

The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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.

Prayer

Happy Father's Day. I feel the need to start with a very brief disclaimer. This is not a targeted Father's Day message. No rah-rah for you go getters. No guilt trip for those of us who may be slacking. But, with that said, as corny as it sounds every day is Father's Day. For those of us who are in Christ, God is our Father through adoption because Jesus lived and died and rose again and the Spirit drew us into his kingdom and made Christ's atonement real in our hearts and minds. The bottom line? This is a sermon about the multifaceted love and grace and mercy and faithfulness of our true and living Father, expressed in and through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit for the strengthening of us, the body of Christ.

My goal is to tackle this text by doing a brief fly over: where does it fit in the flow of Ephesians and then approach it from three different perspectives. First the salvation perspective, then the sanctification perspective and then the perspective of how are we to exist together as the body of Christ.

Oh, maybe one more disclaimer before we dive in. I truly love the book of Ephesians. It seems a little blasphemous to rank books of the Bible, so I won't do that. But personally I have received such blessing, encouragement, conviction and challenges from these six compact chapters that I can easily call it my favorite. And because it is my favorite, some that exuberance may leak out from time to time.

Overview

Let's take a look at this passage in light of the entire book of Ephesians. First, it should be noted that Ephesians was written to a church Paul founded, and at least at this point they were not struggling with any particular issue. We know Paul had concerns about this church's ability to stave off false teaching (Acts 20:28-32) and that in the future they would be theologically astute but their love for Christ will have dwindled (Rev 2:1-7). However this letter is not a critique. Rather it is a challenge. Paul is calling them to look deeply into the majesty of Christ, the overwhelming grace and mercy of God and to lean into the incredible power of the Spirit that is available to all who believe.

Paul starts chapter 1 with a high view of God in trinitarian splendor. Then he moves to exhort the Ephesians (and us) to know this magnificent God by asking to clearly see him through both the beauty and the power of the gospel. He efficiently moves on in chapter 2 to describe the gospel on two planes, first on a personal level: we were all lost, broken, condemned and dead in our sins. But God because of his great love made us alive together with Christ. My friends hear this: it is by grace you have been saved. But he also demonstrates the power and impact of the gospel on the corporate plane: we were collectively aliens and strangers, without mercy and without hope in the world. But God, through the blood of Jesus, destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. He made aliens and strangers to be friends and family. He cast away every sin, every phobia, every structure that kept us apart and provided the one thing necessary to keep us together: his Spirit. In fact this joining of disparate groups of people by the Spirit provides the new temple in which we can truly worship God our Father.

I realize there are easily 4-8 sermons in that quick summary and I would highly encourage a slow meditative read through of the first 2 chapters of Ephesians. But here is where Paul usually starts to apply such magnificent gospel truth. However, before he does, which ends up being chapters 4-6, he decides to explain to the Ephesians that the majesty and beauty and glory and power of the gospel is worth his imprisonment. Why? because the gospel is more than self help, more than simply escaping hell, more than living a moral, godly life. The gospel proclaims the unsearchable riches of Christ, not just to this world but to the entirety of the universe. More than that: Jesus' life, death and resurrection for you is being proclaimed right now in the spiritual realms.

Paul follows on with this thought: we can approach this God, we have direct access to him. How is this possible? How can we come near the God of pure light, of majestic holiness, the God who's very backside is unbearable to look upon and who's train of his glory would fill any temple we could build? He is simply beyond us.

Perspective 1: Salvation

Paul's direct answer to the dilemma of sinful humanity approaching a holy, majestic, transcendent God is in one sense very simple: salvation. As he phrases it here: that Christ might dwell in our hearts through faith. This statement is meant to draw us back to chapter 2. We were dead and now we are alive. We were strangers and now we are children. But, none of this happens by magic. Sin's roots go deep and the blinding power of the evil one is pervasive. Thus Paul's prayer for the Ephesians and for us is for the strength to be saved, that the gospel would land not on a hard packed path or upon rocky soil or in a weed infested garden but in the good, tilled up soil of hearts prepared by the Spirit.

