



Research article

**COMPREHENDING THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE (EPHESIANS 3:17B–19A)<sup>1</sup>**

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ABSTRACT

In this short text (Ephesians 3:17b–19a), the author of Ephesians (AE) prays earnestly for the Ephesian Christians that they may have what it takes to comprehend the incomprehensible love of Christ. On the one hand, AE maintains that this love of Christ is so great that it is beyond human comprehension, and on the other hand, he prays for his readers to comprehend this love. This means that Christians will never be able to exhaust the depths of Christ's love; nonetheless, one can always grow in their understanding of his love. This love, so incomprehensible, says AE, is better grasped in communion with brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Keywords:**

*Christ's love,*

*incomprehensible,*

*comprehend/comprehension,*

*grasp*

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## 1. Introduction

The love of Christ is a central theme of the New Testament (NT). Knowing the measure of his love is essential to a healthy Christian life. Many Christians do not grasp well this amazing love of Christ, and hence, they try too hard to prove themselves or as it were to gain the divine love. Ephesians 3:17b–19a, though brief, paints a beautiful picture of the love of Christ. This study expects to unpack the truth regarding the greatness of Christ's love embedded in this short text. It is also significant to note that this text has received some attention in the promotion of ecumenism and peace. C. I. K. Story is an example: "And so, enmity between nations and the militarism of any one nation can be countered effectively only by a people who are rooted and grounded in the love of Christ (3:17) demonstrated in his cross."<sup>2</sup>

This study argues, against other views, that there are *three* prayer requests in vv. 16–19 and that the object of v. 18 is none other than the love of Christ. AE's<sup>3</sup> prayer in vv. 17b–19a is that the Ephesian Christians will be able to grasp well the incomprehensible love of Christ together with other saints. This means the love of Christ is not fully comprehensible but every Christian can and must grow in their comprehension of this great love. Moreover, this love is better

comprehended in the company of fellow Christians rather than in isolation.

## 2. Literary Context

AE resumes his prayer in 3:14 suggested by κάμπτω τὰ γόνατά μου after a break (3:1–13). H. C. G. Moule correctly sees a connection between 2:22 where AE left his prayer to give the testimony of Paul's call for ministry to the Gentiles (3:1–13) and 3:14 where he resumes his prayer. It is connected by the theme of indwelling—God's indwelling the Church (2:22) and Christ's indwelling the individual believers (3:17).<sup>4</sup> The latter is a part of AE's first of the three prayer requests (see below for details) after resuming his prayer.

Verses 14–19 consists of AE's prayer requests. Some see five requests in this passage (e.g., Bernard Rossier<sup>5</sup>). Charles Hodge finds only one request: "that his readers might be strengthened by the Holy Spirit in the **inner being**, or that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith" (i.e., vv. 16–17a); and he sees all other things (vv. 17b–19) as results of the same.<sup>6</sup> However, it is my contention that there are three concerns or prayer requests. They can be explicitly identified by ἵνα in each case: (i) for the inner man to be strengthened/for Christ to dwell in the

<sup>2</sup> Cullen I. K. Story, "Peace: A Bible Study on Ephesians 2:11–3:21," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 9, no.1 (January 1985): 17.

<sup>3</sup> The author of the letter will be identified as AE, which stands for the author of Ephesians. I am indebted to Ernest Best for this designation.

<sup>4</sup> H. C. G. Moule, *Ephesian Studies* (Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1975), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Rossier, "The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians," in *The New Testament Study Bible: Galatians–Philemon*, The Complete Biblical Library (Springfield: World Library Press, 1995), 129–31.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, Crossway Classic Commentaries, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 111.



