

“Only a Trinity Can Save Us”

Ephesians 3:14-21

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ in order that he might grant you according to the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ in order that you might be strengthened to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, in order that you might be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do exceedingly more than anything that we could ask or imagine, according to the power that is being worked within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In the Name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Introduction.

When I was studying in England, I was enrolled in a Theology Seminar led by, let's say, a “noteworthy conservative theology scholar.” There was nothing immediately alarming about the class or the instructor on paper, but then on day two, we began our study of the Trinity. The Professor explained that the word “God” was not so much a noun as an adjective to be applied to each Person of the Trinity. In other words, much like Mormons believe, this scholar taught us that there are *multiple gods* (three, to be precise), and that their being one god meant that they were all members of the same club.

As you can imagine, with that starting point, things went from bad to worse. As the class progressed, we learned that Christ had a split personality, that his sacrifice on the cross was not fundamentally necessary to be made right with God, and that we are saved fundamentally by our own efforts. What started as a tinkering with the Holy Trinity led to an overturning of all the hope for sinners who can't save ourselves! As the class came to an end, we saw a coalition of us students: Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox, unite to oppose our professor and argue for the true Christian faith in the true Christian God who can truly save weak sinners like you and me.

It is precisely this point that is so important: the Doctrine of the Trinity is meant for sinners. If you are a good person, if you believe that you are sufficient to handle life's problems and the sin lurking inside of you, if you are content to be the way you are, then the fact that God is a “Unity in Trinity and a Trinity in Unity” will be of no value to you. But, on the other hand, if you are like me, a weak, foolish, miserable sinner against God, there is no more important teaching and belief than that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are together one God. It affects everything else that we believe about who Jesus is, what he has done for us, what the Holy Spirit does in our

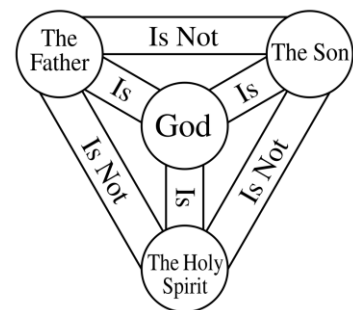
life, what the Church is, how we can be saved, and what our hope in this life ought to be. It is for this reason that the Creeds that we confess as Christians are structured around the Holy Trinity, that the controversies and heresies that the Church has had to endure almost all revolve around the Holy Trinity, and that our worship and prayer continually invokes the Name of the Holy Trinity.

And it is why the Apostle Paul, in the passage that we are considering today in Ephesians 3:14-21, delights in and relies on the Holy Trinity as he prays for the believers in Ephesus, and for us. Though the word “Trinity” does not appear in Scripture, Paul clearly appeals to the reality to which the word “Trinity” refers as he prays in verse 10 that the believers “be filled with all the fullness of God.” In this prayer, Paul indicates that ***the goal of the Christian life is to be completely filled with all the fullness of the Holy Trinity by the powerful working of the Holy Trinity.*** Paul makes a remarkable prayer on behalf of horrendous sinners like you and me that this fullness in fact come to pass in us, with the confident hope that God can do what we cannot do to bring us to a glory that we cannot imagine and could never deserve. For this reason, we will spend most of our time this morning examining this working of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in its three modes: 1) their working for us, 2) their working in us, and 3) their working through us. In this way, I hope that we will come away not only convinced that only the Triune God can save us and has saved us, but also amazed at the riches of the glory that awaits us as we become filled with all his fullness.

2. The Doctrine Itself.

First, however, we should explain what the doctrine of the Trinity actually is. Now this won't really take that long, since the doctrine is more of a mysterious elaboration than a series of laborious technicalities.

So, without further ado, the doctrine of the Trinity is that we worship the One Living and Almighty Lord God of the Universe, who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Three Individual, Distinct Persons but only One God. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, yet there are not three gods but only One God. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father, but each one is completely and absolutely the One and Only True God of the Universe.



Okay, so far this might have gotten a little confusing, but we have to add a little bit more before getting to the more tangible side of things. These Three Persons are distinguished from each other and have their being in each other because of their *relationships* with each other. The Father is called the Father because he is the Son's

Father, and the Son is called the Son because he is the Father's Son. Though the Son is *not created* he is always already "begotten" of his Father as the Father pours himself out completely into his Son who in return reflects his Image entirely, who is his Wisdom and Word, rejoicing always to submit to his Father and to have his being and glory in him.

