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## GOD IS ABLE!

Ephesians 3:20-21

By

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January 6, 2008  
Ephesians Lesson 24

God is Able!  
Ephesians 3:20-21

A woman once approached the famous preacher, G. Campbell Morgan, after he spoke and asked, "Do you think we should pray for even the little things in our lives, or just for the big things?" In his dignified British manner he replied, "Madam, can you think of *anything* in your life that is big to God?"

The apostle Paul would have said, "Amen!" He has just prayed that the Ephesians would be filled up to all the fullness of God. It's a prayer that they would come to total spiritual perfection! You can't go any higher than to be filled with all the fullness of God! Paul adds this doxology to say, "In case you think that it is too much to ask God to fill His saints to all of His fullness, remember that He is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to His power and for His glory."

God is not just able to do beyond what we ask, but *abundantly* beyond. But that's not enough, He is able to do *far more* abundantly beyond what we ask. But, we still aren't to the limit: "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask *or think, according to the power that works within us.*" Now, what is it that you need? I want to encourage you to pray in faith, asking God to do far beyond all that we can ask or think.

Yet at the same time, I want to be realistic in applying this text. There are certain mysteries about the interaction between our prayers and the sovereign will of God that I cannot explain. When John the Baptist was imprisoned, I am sure that his disciples were praying for his release. It would have brought glory to God if John had been released to preach for many more years. Yet, John lost his head. Although God easily could have freed John (as He later freed Peter), it was not His will to do so.

When Jesus predicted Peter's denials, I would have thought that it would be right to pray that Peter not sin at all. But, Jesus didn't pray that. Rather, He prayed that after Peter had sinned and was restored, that he would strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-

32). God's sovereign will permitted Peter's sin in order to strengthen Peter and others in the long run.

Even the apostle Paul, who penned these great words, had many disappointments in his ministry. Demas was one of Paul's fellow workers, and yet he deserted Paul because he loved the world (cf. Philemon 24, 2 Tim. 4:10). Surely, Paul prayed for Demas to repent, but there is no biblical record that he ever did so. Paul prayed for the conversion of the Jews (Rom. 9:1-5), and yet they largely rejected the gospel. In church history, Adoniram Judson was a great man of faith, who gave his life to reaching the people of Burma. And yet, he labored for years before his first convert, and even when he died, there was not much visible fruit.

Over the past 31 years of my ministry, I am painfully aware of many situations where God has not answered my prayers for Him to do for His glory far more than I could ask or think. There have been lost people for whom I have prayed that they would be saved, but they were not saved. There have been broken Christian marriages that I have prayed would be restored, but they ended in divorce. There have been sinning Christians for whom I have prayed that they would repent, but there has been no repentance.

And so I want to motivate you to pray big prayers with faith in a mighty God, who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think. And, yet at the same time, I don't want to gloss over the difficult struggles that you will surely encounter in your prayer life. We simply cannot know the big picture of what God is doing, and so invariably we will experience disappointments in prayer.

Keep in mind that in the context, Paul's prayer for God to do abundantly beyond what we ask or think is not a prayer for physical miracles, but rather for Christ to dwell in the hearts of believers so that we may comprehend His great love for us, so that we will grow to complete spiritual maturity. In that context, Paul is saying:

Because God is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, we should pray for that which would further His glory through Christ and His church.

There are two themes in Paul's doxology:

1. God is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us (3:20).

Under this heading, note two things:

- A. God is able to do far more abundantly beyond what we ask or think because He is omnipotent.

From Genesis to Revelation, we see God's mighty power at work. We can summarize it under four headings:

- (1) God's power is seen in creation.

God spoke the entire universe into existence out of nothing by His word alone! In Romans 1:20, Paul writes, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." The psalmist exclaimed (Ps. 33:6, 9), "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." Or, as Jeremiah (32:17) exclaimed, "Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You." Every day all around us, we have evidence to remind us of God's omnipotence.

Whether we look at the vastness of the universe, with billions of galaxies containing billions of stars, or at the complexity of our own bodies, or at the incredible design on the microscopic level, we see evidence of a powerful Creator. Have you ever swatted a little gnat that was flying in front of your face? Have you ever stopped to think about how difficult it would be to design a creature that small that can not only fly, but also eat and reproduce? Or, as Michael Behe explains (*Darwin's Black Box* [Touchstone/Simon & Schuster], pp. 51-73), microscopic proteins and bacteria have intricately designed, irreducibly complex structures that must be all there for them to work. They could not have evolved gradually. All creation shouts, "God is a powerful Creator!"

- (2) God's power is seen in His judgments.

