



INSIGHT

to biblical TEXTS

LeaderQuest • www.leaderquest.org • neff@leaderquest.org

Ephesians 3:20

INSIGHT to EPHESIANS 3:14-21 (Source: Chapter 9 in Escape)

The text, which is principally used to support the claim that Acts 1:8 refers to the Spirit’s causal power in and through the Christian for living, is Ephesians 3:14-21. Included in this text is Paul’s prayer for believers to grow in maturity (vv 14-19) and a doxology (vv 20-21). In the doxology, we find the phrase “according to the power that works within us” (v 20b), as shown in slide 1.

Now to Him who is able to do [*dunamai*] far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power [*dunamis*] that works [*energeo*] within us (Eph 3:20, underlines for emphasis).

In Ephesians 2:11-3:13, Paul revealed the mystery of the Church, being comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, united as equal heirs. Ephesians 4:1-16 addressed church unity

1

**EPHESIANS 3:20-21
GRAMMATICAL LAYOUT**

20 Now
to Him
who is able to do
(*dunamai*)
far more abundantly
beyond all
that we ask
or
think,
according to His power
(*dunamis*)
that works
(*energeo*)
within us,

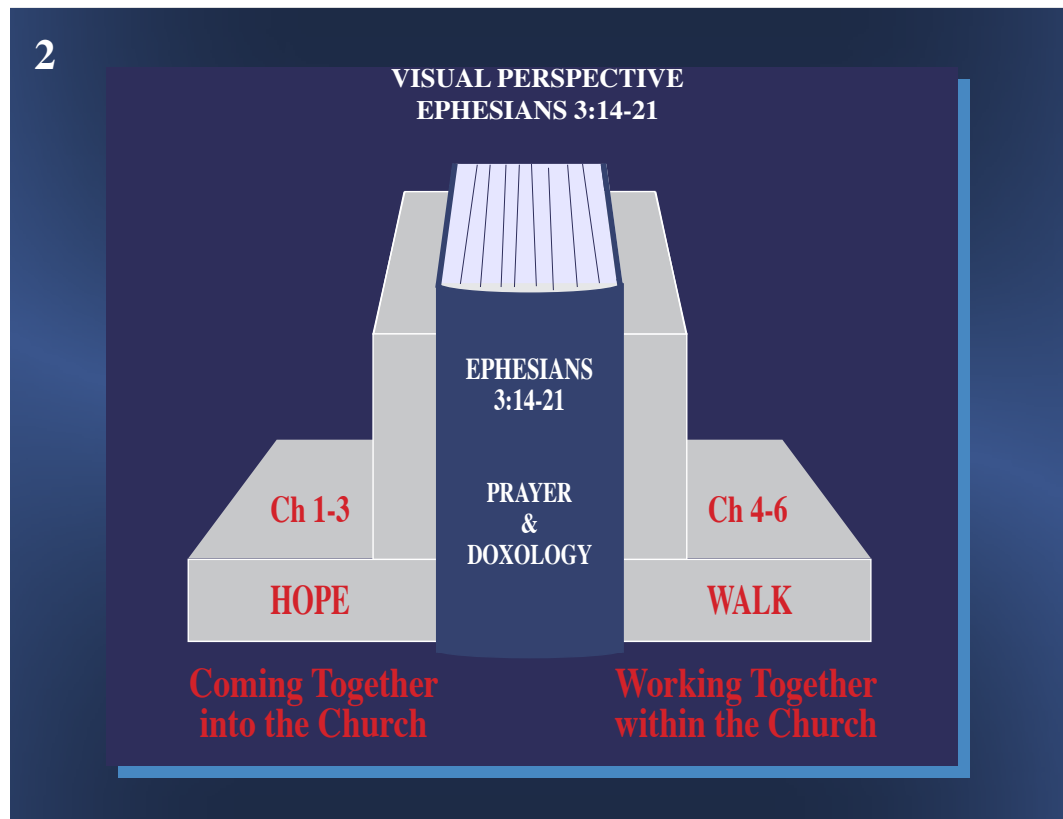
21 to Him
the glory
in the church
and
in Christ Jesus
to all generations,
forever
and
ever.

Amen.

*Who
Power*

Glory

through the use of gift(s) by each individual believer. In between these bookends, “coming together into the Church” and “working together within the Church,” we find Paul’s prayer for the Church (3:14-19). While all commentators do not agree on the thought progression in this long prayer, they concur that the doxology at the conclusion of the prayer (vv 20-21) is the transition from the previous positional section (Eph 1–3) to the practical section (Eph 4–6). Do not lose sight of the fact that the positional section concerned Paul’s *hope* for the Christians in Ephesus, while the practical section addressed their potential *walk* through faithful obedience (see slide 2).