Additionally, Paul prays that as we look at our salvation we begin to understand that it is not a one dimensional business transaction. Instead, it incorporates all that is said in chapter 2 driven by the God we saw in chapter 1. Also it contains all the impact of chapter 3. And, even though we haven't looked at it today, there are clear implications of following Christ, which Paul makes clear in chapters 4-6. While Jesus' yoke may be easy and his burden may be light, make no mistake there is a yoke to carry and a burden to bear. In part that is why Paul's claim on behalf of God's people is that God would continue to do his work and that we would have the strength and power to love him and to follow him wherever he may lead.

It would be remiss of me if I would go on from here without pausing to challenge all who are listening to this message regarding your own walk with Christ. I do not want to assume anything. If Christ does not dwell in your heart through faith, if you are not certain that you have been made alive together with Christ, if you are still a foreigner to God, today can be the day of your salvation. As I said before, this is not magic, there is no secret formula or incantation. It is simply this: acknowledging that Eph 2:1-3 and 11-12 are true for you personally and accepting that Jesus alone is your only hope of salvation. Nothing more. Nothing less. Ask God for the strength to have Christ dwell in your heart through faith and confess that each and every sin you've committed is an offense against our holy God and deserving of eternal, conscious punishment. Believe and trust that Jesus' death was more than sufficient for every sin and that God's good and right justice has been served by Jesus on your behalf. If this is you, please see one of the elders after service. We would love to pray with you and welcome you into the family of God.

Perspective 2: Sanctification

As I have grown in my walk with Christ, I have striven to have a daily time simply reading and reflecting on his word. As I have done this, prayerfully meditating on both the truth and the heart of the God's self-disclosure to his people, I have come to realize a few things. One, it is easy to focus on minute details and thus lose the forest for the trees. Two, the things that God really wants us to understand and absorb in both our heads and our hearts he often repeats, saying it a little differently through different human authors so we can grasp it better and more fully. Third, God will often pack multiple layers in one passage so that as we read (and re-read) his word, we will gain new insights into his nature and character while growing deeper in love with him.

This third item is true with respect to our passage. When I first read Ephesians, I read the entire book as if it were personally addressed to me. Right or wrong, that was my interpretive lens. So what we just walked through resonated with me: God gave me the strength to believe and would continue to reveal the unknowable dimensions of Christ's love, grace, mercy and faithfulness. However, on subsequent readings, it became apparent that Ephesians' main focus isn't simply a call to salvation, as critically important as that is. Rather, it is God's call to us to not become complacent with the gospel or with Christ himself. Instead we are "to attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood and womanhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,"

Consider these diagnostic questions:

- If we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus, how will we know what our good works are if we are not continually communing with him?
- If we are together being built up into a dwelling place for God by his Spirit, how should that inform our worship? And, our view of one another?
- If the church, the body of Christ, is God's demonstration of his manifold wisdom to the entire created universe both physical and spiritual, how does that affect our prayers for and our service to our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Overwhelmed? Me too. But a second reading of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians reveals that our Father will give us the strength to grow in our love for Jesus, even as our comprehension of his love for us, of his grace to us, of his mercy on us and of his faithfulness toward us deepens. And while I often don't stress the original language, there is a word here I would like to point out. It is the word translated comprehend and it is not merely an intellectual apprehension of an idea. Rather it is something more visceral. Here are some of the synonyms: to take eagerly, to seize, possess, to be overcome.

What would it look like for you to seize upon the love of Christ? Can we eagerly grasp ahold of his grace? What if we would all desperately cling to his mercy? Why aren't we overcome by his faithfulness? The short answer, at least for me, is that I lack the spiritual strength to do it.

That is why this prayer is so penetrating for me. Paul's request is simply and profoundly this: that our Father, who is over all things, would give us the strength to seize upon the richness of Christ's immeasurable love and grace and mercy and faithfulness. And by that strength we would be transformed from the inside out. Paul knows God doesn't want just part of our lives. This is an all or nothing deal. And that requires the strength, daily strength that only God can supply.

