

## ***Rooted & Grounded in God's Immeasurable Love***

### **Ephesians 3:14-21 (ESV)**

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,  
 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,  
 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be  
 strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,  
 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being  
 rooted and grounded in love,  
 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the  
 breadth and length and height and depth,  
 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you  
 may be filled with all the fullness of God.  
 20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask  
 or think, according to the power at work within us,  
 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all  
 generations, forever and ever. Amen.

### **Introduction**

Two octogenarians, one from Germany and the other from Denmark, had each enjoyed sixty years of marriage before being widowed. Though living only fifteen minutes apart, their homes were in separate countries. Still, they fell in love, regularly cooking meals and spending time together. Sadly in 2020 due to the coronavirus, the Danish government closed the border crossing. Undeterred, every day at 3 p.m., the two met at the border on a quiet country lane and, seated on their respective sides, shared a picnic.

“We’re here because of love,” the man explained. Indeed, no borders and pandemic were powerful enough to separate them from each other—such was their endearing and enduring love for each other.

However, human love even if it is both selfless and true, is only an imperfect reflection of God’s love. Only God’s love in Jesus Christ is incomparable in potency and immeasurable in limit. And here’s the stunner—Paul tells us in Eph. 3:14-21 that God loves each of us with THIS kind of incomparable and immeasurable love.

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But in spite of this love of God for us in Jesus Christ, we can still drift into some kind of spiritual doldrums. You’re not doubting or denying the faith. But you’re not going anywhere spiritually. You feel spiritually stagnant.

I understand many churches are having “Renew and Rebuild” (or something similar) as their theme for the year. I believe they have chosen this theme

because they desire as a church to get out of their spiritual doldrums and make some significant spiritual advances as they move into the year.

So I hope Paul's prayer in Eph. 3:14-21 can serve as their aspiration and motivation towards their journey towards renewing and rebuilding themselves personally and as a church. Prayer is truly the window of the soul. What we pray for, we usually care for. And the reverse is also true—what we don't pray about, we really don't care about.

Scattered throughout the New Testament epistles, we have numerous short prayers by the Apostle Paul. These prayers are given to us as models and examples. They are not forms to be slavishly followed, but guides to help us frame our thoughts as we come before the Lord in prayer.

Paul wrote one of his “mountain-top” prayers in Ephesians 3:14-21 ... while he was still in Roman imprisonment! This is the second prayer in Ephesians; the first is in Ephesians 1.

There are four things in Eph. 3:14-21 that I believe can help a church pray and move towards spiritual renewing and rebuilding. The first is ...

#### **I. Pray for spiritual strengthening more than physical sufficiency (vv. 14-16).**

Paul wrote this letter from prison. He was getting on in years and with all the physical abuse his body had suffered, he probably had a lot of aches and pains. What would you be praying for if you were in those circumstances? “Lord, please get me out of this prison! Heal my aging, aching body!” But Paul didn't pray for any of those things. In fact, when he finally did ask for prayer for himself in Eph. 6:19-20, he asked for boldness in his witness!

Paul began in 3:1 with these words, “For this reason ...” This takes us back to chapters 1 & 2, especially to 2:19-22. Paul was saying in essence, “Because God saved you by His sovereign grace and made you as Jews and Gentiles into one new man, the church; and because you are being built together as a dwelling place of God in the Spirit; therefore, I pray.”

He prayed that God would make real in the experience of the Ephesian Christians what's spiritually true of them in Christ. In other words, he prayed more for their spiritual wellness than for their physical or material well-being. This is also very relevant to us because so many things sap our spiritual strength—discouraging circumstances, physical weakness, personal failure, unwanted interruptions, unfinished responsibilities, and unresolved conflicts.

Seen in that light, this is a prayer for something most of us desperately need every day—spiritual strength. When we feel spiritually weak, prayer can be difficult or almost impossible. Paul's prayer here is a prayer to pray before you faint. If you are on the verge of giving up, take this prayer to heart before you throw in the towel.

