

# The Higher Life Prayer

by Daniel Steele

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*The higher life prayer is a prayer for believers to be made perfect in love, to know the breadth, length, depth, and height of Christ's love, and to be filled with all the fullness of God.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 36:5, Matthew 5:48, Romans 8:38, Ephesians 3:14, Ephesians 3:17-20

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Christ's Love"

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## Description

Daniel Steele preaches on Paul's powerful prayer for the Ephesian Church, emphasizing the transformative power of Christ's love and the believers' potential for spiritual excellence despite their challenging backgrounds. Steele highlights the expectation for believers to be strengthened by the Spirit, have Christ dwell in their hearts, and be rooted in love, aiming for perfection as commanded by Jesus. He delves into the depth, length, and height of Christ's love, urging believers to seek the unknowable fullness of Christ's love and be filled with all the fullness of God, ultimately praying for the believers' complete spiritual enrichment and perfection in love.

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## Transcript

In the third chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians (verses 14-21, which see) Paul's closet door gets ajar, and all the Christian ages are thrilled with his sublime whisperings in the ear of God. Come, stand by me and listen. It is an honorable kind of eavesdropping. Like his Master, Paul's most earnest entreaties are not for impenitent sinners -- "the world" -- but for believers in Christ, for "the perfecting of the saints." But before following the lowly wrestler through the successive petitions of this wonderful prayer, let us glance at the persons for whom blessings so great are supplicated. The Ephesian Church was composed of believers of far less culture, stability, and moral stamina than are the members of our modern Churches. They were mostly of the poor, the laboring class. These are always the first to receive Christ when he is preached in any community. They were slaves, servants, mechanics, and day-laborers, coming into rough contact with society, and exposed to temptations of the lowest class -- theft, fornication, brawling, and drunkenness. The Gentile converts were struggling with their old pagan habits, making a desperate fight against the heathenish vices which lured them on every hand. The Jewish believers in Christ in foreign cities were probably gathered from the poor -- a class whose representatives are to be found crowded into the Jews' quarter of our modern cities, small peddlers and old-clothes men, aspiring to be money brokers and usurers -- for men change their sky and not their character by crossing seas.

Such had been the antecedents of this portion of the Ephesian Church. It would be natural to say that it is preposterous to expect any high degree of spirituality to be attained by the first, or even by the second, generation of such Christians, just gathered from the bottom of pagan and Jewish society. But St. Paul is lifted above the natural, and grasps by faith a supernatural power, which may suddenly lift these once low-lived men and women up to the summit of moral and spiritual excellence. These remarks have been made for the especial benefit of those who imagine that the higher life was never designed for people whose condition compels them to take what is called "the rough and tumble of life;" and that only contemplative clergymen, wealthy and leisurely women unblessed with little children, and retired business men with ample fortunes and few temptations, can walk steadily in the King's highway of holiness. But in the Ephesian Church we have slaves, subject to the abuse of haughty masters, and from infancy addicted to servile vices; artisans, poverty-pinched, because for Christ's sake they have quit shrine-making; pickpockets and burglars, (Eph. 4:28,) still eyed with suspicion by the lovers of good order; converted harlots and whoremongers, (Eph. 5:3, 8.) wrestling with gigantic, pampered lusts; and mothers in homes of poverty, with troops of fretful children at their heels. St. Paul expects that a Church made up of such unpromising material will, through the cleansing power of the Sanctifier, be "holy and without blemish," a glorious Church, not having "spot or wrinkle."

The degree of spiritual power with which these believers may be endowed is "according to the riches of his glory; that pre-eminent glory which St. John beheld, not in the magnificence of the material universe, but in God's moral attributes, "shining in the face of Jesus Christ," "full of grace and truth." Here we find the illimitable measure of the Spirit's power to strengthen the believer. The power of the Comforter is equal to the glory of the Redeemer. St. Paul prays that these feeble, tempted souls may be strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man, to a degree commensurate with the inconceivable glory surrounding, as with a halo, the character of God. In other words, he prays for an excellence which Christ preaches in his sermon on the mount -- "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

The next petition is, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith:" thus agreeing with that most precious promise of Jesus in his farewell address to his disciples, "I will abide in you." The full significance of this brief petition is, that the Son of God should representatively, by the Holy Spirit, make his permanent abode in the believer's consciousness, rectifying his will, purifying his affections, illuminating his understanding, subsidizing and directing all his energies, and pervading every atom of his body, and filling every capacity of his spirit, making him a particle of Christ's body, "of his flesh and bones," through which the currents of his life ever flow.