The way in which this Sonship and Fatherhood is expressed in love is through the gift of another Person, the Spirit, whom the Father "breathes out" into and upon his Son, and whom the Son "breathes back" to his Father as the return gift of love. Thus, the Spirit seals the bond of love and peace within the godhead, giving life and harmony to their relationship. He is *not created*, and *not begotten*, but he "proceeds" from both the Father and the Son and receives glory as he bestows glory on each of them the glory from the other.

Whew, so far so good. All of what I've been describing becomes important because the dynamics of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit begin to play out in their creation as their eternal love freely spills out onto this theater of their glory. Because they are Three Persons, you can see each Person at work in the world doing his own unique activity, but because they are One God, wherever one Person is at work, the other two are at work as well, and together their working brings about an integrated, unified result and work. So, for example, as God in a single act of creation brought the universe into glorious existence, the Father spoke his creative Word, his Son, through whom all things were made and for whom all things were made, and the Spirit who was hovering over the primordial waters brought existence and life to what the Father had spoken through his Son in the perfect tangible echo of being there in beauty.

Creation itself required but One God to come into existence, but required the unique contribution of the working of each individual Person to bring it about in its climactic perfect performance. However, what is implicitly present in creation become a drastic and dire necessity as God in all of his Triune glory set about to bring his sinful fallen creatures to salvation and to glory. And it is at this point that we turn to the Apostle Paul's prayer to the Triune God that we "be filled with all of the fullness of God."

3. The Trinity's Working For Us.

The first thing for us to consider here in these verses is that Paul draws our attention to what the Three Persons of the One God have done *for us* in history to bring us to salvation and to glory.

Paul brings to the heart of his prayer for us "the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge," (3:19) which is the ultimate expression of the Father "who is able to do surpassingly more than we can ask or imagine," (3:20). When Paul speaks of this kind of love, he's not speaking of a love that dwells in us (like he does in 3:17), rather he

speaks of a love manifested *outside of us* in what Christ has done in love for us by suffering humiliation on our behalf. It is a love which must be known “through faith” (3:17), which casts off confidence on ourselves and looks to the story of Jesus.

And this is precisely where the doctrine of the Trinity becomes so important to Paul, and to what he’s praying for us. Christ had to be *sent* by his Father into the world, to *serve* his Father, and to obey him where we had not. He had to take on our nature by the power of the Holy Spirit to become the perfectly empowered man for the work for which the Father had sent him. And though this love was first expressed by his taking on human flesh, it was ultimately at the cross that we see the love of Christ reflecting perfectly the work of the whole Trinity. As the Father poured out the hot wrath of his justice against sinners by the blast of his Spirit upon his one-and-only Son despite his innocence and righteousness, the Son offered up the oblation of his life to his Father by the same Spirit to be the perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for our sins. And so, in this act of redemption, of salvation, of love that exceeds understanding, the Three Persons accomplished the forgiveness of sins that only the One God could bring about.

But the story does not end here. Paul speaks of “the power being worked within us” (3:20), which earlier (1:19-20) he reveals to be the same power by which God raised Jesus his Son from the dead. Paul is adamant that it was the Father who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 4:24) by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 1:14), because of which Christ is now the possessor of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16), and has become able to give life (1 Corinthians 15:45) and eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:9) to all who believe in him. Without the activity of the Father who gave him this reward for his obedience, or the Spirit who empowered him to conquer death, the Son would have remained chained in death. But as it is, the Triune God, each Person with his unique contribution, has brought about the end of sin, Satan, and death and the beginning of a New Creation full of glory in the one event of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

And it is in the glory of the Son of God, who has received equal glory with the Father (John 17:5), that the Father will not only bring himself glory (3:21) but “by the riches of his glory” (3:16) he will bring the Church of which Christ is the head to the same glory in which he himself dwells in eternity. As a down payment of this, the Father sends the Spirit upon the Church after Christ ascends (John 14:16) because Christ asks him to send the Spirit, though the Apostle Peter preaches that the way this happens is that the Father gives the Spirit to the Son who then pours him out on his people at Pentecost (Acts 2:33). But the Spirit is, of course, the down payment of the “weight of glory” (Romans 8:18) to be poured out upon the Church and on all the New Creation when Christ comes again in glory.