Besides exemplifying how to pray in relation to our position in Christ as His people, Paul went on to exemplify our posture before God in prayer. He added in v. 1, "I bow my knees before the Father." He is not mandating a kneeling posture for prayer, but really he is revealing an attitude for prayer. Kneeling revealed reverence, submission, humility, and adoration before God. The Greek word translated "before" means "face to face with". Along with the word "Father", it implies the intimacy of a child coming before his loving father face to face, and who will warmly receive him.

In that culture, "father" was not only a term of intimacy, but also of authority. Thus, while we are invited to come to God as our loving Father who delights in His children, we should always do so with reverence and submission to His sovereign authority. He is not so much our "good buddy; our best of friends in the sky"! He is the Almighty and Holy God before whom even the angels cover their faces in reverence (Isa. 6:2)! Prayer is the admission that we are totally dependent on God. We can't do life on our own. But the Father is able ... and He is always willing to help!

Moving on, Paul exemplify how to pray according to God's grace, not according to our performance. The word "grant" used by Paul in v. 16 means "give freely". Indeed, we freely receive all of God's riches in Christ through His grace; His unmerited favour. Yes, we must confess and forsake all known sins if we want God to hear our prayers, but we don't approach His throne on the basis of being worthy in ourselves to deserve His blessing. We come to Him as unworthy sinners, but through the righteous merits of our High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Note that when Paul prayed in v. 16 that "according to the riches of his glory he may grant you ..." he was not having so much material riches in mind. Rather he was pointing to the spiritual riches that God has freely provided for us in Christ.

Paul did not ask God to give OUT of the riches of His glory, but ACCORDING to those riches. If a billionaire gives you \$100, he gave out of his riches. If he gives you \$100 million, he gave according to his riches. Paul added in v. 16 in his prayer that "according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being ..." This implies two things:

- First implication: We are praying for the power of the indwelling Spirit because our problems are beyond our strength to solve. This strengthening is an ongoing experience of God's power to FIRST change our hearts before our situation as we walk in the Spirit every day.

When you are made strong in the inner man by the Holy Spirit, there will be power to blast out the unbelief, and power to overcome despair, and power to rise above anger, and power to keep going when we would rather quit. Note that this power is put to work in the "inner being" or the "inner self". That "inner self" is our control room of life where turning-

point decisions are made and life-changing actions are taken. This is the place (the “inner being”) where we need the most help.

- Second implication: We are praying for power through the indwelling Spirit in the inner being because God changes outward behaviour by changing the heart. Modern science with all its amazing discoveries still cannot impart life to a dead person. But that’s what the new birth in Christ is about—God makes those who were dead in their sins alive in Christ (Eph. 2:5) through the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8; Eph. 1:19-20).

So, pray for inner transformation for ourselves and for others, not just outward behavioural changes. We may be able to change our outward behaviour through techniques or methods that we learn in psychotherapy. But if God doesn’t change our heart, we’re just like a pauper putting on a royal robe—external form but no internal substance! Genuine Christianity is not just a moral improvement programme. We need changed hearts. It begins at the new birth, but continues throughout life. For that kind of inner change, we need nothing less than the daily power of the Holy Spirit.

So the prayer is not, “Lord, take away my burdens,” but rather “Lord, give me stronger shoulders to carry the load.” It is a prayer for spiritual strength to do the work and live the life that God has called us to. “This is my path, Lord, the path you have chosen for me. Make me spiritually strong in my inner being to work and live as you are leading.” That’s the heart of this magnificent prayer. Everything else flows from this fundamental plea to God.

Paul prayed to the Father in v. 16 that “according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being ...”

Have you ever felt a loss of spiritual strength? You lose your strength to believe. You lose your strength to be a good husband/wife or father/mother or son/daughter. You lose your strength to be a good Christian in and out of church.

