

THE SUPERLATIVE POWER OF GOD
Ephesians 3:20, 21

Intro: One of the most encouraging things that any child of God can do, is to go through the Bible noting the passages which tell us what God is able to do. It would be impossible in one message to deal with all of the passages, OT and NT, which speak of the mighty power of God, His sovereign power, but don't fail to notice them in your Bible reading.

To show you what I am thinking about, let me briefly run through some Bible verses which use the word "able." Most of them are in the NT, but the book of Daniel in the OT gives us two good illustrations:

- 1) Dan. 3:17, Daniel's three friends, speaking to King Nebuchadnezzar, told him that their God was able to deliver them from the fiery furnace.
- 2) Dan. 6:20, where King Darius asked Daniel if his God were able to deliver him from the lions. And Daniel responded by telling him that the Lord had sent an angel to shut their mouths.

The NT gives us many examples of what God is able to do. In Matt. 3:9 and Mark 3:8 John the Baptist told a group of Pharisees and Sadducees who were boasting that they were children of Abraham that God was able to raise up from stones children unto Abraham. In Matt. 9:28 the Lord claimed to be able to give sight to two blind men, which He promptly did. In Matt. 10:28 the Lord told the twelve not to fear those who could kill the body, but to fear Him Who "is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." He was speaking of God. In Matt. 26:61 our Lord claimed that He was able to raise Himself from the dead. He made the same claim in John 10:17, 18--a proof of His Deity. In Acts 20:32 we find that the Apostle Paul commended the Ephesian elders to God and to His Word because He was able to build them up and to give them an inheritance among the sanctified. Rom. 4:21 tells us that Abraham believed that God was able to do whatever He has promised that He would do. In Rom. 11:23 Paul said that after God had cut off the natural branches, speaking of Israel, He was able to graft them in again. In Rom. 14:4 Paul encouraged the Roman church by saying that God was able to make the weak brother stand. In 2 Cor. 9:8 Paul told the Corinthian believers that God was able to make all grace abound toward them. In Phil. 3:21 Paul told the Philippian church that God was able to subdue all things to Himself. Paul confidently declared in 1 Tim. 1:12 that God was able to keep that which Paul had committed to Him "against that day." Heb. 2:18 says that our Lord is able to help those who are tested. Heb. 7:25 say that Christ is able to save to the

uttermost... Heb. 11:19 tells us that Abraham believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead, although he had never seen a resurrection. The benediction in Jude 24 says that God is not only able to keep us from falling, but to present us faultless before His presence with exceeding joy.

There are many passages which speak of the power of God and the works of God where the word "able" is not used. But these verses give us enough to know what a mighty God we have, and that His Son is just as mighty as He is. God created the universe and all that is in it, and it is by His power that everything in it continues to function.

But now I come to my text for this evening: Eph. 3:20, 21. I do not know of a statement about the power of God in all of the Bible which exceeds the claim which the Apostle Paul made for God in this passage. (Read.)

I. THE MEANING OF THE VERSES (Eph. 3:20, 21).

I could not think of a better way to describe it than to call it THE SUPERLATIVE POWER OF GOD. This word superlative means not only that it is superior to all others, and of the highest order and quality, but that it is impossible for any power to be greater than God's power. A. T. Robertson says that "above all" means above and beyond all (IV, 534). And then Paul used a word which is found nowhere else in the NT. It is translated in the KJV, "exceeding abundantly." The NIV translates it as "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." Thayer, another Greek authority, says that it means "far more than" we could ever ask or think. John Eadie in his commentary on Ephesians says that this expression means that God has "infinite ability" (p. 261).

Now notice that this benediction came at the close of one of the most wonderful prayers ever recorded by the Apostle Paul. And Charles Hodge had this to say about verses 29 and 31:

Paul's prayer had apparently reached a height beyond which neither faith, nor hope, nor even imagination could go, and yet he is not satisfied. An immensity still lay beyond. God was able to do not only what he had asked, but infinitely more than he knew how either to ask or think. Having exhausted all the forms of prayer, he casts himself on the infinitude of God, in full confidence that he can and will do all that omnipotence itself can effect. His power, not our prayers nor our highest conceptions, is the measure of the apostle's anticipations and desires. This idea he weaves into a doxology, which has in it more of heaven than of earth (Sovereign Grace Publishers edition, p. 67).

And so we can see that God is not restricted either by our prayers nor by our knowledge. What a marvelous God we have!

In the book of Isaiah we learn that the Lord told King Ahaz to ask Him to do whatever he wanted him to do, to make it as deep as he wanted to, or to make it as high as he wanted to. But Ahaz refused saying that he would not tempt the Lord. What a shame! God was throwing heaven open to the King of Judah, but he refused to take God up on the opportunity that he was given. How often we are guilty of treating the Lord and His Word the same way.

But now look at verse 21.

This is really a doxology. Such a revelation of God as we have in verse 20 should lead all of us to worship God for His greatness and His power. These words were written in those days when the power of Rome was at its height. All of the Roman subjects feared the Caesars and their power. But Paul here, in speaking of the power of God, put it so far beyond the greatest earthly power that there was no way to compare God's power with any other, nor with all human powers put together. How this should strengthen our faith!