And so, just as our forgiveness is found in Christ's death, just as our new life is found in his resurrection, and just as our hope is confirmed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the whole of our Christian faith, life, and hope is found in the infinitely powerful working of the whole Trinity. For us sinners, this means that where we were unable to save ourselves from slavery to sin, from slavery to death, and from slavery to Satan, we have a God who in the whole entirety of his Being and in the actions of his Three Persons has done and given everything to save us and to bring us to glory: "to fill us with all of the fullness of God."

I have seen firsthand in my own life how neglecting a proper understanding of the Trinity's working for us can bring me harm. About eight years ago, my then girlfriend and I were having a conversation about the ways in which we tend to relate to God. At one point, I remarked that I had a very difficult time relating to God in Jesus. The Father, Almighty and Omnipotent Creator and Commander of the Universe, he made sense to me. The Holy Spirit, while a little fuzzier, also made sense in that he seemed like a power or force that just rushed over people in the Bible. But the Son and what he had done for me, well he just seemed a little trite, domesticated, even (though I would have hesitated to say it then), irrelevant to my daily life of school and relationships. I didn't realize it then, but this little conversation with a harbinger of one of the worst years of my life.

A month later, I spiraled down into a period of intense depression of the spiritual sort. The Lord began to convict me of sins in my life, but I struggled to find the will to change my behavior or an assurance of the forgiveness of sins. As I panicked more and more, I plunged further into myself, and further into the misery of a life of guilt without escape. But after about a year, a change began to creep over my life, a joy and a purpose. The change came as I began to set my mind and my heart on God as Three Persons, as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and not on him as an abstract "God" in his unity. Bit by bit, God brought the Gospel, the Good News of who Jesus is and what he has done on my behalf, sharply into focus for me, as I came face to face with a Triune God who had done everything and given everything to save me. Worship came alive, and power came into my life to trust God through Christ, to have victory over sin, and to love the people around me with God's love.

Brothers and sisters, my own wrestling and struggles have confirmed for me the foundational importance not only of being clear in what we believe and confess about the Holy Trinity and what they have done for us, but in clinging to it. It is only in this way, through what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have accomplished in history to bring us salvation, that we can be filled with all of their fullness and live in blessedness with them forever.

4. The Trinity's Working In Us.

Now, returning to what the Apostle Paul prays for us in asking that we be filled with all the fullness of God, he turns his attention to how the one God by all Three Persons is at work within us to bring us to this fullness. In order for us to be strengthened to comprehend and to know the love of Christ, Paul prays that the Triune God take up residence in our lives, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit would inhabit and transform us.

This indwelling and transformation happens uniquely because of the Father's grant and decree. Paul prays that "the Father would grant you to be strengthened" (3:16), and that he does this "according to the riches of his glory." The Father grants us to know him because it brings him glory that we come to dwell with him, and for him to dwell with us, and it is for this reason that "it is God who is at work within you, to will and to work according to his good pleasure," (Philippians 2:13). As Jesus puts it to the Father, "And this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3) And for this reason, we ask that God the Father would grant what he alone can give.

However, as Jesus also makes clear, we come to know the Father, to dwell in him and he in us, only through the Son. When Phillip says "Show us the Father, and it is enough" (John 14:8), Jesus says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), and beforehand he says, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). He appeals to his disciples, "Abide in me, and I in you ... for apart from me you can do nothing," (John 15:4-5). How then can we know the Father from whom comes eternal life? It is only by being united to his Incarnate, Crucified, and Glorified Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, so that he dwells in us and we dwell in him. When we abide in him, he makes his abode with us, and his life becomes our life, and "we are filled with all the fullness of God."

But how do we dwell with Christ? How can he dwell in our hearts, that is, in the very core of our mind, will, emotions, and person? He has ascended to his Father's right hand, to heaven where we cannot see, hear, or touch him. If he is removed to the Father, how can his life, the Father's life, be my life unless I come to be where he is?

Paul's answer in chapter two is that in fact God has united us together with Christ, so that his death *is* our death, his resurrection *is* our resurrection, and that we have been raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavens! This total union comes only through faith in him. Faith means entrusting ourselves completely to what God has promised to us on the basis of what Christ has done for us: a belief that takes God at his word and rests in Christ alone. When we cast ourselves upon him as our only Hope, our only Savior, and our only Lord, he actually comes into our inner being through faith because we have been united with him in heaven, where his Father is.