In Ephesians 3:20, there is an agent at work in the believer. Since “power” is the agent, our immediate question would be “To what power did Paul refer?” Christian writers typically point to Ephesians 3:16 for the answer.¹ It is the “Spirit’s power” that works in and through each believer, overlaying Acts 1:8 and indicating that believers are “strengthened with the Spirit’s power” (Eph 3:16). The power they assume concerns an energizing by the Spirit that causes obedient living. When this typical approach is embraced, the means by which the Spirit’s power works in and through the believer is never indicated. Rather, the assumption is that the believer is mystically zapped with special energy, causing him to do God’s will.

Ephesians 3:7

Nevertheless, the answer is readily found thirteen verses earlier in Ephesians 3:7. There Paul explained that God had gifted him for ministry “according to the working [*energeia*] of His power [*dunamis*],” as shown in slide 3. The readers would readily associate verse 7 with “according to the power that works within us” (v 20b), as Paul concludes the first section of his letter. See the shift in God’s power for ministry from relating to Paul (v 7) to relating to them (“within us,” v 20). Particularly this would be reinforced as Paul then turned to the practical section and addressed their very own individual gifts for ministry within the Church (cf. 4:7-16). Certainly God is the One “who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (3:20a). His power is at work both in and through the Christian, both Jew and Gentile, in a causative manner for ministry.

3

EPHESIANS 3:7
GRAMMATICAL LAYOUT

7 [The gospel]
of which I was made a minister Who
according to the gift
of God's grace
which was given to me Gifted
according to the **working**
(*energeia*)
of His **power**
(*dunamis*)

Ephesians 3:16

While verse 20 does address *causational power*, working in and through each Christian's gift(s) *for ministry*, the contention of this author is that Paul's prayer (vv 16-19) and in particular verse 16 refers rather to *influential power* in believers *for living*. Understanding Paul's prayer request is critical (see slide 4).

16 [T]hat He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power [*dunamis*] through His Spirit in the inner man 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts [minds] through faith (Eph 3:16-17, underlines for emphasis).

Appealing to “the wealth of [God's] essential being,”² Paul requests that believers “be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (v 16). Notice first that the recipient of the request is the believer's “inner man,” the heart or mind of the Christian, as distinguished from the “outer man,” the physical body (cf. 2 Cor 4:16).³ “In this context it is the innermost being of the believer which is to be strengthened,”⁴ indicating that Paul's concern was for “an inner strength as opposed to a physical strength”⁵ or ministry ability. While outward behavior is the result of choices made, inner values that determine Christians' decisions are central to Paul's prayer. Ephesians 3:17 provided the desired result of being strengthened. “So that Christ may dwell in your hearts [minds] through faith,” referring to Christian maturity, a growing knowledge of and intimacy with Christ. Paul desired that Christians would ultimately experience the “love of Christ” and the “fullness of God” in their lives (vv 17-19).

Having identified the object of strengthening, the inner man, and the result of strengthening, intimacy with Christ, our focus now is how to understand the actual means strengthening can be experienced. We are told that “strengthening or becoming strong in the inner man” is through the Spirit, but how is that experienced?

Three factors clarify verse 16 and explain the way “strengthening” occurs without violating the content by inserting Acts 1:8.

**First Factor
Contextual**

The *first factor* is contextual. While verse 16 is typically used to explain power in verse 20, verse 20 is then turned around to interpret verse 16's power. Let's concede that God's causational power for ministry is in view in verse 20, but verse 16 concerns living the Christian life, dealing with influential power. I submit there are three contextual considerations supporting this assertion: (1) the actual verb form of the request, (2) the identical verb form used in other prayers by Paul, and (3) the use of “power” in the New Testament.

