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**Power Passages
in Focus**



For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:14-19

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The movie, *Glory*, is the story of the first black-union regiment to fight in the Civil War. Prior to a major battle in which many were not expected to survive, a small regimental group spent the evening reflecting on their camaraderie and growth together as a fighting unit. Singing around a campfire, a number of men spoke to encourage one another in the face of the danger ahead. As would be expected, one soldier's words were directed toward God saying, "Lord, give us strength!"

This appeal resonates with believers who seek to live a fruitful Christian life or when facing difficulties. The passage of choice for support is typically Ephesians 3:16, "to be strengthened with power." Can this appeal be substantiated from the context of Ephesians and the purpose for which Paul wrote? This chapter explores this issue.

New Testament Power Passages

Other than those already addressed in previous chapters, do some passages point to the believer's empowering, strengthening,

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and establishment by God? Yes. In fact 170 times such words are used in this way in the New Testament. The chart, *Power and Related Words*, provides a summary of the usage of the eight words (three nouns and five verbs) and the overwhelming times “power” and related words are used in the New Testament. Notice that *power* is the predominate word employed, accounting for 71 percent of the total, while *believers* account for only 27 percent of the total occurrences.

| Word | Total | Individuals Addressed | | | | | Percentage |
|--------------------------|-------|-----------------------|--------|----------|-----------|--------|------------|
| | | God | Christ | Apostles | Believers | Others | |
| Power (N-δυναμις) | 120 | 23 | 35 | 21 | 23 | 18 | 71% |
| Strength (N-κρατος) | 12 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 7% |
| Strength (N-ισχυς) | 11 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 6% |
| Strengthen (V-δυναμοω) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1% |
| Be Strong (V-ενδυναμοω) | 8 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 5% |
| Be Strong (V-κραταιωω) | 4 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2% |
| To Establish (V-στηριζω) | 13 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 9 | 2 | 8% |
| Strengthen (V-σθενωω) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1% |
| Total Use | 170 | 26 | 47 | 25 | 46 | 26 | 100% |
| Percentage Used | 100% | 15% | 28% | 15% | 27% | 15% | |

Of the 46 times these eight words are used in relation to believers, *the actual dynamic and interworking of any empowerment concept is not addressed or explained*. The empowerment or strengthening is stated, but no mention is made of how it occurs. *The interpreter must rely on other passages for understanding this particular dynamic in the life of the believer*. Imposing concepts from other passages (e.g., reading in a preconceived *empowerment model* from Acts 1:8 and Ezek. 36:27) on these 46 instances will lend credence to any particular interpretation. You can make these passages say anything

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you want based on your theological bent since these passages do not provide explanations; they give rather only statements about empowering and strengthening.

Ephesians 3:14-19 Considered

The chart, *Use of Power with Believers*, presents the 23 instances when “believers” and “power” coincide. To gain a perspective of actually how theological bents are imposed on particular texts, con-

| USE OF POWER WITH BELIEVERS | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----|-----|---|--|
| Book | Ch. | Vs. | Context | |
| Matt. | 25 | 15 | Believers—Talents according to "ability" were given | |
| Rom. | 15 | 13 | Believers—Abound in hope by power of Holy Spirit | |
| 1 Cor. | 5 | 4 | Church—Assembled with power of Jesus to judge evil doing | |
| | | 12 | 10 | Believers—Gift—Effecting of miracles |
| | | 28 | | Believers—Gift—Then miracles |
| | | 29 | | Believers—Gift—All are not <i>workers</i> of miracles, are they? |
| 2 Cor. | 14 | 11 | Church—Know the meaning (power) of language | |
| | | 4 | 7 | Believers—Gospel from power of God, not of men |
| | | 6 | 7 | Believers—Servants in power of God |
| | 8 | 3 | Believers—Gave money according to ability and beyond own ability | |
| | | 13 | 4 | Believers—Raised and lives because of the power of God |
| Gal. | 3 | 5 | Believers—Christ supplies Spirit and works miracles among you | |
| Eph. | 3 | 16 | Believers—Strengthen with power through His Spirit in inner man | |
| | | 20 | Believers—Able to do, according to the power that works within us | |
| Phil. | 3 | 10 | Believers—To know the power of His resurrection | |
| Col. | 1 | 11 | Believers—Strengthened with all power, according to His might | |
| 2 Thes. | 1 | 11 | Believers—That may fulfill work of faith with power | |
| Heb. | 6 | 5 | Believers—Tasted good word of God & powers of age to come | |
| 1 Pet. | 1 | 5 | Believers—Protected by the power of God for a salvation | |
| 2 Pet. | 1 | 3 | Believers—Divine power has been granted to us everything for life | |
| | | 16 | Believers—Peter make known the power & coming of Christ | |
| Rev. | 3 | 8 | Believers—Have little power and have kept My word | |