Now, sometimes we have to lose our strength so that we can find God’s strength. Each of us here is going through something—some concern that is stressing us out or some situation we wish is different. And maybe we’ve been trying to handle it as best we can, but it just keeps getting worse and worse. What if God wants you and me to get weaker before we can get stronger? What if you and I actually need to be weak in ourselves in order to better understand and experience God’s strength is us?

Imagine you start working out in the gym after not doing so for a long time. The first couple of days you overdid it, and your muscles became extremely sore and weak. Despite all that ache and weakness, it was still the first step towards getting stronger in the days to come. The Holy Spirit is like our spiritual fitness

trainer who helps us in our spiritual weakness so that we can become spiritually strong as we allow Him to work with us and in us.

Yes, we pray for inner strength to better grasp and experience God's grace, but sometimes that means He has to first take away the strength we have. "God, please give us the inner strength we need by first making us lose our own human strength"—this is a very humbling, frightening yet powerful thing to pray. Our physical sufficiency—e.g. human abilities, earthly wisdom, material resources—is not necessarily a bad thing, yet it can blind us to our need to submit and depend on God to grant us growth in spiritual strength. But when we acknowledge and confess that we are spiritually poor and weak, we will then come to pray for inner strength through the Spirit in humble submission and dependence.

Moving on. To help us pray and move towards spiritual renewing and rebuilding, Paul went on to say that we are to ...

## **II. Pray for Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith so that we are rooted and grounded in His love (v. 17).**

Verse 17a reads, "... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith ...". Now v. 16 speaks about God's "glorious riches" and v. 17a here speaks about Christ "dwelling" in our hearts.

Remember that Paul was writing to believers in Ephesus. But doesn't Christ already dwell in the hearts of all believers? Yes, but this is something more. Paul was talking about Christ being at home in our hearts. And this means at least two things:

- One, it means Christ dwells in our heart as we trust and obey Him. Biblical faith is not passive. Rather, it is an active reliance on God and His promises, often in the face of challenging circumstances. Biblical faith is always linked with obedience. If you trust God, you obey God. Jesus spoke of the link between our obedience and His being at home in our hearts in John 14:23—"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." Put in another way, Christ is not really at home with a Christian who keeps a disobedient heart.
- Two, Christ dwelling in our heart means that He progressively takes over the different areas of our life. This is a lifelong process where you and I become increasingly comfortable with handing over control of different areas of our life to the Lordship of Christ.

Verse 17a says, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." The prayer is that Christ might be "down home" in your heart. It pictures a man at home in his own house. There is a significant difference between a house and a home—a house can be nothing more than a physical building; a home is a dwelling place where we feel a deep sense of belonging and relationship. It is very possible for Christ to be "in" our heart but not "at home" in our heart. E.g. if I

host a guest to stay with me, my place is a house for him to stay in, not a place that he can call “home”, even if I tell him to make himself at home. Why? Because there are many things unfamiliar to him—where things are placed, how certain appliances work, what my daily home routines are, etc. Until Christ is at home in our heart, He will always seem like a stranger to us even though He lives in you and me.

F. B. Meyer, a contemporary and friend of D. L. Moody, was a Baptist pastor and evangelist involved in ministry and inner city mission work on both sides of the Atlantic—England and America. Author of numerous religious books and articles, many of these remain in print today, he was described in an obituary as “The Archbishop of the Free Churches”.

Meyer was part of the Higher Life Movement and preached often at the Keswick Convention. He was known as a crusader against immorality. He preached against drunkenness and prostitution. He is said to have brought about the closing of hundreds of saloons and brothels.

The story is told that in the midst of a successful ministry, F. B. Meyer confessed that something was lacking in his life and ministry. He once confessed that his early Christian life was marred and his ministry paralyzed just because he had kept back one thing from the bunch of keys he had given to the Lord—something that he refused to release and surrender to the Lord. This key to one room was kept for his personal use, and the Lord shut out. The effect of this incomplete consecration was found in a lack of power, lack of assurance, lack of joy and peace.