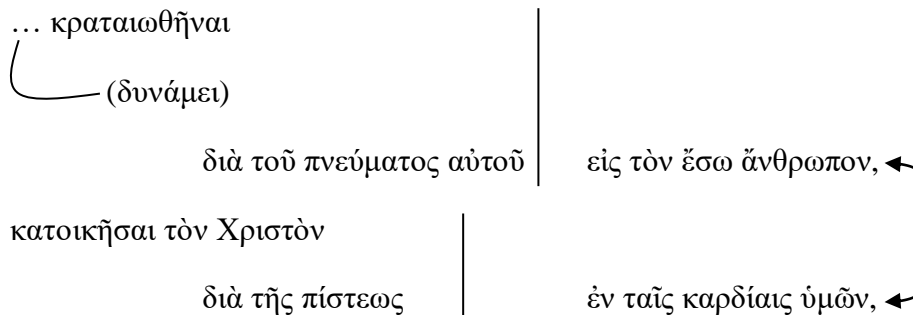
recipients' hearts (vv. 16–17a), (ii) for them to grasp the measure of Christ's love (vv. 17b–19a), and (iii) for them to be filled with/in all the fullness of God (v. 19b). Our focus in this paper is on the second prayer request.

Some have divided the first request into two: (a) v. 16 and (b) v. 17a. However, considering the explicit division indicated

by ἵνα, it is better to see them as one request because either they are parallel to each other or v. 17a further explains v. 16. The request, thus, is not a different one. The connection here can be seen through the allusion to the Spirit and to Christ, and especially the parallel between “inner man” and “heart” as illustrated by figure 1.

## Figure 1: Ephesians 3:16–17a

ἵνα δὴ ὑμῖν                      κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ



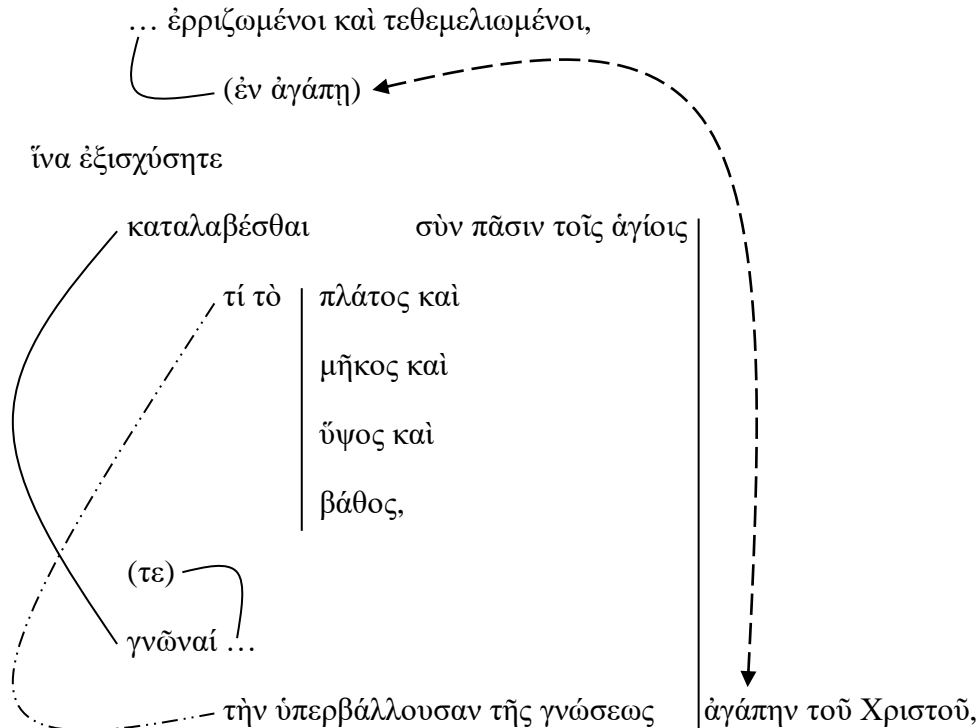
Similarly, the position of v. 17b is a little awkward. Some connect it with the preceding section (e.g., Kenneth S. Wuest<sup>7</sup>). Others see it as independent or a parenthesis.<sup>8</sup> I reckon it is clearly connected to v. 18, and hence, to v. 19a as well. They are connected to each other by the theme of love (see the dotted-arrowed line in figure 2).

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, “Ephesians and Colossians,” in *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 89.

