

Text: Ephesians 3:14-21

Title: “Praying the Gospel Further Into Our Hearts”

(Series: “Navigating an Alternative Reading of Reality”)

As I said last Sunday: I love to hear the Apostle Paul preach. But I also love to hear the Apostle Paul pray. No one prays as passionately and expressively as Paul prays. Except, of course, Jesus of Nazareth, who taught Paul to pray, and in whose name Paul prays.

After studying all of Paul’s prayers in all of Paul’s letters, NT scholar David Crump observes that Paul “asks for nothing in moderation” (*Knocking on Heaven’s Door*, 233). Says Dr. Crump: Paul’s prayers are marked by “blatant extravagance”... as we saw last Sunday! Says Dr. Crump: “Superlatives become the lingua franca” of all Paul’s praying.

“...according to the riches of His glory...”

“...know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...”

“...filled up to the fullness of God...”

“...able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine...”

I love to hear Paul preach the Gospel. But I also love to hear Paul pray the gospel. I especially love to hear him pray the prayers recorded in his letter to the Ephesians. And especially the prayer he prays in the third chapter of Ephesians. Listen again.

“I bow my knees before the Father... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power, through His Spirit in the inner person; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

Nothing in moderation! Blatant extravagance!

Up to this point in his letter Paul has been opening up the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has been developing for us an alternative vision of reality; an alternative vision shaped by the life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

He then falls to his knees. Not his normal posture for prayer. He falls to his knees. And on his knees, takes our hearts into his hands, lifts them to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, and prays the Gospel he has been preaching into our hearts.

In jail. He gets down on his knees in jail. In prison. Awaiting trial before Caesar. In prison, where he no doubt agonized over why he, as an ambassador of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, should end up in such crummy circumstances. Where he no doubt prayed for release from captivity. Where he no doubt prayed for wisdom to make his case before the Emperor. In jail, in prison, he gets down on his knees, takes our hearts into his hands, lifts them up to the God of the gospel, and prays the gospel into the control center of our being.

In chapter one of his letter, Paul tells us that he has been praying; he gives us a kind of “prayer report.” In chapter three of his letter, Paul actually prays. In chapter one he prays that we might

know the gospel. In chapter three he prays that we might experience the gospel. In chapter one he prays that we might know the God of the gospel. In chapter three he prays that we might experience the God of the gospel. That we might experience God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Look again at the One to whom Paul prays.

The Father. “I bow my knees before the Father.” The Father of Jesus. Who because of Jesus, because of what Jesus does for us in obedience to His Father, is now *our* Father. Paul is taking seriously what Jesus taught us. “Pray then in this way,” He says in His Sermon on the Mount, “Our Father,…” (Matthew 6:9). It is one of the greatest blessings of the gospel! To address the Awesome and Holy God, the Living God, as “Father”. To address the Awesome and Holy God, the way Jesus does, the way the Father’s only begotten Son does. Paul really believes the Gospel: in and because of Jesus Christ, we have been adopted... by Jesus’ Father... and have been granted the same status before the Father Jesus has! Jesus’ Father – whom Jesus loves and trusts – is now *our* Father. *Your* Father. *My* Father. The Father delights in you as He delights in Jesus. The Father delights in me as He delights in Jesus.

“I bow my knees before the Father,” says Paul in a prison cell. And so do I.

Who is able. Massively able. Paul expresses it in his doxology from the prison cell: “Now until Him who is able...” Able to do. Able to do what we ask. Able to do what we imagine. Able to do all that we ask or imagine. Able to do abundantly more than all we ask or imagine. Able to do exceedingly abundantly more than all we ask or imagine.

What are you facing today? The One before whom Paul bows his knees is able.

And acts “according to the riches of His glory.” Glory is a way of saying, “All that makes God be God.” “Riches of His glory.” The riches of God’s very essence: wisdom, power, mercy, grace, justice, love, creativity. Unfathomable riches. The Father of the Lord Jesus acts toward us out of the inexhaustible wealth of His very being!

Last Sunday we listened to Paul pray the first half of his blatantly extravagant prayer: “That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through the Holy spirit in the inner person; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Paul takes our hearts into his hands, lifts them up to the Living Gods, and prays: Father... good and gracious Father of Jesus... You are able to do way beyond anything any of us can ask or dream. Will You, out of the bottomless well of what makes You be You, invigorate our inner persons with the power of Your Spirit, with the power that raised Jesus from the dead, so that Jesus may freely dwell in ever nook and cranny of our being.

Now let us listen to Paul pray the second half of his prayer: “That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” Many commentators throughout church history have

called this part of the prayer “the boldest prayer ever prayed”. Second only to the bold prayer Jesus prays recorded in John 17.

The second half of Paul’s prayer begins with an exclamation. Paul is dictating his praying to his secretary Tychicus. And then – as is typical of Paul – right in the middle of an exquisitely crafted sentence, he breaks out with an exclamation: “You are rooted and grounded in love.” He is not praying that we become rooted and grounded. That is already the case, even if we do not realize it yet. Because of all that God has done for us in Jesus; because Jesus has come and taken up residence in us; Paul can exclaim, “You are rooted and grounded in love.” Whether you and I feel it or not, “You are rooted and grounded in love.”