F. B. Meyer experienced the lordship of Jesus Christ when he finally handed over this last key.<sup>1</sup>

Does Jesus Christ have the key to every room in our lives? Is there a room marked “Private—Keep Out”? If so, Paul prays for us today to surrender fully to the Lord. He reminds us that ...

- Jesus Christ is not just watching you and me, He’s in you and me in the Person of the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus Christ is not just with you and me, He’s in you and me in the Person of the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus Christ is not just in you and me, He wants to be at home in your heart and my heart in the Person of the Holy Spirit.

And as we progressively let Christ be at home in our heart, we are being strengthened in our inner being by the Holy Spirit.

Paul added in v. 17b that we “being rooted and grounded in love”. He did not specify whether he’s talking of God’s love for us, or our love for Him, or our love

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<sup>1</sup> W. Y. Fullerton, *F.B. Meyer, a Biography* (Ontario, Canada: Ontario Christian Books, 1992), 58.

for others. He's here talking about love as the main principle of the Christian life.

Scripture tells us that we are able to love God and even others because He has first loved us in Jesus Christ. God's great love for us as demonstrated in sending His own Son to be the sacrifice for our sins undergirds everything. The Lord Himself said in Matt. 22:37-39, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Thus the Christian life is rooted and grounded in love. To be "rooted" in something is to go deep into the soil and draw life from it. We need to keep our roots deep in love, i.e. love for the Lord and for others, so that our spiritual life can be renewed and rebuilt by love as we worship the Lord and as we work with others.

The NIV in v. 17b uses the word "established" instead of "grounded" as in the ESV. Both terms actually refer to a "foundation". A house with a good foundation won't fall when the storm comes. Taken together, if we're rooted and grounded (established) in the Lord's love, we will not walk away when our church family hurts us, or the leadership does something we don't like, or when ministry doesn't seem to be going anywhere, or when something goes terribly wrong in our life. More than that, if we're rooted and grounded in the Lord's love, we'll be able to extend that love to those who really need it. This implies we don't cut off others in their imperfections because we believe in the transforming power of the Lord to change lives in His love.

So if we are praying to renew and rebuild the church, Paul calls us to first pray and work towards being rooted and grounded in God's love for Him and for one another.

Moving on to vv. 18-19, we see Paul speaking of praying and moving towards spiritual renewing and rebuilding by exhorting us to ...

### **III. Pray to understand the immeasurable and unfathomable extent of the love of Christ (vv. 18-19).**

In vv. 18-19a, Paul prayed that God's people "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge".

Paul speaks of the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ. The late Baptist pastor W. A. Criswell correlated these four dimensions of God's love in Eph. 3:18 with John 3:16 this way (<https://wacriswell.com/sermons/1976/god-s-love-in-four-dimensions>):

- Breadth points to "For God so loved the world" because He included you and me.
- Length points to "That he gave ... his Son" because He sent Jesus to die for you and me.
- Depth points to "Should not perish" because He reached down for you and me.

- Heights points to “Have everlasting life” because He lifts you and me up to heaven.

Christ’s love is broader than the universe, longer than time, higher than hope, deeper than death. As we are strengthened by the Spirit on the inside, we will come to a new comprehension of his immeasurable and incomparable love for us.

Every child of God knows the love of Christ to some extent. But vv. 18-19a states that we can never know it fully because it is beyond total human comprehension. Even then, Paul wants us to make the immeasurable love of Christ ours on a deeper level. He wants us to experience the limitless love of Christ. Of course, this isn’t something we will achieve this year or even in this lifetime. But we can still grow in our understanding and knowledge of Christ’s love from one level to another.

However, note that we will not come to understand and know the immeasurable and unfathomable love of Christ by our own self. There is a corporate emphasis in Paul’s prayer.

- In Eph. 2:19-22, Paul is talking about the church being built together into a dwelling place of God.
- In Eph. 3:18, Paul prays that we may be able to comprehend the magnitude of Christ’s love with all the saints.
- In Eph. 3:21, Paul prays that there will be glory to God “in the church and in Christ Jesus”.