Along with all of this, note vv 20-21. This prayer, indeed every prayer, ultimately is not about us. This prayer is for God's glory throughout all generations, forever and ever Amen.

Perspective 3: The body of Christ

Confession time: If I had written this sermon a year ago, or even 3-4 months ago, I would have expanded the points above and at this stage be approaching a conclusion. And in the process I would have robbed you (and myself) of a key aspect of this prayer. But over the past few months the elders have been reading "Compelling Community". One of the theses of this book is that the body of Christ is distinct as collection of individuals, even though from outside we might have a variety of similarities with other "communities" within our area. One distinction is the depth of what unifies us. It is nothing less than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the Fatherhood of God achieved by the adoption that comes through the cross. And it is the unity of the Spirit empowered by his fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Another distinction is the breadth of our community. We are not limited by race. We are not limited by gender. We are not limited by socioeconomic background. We are not limited by religious background. We are not limited by age. We are not limited by marital status. We are not limited by political party. I could go on but the point is that body of Christ has a depth no other community can hope for and has breadth no other community can possibly sustain.

That's fine, you might say. But how does that apply to Ephesians 3? I am so glad you asked. Remember my comments earlier about God progressively revealing himself to us through his word? Well, he has done that again for me through my study of Ephesians. On that journey the Spirit has shown (directly and through gifted commentators) that much of the book is written to the church as a community, not to an individual church member. This resonated

with me when I look back at a time I was in leadership at a church that was struggling with a myriad of individual wants and needs but had very little perspective of the church as a body. But now it reverberates in my heart and mind because it really does demonstrate the manifold wisdom and character of God and is part of the upward call of Christ.

If you will, allow me one example. Why would Pastor Dan and I ever be in the same building together much less enjoy unity in our heart for the gospel to reach the Coulee Region and around the world? While we are close in age, we have vastly different backgrounds. His talents, skills and abilities nowhere intersect with mine. His brain and my brain operate in radically different ways. Even how the Spirit leads him in prayer is strikingly different than how the Spirit leads me. And yet God uses this breadth to demonstrate the depth of what unites us: The love and grace and mercy and faithfulness of God manifested in Christ. We are linked by the good news that God forgives sin because Jesus paid it all. And we strive together because we are both called, in our own way, to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

But guess what? Whether is it me and Dan, whether it is you and the person behind you, whether it's someone who looks different or thinks different or prays different, the unity of the Spirit requires effort. As D.A. Carson would say: grace-driven effort. So Paul prays that the Ephesian church and by extension the church at LEFC would be strengthened so that Christ might dwell in our hearts collectively. Why? So as a body we might comprehend (eagerly seize, be overcome by) the overwhelming magnitude of Jesus' love, grace, mercy and faithfulness for us as a community of faith, a family rooted in the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel. And dare I say this: Jesus didn't save us just to prepare us for heaven. He saved us to glorify God by sacrificially serving one another in love.

Conclusion

As I stand here, I have to admit I'm overwhelmed. Ephesians does that to me. Or more precisely, the Spirit does this to me through Ephesians. But I feel compelled to stress some things.

- The first is this: however you approach the book of Ephesians and Paul's prayer recorded in chapter 3, remember it is first and foremost about God the Father, Jesus his beloved Son and the Spirit who is his great gift to us.
- The second is this: salvation is a great and free gift available to any and all who willingly give up their striving for salvation and simply accept Jesus as their Savior and their Lord. No strings. No fine print.
- The third is this: our journey with Christ requires strength. A strength that God, through his Spirit will gladly provide. The Christian life is not unlike traversing the Grand Canyon. Some parts are easy, other parts are extremely difficult; some parts are breathtaking, other parts are dry and mundane; some stretches are safe and smooth, others are rough and have scorpions on the trail; and some parts are traveled in the security of the day while others are traversed in the dark of night. But though it all Jesus is both our path and our guide. He will surely walk us and give us the strength to reach the other side.
- The fourth and final one is this: Ephesians 4:1 introduces the final three chapters with a summary statement that will be my call to us all: Brothers and sisters, by the power

available to us because of Jesus' resurrection, walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have received.

Prayer

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.