It is helpful to recognize Paul's request, “that He would grant you...to be strengthened,” includes a verb form indicating the possibility of an outcome based upon a particular condition or circumstance.⁶ More appropriately the verb “would grant” can be translated “may grant,” clearly conveying potential. In his letters Paul always assumes a positive or hopeful outcome. Nevertheless, this verb form each time indicates the possibility of negative results. Let's remember that God is continually “working *in* believers” both for ministry

4

EPHESIANS 3:14-19
GRAMMATICAL LAYOUT

14	For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,	<i>Who/ What</i>
15	from whom every family derives its name in heaven and on earth,	
16	that according to the riches [wealth] of His glory, He would grant you to be strengthened in the inner man [mind], with power (<i>dunamis</i>) through His Spirit;	<i>Request</i>
17	so that Christ may dwell through faith, in your hearts [minds]; that being rooted and grounded in love, with all the saints	<i>Result #1</i>
18	you may be able to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge	<i>Result #2</i>
19	that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.	<i>Result #3</i>

and for living, but the actual “living *through* Christ” is dependent on believers choosing to access God’s available resources, His Word and the Spirit’s filling, leading, and teaching.

Paul praying for believers to grow in maturity is found in Philippians 1:9-11 and Colossians 1:9-14, as well as here in Ephesians 3:14-19. In each instance the same potential verb form is used: “may abound” (Phil 1:9) and “may be filled” (Col 1:9). On every occasion the answer to the prayer depended on the response and openness of those believers to God’s provisions already present in their lives. They would experience what Paul prayed only if they chose to follow Christ and matured. On the other hand, they could also choose not to obey, forfeiting fellowship and maturity.

The last contextual consideration is the actual use of the word *power* in the New Testament. As would be expected of the 120 times power (*dunamis*) occurs, the majority of the time it relates to miracles, the Second Coming, and God. In those instances causal

**Second Factor
Structural**

power is obviously in view. Nevertheless, a closer look at other instances where either causal power or influential power is a factor depends on the individual circumstances. Notice in reference to our present concern Paul’s hope was for believers to experience “strengthening” that was contingent on the right response by those believers to the truth found in the practical section of the book (Eph 4–6). This lends credence to the fact that influential power, rather than causal power, is the issue in 3:16. Otherwise, Paul was expecting God to automatically and instantaneously impart inner strengthening for these Christians regardless of any response on their part.

The *second factor* is structural. To properly explain how “strengthening” occurs, the grammatical structure of Ephesians 3:16 gives insight into what is necessary for strengthening to take place (see slide 5).

5

**GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE
EPHESIANS 3:16**

PROCEDURE

HOPE	Manner	Agency	FOCUS
Strengthened	<i>with</i> Power	through Spirit	in Inner Man
(Spiritual Growth)	(Allowing Spirit to Influence)		(Illumined Mind)

The hope of being “strengthened” comes with a description of how it was to be accomplished, “with power”⁷ and “through His Spirit.”⁸ The text also tells us the focus of this strengthening—the believer’s inner person, which includes the Christian’s new human spirit and illumined mind (see Appendix B in *Escape*). As mentioned above, verse 17 stated the result of “becoming strong” in the inner man—“That Christ may ‘be at home in,’ that is, at the very center of or deeply rooted in believers’ lives.”⁹ Consequently, “acquiring strength...in the inner man” means that “Christ must become the controlling factor in attitudes and conduct.”¹⁰

Unless you understand “becoming strong” in this text to involve an instantaneous zapping of power in which the individual is caused to be strengthened, the only other option is for the believer to continually choose to be available to God, His Word and the Spirit’s ministries. In that case spiritual strengthening (growth) in the inner man is experienced over time through the ministry of the Spirit’s influential power. The inner man, the new man in Christ (Col 3:10), requires daily renewal and development (2 Cor 4:16) by the renewing of the his mind through the Word (Rom 12:2).

Rather than God bestowing strength, the Christian will experience strengthening through the Spirit’s working within him. Remember, God is always at work *in us* for living. Only as we allow His Spirit to continually influence our minds and motives will our choices and our walk be in harmony with God’s will.

You’ve probably seen the bumper sticker *God Is My Co-Pilot*. The implication is that God is always with me and involved in every decision and activity of my life. The rub comes in one’s understanding of the way that is actually worked out in the Christian life. Many perceive this means God taking hold of the controls, suggesting a godly autopilot. Taking the controls, God causes and produces behavior in and through the believer, while the Christian is passive and just along for the ride.

Let me suggest another scenario, a better perspective that fits with the context of

Ephesians 3:16. One in which the Christian remains in manual control and continues to fly the plane. Rather than picturing causational control and power, only the Spirit's influencing power is in view. In this case, the Spirit of Christ is likened to a flight instructor, sitting with you and, if you allow Him, He will be involved in your every decision and action. You already have the instruction manual for flying, His Word. Second Timothy 3:16 states, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." When we fly or live with respect to the Spirit's influence in light of God's handbook, the believer is "equipped for every good work" (v 17). The Christian's responsibility is to live the Christian life in obedience to the Word, but this only happens as he allows the Spirit to influence every decision and action.

