when we have many deacons overseeing teams of servants, and when our council of pastors is loaded with godly, qualified men. I envision a time when the members grounded long-

term in our community outnumber those associated with the seminary, when William Jewell College and the city of Liberty know about Sovereign Joy because of its love and its intentional witness for Christ. I long to see our church become a mobilizing center for equipping Bible-believing, Christ-embracing, gospel-cherishing, nations-loving men and women who are sold-out for the sake of Jesus's name—humble in prayer, skilled in the Word, bold in their testimony, sacrificial in their love, and hopeful in Christ's return.

But there is more. With Paul, I can pray that our Father of glory would “give [us] a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of [our] hearts enlightened, that [we] may know what is the hope to which he has called [us], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (Eph 1:17–19). Furthermore, I can ask that “according to the riches of his glory he may grant [us] to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in [our] inner being, so that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith—that [we], being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fulness of God” (3:16–19). It is that last element that absolutely blows me away. Paul says that God who is powerful beyond all can do more than ever what we ask or think, yet Paul was able to request and imagine God filling us with all the fulness of God. What could be more than that? How could it get better or more extreme or more extensive?

Brothers and sisters, find rest today. Find hope today and do not lose heart. As Paul says elsewhere,

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor 7:16–18).

May we join the apostle in considering that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18).

Who is worthy of glory? The God “who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph 3:20). This last note regarding God working within us is significant. It not only recalls that we are God's temple in which he dwells, it draws attention to how we become agents in fulfilling his good purposes—“his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (2:10). God's gracious power toward us does not make our work unnecessary; it makes it possible. Thus, Paul could say, “By the grace of God I am

what I am.... I worked harder than any of [the other apostles], though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor 5:10). Similarly, he charges, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12–13). We can work because God is decisively working in us. “Him we proclaim.... For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col 1:28–29). The God worthy of glory is the one who is powerful beyond all to do more than ever what we ask or think, according to the power working within us.

The Meaning of “To God Be Glory” (3:21)

But we now must ask, if it is this God who is worthy of glory, what does “to God be glory” actually mean? Paul says, “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations” (3:21). Is the church or Christ somehow giving God something he does not already have?

“Glory” is a term associated with weight, honor, or value. To glorify is to prize or praise worth and beauty. It’s game day for my team; these are my Detroit Lions’ socks. And when I cheer on the Lions, I glorify them, elevating them before others. I am presently in my thirty-second year of marriage to Teresa and my twenty-first year of full-time ministry. Together we have journeyed through so much, yet perhaps more than ever before I find my heart treasuring the gift she is to me. Daily she brings me such a wealth of wisdom, skill, care, companionship, and joy. I am such a better man, better husband, better pastor because she is by my side. And in recognizing this and in verbalizing this, I glorify her—not giving her something that is not already hers but in testifying to what is already hers.

In this book, we have already seen *glory* appear several times. In 1:6, God predestined us for adoption through Jesus “to the praise of his glorious grace.” God’s saving grace is infused with glory. In 1:12, God’s glory is praised when Christians hope in Christ, and in 1:14 our claiming our future inheritance will result in the praise of God’s glory. 1:17 calls God “the Father of glory,” as if all that is praiseworthy, honorable, venerable finds its ultimate source in him. God’s glory is what we see and savor when we encounter him. It’s what is put on display when all that distinguishes God as God goes public. To experience God’s superior beauty, incomparable greatness, and matchless power through his words and deeds is to encounter his glory. Thus, to glorify God is not to give him something he doesn’t already have but to recognize and rightly magnify who he already is. We magnify him not like a microscope takes something minute and makes it large but like a telescope magnifies the magnificence of a distant moon. Paul’s statement “to him be glory” is a prayer that who God is already glorious would be rightly

revered, reflected, resembled, and represented in two agents of glory, and this leads us to our final point.

The Agents and Extent of Glory (3:21)

Having called Christians to unity in Jesus, Paul pauses to pray that God's splendor would be put on display "in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." On earth the church is the principal agent to testify to God's worth and love. As I consider how the church glorifies God, we could pause to talk about conversion, fruitful obedience, praise and gatherings for worship, prayer, or discipleship and mission. Yet today, I want to consider how the church's suffering and trials become a context for God to be magnified.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us how he was given a thorn in his flesh, which he describes as "a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited" (2 Cor 12:7). Satan was there, but the purpose of the thorn was to keep Paul from pride, which means God and not Satan was decisive in the apostle's suffering. God was in charge. Paul pled with the Lord three times to remove this thorn, whatever it was, but Christ said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (12:8–9). Paul then declares, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (12:10).

Paul's weakness humbled him, removing pride and forcing him to seek God for comfort and aid. When Paul received help, God was magnified as helper. The apostle's need for healing made much of the healer. Paul was satisfied, and God was glorified. When we shift from self-reliance to God-dependence, we exalt God's greatness and receive grace. Because "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet 5:5), we should see divine humbling as a severe mercy. When we trust in ourselves less and God more, the spotlight shifts to the splendor of our savior. We glorify God most when he satisfies us most, and sometimes God strips us of earthly comforts or securities so that we will recognize him as our ultimate source of strength and supply. When members of Christ's church suffer in ways that display God's worth and God's power over their own, we testify to God's greatness in the world in ways that can move others to revel in God as well. Others will "see your good deeds and glorify God" (1 Pet 2:12; cf. Matt 5:16). Consider Paul's words in 3:13, "I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory." Jesus is seeking to "present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27). When Paul suffered in a way that revered, reflected, resembled, and represented God's glorious power and worth to the Ephesians, he aided them in doing the same. Paul prayed that God would be

glorified in the church, and I long for God to fulfill that prayer among Sovereign Joy through our affliction. May our suffering move us to savor our savior, who is good, who is in charge, and who knows what is best for us. Whatever your pain or problem today, let your heart look to Jesus. You will be satisfied, and he will be glorified, and in the process you will help others glorify God as well.

Finally, Paul prays that God will be glorified in Christ Jesus. Jesus is one with the Father, and all the glory of the Godhead is his (John 17:5). Yet here Paul longs that God would be further glorified in Christ Jesus. What does he mean?

To answer this let us consider two texts. First, look at 5:18, 20. Paul says that in evil days, “do not get drunk with wine ... but be filled with the Spirit ... giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Millions of prayers from people in numerous religions we be offered today, but only prayers *in Jesus’s name* will reach God’s throne. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The only way we can approach God’s presence expecting aid is “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” By his blood and righteousness alone do we stand. “All the promises of God [in which we hope] find their Yes in [Jesus]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Cor 1:20). “Amen” is not just a word of conclusion. It’s related to the verb “to believe” and it’s an expression of our absolute trust in God’s faithfulness to us because of what Christ has done for us. We thus give thanks in Jesus’s name, and God is glorified as we do.

Now, as we conclude this sermon, look back at 2:6–7. We read that God “raised us up [together] and seated us [together] in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” The only way that we receive any blessing from God is *in Christ*. Our score had only demerit, yet Jesus’s wealth of obedience overcame our poverty; his wounds alone bring our healing. All that we are and all that we ever will be is due to him, and therefore every growth in fruitfulness, every glimpse of grace, every joy in redemption glorifies God in Christ Jesus. And for eternity—or as Paul says in our passage—“throughout all generations, forever,” God will be magnified in ever-increasing ways for eternity as we grow to recognize more and more the “the immeasurable riches of [God’s] grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” And the more our united joy increases in the powerful and grace shown us in Jesus, the more God will be glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus forever.