

We are Empowered

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. My name is Nick. I'm Pastor for Discipleship here at St. Paul's. It's my joy to open the Word with you. We've just had Chinese New Year, and many, many Chinese New Years ago in the 80s, there was a little girl and she was given some red envelopes. She laid them all out on her bed, but one of them slipped down the back of her bed, down the side of her bunk bed frame, and was lost, forgotten. Flash forward 40 years, she was a single mum, battling debts and barely making ends meet, until one day when her old bed frame finally broke under the weight of her two sons playing in their room, they pulled down the old bed to throw it away, and wedged under a wooden slat, she found the red envelope.

It had been given to her by her grandfather, long passed away now. That year he'd sold his business, and he'd done something special for his favourite grandchild. In the envelope wasn't cash, but shares in a company he'd just been told about. He'd printed out all the details on this folded A4 page, put it in the envelope, it was all legally in her name. And at the time, he was very generous.

He put nearly three, just over \$3,000 worth of shares in that envelope. 33,000 shares at 10 cents each. 40 years later, those shares were \$290 each. That's what they were worth. Nearly \$10 million. Without knowing it, this family had been battling to stay afloat while being millionaires the whole time.

This mirrors the experience of many Christians who come to faith, and yet through their life feel like the wallets of their strength to keep following Jesus are always emptier than they would like.

Today, Paul is going to show us where the red envelope of God's strength for his church is. So far in Ephesians, Paul has been encouraging us to remember the riches that Christians have in Jesus, in Christ, right now. We have eternity in front of us. God the Father, certain, safe, joyful, glorious, with him forever. We have each other, the church. God's riches displayed in a family of support and love. And we have his grace to us that while we were powerless to save ourselves or do anything in our own strength, through Christ, God has saved us and empowers us to live for him by the Holy Spirit. We have great hope in Christ. And if you're joining us online or you're in the room with us and you don't yet follow Jesus, consider the blessings and love available to all people in Christ. And last week we heard how Christ has destroyed the walls of hostility that divide humanity on the cross.

Jesus took the Roman punishment for an insurrectionist so that our rebellious lives could be exchanged for his life of love for his enemies. But even after this exchange, Christians are still prone to retaliation, divisions, fears of those unlike us, even racism. So where do we find the strength to be a unified church, wrestling with sin and one another in a broken world?

[4 : 1 6] When Christians experience the riches of Christ's love, God strengthens his people with power to be his church and achieve his mission. Who is the church? This week we're focusing on the fact that we are empowered. Heavenly Father, I pray that you will provide strength for your church through your spirit to behold the love of Christ for them in such a way that they are empowered to display your glory to our city as your church in powerful ways. Amen. Today I have three points. Why do we need to be empowered? What does it mean to be empowered? And how do we get empowered? First, why do we need to be empowered? I want to draw your attention to how Paul begins not just this passage but this chapter.

We didn't read it and there's a reason for it. Have a look at chapter one there, verse one there. Paul starts, for this reason I, and then he gets completely distracted. He goes on this tangent and he gets completely distracted. His train of thought gets broken. He was far away from these people in Ephesus, writing this letter from a Roman jail cell and he knows that this church is worried about him, about what the future might hold without him. Just as Paul shared the boundless riches of Christ with them, God's plan is now to do the same thing through the church. The mission that was

Paul's, the mission of God in Ephesus is now in their hands. It's in the hands of the local church. And Paul imagined them reading this letter. It's almost like he got to this point and then just cast his mind to them and thought, I wonder if they're discouraged. Wondering how they're going to do God's mission to face it without me. So how will Paul strengthen the church for their mission? Well, the prayer that Steve just read out is Paul's answer. It's a prayer. Paul could have asked God to make things easier for the Ephesians. He could have asked for more receptive hearts in their city to their message or even to Christians in their midst. Even for himself to be released to go help them in Ephesus. But instead, he prays for power from God to see immeasurably more done through them.

