

Prayer of Illumination

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light. Send out your light and your truth, O God, and let them lead us, through Jesus Christ, your Son, in whom we pray. Amen.

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According to the Riches of his Glory

Ephesians 3:20-21 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, we have just heard words as magnificent as anything in Scripture. We've heard a prayer so rich, so dynamic, so alive with the Spirit of God that none of us can take its full measure. You know, all Scripture is inspired, but some Scripture is electric. It's electric and you hardly dare to touch it.

The prayer shows us the huge U-shaped flow of traffic between God and the people of God. God pours out grace and glory among people who put it to work and then give the harvest right back to God. So the prayer begins: "I bow my knees before the Father," the first of the Holy Trinity, the one from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth has gotten its identity as children of God. This is the family of angels and humans, of saints and martyrs, of people living and dead—the whole family of God. When we pray we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses. Our prayers are always family prayers. In fact, I can think of excellent reasons to believe that this very hour, while we sing and celebrate, we are

surrounded by Gerrit Boer and Foppe Ten Hoor; by Geerhardus Vos and Louis Berkhof; by Harry Jellema and John Bratt; by Brant Lanser and Jylene Baas and Catherine Van Opynen. I know that some of them might be too busy to attend, but we sort of *expect* them today, because this celebration is for all the saints.

Paul starts with God the Father, and asks for God's Spirit to unleash his power, and for God's Son to plant his love. Power, love, Christ, Spirit—these gifts and persons must come down so that some of their glory may go back up to God in the great family exchange of giving and taking and giving back. Give, O God, from the riches of your glory, says Paul, so that we may have Christ in us, and strength in us. Give us the strength, O God, so that we may become warriors against the spirits of darkness, and agents of all the good works that You have created us to do—all the works of justice, the works of forgiveness, the works of conspicuous kindness that send glory right back to God.

Chapter 6 tells us that we need this strengthening because our battle isn't against flesh and blood, but against the powers, the powers of this present darkness. The Holy Spirit isn't the only Spirit around, as Robert Roberts says. There are also the spirits of pride and cruelty. There are spirits of deceit and confusion. There's the spirit of hypocrisy that Jesus hated so much. There are spirits of sexism and racism and hatred of homosexual persons—evil spirits that can haunt great Christian institutions and corrupt them.

The Holy Spirit is at war with evil spirits, and so we need God's gift to discern the spirits, to disentangle the spirits. We need to know who's who and what's what in the great competition of world spirits.

Let me say that all this discerning is very hard to do. We have to hate what's evil and cling to what's good, but sometimes good and evil twine around each other so that it's hard to tell where the one leaves off and the other begins. According to Scripture, the devil himself is a master of disguise, and likes to masquerade as an angel of light.

This is one reason why we need powerful education in Calvin College and in Calvin Theological Seminary. We want the knowledge, skills, and virtues that will serve God's kingdom of light, but that means we have to learn the difference between darkness and light, and struggle to find our way through the shadows that lie between them.

To succeed we'll need the riches of God's glory. We'll need some of the glory to enlighten us, and then to strengthen us to do God's work in the world. And so Paul bows his knees before the heavenly Father and prays that God will send strength and love, so that believers will be able to comprehend the great things of God—what is the breadth and length and height and depth. Paul prays that believers will know the love of Christ, the ultimate source of every self-giving impulse that has ever blessed the church and the world. The love of Christ. Paul's

not talking about giving a hug or sharing a feeling. These little loves won't take anybody to a cross. To go to a cross for somebody, your love would have to be fierce. Paul is talking about the love of *Jesus Christ!* To go to a cross you would have to be terrifying in the strength of your passion for sinners. “God so loved the world that he sent his only Son”—that’s not just a Bible verse. That’s a cry from the depths. That’s almost a battle-cry.

Paul prays to God the Father to send the power and the Spirit and the love of Christ, so that by the power at work within them believers may join hands and join forces to battle for good in the world. Then all the glory of the battle, and all the glory of good works of justice and compassion, all the glory of billions of saints and martyrs fastened by faith to Jesus Christ—all this glory with names and faces and histories in it—all this glory may go back to God. The glory of God is like the Son of God, coming down to do the great works of redemption. There is terrible struggling and fighting and dying, but then there is the astonishing power of resurrection and ascension that sends the incarnate Christ, wounds and all, back to the one who sent him.