<sup>8</sup> See Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary, ed. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield and G. N. Stanton (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 342.



Figure 2: Ephesians 3:17b–19a



### 3. Critical Exposition

AE's second prayer request begins with "being rooted and founded in love" (17b), which as discussed earlier, is connected to v. 18f. "Rooted" and "founded" are parallel concepts. The first is a metaphor from agriculture or botany and the second from architecture. AE has already used the latter in 2:20. The idea is that love is at the very core of Christian life. Both Greek words here are perfect participles (ἑρριζωμένοι and τεθεμελιωμένοι), which means that some action has already taken place and yet it has a continual effect. In other words, we as believers are already rooted and founded in love; nevertheless, it is not a once-for-ever event but a continuous, ongoing (probably lifelong) process. There is no unanimity among

scholars between whether the love referred to here is divine or human. However, in light of the connection established above with the following section (vv. 18–19a), it is probably referring to Christ's love since it is the object of the latter. Nevertheless, true Christian (human) love springs out of the love of Christ for them. They both are interconnected.

ἐξισχύω is a strong verb. It is a compound verb, which comes from a combination of ἐξ and ισχύω (to have power, strength or might, or to be able). This compound verb (ἐξισχύω) has a much stronger sense, carrying the idea of being 'fully capable



of doing or experiencing something'; it literally means to be *strong enough*.<sup>9</sup>

The aorist infinitive καταλαβέσθαι (from καταλαμβάνω) is also a compound verb which comes from λαμβάνω. κατα is used either to intensify or to give a sense of immediacy to a regular word.<sup>10</sup> κατα originally meant “from above to below,” i.e., “completely.”<sup>11</sup> Precisely, it may mean (i) win, attain, (ii) catch up with, seize, or (iii) understand, grasp.<sup>12</sup> It is certainly in the third sense that the word is used here by AE.<sup>13</sup> The idea of grasping is therefore more suited in this context.

τοῖς ἁγίοις in v. 18 refers to believers. When NT uses “saints,” it refers to believers of Christ. That it is referring to believers is also clear from 1:1; the letter is addressed to the saints, who are none other than the believers. AE is probably saying here that the true understanding of this great love of Christ does not happen in isolation but it takes place as we share in the fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ (σὺν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἁγίοις). This is perfectly in line with AE’s overall emphasis in the epistle, namely, the unity of believers (Jews and Gentiles). Ronald Olson puts it this way: “As individual believers we have knowledge of God in

part. However, as we are joined with others our knowledge of God is increased, our knowledge of God’s love compounded.”<sup>14</sup> Cynthia Jarvis says it more succinctly in that this love is ‘comprehensible in its incomprehensibility within the communion of saints....’<sup>15</sup> We should not forget however that it is not fully comprehensible since it surpasses knowledge (v. 19a).

The object of the four dimensions (τὸ πλάτος καὶ μήκος καὶ ὕψος καὶ βάθος) is not explicit. This has resulted in a variety of interpretations, which is evident by the fact that even a commentary of as early as 1883 lists ten different interpretations; finally agreeing with one, namely the “Christian temple,” i.e., the Church. John Eadie, in this commentary, bases his argument primarily by linking the clause with the closing verses of chapter 2, with the view that 3:1–13 is a parenthesis.<sup>16</sup> However, he wanders a little too far in his search and fails to notice the closer context of the passage as I will present below.

John Calvin mentions that Augustine, alluding to the cross, explains the breadth, the height, the length, and the depth as love, hope, patience, and humility respectively.<sup>17</sup> John Stott explains the

<sup>9</sup> Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 350.

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Delling, “λαμβάνω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>12</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 519–20.

<sup>13</sup> So also ibid., 520.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Olson, “‘Thinking and Practicing Reconciliation’: The Ephesians Texts for Pentecost 8–14,” *Word and World* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 325.

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia A. Jarvis, “Ephesians 3:14–21,” *Interpretation* 45, no. 3 (July 1991): 287.

<sup>16</sup> John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Classic Commentary Library, ed. W. Young (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 251–55.