Verse 16, I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being. Paul knows of a power that God can give Christians that will fill them to the measure of all the fullness of God. That's what Paul wants. More than his own freedom, more than changes to the circumstances of the church. Real power from God to be his church. But Christian, you might be asking a good question here. Isn't Christ dwelling in every Christian already? Yes. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. At the very moment a Christian yields their life to Christ, he lives in them. So what more do Christians have to draw on than the indwelling presence of Christ by the Holy Spirit?

A kind of change that Paul imagines here isn't more of Christ in us, but a deeper knowledge, a surpassing knowledge, verse 19, of just how loved they are by Christ, that once experienced gives them power.

[8 : 55] There is more to experience of Christ and his love day by day as the Spirit provides. It's the love of Christ experienced that Paul wants to show empowers the church. Paul fears that Christians in Ephesus will live poor even amongst the riches of their salvation, like a mum with millions under the bed. Paul asks the Spirit to give us an empowering experience when we remember the love of Christ for us that will strengthen our discouraged hearts. Second, what does it mean to be empowered? We've used this illustration in a number of ways, but this week I thought of it from the perspective of a dad with a young child, that's me, and I remember one Easter weekend many years ago, we gave our middle child chocolate for the first time.

We told her she'd like it, but she wasn't excited. Even today, she has the character of someone who will doubt first, especially what a parent says is true. She will doubt first, and then she will slowly lean into maybe the truth, maybe the experience, maybe how things look. And to this one-year-old, the shiny wrapper was far more exciting than what was inside. Our joy wasn't catching on. And we took a video of all of this, and I remember ending the video because it was going so badly. She was almost too terrified to eat it out of the pressure of how excited people were compared to how she was. But then she tasted it.

We have this photo of this moment. She has this smile. It's almost an aggressive bite into a piece of chocolate. It's like, give me more of that. Oh, this is incredible. And also, I'm on camera. I've got a smile. It's the funniest little photo. The moment she experienced that chocolate is good, she was convinced. Experiencing the love of Christ is to take the reality of the riches, taste the reality of the riches of God. And just like chocolate puts a whirlwind of energy in a toddler, so too does the love of Christ put a power in the church. Many churches are hesitant to experience something that might stir our emotions. Most on the North Shore trust emotions less than we do evidence, data, and truth.

But in Christianity, both the knowledge of God and the affections for God always go together. There was a philosopher and a mathematician, an inventor, a real head knowledge guy, his name was Blaise Pascal, many, many years ago. He was also a Christian. And when he died, his coat was found to have a page of his diary, apparently this page, sewn into the fabric so that any time he wanted, he could look back on something that happened to him, something that he had experienced. And on there is a date and a title. The title is Fire.

Fire. Here's what he wrote. Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned, certainty, security, feeling, joy, peace, and on and on the diary entry goes.

[13 : 09] He had experienced the love of Christ that day for him so deeply, emotionally, physically, that it changed his perspective on his entire life. And he wanted to remember how that day felt.

When the truth of the truth of the love of Christ grabbed him in this experience of wonder, awe, fear, and praise.

What experiences of the love of Christ have you had? What experiences of the love of Christ have we had together?

Think of the moments we've shared singing where it's like all of a sudden someone's turned up the volume of our voices and our emotions are running high in the room.

Think of the tears that you might have shed maybe in someone's home with your Bibles open with someone or sharing your testimony or hearing their testimony of God's love in Christ.

[14:21] There are experiences of God that stir deep emotions. And Paul knows we need experiences of the love of Christ to empower his church.

So as you discover more knowledge of the love of Christ for you, you may have a Holy Spirit-empowered experience. Now, this is really important.

Tim Keller uses a really helpful image here for us to understand this, the image of a kiss.

Imagine someone kisses you. Woo! You hope you are the reason that they want to kiss you, right? But if you discover that they're only here for the kiss and that they can get it from another and you just happen to be there, then that kiss loses all its meaning to you.

[15:36] If you go after the kiss and not the person, then the kiss is nothing. But if the kiss is about the person, then the kiss means everything.