I have experienced Christ’s love in many ways in my life; you have experienced His love in other ways in your life. So when we get together as fellow believers, we tell our stories of how Christ has shown His love in our lives. However, even when we pool all our stories together, we still cannot fully know the breadth and length and height and depth of His love! It surpasses our complete comprehension and knowledge!

As we move on to what Paul said in v. 19b, we see the “summit” of his “mountain-top” prayer—“that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”. It is a prayer that God will totally fill or control every aspect of our lives—our mind, our attitudes, our goals, our motives, our emotions, our relationships, our finances, and every decision we make. It corresponds to what Paul says later 4:13—“... until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ ...”

As Paul has pointed out in his entire prayer, this is an ongoing process that we go through in this life. It is God’s purpose that every believer be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). So we should join Paul in pressing “on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14).

Paul added in Eph. 3:19b, “That you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” The word “filled” has the idea of being dominated by



something. If you are filled with rage, then rage will dominate your life. If you are filled with love, then love dominates your life. If you are filled with joy, then joy dominates your life. When you are filled with God, then God Himself will dominate your life. It pictures the total transformation of the human personality by virtue of the presence of God in one's life. This is an amazing thought—to be filled up with all the fullness of God. As believers we have been created to be the “containers” of God. He desires to pour His life into ours and to fill us until we're full.

Let's suppose you have a big jar of muddy water that you desire to see become a jar of clean water. What's a good way to make the transformation? Take a hose and hook it up to a tap. Now place the hose in the jar and turn on the water. As the clean water rushes in, it flushes out the muddy water. If you let the hose stay in the jar long enough, the muddy water will eventually be completely displaced by the clean water.

This is a “parable” of the Christian life. All of us are like that big jar of muddy water when we come to Christ. Some are muddier than others, but all of us are unclean in some ways when we find the Lord. It is the work of a lifetime to replace the muddy water of our sinful inclinations with the pure water of God's holy character. This is the answer to our deep-seated bitterness, lust, greed, hate, envy, impatience, dishonesty and unfaithfulness. This is what Paul's prayer in v. 19 envisions for every believer when we are filled up with the fullness of God. When the beauty of God, the grace of God, the mercy of God, the holiness of God, the kindness of God, and all that God is begin to fill us and drive out the impurities in us (e.g. the lust, greed, impatience, unbelief, critical spirit, pride, and the angry intolerance in us), the Holy Spirit will begin to transform us as we allow Him until the perfection of God is reflected in us on that day when we see Him face to face.

## Conclusion

We can call Paul's prayer in Eph. 3:14-21 as a “mountain-top” prayer. Let me now suggest two ways to put feet to this great prayer as we pray for our spiritual renewal and rebuilding as individuals and as a church.

- One, pray boldly for God to do that which is humanly unimaginable. Don't keep praying “small and safe” prayers. Ask God for things that are way beyond our human ability or imagination. Yes, no prayer is too small for God to be interested in answering. Yet at the same time, no prayer is too big or too difficult for God to respond.

But here's a caution. Sometimes, for reasons we cannot understand, God does not answer our prayers the way we have hoped. E.g. fervent prayers for the conversion of some people who eventually died in their unbelief, prayers for broken marriages that were not healed, prayers for sinning Christians who still remain unrepentant. So there is a mystery about prayer and we cannot always understand God's ways. But even so, pray boldly for God to do that which is humanly unimaginable and leave the answer in His hands.

- Two, pray for spiritual renewal and rebuilding by first seeking the mind of Christ before doing the things of God. So how can we grow strong spiritually with a mind that knows, agrees with, and obey God in Jesus Christ? How then shall we live?