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Calvin’s



dimensions in similar fashion: “the love of Christ is ‘broad’ enough to encompass all mankind ... ‘long’ enough to last for eternity, ‘deep’ enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and ‘high’ enough to exalt him to heaven.”<sup>18</sup> The problem with Augustine and Stott’s interpretations is that they both read their views into the text. With Augustine’s approach, we can easily replace his equivalence of the dimensions with other characteristics of Christ such as grace, mercy, goodness, etc. Likewise, although Stott is correct in his evaluation of Christ’s love, he is making the text say what it has not said. As with Augustine’s case, we can easily replace Stott’s equivalence to the dimensions with other truths.

Clinton Arnold gives an interesting perspective too. He holds that the phrase is referring to “some notion of *the power of God*” (emphasis mine).<sup>19</sup> Comparing this phrase with Rom 8:39 where the two dimensions (viz., height and depth) are mentioned, he says that there is a juxtaposition of the two dimensional terms to “angels,” “principalities,” and “powers”; and thus concludes that they refer to “a certain sense of power or might.”<sup>20</sup> But a closer look at Rom 8:39 will reveal that “height” and “depth” are juxtaposed not solely to angels, principalities or powers, but also to death

and life, things present and future, and other created things. Therefore, Arnold is basing his argument on a portion of the text that supports his theory, which is inadequate. Moreover, the overall context of Rom 8:39 is that of the divine love. He then compares the text with Phil 3:10, 12. Following Schlier, he says that apart from our Ephesian text, the two verbs καταλαμβάνω ... γινώσκω appear together only in Phil 3:10, 12 in the Pauline corpus. Thus, picking on the words from Phil 3:10 regarding the knowing of the “power of his resurrection,” Arnold concludes that since “divine power” is the object of καταλαμβάνω in Philippians, it is normal for Paul or his follower to use the verb to refer to the same object in Eph 3:18 as well.<sup>21</sup> While there is no denying that a verb can refer to the same object in more than one instance, it is improper to think that it should (most likely) refer to the same object in two different letters and contexts. Arnold is trying to extract too much out of the structure of two brief texts based on two verbs appearing together. In addition, he compares the text with a magical papyrus comprising of the two appearances of the four dimensions, in which, he says the dimensions express “supernatural power.”<sup>22</sup> While this kind of comparison is useful, Arnold goes quite far in his search for the object. He, like Eadie fails to look at the immediate context, which clearly points toward the object of the clause. The four-dimensional clause is as it were sandwiched between

Commentaries, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 263.

<sup>18</sup> John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 137.

<sup>19</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1992), 90.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 94–95.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 91–93.





two clauses talking about love. Therefore, the four dimensions refer to the love of Christ. Moreover, the dimensions are mentioned simply as a device to intensify the truth concerning the greatness of Christ's love. There is no need of explaining them individually as do Augustine, Stott, and many others. They, as Wuest says, "have no particular significance except to give the general idea of the vastness of the love of Christ."<sup>23</sup> It is also significant to note that the four dimensions are preceded by only one article, which suggests that they are not to be seen distinctly.

Being rooted and founded in love, thus, goes hand-in-hand with being able to grasp the measure of the love of Christ. They are inseparable. One cannot truly grasp the measure of his love unless they are rooted and founded in love. Similarly, one cannot help but be rooted and founded in love when they are able to grasp well the measure of his love.

When used to connect clauses, τε (v. 19) "indicates rather close connection and relationship...."<sup>24</sup> This again shows that v. 18 and v. 19a are closely connected, and are in fact referring to the same object, namely, the love of Christ. ὑπερβάλλω is another compound verb: ὑπερ means "above" or "beyond" (in the accusative) and βάλλω means "to throw." Therefore, it originally meant "to throw beyond," then it developed to being understood as

"to go beyond"; in LXX also, the word is used primarily in the latter sense; and in the NT, it is confined to the Pauline corpus.<sup>25</sup> It is also a strong word, not uncharacteristic of AE. This is why English translators use the word "surpass" to translate it in order to bring that sense of "going beyond."