Faith is as precarious as it is perilous, however. As sinners, our *last tendency* is to place our trust in God, to submit to his Lordship; rather, we like running our own lives, being our own saviors, and being our own gods. This is exactly why Paul prays not only that the Father give us love and grace to believe in Christ so that he might dwell in our hearts, but also “that with power we might be strengthened through his Spirit in the inner man,” (3:16). Just as it is necessary for Christ to bring us to the Father, it is necessary for the Spirit to bring us to Christ!

It is the Spirit who brings life (Jesus describes it as “being born again of the Spirit”), and our spiritual walk with God begins, continues, and ends as the Spirit of God is poured out into our lives. It is the Holy Spirit, working through and with the Word of God, who takes our dead and darkened hearts and makes them alive, free to respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ, and who creates, strengthens, and confirms our faith in Christ. He convicts us of sin, brings us to Christ, and then gives us growth in holiness and righteousness. It’s no wonder then that Paul prays that the Father would strengthen us with power through the Spirit.

How amazing and important is this Trinity then! We can say that if we have the Spirit, then we have Christ, and if we have Christ, then we have the Father, because they together are completely One God! But it requires the Spirit bring us to dwell with Christ who in turn has become a man like us and gone to dwell with the Father who now dwells with us because he sent us the Spirit through his Son! Only this One God in Three Persons could thus bring his working and power and indwelling presence into our lives in this way!

The Spirit brings this presence into our life through the means which Christ himself instituted for us to receive the Spirit from his Father. That is, it is when we come to the Word of God, to read it, hear it read, hear it preached, and sing it back and forth to one another that the Spirit does his work in our lives to bring us to faith and to unite us to Christ. He confirms this work in the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion, as he brings into our life the fullness of Christ’s life. And he heightens and intensifies this as we approach the Father in prayer.

Prayer itself for the Christian happens only because it follows the pattern of the Trinity. Paul “bends his knees before the Father” (3:14), expressing continuous prayer, to ask for this presence, the fruit of the Trinity’s working for us which is the Trinity’s working within us to bring us to perfection, to full manhood, to the measure of Christ (4:12-13), “filled with all the fullness of God.” So we come to the Father in prayer and present our requests to him through the Son, our Great High Priest who is there before him interceding for us, empowered in the Spirit who prays along with us. The activities of prayer and worship, unlike any other activity in life, bring us into communion with the Trinity as we enter into their conversation, and are made like them in the process.

This notion of prayer and praise strongly resonates with my own experience. The semester that I studied in England was one of the most difficult semesters of my life. It was full of intellectual doubts about my believers, broken relationships with my peers, fears about my future, and the cold awful confrontation between me and my wretched sinful habits. I look back however on that term as one of the times in my life that God brought me to my knees in prayer with a regularity which would have been depressing if it had not been so empowering. It was during that time that God not only powerfully healed relationships, taught me lessons, and brought clarity to my path, but a time when God *actually changed me*, and through his work in my life I felt his hand and touch in a way that has encouraged me ever since.

Beloved, the Persons of the Trinity have chosen you, to make you their temple, and they have promised to sanctify you and make you theirs forever. Call upon them, draw close to them in prayer. For no matter how screwed up you might be, no matter how broken you might be, no matter how sinful you might be, their purpose for you is to be filled with all their fullness, and in the process to become like them as they are.

5. The Trinity's Working Through Us.

Paul's vision and prayer of our being filled with all the fullness of the Triune God begins with his work for us, and continues within us, but it does not stop short of his working *through us* as well.

The "power that is being worked within us" (3:20) is the same power that Paul describes as he refers to the character of his own ministry: "For this I also toil, struggling according to his energy, which is being worked powerfully within me," (Colossians 1:29). Paul understood that the same working of the Triune God which he wrought for us in history and which he works in us for transformation is at work *through us* as we seek to serve God in this life as he taught us to do. The pinnacle of this great power of the Triune God making us his instruments is, however, expressed in something so humble it makes us wonder if Paul cannot be mistaken. It is expressed *in love*.

The empowerment of our inner being by the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ in our hearts through faith have the clear purpose and result that we be "rooted and established in love," (3:17). At this point, Paul is addressing *not* God's love for us, but rather his love that resides within us, which is willed and acted on by us. Paul makes it clear that this love is not of our own working at its root, but the powerful working of the Triune God to make his love tangibly known in the faces of sinners.