Throughout the Bible there are examples of God unleashing a small amount of His power to bring judgment on rebellious sin-

ners. He brought the worldwide flood in Noah's day. He confused the languages of the proud men at the tower of Babel. He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone. He unleashed the ten plagues on Egypt and then destroyed the Egyptian army in the sea. On numerous occasions, God destroyed thousands of people in a short time, through plagues or warfare or natural disasters (Num. 16:25-35, 46-49; 25:9; Judges 7:22; 2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chron. 20:22-23; Ps. 18:12-15).

(3) God's power is seen in His converting sinners.

The apostle Paul is exhibit A, of course. He was persecuting the church with vengeance, when God stopped him in his tracks and changed him into the man who would preach to the Gentiles, whom he formerly detested. In our text, Paul refers to "the power that works within us." That takes us back to Ephesians 1:19, where Paul said that the same power that raised Christ from the dead (the greatest display of power in human history) is what raised us from spiritual death to life. In Ephesians 3:7, Paul refers to the working of God's power that converted him and made him a minister of the gospel to the Gentiles. In 3:16, he referred to God's power through His Spirit that strengthens us in the inner man.

When the rich young ruler walked away from salvation, Jesus told the disciples that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved. When they exclaimed, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus answered (Matt. 19:26), "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." We need to remember that the conversion of a soul is not a display of human willpower, but rather a display of God's mighty power in raising the spiritually dead to new life.

(4) God's power is seen in His working when we are unable to do anything.

The whole point of prayer is to ask God to do what we cannot do in our own strength or ability. If we think (erroneously) that we can pull it off ourselves, then we don't need to pray. God often puts His people in impossible situations to display His power and glory. There are far more examples of this in the Bible than I can list, but here are a few.

*Abraham and Sarah* were physically beyond the ability to conceive children. Even when they were younger, Sarah had been unable to conceive. When Sarah laughed at the idea that she would conceive, the Lord confronted her with the rhetorical question (Gen. 18:14), "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" In response to God's promise, she did conceive Isaac. Later, when God asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham obeyed because (Heb. 11:19), "He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead...." Nothing is impossible for the Lord!

God directed *Moses and the Israelites* to leave Egypt by a route where they had the Red Sea in front of them and the pursuing Egyptian army behind them. They had no human means of escape. In that impossible situation, Moses told the panicked people (Exod. 14:13), "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today...." The Lord miraculously opened the sea so that the Israelites could pass through, but He closed the sea over the Egyptian army. Nothing is impossible with God!

*Elisha* was surrounded by the army of the king of Aram, with horses and chariots that had come to take him captive. When his panicked servant told him that they were surrounded by this hostile army, Elisha calmly answered (2 Kings 6:16), "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then he prayed (2 Kings 6:17), "'O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.' And the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." Nothing is impossible with God!

Later, when the same king had surrounded Samaria, the famine was so bad that women were eating their own children in order to survive. Elisha predicted that the very next day the famine would be completely lifted. The royal officer of the king of Israel retorted (2 Kings 7:2), "Behold, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, could this thing be?" Elisha responded by predicting that official's death, but affirmed that the famine would end, according to the word of the Lord. The following day the Lord caused the invading army to hear the sound of chariots and horses, so that they panicked and fled, leaving all of their supplies behind. In their haste to plunder the camp of the Aramean army, the people of Sa-

maria trampled to death the king's official, exactly as Elisha had predicted. Nothing is impossible with God!

I could cite many more examples, but here is one from the New Testament. Herod had imprisoned the apostle *Peter*, and was planning to execute him the next day. Peter was chained to two guards, inside a locked cell, with more guards outside, inside a prison with a locked iron outer door. In response to the church's not-very-believing prayers for Peter's release, the Lord sent an angel who caused Peter's chains to fall off. He led Peter through opened iron doors, past all the guards, and out into the streets as a free man. Again, we see, nothing is impossible with God!

I should point out, however, that prior to Peter's escape, Herod executed James, the brother of John. Was the church praying for James' release? We are not told, but I cannot imagine that they did not pray. Although God easily could have delivered James, He allowed him to die, while rescuing Peter. We need to remember the words of Hebrews 11:33-35a, which tell of great heroes of faith, "who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection." We all say, "Amen, preach it brother!" We like stories like that!

But, keep reading (11:35b-39), "and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised." They believed God, but He did not deliver them from their trials.

And so while God often displays His mighty power by working when we are incapable of doing anything in our own strength, at times for reasons we do not usually understand, He chooses not to display His power in such ways. At those times, His power is

displayed through the patient, joyous endurance of His people in the midst of their suffering (Col. 1:11-12; 2 Cor. 12:7-10). But even when God chooses not to deliver us, it is not because He is lacking in power. He is able to do far beyond what we ask or think because He is omnipotent.

- B. God is willing to do far beyond what we ask or think because He is good.