If Christian perfection is not sought in this petition for the abiding Christ in the heart of each disciple in Ephesus, we fail to comprehend the meaning of that term. "That ye may be rooted," like a tree, "and grounded," like a building, "in love." This is but a metaphorical expression for that perfect love that casteth out all fear that hath torment. The education of the intellect, and the discipline of the moral nature, tend toward stability of character. But this is an inferior excellence in the Apostle's estimation compared with that stability produced by love binding the soul to God as with a golden chain; the stability of a planet freely moving in its orbit around its all-glorious center of attraction.

"That ye may be able to comprehend with all (perfected) saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height." The breadth and length of what? Paul has failed to say, except by implication in the next verse, from which we infer that it is "the love of Christ." In what sense St. Paul has applied these geometrical dimensions to love -- a spiritual quality and without extension -- it is difficult to determine. But we believe that their meaning is to be sought in the logic of Aristotle, in which St.

Paul must have been drilled in the university of Tarsus, the most celebrated seat of Grecian learning east of Athens. The Greek logicians employ the term breadth to denote the extension of a notion, the number of individuals to whom it will apply, as, for instance, man includes every being possessed of human attributes. The term depth denotes the intension of a notion, the aggregate of qualities which lie piled up one upon another, in one individual distinguishing him from all others.

Sir William Hamilton adds to these logical terms a philosophical term, namely, protension, applicable only to time or extended duration. With these terms -- extension, intention and protension, throwing a flood of light upon the breadth, depth, and length of divine love, we are able to get an enlarged view of the comprehensiveness of this petition. "That ye may know the breadth," is to know the vast number of individuals of our race embraced in the scheme of redemption. It is a remarkable fact, that as soon as love is fully shed abroad in the believer's heart he immediately overleaps the limitations of his theology, if he has been so unfortunate as to have been educated in the belief of a limited atonement, and feels irresistibly drawn toward every lost sinner as the object of Jesus' mighty love.

Hence it is that the missionary spirit is so intense in fully consecrated souls. They have been brought into the most intimate sympathy with the breadth of Christ's love. Hence they plunge into the moral cesspools in our great cities, to pluck lost men and fallen women from the fires of perdition. The secret motive power which impels them to go down into these pits, and cheerfully breathe the fetid miasmas which settle there, is, that they know by experience the amazing breadth of Jesus' love.

"He left his Father's throne above;

(So free, so infinite, his grace!)

Emptied Himself of all but love,

And bled for Adam's helpless race;

'Tis mercy all, immense and free,

For, O my God, it found out me!"

When Paul prays that the Ephesians may know the length of Christ's love, he prays for their eternal blessedness, for his love knows no limit in duration. In ordinary experience the sense of Christ's love is faint -- he visits but does not abide. Hence there is a lurking fear that Jesus may cease to cherish him on whom he has once smiled, even though there should be no apostasy on the part of the believer. Such a state of experience cannot be called rest in Jesus. There is unrest and fear where there should be repose and confidence. There is no cure for this but the fullness of the Spirit, revealing the fullness and perpetuity of Christ's love to the believer. In that glad hour the believer knows that Christ can be fully trusted for the future, as well as for the present. He hears the Saviour say,

"Mine is an unchanging love,

Higher than the heights above,

Deeper than the depths beneath,

Free and faithful, strong as death."