Of course, love beautifully reflects the working of the Trinity in all other respects in a way that no other virtue can, since love can never exist within the context of one person: it always requires multiple persons. John can say in his Epistle that "God is

love” (1 John 4:8) precisely because God exists as Three Persons who love each other completely, freely, and limitlessly for all eternity. And this God who is Love in all its fullness would not, could not fill us with his fullness unless this fullness were expressed in love for the true God and in love for our neighbors. This love, in turn, reaches its highest and most glorious form in a community of individuals who, loved by God first, then proceed “to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us,” (5:2). And this, brothers and sisters, is what we call “the church.”

It is in this Love alone that we sinful and wretched sinners can become instruments in the hand of God, living stones built into the edifice of the Church, a royal priesthood and a holy nation (1 Peter 2:5, 9): the very Bride of Christ. It is in this Love alone that we can become “salt and light” in a world of rotten fetid darkness which Christ *will* overcome (and indeed *has* overcome). It is in this Love that the gifts of the Spirit can be exercised to build up the Body of Christ and all its members, and it is in this Love that the fruit of the Spirit can be tasted by all who long to know the love of the Father. How then do we show this love? What does the Trinity do to empower this?

Our model is found uniquely in the work of God the Son, sent by God the Father, and empowered by God the Holy Spirit. Paul, who called himself a “slave of Christ Jesus,” urges that in order for us to live in love together, that the same mind that Christ had ought to be in us, as he humbled himself and became obedient to his Father, even unto suffering and death (Philippians 2:). The Spirit was given to Christ to empower him for humiliation rather than exaltation as he submitted freely to his Father’s will. And so, when we ask the Father to be filled with his Spirit, we are asking that we be given power to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21), that just as Christ washed our feet, so should we wash the feet of others, that just as he first loved us, so should we love others, and that just as he lay down his life, so should we lay down our lives for others.

Only in this way, says Paul, will we be rooted and established together to comprehend and to know the love of Christ and, in the fullest way to be filled with all the fullness of the God who dwells in eternal fellowship and communion as Three Persons. And thus, having humiliation and servitude in this life, we will know the glory that he now enjoys and the joyful fruits of eternal love firsthand.

I learned the service end of this love when I served as a volunteer at an orphanage in Peru. As I’ve told many of you before, after about seven months serving there, I reached the end of my human love for the orphan kids. They were spoiled, vicious, annoying little brutes and no amount of acquaintance with their life’s problems was of any use in moving my heart to pity, affection, or self-sacrifice for them! But I was convicted of my serious lack of love, and went before the Lord in prayer.

I asked that I would be given for these “unloveables”, a love which was his and not mine, which came from his power and glory and not from my weakness and sin. And do you know what? In a short amount of time God gave me a love for those little monsters! He changed my heart towards them in a way that made everyone in the orphanage look up and say, “What’s gotten into David? He’s not his normal prickish self! Why, he’s even gotten to Ana!”

Now nine-year-old Ana was one of the “problem children” of the orphanage. As God began to change my heart, I had begun taking her aside once every couple of weeks to make bachelor delicacies in the kitchen. I would cook and she would help, and as we worked together she began to open up to me about what was in her heart. We would eat simple things and drink tea, and with just this simple gesture of genuine love *her* life began to change. Not only did she begin reading more,, being nice to the others, and not talking back to her elders like she had, but she began to grow closer to God in her own life.

Beloved, “behold what manner of love that the Father has given to us: that we should be called children of God,” (1 John 3:1). As his children, you are called to be filled with all his fullness, that is, with all of his Triune Love which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have for each other, a love which in you reaches out to every person, which serves every person, and which longs for every person to know the Love of that Holy Trinity which has loved us beyond anything we could ask or imagine.

6. Conclusion.

This has been, I admit, a marathon of sweet doctrine, and perhaps bound to leave us exhausted. But I pray that through it all one has been made clear is the great love and power of this Triune God who has done everything and given everything to make us ours! The unfolding of the doctrine of the Trinity, which lies at the heart of so many other doctrines, plays out as the greatest story, the greatest drama with the most interesting principal characters that the world has ever known. It is a dramatic story of such force that, as the essayist Dorothy Sayers once intimated, it would take a whole nation of Anglican clergymen to make it seem boring! And I do hope that you have not been bored by me today.

So then, let us press on, let us press on to know the Lord in all of his Triune Power, and to comprehend his Triune love which surpasses comprehension, and let us seek to bring him the glory for which he, the only true God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, has made us his and that glory which he will give to us at the end of the ages, forever and ever. Amen.

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