So if you go after an experience of being deeply moved but do not go after God, then your experience is nothing. But if you experience deep affections as you go after the love of Christ for you, then that experience means everything.

Keller says, through the power of the Holy Spirit, information becomes sensation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, information about the love Christ has for you can become sensation.

We can't always hope to experience God's love in Christ with this emotional depth. But together as God's church, we can ask God to strengthen us regularly in our midst.

These experiences can happen together or we can share them with one another when they happen, when we are together. And I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide, how long and how high and how deep is the love of Christ.

[17:07] The church are the glorious riches of Christ. We've already heard that in Ephesians. And they are the location where God's glory will be displayed in power through us.

There's no individualism in this passage at all. Any experience of Christ's love on our own, shared together, can empower us together.

There were 35 of us gathered around Steve on Wednesday night as we explored God's vision for St. Paul's Chatswood towards 2030. And we shared big goals.

Steve's just shared the summary of those this morning. We want to make a big impact in our city. Not to be known, but for Christ's love for our city to be known.

We want to see him do incredible things. And we can't do that unless God empowers us. Just like the church in Ephesus couldn't do that unless God empowers them.

[18:14] So Paul's huge goal for the Ephesian church and for us is that God will, and another tangent it seems, but God who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or even imagine, will empower his church to glorify God throughout all generations forever and ever.

What it means to be empowered by God is for the church to regularly, purposefully pray that God might strengthen them through his spirit as they experience the love of Christ.

So how do we get empowered? There are many practical ways that we can pursue the love of Christ, but let me give you four, and then we'll do one of them together.

First, yield. Look at verse 14. Paul's posture, he tells us, and he may have been as he dictated this letter, is that he is on his knees.

Or he might have been saying, I am doing this regularly. I'm on my knees praying this prayer for you. But in Paul's day, people didn't pray kneeling.

[19:39] That might be what we see on TV or what you might have experienced as a more traditional way of praying. But no, in Paul's day, they stood to pray.

So it's important that we realise Paul's telling them this to show them something. It's actually an act of submission. God is our Father, and ours is a relationship of intimacy and love, but also of authority.

To submit to God's authority to you, to change you, is an act of obedience. You may not want God to change you.

You might not feel like you need changing. Or to feel deep emotions. But trust your Father. Yield to Scripture, and find out more, and more, and more about the love of Christ for you. And be open to the Spirit to empower you, and change you.

[20 : 51] Yield, and meditate. Look at verse 18 with me. What do you notice about the verb there? It doesn't say read about the depth and height and width and of the love of Christ. It says grasp. Grasp.

That word literally means wrestle or ambush. It's a very intense, strong word. What Paul's saying is it's a wrestling with the truth of the love of Christ into your own heart.

An active, reflective, purposeful activity that the Bible calls meditation. If you want to get a picture of what this looks like in the Bible, Psalm 103 is really helpful.

It's a talking to your soul prayer. prayer. It's to yourself, examining your own life, beliefs and understanding and desires and loves and comparing them to God's perspective of the world and yourself like a wrestling match between your will and the will of God.

[22 : 07] Your priorities and the priorities of God. And by the Spirit, it's an experience that can happen to you. You can grasp it and even as you do, you can be grasped by it.

The disciple, Peter, he was ambushed by God's word in Acts 10. Last week, we were talking about the topic of unity in the church and one of the, well, the leader of God's church, Peter, failed immediately when it came to allowing Gentiles to be fully a part of the church, non-Jews to be fully a part of what God was doing.

He knew God loved them. He knew they should be a part of the church but he didn't live it. He was ambushed by a revelation from God and to accept all people in the church.

To grasp the love of God, we reach out and grasp the pages of scripture, not just to read it but to always meditate on it.

There is no, and let me just say here, this is not meditation where you empty everything out of your mind and sit blank. Christian meditation instead is to fill our minds with God's words and reflect.