In the first stages of Christian life the spiritual perception is not usually strong enough to hear this voice, but more frequently the ear is not intently turned in the right direction. But in that maturity of grace in which love is made perfect, the feeling of the permanency of the Divine regard takes full possession of the soul, and it becomes a certainty that he will not desert us unless we desert him. This possibility only induces us to grasp with a firmer grip the promise that we shall be "kept by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation." Then we exultingly ask, with the Apostle, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" that is, who will turn away Christ from loving us? "I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Mr. Wesley had been preaching thirty-four years before he was "thoroughly convinced" that perfect love "is amissible," -- "capable of being lost." It is evident that he was not a believer in that kind of perfect love which may be experienced today and lost to-morrow; a species which many mistaken professors avow, to the great detriment of the genuine experience, and to the representation of the unchanging Jesus as an exceedingly capricious being.

In the petition, "that ye may know the depth and height," we have really but one dimension, depth, which denotes the multiplied qualities of Christ's love, or, more exactly, the various spiritual perfections which it bestows on the believer. As God out of sunshine and dust makes all the varieties of color which clothe the landscape as out of water and sunbeams he creates the seven colors of the solar spectrum -- so out of human faith and the Sun of righteousness he produces the whole rainbow of Christian graces. To know the depth of Christ's love is to possess all "the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, patience, and temperance," a spiritual constellation made up of "these gracious stars, perfect repentance, perfect faith, perfect humility, perfect meekness, perfect self-denial, perfect resignation, perfect hope, perfect charity."

The next petition is, that ye may "know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge." Divine solecism! Blessed paradox! To know the unknowable fullness of Christ's love; to drop the short sounding-line of human experience into the unfathomable ocean of the Divine mercy. We understand St. Paul to assert that the love of Christ surpasses all merely intellectual comprehension and logical statement, while it is apprehended by the spiritual intuitions. All who pass into this deep experience are impressed with the vastness, the boundlessness, of Christ's love, a sea without bottom or shore. "How little of the sea," says Rutherford, "can a child carry in his hand; as little am I able to take away of my great Sea, my boundless and running-over Christ Jesus!" This is not a peculiarity of the experience of justification. The Ephesians had not yet been

"Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea

And lost in its immensity."

They were still only ankle deep, standing in some little land-locked bay, without any conception of the immense, the limitless, expanse of waters beyond their view, hidden by the intervening promontories of ignorance and doubt. This petition is distinctively for the "higher life," as is the next, "that ye may be filled with all the fullness of God," or more exactly, "even to all the fullness of God," even as he is full each in your degree, but all to your utmost capacity, with wisdom, might, and love. The rhetorical redundancy of this petition strikingly exhibits the richness and fullness of the Apostle's experience struggling to find utterance in words. The thought, nakedly expressed, is, "that ye may be filled with God." In logical exactness there can be no increase to "filled." But St. Paul's soul, all aglow with the ardors of Christian

love, must intensify the expression by adding fullness to filled, and then crowning the thought with the tautological all as a finishing of the climax. We do not understand that this is a petition for the omnipresent and almighty God to compress his infinitude to the limitations of the human body and soul, as in the mystery of the incarnation, in which there "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily:" it is rather a prayer for that complement of blessing, each perfect in kind, which fills the cornucopia of God's grace under the remedial dispensation, and which is ready to be poured upon all who have the spiritual capacity, the faith, to receive them. To deny that this petition is for Christian perfection would be as absurd as to deny that the sun rolls daily through the skies. St. Paul, aided by the Holy Spirit -- we would speak reverently -- could not have penned words more clearly and unequivocally describing the blessing of perfect love as taught in the Wesleyan standards.