Firstly as a Christian, seek to agree with the mind of Christ, and then let Him lead and you follow. Rom. 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind ...” Renewing the mind is an ongoing process. Every day you need to spend time with the Lord in His Word so that you can intentionally think and act according to His wisdom, way and will. This doesn't imply you have to be perfect, but you need to make progress so that you can keep your mind renewed and grow in your relationship with the Lord. Someone once said wittily, “God has given us His Word as bread for our daily consumption, not as a cake for our special occasion.” Indeed, if we care less about our Bible reading, we can become careless in our Christian living.

Your relationship with Jesus Christ will only grow when you know what He says AND then act on what He says. In other words, your relationship with Jesus Christ will grow in wisdom and strength only if you let the Lord lead and you follow, not the other way round. As such, I believe that a single Bible verse lived out less than perfect is still better than an entire Bible chapter recited word-perfect.

Secondly as a church, seek to follow Christ's mindset of humility exemplified in His emptying and serving. Phil. 2:5-8 reads, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

When He came from heaven to earth, Christ put aside His right of equality with God—He “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped”. When we want to agree with the Lord and with one another, we cannot keep grasping. I believe people mostly welcome change for the better. But change often means some loss of what is familiar. It is this sense of loss that is unsettling to people, and so there is this tendency to hold on to the familiar. Yes, it is always good to bring about positive change, and it is also wise to do so by helping people ease their hold on the familiar in God's love. To change for the better and for the glory of God does not mean we cast away all our past. To cast away all our past is like saying that God has done absolutely nothing in and among us that is worthy of preserving. I believe this is not giving glory to God because our past is not merely our human history, but also God's story with us as He walked with us, and in His faithfulness used us to do and establish His will in spite of our unfaithfulness. So the wise thing to do is not to cast away all our past or grasp stubbornly onto our past. The

wise thing to do is to keep what is good, improve on what can be better, and change what has already served its purpose as we move together as God's one people in His new season for us. In this way, we do not demonize our past but we validate the contributions of our past because we allow it to serve not as our master ... but as our servant. This is the mind of Christ.

When He came from heaven to earth, Christ emptied Himself of His heavenly glory and took the form of a servant. The word "servant" refers to a "bond-servant"—i.e. one with no rights of his own. You remember the Last Supper in the Upper Room when Christ knelt down to wash all His disciples' feet. It was a task assigned only to the lowliest of servants in the Jewish home. None of the disciples would want to stoop to wash the Lord's feet, much less one another's feet because each viewed himself as above the others. It is common that people don't want to be servants, or don't want to be treated like servants. Unfortunately, it is the desire to want to be served and esteemed that often leads to discord. This attitude of "one-upmanship" often undermines any effort to move and minister together in the Lord's work. But the mind of Christ is this—"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give (I'll paraphrase as "to empty") his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Thus, to get out of the spiritual doldrums; to be spiritually renewed and rebuilt, Paul gives us an example of how we are to so pray in Eph. 3:13-19. Let's learn to pray this "mountain-top" prayer of Paul for ourselves, our family members, and our church.

- Pray for the Father to grant that we will be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner person.
- Pray that Christ would dwell in our heart through faith; that we will be rooted and grounded in love.
- Pray that we will be able to comprehend with all the saints the immeasurable extent of the love of Christ, and be filled up to all the fullness of God.
- Pray for God to do far more abundantly beyond all that we dare to ask or think for His glory.

The prayer of Paul in Eph. 3:14-19 seems like praying for the humanly impossible. Indeed, it is humanly impossible because the answer to this prayer is not up to us, but to God. That brings us to the magnificent doxology that concludes this prayer in Eph. 3:20-21. As we close, I like you to join me in reciting these two great verses as our personal and congregational prayer to the Lord in Eph. 3:20-21: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

**Reflect & Apply**

1. Think about a time when you were in the spiritual doldrums. What helped you to get out? What didn't help?
2. To what extent do you experience Christ dwelling (at home) in your heart through faith? How could you make this better?
3. Is your Christian walk centred on Christ's immeasurable love or more on your personal performance? How can you change this?