Typical of Paul he mixes metaphors. Rooted – and agricultural metaphor. Grounded, or founded – an architectural metaphor. He did this earlier in the letter, in chapter two. “Building” and “growing”: “... in whom the whole building begun filled together is growing into a holy temple” (2:20-22). He does this in his first letter to the Corinthians, speaking of disciples of Jesus as both God’s building and God’s field (3:6-17). He does this in his letter to the Colossians, saying that we are “rooted and grounded in the faith” (1:23), and “rooted in and built upon Christ” (2:7).

“You are rooted and grounded in love.” Whether we realize or not, love is the soil in which we are growing; love is the foundation on which we are standing. You are rooted; you are grounded, in love.

Then Paul returns to praying.

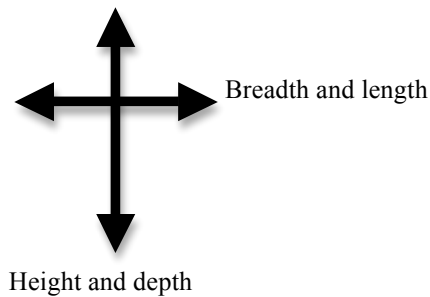
“That you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth...” “May be able.” Better translated as “may be strong enough.” Paul recognizes that we are facing a challenge, and prays that we be made strong enough to press through.

The challenge? To comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth! “Comprehend” (*katalambano*). Catch. Grasp. Seize. Lay hold of. It is the same word Paul uses in his letter to the Philippians when he says: “I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (3:12). I press on that I may *catch* that for which I was caught by Christ Jesus. That I may *grasp* that for which I was grasped by Christ Jesus. That I may *seize* that for which I was seized by Christ Jesus. It is the same verb the Apostle John uses in the prologue to his gospel. John 1:5 – “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” The light shines in the darkness – praise God! – and the darkness did not *catch* it. The darkness did not *grasp* the light. The darkness did not *seize* the light. The darkness did not *seize* the light. The darkness did not *lay hold* of the light. Indeed, the light laid hold of the darkness!

Paul takes our hearts into his hands, and asks the Father to make us strong enough to catch, grasp, seize, lay hold of “the breadth and length and height and depth.”

To what do those terms refer? Breadth, length, height, depth. What does Paul have in mind?

Throughout church history, different opinions have been offered (summarized by Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, 234). The “oldest known view” is that the terms refer to the “four points of the cross”.



This is the view of significant church thinkers like Origen and Irenaeus of the second century, and Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of the fourth century. Later in the fourth century, a prevailing view was that the four terms referred to “the dimensions of a perfect sphere, which, in turn, stood for the perfection of the God Paul wanted his readers to know” (234). (See also Thomas Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary, Vol. VIII, p. 154.*) In the 18th and 19th centuries some leading commentators believed the terms referred to the dimensions of the New Temple made up of believers, to which Paul describes in chapter two of his letter. Paul wants us to grasp the totality of the church Jesus Christ is building. In the 20th century a number of scholars suggested that the terms refer to the dimension of believers’ “inheritance” in heaven, to which Paul refers in chapter one of his letter.

A view to which many have learned throughout the centuries is that “breadth and length and height and depth” refer to wisdom, to God’s wisdom. In Ephesians 1:8, Paul says that “in all wisdom” God made known the mystery of His will. In 1:17, Paul prays that we be given “a spirit of wisdom”. In 3:10, Paul says that through the church “the manifold wisdom of God” is being made known to the principalities and authorities in the heavenly places. So many argue that Paul is praying that we be made strong enough to comprehend God’s wisdom – its breadth, length, height, and depth.

And there is Biblical precedence for this line of thought. In the book of Job, one of Job’s friends (Zophar) says: “Would that God might speak, and open His lips against you, and show you the secrets of wisdom!” (11:5-6) And then he asks Job: “Can you discover the depth of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea” (11:7-9). In his letter to the Romans Paul cries out: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and unfathomable His ways” (11:33).

So it is possible that in his prayer in Ephesians 3 Paul is asking the Father to help us comprehend, lay hold of, the vastness of God’s wisdom.

Please, Father!

But it seems to me that the majority of believers through church history – John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, John Calvin – are right when they argue the terms “breadth, length, height, depth” refer to love. Just before Paul uses the term he speaks of “being rooted and grounded in love.” And right after using the terms he speaks of knowing the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. In prison Paul asks the Father of the Lord Jesus to make us, by the Holy Spirit, strong enough to catch, to grasp, to seize, to lay hold of the “breadth and length and height and depth” of the love of God in Jesus!