In our analysis of this prayer we have shown that every petition is an outbreking of Paul's soul that the Ephesians might be made perfect in love. There is nothing negative in it; there is no allusion to indwelling sin; the aim of the whole is for the fullness of the divine life. It is certain that he himself enjoyed the high state of experience into which he would lead others. The struggling expression, the strain and cumulation of words, all indicate a soul running, with abounding joy, up this higher path, and not a mere guide-board with its foot planted in the ground, and outstretched, painted hand pointing out the way which "the vulture's eye hath not seen." This heaping up terms, amplifying, heightening, and intensifying his expression, as if his soul was agonizing for utterance, is seen in the doxology at the end of the prayer. "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." What a conception of the "exceeding greatness of Christ's power to usward who believe" does St. Paul here take! Can anyone believe that this was revealed to his intellect by the Spirit of inspiration, and not to his consciousness in personal experience? Who can say that the great Head of the Church stationed St. Paul as a porter to open the gate for others to enter this paradise regained this Eden of love made perfect -- while himself was tantalizingly forbidden to enter so long as he dwelt in a fleshly tabernacle? No, the Master is not so severe with his chosen servant.

This doxology is a molten stream from the glowing heart of a Vesuvius. The inward fires cannot be restrained. "A power" is working in him. This power is the measure of the marvelous work which will be wrought in every one that grasps the promises. One would think that it was enough to know that Christ Jesus "is able to do all we ask;" but St. Paul adds, "or think." Thought always outstrips language. In religious experience words are but a pitiful mockery of the reality, and "language is lame" indeed. But not satisfied with this expansion of the thought, Paul adds the word above, which lifts the expression to an indefinite height. He then multiplies the force of the above by the word abundantly, a term which of itself is full and overflowing. The effect of abundantly, put before above, is, in mathematical phrase, to raise it to the second power. But this does not adequately set forth the amazing wealth of blessing stored up in the power of Christ as in an infinite treasury to be unlocked by the key of faith. He immediately broadens and deepens the abundantly by the illimitable term exceeding, which so enlarges the entire conception that our minds, struggling to keep up with the widening idea, fall back upon themselves in despair, when they attempt to compass in thought abundantly multiplied by exceeding, a thing as unthinkable as infinity multiplied by infinity. Bear in mind that there is no limitation of the exercise of this power of Christ to the hour of death. On the face of every petition, in the use of verbs in the present tense, there lies prima facie proof that St. Paul is praying for blessings to be enjoyed by the Ephesians immediately in this life. Recur now to the circumstances and antecedents of these Christians as portrayed in the beginning of this chapter, and add to this the declaration that Jesus is yesterday, to-day, and for ever the same, and you, my dear reader, have ample ground for your faith in Jesus Christ for this great salvation.

Reader, this very prayer has been preserved for nineteen centuries for your instruction in righteousness. The prayer is for you as much as for the dwellers in Ephesus. It was put on record as a permanent publication of the complete salvation to every generation -- an inventory of the unsearchable riches of Christ -- the rich gifts and blessings of which he is the almoner through the Holy Spirit. It has been answered in the spiritual enlargement of thousands of souls all along the Christian centuries.

We quote but one instance, the Spirit-baptism of a young Swiss preacher, who afterward became the bright evangelical light of Switzerland, and whose "History of the Reformation" is read throughout the Protestant world. Says Merle D'Aubigne: "We were studying the Epistle to the Ephesians, and had got to the end of the third chapter. When we read the last two verses, 'Now unto Him who 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 throughout all ages;' this expression fell upon my soul like a revelation from God. He can do by his power, I said to myself, above all we ask, above all even that we can think -- nay, exceeding abundantly above all! A full trust in Christ for the work to be done within my poor heart now filled my soul. We all three knelt down: and although I had never fully confided my inward struggle to my friends, the prayer of Rieu was filled with such admirable faith as he would have uttered had he known all my wants. When I arose in that inn room at Kiel, I felt as if my wings were renewed as the wings of eagles. From that time forward I comprehended that my own efforts were of no avail; that Christ is able to do all by his power that worketh in us; and the habitual attitude of my soul was to lie at the foot of the cross, crying to Him, 'Here I am, bound hand and foot, unable to move, unable to do the least thing to get away from the enemy, who oppresses me. Do all thyself. I know thou wilt do it. Thou wilt even do exceeding abundantly above all I ask.' I was not disappointed; all my doubts were removed, my anguish quelled, and the Lord extended to me peace as a river. Then I could comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. Then was I able to say, 'Return unto thy rest, O my soul, for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee.'"

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