[23 : 39] Seek to connect with God daily. That's one of our seven rhythms of grace. What it means to live in Chatswood as his people, regularly connecting with God.

And here's a starting point if you've never done this. Read, meditate and pray. Read the word of God. Give yourself time to wrestle with what you have read.

Meditate on it and pray. Behold the love of Christ in Scripture and grasp it in your soul as the information you read becomes sensation by the power of the Spirit.

And yes, thirdly, pray. This passage itself is a prayer and it's a prayer for experience. And it is not the only thing you should pray for.

but we can ask the Spirit to empower us as we reflect on the love of Christ for us. Hudson Taylor, who was the founding missionary of the gospel going into China, he prayed every day starting like this.

[24 : 51] It's actually a longer poem, but the start of the poem that he wrote in the top of his diary was this, Lord Jesus, make thyself to me a living bright reality.

Lord Jesus, make yourself to me a living bright reality. God can make us more receptive to the bright love of Jesus through his Spirit.

Praying in step with this passage is like asking God to change us as if we're a normal boring piece of A4 paper like this.

Change us into a photosensitive chemically treated piece of paper, receptive and ready to receive the light of Christ, seen in his word and heard in the church, experienced in Christian friendships, and then have it come to life on us, like a photo instead of a blank white page.

Pray for God to give you an experience of the love of Christ. And then fourthly, together. If you want to know the love of Christ deeply, you need to be deeply involved in the church community.

[26 : 20] the promised power of this passage involves other Christians. God pours out his power over the church together with all the Lord's holy people.

This whole letter is all about the church and it's evidence enough for any Christian to dig roots and foundations in a church.

And if we take our lead from this passage, together as God's church, we can grasp the love of Christ deeper together.

So let's do it. Let's explore the love of Christ together now and answer this question. How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ?

for you. How wide is the love of God for you? Jesus said, when I am lifted up at the cross, I will draw all people to myself.

[27 : 36] All people can come to Jesus. His love reaches to all people of every nation. His love is to all nations.

And Isaiah 1.18 says, though your sins be as scarlet, you shall be whiter than snow. This vivid image of scarlet to white or red to white is actually about blood.

Even if you've killed, you can be forgiven no matter what you've done. That is how wide the love of Christ is for you.

How long is the love of God? Revelation 13.8 says that Christ was ready to die for you before the universe was made.

In eternity past, God had a plan for you. And Jesus said, I give them eternal life and no one can pluck them out of my hand.

[28 : 43] Jesus will never let go of the ones he loves. And Philippians 1.16 says, the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

His love is with you every step you take. God's love is that long. How deep is the love of God for you?

How deep is his love? The depth of Christ's love is seen in how far he will go to show you. What did it cost you?

What does it cost anyone for God to love you? Nothing. What did it cost God to show you his love? Everything. Death of his son on a cross.

Jesus died your death and went to hell for you, as Peter taught. Christ's love is as deep as deep can go. God's love is that deep.

[29 : 47] And our high is the love of Christ for you. John 17, Jesus prays, Father, I want them to have the glory that we have.

Christ loves us up into the status and riches and glory that he has with God the Father. And John, in 1 John, says, we will be like him and we will see him as he is.

God lifts us into holiness and nearness with the highest king. That's how high the love of Christ is for you.

The love of Christ is the red envelope of the Christian. But is it lost under your bed? God or are you experiencing the love of Christ each day?

Yield yourself to Christ and connect with him daily in the word and meditate on it. Seek to grasp Christ's love for you and pray that the spirit would move you deeply, even knock you off your feet onto your knees like Paul and prioritize being together, seeking the love of Christ with the church.

[31 : 05] Where do we find strength to be united church? Wrestling with sin and one another in a broken world? In the love of Christ for us. God empowers his people to be his church as we behold the love of Christ.

Who is the church? We are empowered. And what are we empowered to do? Well, you have to join us in Ephesians 4 from next week on.

We need the power of God working within us to experience the love of Christ, to do more in God's mission than we can ask for or even imagine.