Satan tempted Eve by getting her to doubt that God and His commandments are good. When we are facing impossible trials, we must be on guard against the same temptation. It is easy to begin to doubt that God really cares about us. But, Paul reminds us (Rom. 8:31-32), "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" If He did the greatest thing in giving His own Son, He will now do the relatively smaller things, according to His good and perfect will.

In the same vein, Peter writes to those who were suffering terrible persecution at the hands of the wicked Nero, telling them (and us) to cast all of our cares on the Lord, because He cares for us. Then he warns about the devil's prowling around like a lion to devour us, and adds (1 Pet. 5:8-10), "But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you." So, even in the worst of trials, we should remember that God in His goodness is willing to do far beyond what we ask or even think.

There is far more here, but I must move on! Note, also,

- 2. We should ask for that which would further God's glory through Christ and His church (3:21).

Note two things:

- A. God's glory is the end for which He created the world.

Jonathan Edwards wrote a brilliant (and not easy to follow!) essay on this subject. John Piper is the best modern author to help

us understand this point (see, *God's Passion for His Glory* [Crossway], which contains the complete text of Edward's essay). Edwards argued that God would be unrighteous if He did not delight fully in what is most beautiful and worthy of delight, namely, in Himself and His glory. While it would be utterly sinful for us to delight in our own glory, because we are imperfect and sinful creatures, it is utterly right for God, because He alone is the absolutely perfect, eternal Creator.

Also, God's glory is the goal of redemption, as Paul has made clear (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14, 18; 2:7; 3:10, 16). As God saves people who were formerly dead in their sins, (2:1-3), seats them with Christ in the heavenly places (2:6), and builds them into His holy temple (2:21), He is glorified. As Peter O'Brien notes (*The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 269), "The doxology at the end of Paul's prayer concludes the first half of the letter on the same note with which it began in the introductory eulogy (1:3-14), namely, in praise of God for his mighty salvation, initiated in eternity, carried into effect in Christ, and intended to redound to the praise of God's glorious grace for all eternity. Paul wants his readers to have a theological perspective on God's mighty saving purposes."

- B. God's glory is displayed in His church when we live in harmony and obedience and ask Him to work through us for His purpose and glory.

Paul puts the church first, because he has been showing how the church is God's new creation, brought into existence by the cross that broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. As F. F. Bruce puts it (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 331), "God is to be glorified in the church because the church, comprising Jews and Gentiles, is His masterpiece of grace." But, since the church is the body of Christ, the head, God's glory in the church "cannot be divorced from his glory 'in Christ Jesus'" (*ibid.*). And, this glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus will continue not only in time, but throughout eternity, as He continues to "show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (2:7).

In the context, Paul is laying the doctrinal foundation for the appeal to love and unity and holiness, which follows (4:1-5:21). So the application of this mind-stretching truth is that God is only

glorified in the church in the present age when we live in harmony (2:15-16, 19-21) and holiness, and when we depend on Him in prayer for that which would glorify Him. When the church divides over petty issues, or when church leaders or other Christians fall into sin, it brings dishonor to our glorious God. So we must be on guard and we must pray for God's glory to be displayed through us, as He transforms us for His glory.

### Conclusion

Here are four ways to apply these wonderful verses:

*First, don't be guilty of not having because you haven't asked.* God says (Ps. 81:10), "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it." So, open wide! Ask!

*Second, don't be guilty of not having because you doubt God's ability or His willingness to give.* Nothing is impossible with God! As the loving Father, He will give good gifts to His children who ask (Matt. 7:11). We can't always understand His purposes, but we never should doubt His ability or His goodness towards us.

*Third, don't be guilty of praying small prayers.* Pray "big" prayers! It is impossible to ask God for too much, assuming that it is in line with His will and for His glory. Phillips Brooks said, "Pray the largest prayers. You cannot think a prayer so large that God, in answering it, will not wish you had made it larger. Pray not for crutches but for wings."

*Fourth, pray for yourself and for this church that for His glory, God would do through us that which is humanly inexplicable.* Don't try to scrounge up 200 denarii to barely meet the needs of the hungry multitude. Pray for the Lord to multiply our few loaves and fishes, so that He would get all the glory. Pray for the powerful conversion of many sinners. Pray for repentance and holiness for His saints. Pray that He will be glorified in His church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations forever and ever. Amen!

## Application Questions

1. How can we pray in faith (Mark 11:22-24) when we can't know God's sovereign will for certain in advance?
2. How can we sort out whether our prayers are selfish or for God's glory or some mixture of both?
3. Put yourself in the place of the apostle John. Your brother is executed, while Peter is miraculously freed. How would you feel? How would you process your confusion over this?
4. Some claim that if we have faith in God, He *must* answer our prayers. Why is this wrong? (See Heb. 11:33-39.)

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