But now let us consider:

II. HOW THESE VERSES ARE GENERALLY USED.

As the saying goes, if I had a nickel for every time I have used these verses in prayer, it would amount to quite a sum. In my own times of trial it has been comforting to me to remember what this verse tells us about God. As I have prayed with sick people, I have not hesitated to remind the Lord of these verses. The sovereign, omnipotent power of God is meant to be a comfort to all of us at all times. It is wonderful to know that no situation can arise in our lives which is greater than the mighty power of our Lord. He can make the sun stand still in the sky. He can open the Red Sea, and the Jordan River. He can defeat mighty armies without any help from man. He brought the heavens and the earth into being from nothing. He heals all of our diseases. He is greater than the Devil. Nobody, nor any combination of men and nations, has ever been able to nullify a single purpose of Almighty God. Kings do His bidding very willingly without knowing that they are doing God's will. Truly the Apostle Paul was not only making an amazing statement about God here, but it is absolutely true. It was true then; it is still true today.

However, what specifically was it that Paul had in mind when he wrote this verse? What was there that would call for the

greatest of all displays of the power of God?

Was Paul advising them about how they could overthrow Rome? No, Paul never did that, but there is no question but that He could have done that if that had been His will at that time.

Was Paul talking about the supply of some material need that the Ephesian church had in those days, something perhaps that had to do with money. No, there is no evidence of that.

Was he, like some of our charismatic friends, telling the Ephesians that they could see the power of God on display if they would have a healing meeting, and bring all of the sick people they could find so they could all be healed. No. In the early days of the Church the apostles exercised miraculous powers, but those powers seem to have been taken from them even before the NT was finished.

It was none of these things.

What, then, was it? How can we tell?

III. THE PRIMARY MEANING OF THESE VERSES.

If we are to find the answer to our question, we need to look at the context, the verse which lead up to these verses, and the verses which follow.

If our consideration of some of the golden texts of Scripture do anything for us, I hope that they will teach us how important the context is. False teaching can arise when we lift verses out of their setting in Scripture, and then seek to interpret them. But we are on safe ground if we examine the context.

A. Look at the prayer in Eph. 3:14-19.

Note what the requests are. Have you noticed that Paul included all three Members of the Godhead, with one request about each one? Would you ever think of praying such a prayer if it were not for this prayer in the epistle to the Ephesians? It is amazing to think that such a prayer can be prayed for every child of God, from the youngest to the oldest, and from the most obscure person to the best known.

What was Paul's burden in this prayer?

It was for the spiritual growth of all of the people of God.

Now let us look at what follows our verses in chapter 4.

B. Look at Eph. 4:1-3.

Remember there were not chapter divisions in the original letter. Paul would probably be amused to hear us talking about chapters and verses in his epistles. With him it was one continuous letter, and we can see the connection between chapter 3 and chapter 4 by Paul's use of the word "therefore" in chapter 4, verse 1.

Actually the emphasis that Paul was making in the first three verses goes on down through verse 16, but we can see enough in verses 1 through 3 to be able to see where he was going in his thought.

(Read Eph. 4:1-3.)

Here Paul was definitely concerned about the fellowship of the believers with each other. It is describe as the unity of the believers. And the word "therefore" links his emphasis in chapter 4 with his prayer and our text in chapter 3.

Now we are prepared to see why the Apostle Paul was revelling in the omnipotence of God.

IV. THE TWO GREATEST WORKS WHICH GOD DOES, REQUIRING A SUPERABUNDANCE OF POWER.

What would you say are the two greatest works of God? Creation? Supporting the universe day after day? Healing diseases? Raising the dead? Controlling the nations? These all require superhuman power, but none of these can be called God's greatest works.

His two greatest works are these:

- 1) Transforming sinners into saints.
- 2) Unifying the people of God into the one Body of Christ.

What God does in the hearts of His people requires a super-abundant power. And we are beginning to make progress in our praying when we see that our praying doesn't do it; God does it in answer to our prayers. And what He has in mind for us is far beyond all that we could ever ask or think. Even the aged Apostle John said in his first epistle that "it doth not yet appear what we shall be." Oh, he knew much about what God's purpose was, but he didn't know it all, and you won't even find it all in Scripture. We know we are going to be like the Lord, but what that will mean we still do not understand. You can ask me a lot of questions about heaven to which I will have to answer, "I don't know."

But think beyond the perfection of the saints to the unifying of the body of Christ, and again you will see that only a superlative power of God will ever be able to accomplish it. Think of how many divisions there are among the people of God there are. We differ over how sovereign God is. We differ over how enduring salvation is. We differ over church leadership, over evangelism, over baptism and the Lord's Supper. And yet Paul told the Ephesians in this chapter that we are some day going to see a Church, a glorified Church, in which there are no divisions. Such a work can only be done by the superlative power of God.

Concl: It is so easy for us to lose sight of the Lord in our spiritual progress, as well as in our concern for others in the family of God. And when we look at the condition of the professing Church today, it is easy for us to have a hopeless feeling. What do we need? We need to look to the only One Who can make us what we should be, and Who can make the Church what it needs to be.

Note Paul's order. The individual believer comes first, and then the Church. The only way we can have a strong, unified Church is for us to have healthy, spiritually minded, growing Christians, the kind who are described in Paul's prayer in Eph. 3.

So when we get discouraged about ourselves, and/or about others, and about the Church, let us turn to Eph. 3:20, 21 and be reminded that the things which are completely beyond us are gloriously possible and absolutely certain with God.