sider the one most often used to support the typical empowerment view, Ephesians 3:14-19, with emphasis on verse 16.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, *that* He

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would *grant you*, according to the riches of His glory, *to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man*, **so that** Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and **that** you, being rooted and grounded in love, *may be able to comprehend* with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, **that** you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (italics added).

In these verses Paul described the content of his prayer to God on behalf of believers. As in Philippians 1:9-11 and Colossians 1:9-14, here Paul also prayed for believers to grow in maturity in Christ. Since Paul was praying expectantly for growth, how is the “power” (“He would grant you...to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man”) in Ephesians 3:16 to be explained? But before addressing the “power” issue, one must understand the structure and progression of Paul’s entire request.

In Paul’s writings he commonly used a long sentence to explain a truth. The construction of the extended material must be understood to grasp properly the flow of his thought. This author believes Paul presented his only request in verse 16, that the Father would provide for the believers in Ephesus “to be strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inner man.”¹ Thereafter, verses 17-19 contain a progressive series of expected results derived from their being “strengthened with power through the Spirit.” These three results are (1) “that Christ may dwell in [their] hearts through faith” (v. 17), (2) “that [they] may be able to comprehend...the love of Christ” (vv. 18-19a), and (3) “that [they] may be filled up to all the fullness of God” (v. 19b). What then does it mean “to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (v. 16)?

One commentator provides the typical approach to explain the meaning of power in Ephesians 3:16, when he writes, “What the writer is praying for is therefore this, that within these hearts such a

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controlling influence may be exerted that they may be strengthened more and more with *Spirit-imported power*. See on 1:19; cf, Acts 1:8.”² Notice the supporting reference to Acts 1:8. The empowerment, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” template has been overlaid on the Ephesians 3:16 text by the commentator. As the same author discusses Ephesians 3, he turns to Philippians 2:12-13 for support. “But they should remember at all times that apart from the power of the Holy Spirit...they are completely powerless.”³ The empowerment envisioned here is a further energizing of the Spirit’s power, distinguished from the initial reception of the Spirit.⁴ Those who embrace this typical understanding do not indicate the means by which the Spirit strengthens the believer. Rather, the assumption is that the believer accepts this as a mystical experience by which he is infused or zapped with special energy, causing him to perform or conform to God’s desires.

However, could it be instead that the inner man is “being renewed” (Col. 3:10; 2 Cor. 4:16) through the Word (Rom. 12:2, see chapter 11)? And is this not what Paul expressed in his earlier writings in Galatians 5:13-25? Walking by the Spirit is a choice that produces intimacy with Christ, revealed in love for others and behavior that reflects growing maturity in Christ (see chapter 5). Ephesians 3:16-19 is an *echo* of Galatians 5, but it is also a *preview* of Ephesians 5:1-21, where Paul explained that the filling of the Spirit (5:18) is rooted in the believer’s walk (“walk in love,” 5:2; “walk as children of light,” 5:8; “walk...as wise,” 5:15) and is expressed in gratitude to God and fellow believers (5:19-21). An interpreter of this passage then could just as well

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understand the “strengthening by the Spirit’s power” to refer to allowing the indwelling Spirit to strengthen the inner man through His voluntary filling (Eph. 5:1-21), leading (Gal. 5:16-26), and teaching (1 John 2:27) influence via the Word of God.