According to A. T. Robertson, τῆς γνώσεως (v. 19) is in the ablative case. The ablative case is similar in form with the genitive case. For this reason, some grammarians call it an "ablative genitive," which, in fact, is not quite apt because the form only is identical to genitive but not the sense. Robertson calls it the "whence" case because it is "the case of origin, source, separation or departure." Robertson further says that the ablative case is not used with verbs (as in v. 19) as much as other cases like nominative, genitive, and dative; nonetheless, there are enough examples of the same.<sup>26</sup> There are primarily ablative of (i) separation, (ii) agency/means, (iii) comparison, and (iv) object.<sup>27</sup> Verse 19 is certainly the ablative of comparison.<sup>28</sup>

The measure of Christ's love is further explained in v. 19. In fact, it says that his

<sup>23</sup> Wuest, 90.

<sup>24</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 229.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Delling, "ὑπερβάλλω, ὑπερβαλλόντως, ὑπερβολή," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 520–21.

<sup>26</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 514–19.

<sup>27</sup> Curtis Vaughan and Virtus E. Gideon, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament: A Workbook Approach to Intermediate Grammar* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 42–45.

<sup>28</sup> So also Robertson, 519.



love surpasses knowledge. There seems to be a contradiction here. On the one hand, AE prays for the believers that they may “know” the love of Christ; on the other hand, he says that his love is beyond knowledge. Such is the measure of our Lord’s love that we will probably never fully grasp or understand its full extent in this lifetime. Gene Getz agrees: “We can spend a lifetime trying to understand the love of God and never plumb its depth.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, this is no reason for not praying and endeavoring for the same. We can always grow in our comprehension of his love. In other words, we can never reach the full comprehension of his love but there is always potential for more. Therefore, we should continuously yearn for a greater measure of the understanding of this love. To get as deep a grasp as possible of his love should be our goal. This swiftly makes way for AE’s final request—that they may be filled with all the fullness of God (v. 19b).

Some see in v. 19a a polemic against Gnosticism or proto-Gnosticism, but there is no need to think of it in this manner. AE is neither attacking knowledge nor is he comparing love versus knowledge.<sup>30</sup> He is simply acknowledging the extent of Christ’s love, which is beyond human knowledge. It is a description of Christ’s love and not a comparison of any sort.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has carefully analyzed the literary structure of the text and has

shown that AE has three prayer requests in 3:14–19, and that the object of v. 18 along with v. 19a is the “love of Christ”; not the knowledge, or the power of God, or something else. The study has shown how vv. 17b–19a are connected to each other and are a part of one prayer request.

In this short text (vv. 17b–19a), AE prays that his readers may be able to grasp/comprehend the love of Christ. There is an irony here because AE also says that this love surpasses knowledge. This means we will never be able to grasp completely the measure of the love of Christ on this earth (i.e., it is not fully realized in this lifetime), but we can always grow into a deeper grasp of it. This is all the more a reason for us to pray and endeavor to have a greater grasp of his great love. This love is more fully grasped within the community of faith (i.e., fellow Christians or saints) than in isolation.

Grasping well how much Christ loves us will save us believers from trying too hard to prove ourselves. God’s love is big enough to cleanse us from any magnitude of our sins and transgressions. Nothing we do makes him love us more or love us less; he already loves us to the fullest measure. Nevertheless, it should be our prayer and effort that we grow more and more in our comprehension of this love. May this be the desire of our hearts!

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<sup>29</sup> Gene A. Getz, *Looking Up when You Feel Down: Based on Ephesians 1–3*, Biblical Renewal Series (Ventura: Regal Books, 1985), 155–56.

<sup>30</sup> Best, 347.





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### Appendix: Translation of Ephesians 3:17b–19a

v. 17b: being rooted and founded in love,



v. 18: that you may be strong enough (fully able)  
to grasp together with all the saints what is the  
breadth and length and height and depth,

v. 19a: and to know the love of Christ which  
surpasses knowledge,