Third Factor Theological

The *third factor* is theological. The inner man, particularly the believer's mind, is the recipient of the Spirit's influence.¹¹ Paul's prayer request was that believers might acquire spiritual strength (v 16) so they would know Christ intimately (v 17). As a result, they would comprehend the magnitude of His love (vv 18-19a) and experience His fullness in their lives (v 19b).

Paul addressed the concept of acquiring spiritual strength in light of one's weakness. We encounter this weakness-to-strength exchange in two other texts. Philippians 4:10-13 pictured this exchange, which led to Paul gaining a godly perspective amidst his situation or circumstance. Consequently, Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (v 13). Likewise, Paul came to understand through his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7-10) that one's lack of physical strength actually develops inward strength in light of the sufficiency of God's provision. He concluded, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (v 10).¹² In each instance, an inward change of perspective toward God and His provisions yielded strength for living. Needless to say, unless driven by an agenda, the Spirit's causational power is not needed or required in Paul's request of "strength" for the believers in Ephesus.

Conclusion

If you come to the Scriptures with a viewpoint that God's power can be either causational and influential, you will realize that Christians can experience power for ministry and power for living.



Endnotes:

1. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Henderson Publishers, 1994), 695-97 and Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 478, 493.
2. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 477-78.
3. Ken Neff, *Escape* (Jacksonville Beach, FL: Leaderquest, 2018), 269-86. Appendix B, *Theological Distinctions: Kingdom and New Covenant* address the composition of the inner man (mind and spirit) and the outer man (physical body). In Ephesians 3:17 the heart is the illumined mind of the believer's inner man.
4. Hoehner, 479.
5. *Ibid.*, 478.
6. *Ibid.*, 477.
Hoehner understands the verb "would grant" to be in the subjunctive mood, assuming uncertainty, probability and potential. When the verb in the

subjunctive mood is used in a subordinate clause introduced by the conjunction *ina*, it is translated “that God *will give* you” (Eph 1:17) according to Philip Williams [Philip R. Williams, *Grammar Notes* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary Greek class notes, 1971), 25-26]. The subjunctive mood is likewise used in Ephesians 3:16 and should be translated “that He *may grant* you.”

7. Philip Williams [Philip R. Williams, *Grammar Notes* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary Greek class notes, 1971), 11.

The italic indicates that “power” is not the object of the italicized preposition *with*, but rather is translated as such to express the intent of power’s dative form. A noun in the dative form, denoting the manner in which something is accomplished, is a *dative of manner* and typically indicated by “with.”

8. Sources providing insight into the expression *through/by the Spirit*.

Eugene Van Ness Goetchius, *The Language of the New Testament* (New York; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 153-54.

The construction of the prepositional phrase “through His Spirit” includes the preposition *dia* and its object in the genitive form. The use of the preposition *dia* with a *genitive form* of its object conveys the meaning “through, by, by means of,” indicating that the Spirit are the basis on which action is taken or is experienced.

Philip R. Williams, *Grammar Notes* (Tacoma, WA: Northwest Baptist Seminary Greek class notes, 1988), 15-16.

“The noun in the genitive specifies the agent...by whom something is done.” Within a sentence, the subject receives the action of a passive voice verb form (infinitive, verb noun, in this case) by the indicated agent. However, the manner in which that action is accomplished must be determined from the context. In this case, the “manner” is *with power*. Ephesians 3:16 is understood as follows:

(Believer) to be strengthened *with* power by (*dia*) the Spirit
(Subject) (Manner) (Agent)

Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 433-44.

Wallace understands Ephesians 3:16 to address the Spirit as the “agent” of “strengthening” believers and writes, “The subject of a passive verb receives the action that is expressed by $\delta\iota\alpha$ + genitive.”

[BDAG–Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich] Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 548.

See marker A, 4, a. When the preposition *dia* is used with a genitive noun, it is recognized as “marker of personal agency.”

9. Hoehner, 481.

10. Ibid.

11. Neff, 279-86.

The inner man is discussed in Appendix B, *Theological Distinctions: Kingdom and New Covenant*. The Spirit’s teachings ministry is discussed in chapter 10, *Spirit: Empowers and Influences of Escape* (143-61).

12. While different Greek words are used for “strengthening” in Ephesians 3, 2 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 3, the weakness-to-strength principle remains the same.