“May be strong enough” Why pray this? Because Paul knows us; he knows our hearts. He knows we all face external circumstances and internal dynamics that keep us from laying hold of the love of God in Jesus. Some of us experienced things in childhood that keep haunting us, drowning out the knowledge of the love of God. Some of us have these tapes playing in our minds about how unworthy we are of the love of anyone, let alone God. Some of us have done things in our past that we cannot forget, that keep us from expressing the love of God. Some of us are facing circumstances right now that seem to call the love of God into question. Many of us look around at all the misery in the world right now and wonder where the love of God is. Some of us are disappointed with God; we feel let down by God, and are not sure we can trust the claim that He loves us. Some of us have tried to be “good Christians” all our lives; we have “kept the rules” so to speak, but God is not acting in ways we think we deserve God to act, and we are deeply angry with god; the anger keeps us from experiencing any love, let alone God’s love. (Tim Keller). And there is the enemy of Jesus, the enemy of our souls, who does not want any human being to know and experience God and His love. Who fuels our own sense of unworthiness; who lies to us, telling us that our sin disqualifies us from relationship with God.

Oh, Father, make them strong enough to press through all the obstacles, to overcome any and all lies and confusion; and help them lay hold of the “breadth and length and height and depth” of your love for us in Jesus Christ.

Father, help us seize the breadth of Your love. Broad enough to include millions upon millions of sinners, from every race and every clan. Father, help us seize the length of Your love. Long enough to last through all the ages. Long enough to reach to the farthest places. No one can escape the reach of your love! Father, help us seize the height of Your love. Love that opens the door into heaven. Love that raises us up with Jesus, that seats us with Jesus in the heavenly places. Father, help us seize the depth of your love. Love that comes down. In Jesus. All the way down. Into the depths of our sin and sickness. Into the depths of our darkness and death. You came all the way down to lay hold of us! Oh, Father, make us strong enough to lay hold of Your love!

“Oh the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless free.”

And then! And then Paul prays the prayer that blows the circuit boards. I ask that, according to the riches of His glory, “You be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

“Be filled.” Passive. Meaning we do not do the filling. Although we try to do so. In all kinds of ways. “Be filled.” Passive. The so-called Divine person. Because only God does it. Only God fills us.

“Fill them,” Father. The very literally means, “completely fill”. “Completely fill them,” Father. Fill them up to full capacity. Fill them up to the rim.

Yes... please.

And what is the measure of this filling? “To all the fullness of God.” Paul takes our hearts into his hands, lifts them up to the Living God, and asks that they be filled so completely that the filling can only be measured by “all the fullness of God.”

Can you handle this?

What is this “fullness of God”? One scholar gets about as close to the meaning as we can get when he writes that “the fullness of God” is “the sum total of the divine attributes” (R. Schippers, TDNT, Vol. I, 740). “The fullness of God” is the sum total of God’s wisdom, power, truth, beauty, holiness, justice, love. “The fullness of God,” like “Glory”, is all that makes God be God.

Oh my goodness! Kneeling in a jail cell, Paul prays that we – broken, imperfect, empty people – be filled up to the degree, to the level, to the extent, that the filling can only be measured by the sum total of the attributes of the Living God.

Can you handle this?

The question is: So, with what does God fill us; with what does God fill us so that the filling is measured by “the fullness of God”? Ready? The fullness of God!! God fills us with the fullness of God so that the filling can only be measured by the fullness of God.

In his letter to the Colossians (an expansion letter to Ephesus), Paul says that the fullness of God dwells in Christ; 1:19 – “It was the Father’s good pleasure that all the fullness dwell in Him.” Then in Colossians 2:10, Paul says that in Christ we have been made complete, we have been filled. In relationship with Jesus Christ, we participate in all that is in Jesus Christ. If we are *in* Him, we are in His fullness, which is the fullness of God.

See why, Paul’s prayer has been called “the boldest” of all prayers? Paul is asking the Father of Jesus to fill the disciples of Jesus Christ **with** and **to** the measure of all that makes the Living God the Living God.

Can you handle this? Of course not! We rightly feel overwhelmed with the thought! Paul is not praying for a little spirited “pick-me-up”. Paul is not just praying for a change in perspective that helps us cope with the stresses of our lives. Paul is not praying for a little shot-in-the-arm to help us go on living in our self-empowered, self-directed, lives. Paul is praying that the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ fill us... with Himself! That the Living God fill us so full that the filling can only be measured by the fullness of God Himself!

Can you handle this? No. But God can!

Because this prayer is so bold, it is important to point out that Paul does not then suggest that because of this filling we somehow become God, or gods. The filling makes us godly, thank God. But not God. When we fill a glass with water the glass does not become water. When we fill a balloon with helium the balloon does not become helium. When God fills human beings with God, human beings do not become God. Quite the contrary! To be filled up to the fullness of God finally makes us human. We finally become what we were created to be. It was when God breathed His breath into the life-less humanoid that Adam became a living being. So for everyone descended from Adam, when the Triune God fills us with all that makes the Triune God be God, we finally become all we were meant to be.

What a complement this pays us humans! Paul's prayer says we were made in such a way that the only thing that finally fills us is God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Nothing else can finally satisfy our hearts. They were made by God, for God. The only things that finally fills us is God!!

I love to hear Paul preach the gospel. But I really love to hear Paul pray the gospel. Nothing in moderation. Blatant extravagance. That you be strong enough to lay hold of the boundless love of God. That you be filled up to *all* the fullness of God.