Ephesians, chapter 1, tells us that this same power—*the power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead*—this is the power at work within us, within deeply flawed people like us! God is able to do not only what we **ask**, but also what we **imagine**. God is able to do **more** than we ask or imagine. God is able to do **FAR**

more than we ask or imagine. In fact God is able to do **abundantly** far more than we can ask or imagine. Paul piles up the superlatives in this great burst of enthusiasm for what God is able to do according to the riches of his glory. What God does is to put the power, the *dunamis*, the **dynamite** of the resurrection into the lives of ordinary people.

In one of Douglas Nelson's sermons there's an account of a Salvation Army Band playing out in the rain on a street corner. The incident happened maybe fifty years ago. The band was soaked and a little bedraggled, but they managed to toot and honk their way through a couple of hymns. But "one man didn't toot. He blared." His trombone blasted away, ruining the balance and harmony of the performance. This player was "a hulking tough, with a red, bloated face and a prizefighter's nose. Someone spoke to him afterward about his zest, and the man beamed." Then he lifted his trombone and said, "Listen, Mister. When I think what God has done for me I could blow this thing out straight!"

The incident reminds me that Charles Smith, former conductor of the Calvin Alumni Choir, had a general warning for conductors: "Never look at the trombones. It only encourages them!"

The great prayer of Ephesians 3 reaches for the heights and the depths with such grandeur that it comes as a shock to recall that the man who prays these words isn't a pope or a governor. Paul's a prisoner. He's a soul on ice. He's been

converted by God, and jailed by Rome, and from his tiny world he pours out a magnificent chorus of prayer for the Ephesian church. How heroic, this is, said John Calvin. How heroic for a suffering prisoner to pour himself out for believers on the outside, praying God for great things to happen to Christians who are safe.

Great things according to the riches of his glory. Great things “by the power at work within us.” Great things that send the glory back to God who gave it.

And what are some of these great things? They’re the things that belong to the resurrection. They’re the resurrection things. I’m talking about the Church of Jesus Christ preaching the gospel of grace, so that men and women who were dead in their sins may stand up, throw off their old lives, and come into the morning light like Jesus walking out of his tomb. I’m talking about the billions of Christians across the centuries and across the globe who have bowed their knees before the Father, and prayed "Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And then those Christians got up on their feet, and went out and built a hospital. They built cathedrals, but also factories. They built farms and also farms to grow ministers, which is what seminaries do. They fought the Devil and his hosts, and sometimes they did it by hiding Jews.

They had the power at work in them, and so they bore children, and wrote poems, and dug canals. They fixed teeth, and taught geography, and did it to the glory of God. They sent missionaries, and they sent plumbers and electricians

right along with them. The power was in them. The Spirit was in them. The family in heaven and earth was around them. They had the sense that they could bring something to the Kingdom of God, and God would take it and do with it way more than anybody could ask or even imagine.

And so, one day on the second floor of an elementary school on Williams Street down by the train station—one day Gerrit Boer began to teach seven students seventeen subjects so they could eventually minister the gospel. One winter day in 1876 these wonderful schools were born. Gerrit Boer had noise, ignorance, and poverty to contend with, but he also had the power at work within him. The power was in him, and in so many across a century and a quarter who have given their money, and their prayers, and their volunteer labor to sponsor these schools. They wanted students, faculty, and staff to explore the breadth and length and height and depth of the things of God, and then serve the church and the world with what they had learned. And God has seen fit to bless these efforts according to the riches of his glory. Doc DeVries and Nicholas Wolterstorff and Henrietta Ten Harmsel; Henry Stob and John Kromminga and Tony Hoekema and James DeJong; Tony Diekema and Gaylen Byker and Carol Smith and RhaeAnn Booker—all with the power at work within them. And in this Fieldhouse today, sits President William Spoelhof, who built so much that endures, and who did it

with such grace and truth that on this campus his name will stay in memory like a triumph.

These people and thousands of others, including the donors of buildings and scholarships, the architects and engineers of buildings, programs, and curriculums—all these and the students who work and think and form lasting loyalties on this campus—all these and, of course, the students who have come today to play their trombones in the band—all have had some of the resurrection power at work in them. All these and so many more family members in heaven and on earth have had the kingdom and the power and the glory in them.

But now we have another 125 years to begin. So “to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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