So, which is the better explanation? Since no text explains exactly how this “strengthening by the Spirit’s power” occurs, only that it can occur, does the empowering through the Spirit in Ephesians 3:16 refer to:

1. Receiving the Spirit’s energizing ministry in the believer subsequent to but (a) identical to or (b) different from receiving of the Spirit’s initial empowerment

Or

2. Experiencing the indwelling Spirit’s influencing (voluntary filling, leading, and teaching) ministry already present within the believer.

Either aspect of the first option concerns getting “plugged into” the Spirit’s energy. On the other hand the second option concerns both (a) realizing the believer already possesses the Spirit’s resources and (b) accessing these resources as we walk in obedience to His Word.

Option #1
Involves injecting
what is not
yet possessed.

The former-energizing option involves injecting what is *not yet* possessed; the latter-influencing option involves accessing and experiencing what is *already* possessed. God is expected to initiate the former, since believers require additional energizing. Believers are expected to initiate the latter one, since God

has already provided His resources. As already noted, Ephesians 3:16 does not state *how* the “strengthening with power through the Spirit” is accomplished; it simply states that it *may occur* (not must

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occur) in the believer's life. One's theological bent determines his preference as to how he understands that strengthening to occur.

Conclusion

Each of Paul's prayers (Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-14; and Eph. 3:14-19) concerns the progressive growth of the believer toward maturity in Christ. Differing from Old Testament saints who did not possess the Spirit's resources and yet were responsible to obey God and grow in maturity (e.g., Abraham in James 2:21-24), believers today through the New Covenant possess unprecedented privileges and thus increased expectations to walk obediently. However, New Testament believers are never provided additional empowerment by the Spirit to walk in obedience to God's Word;⁵ rather, they already have been provided with the resources of the Spirit in order that they *may*.

So why are so many Christians not living according to God's Word? The answer is not that they do not possess the resources to do so; rather, they choose not to! Those choices are the very reason for Paul's prayer, as well as the basis for the scores of Paul's commands to believers. Since "strengthening through the Spirit" is not automatically imposed on believers, the choice to access and experience the resource of the Spirit already possessed results in obedience, which is a necessity for increasing maturity in Christ.

When someone says, "Get plugged into God's power," the empowerment template of Acts 1:8 and Ezekiel 36:27 is being superimposed. The issue is not whether God's energy is working in and through the believer, but rather what choices he is making since he

Option #2
*Involves accessing
and experiencing
what is already
possessed.*

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already possesses all the capabilities the Spirit offers and supplies. No believer is lacking anything to walk obediently with Christ. Instead he may not be using what he already possesses—allowing the Spirit to influence his behavior through His filling, leading, and teaching ministry via the Word of God.

Chapter 12, NOTES

1. There are two major ways to interpret the relationship between verse 16 and verse 17 in Ephesians 3. One approach embraced by Gordon Fee is to understand that “*And He might grant...that Christ may dwell in your hearts*” in verse 17 is parallel with verse 16 (“He might grant you...to be strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit”) and therefore a *second request* in Paul’s prayer (Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 696). The second approach held by R. C. H. Lenski understands verse 17 to be the *result* of the request in verse 16 and so he translated it, “*so that* Christ may dwell in your hearts” (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937], pp. 493-94). This author agrees with the second approach.
2. William Hendriksen, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 171 (italics added).
3. *Ibid.*, 171-72.
4. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 695.
5. This author does not limit God in His activities with men. Obviously it must be understood that God can intervene in history to directly and miraculously change people and their actions (e.g., to overcome an addiction or heal an affliction). The issue here is the usual (normative) manner by which God deals with His people and provides resources so that they may live obediently.

