

## A Prayer for the Church

A sermon on Ephesians 3:14-21 by Rev. Heather Thomsen Tang

We're in the middle of a sermon series called the Household of God, and we're studying Ephesians. Last week Amy preached through the beginning of chapter 3. She explained how in verse 1, Paul was setting himself up to offer a prayer for the church, but then, mid-sentence he jumped on a rabbit trail and chased that rabbit into an epic tangent about how the church has been tasked with the administration of the mystery of God. The mystery, Amy explained, is actually no mystery at all, but rather is the revelation that in Christ, God has brought enemies together into one family: he has brought together Jews and Gentiles into One body, and has brought all people near to Himself. So when the writer says in verse 14 "for this reason" – that's what he's referring to: the reason of the good news of reconciliation between people and God, which the Church has been tasked to administer. Verse 14, the first verse in our text for today, hints at all of this that has unfolded in the chapters before. A paraphrase of verse 14 might go like this: "Because you have been reconciled to one another and to God [as I spent all of chapter 2 explaining], and because you the Church has been tasked to share the good news of this reconciliation [as I explained in the beginning of chapter 3], now here I am kneeling before the Father, praying for all of you."

So here we finally have it, the actual prayer that we've been waiting 14 verses to hear! Let's quiet our hearts, and invite the Spirit to illumine us as we hear God's Word from Ephesians 3:14-21 <sup>14</sup>For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family<sup>[a]</sup> in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup>may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup>and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

*This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!*

Now I'll be the first to admit, this prayer can be a little hard to follow, due to its trademark Pauline style of being one giant run-on sentence. So as we work our way through the text, one of the keys to understanding the aim of this prayer is to keep track of all the "so that" clauses the writer uses to move from one concept to the next. Following the progression of "that" and "so that" will help us follow Paul's intent.

There are 8 verses in this passage, and each of these verses could have a sermon written about just that one verse. This is a rich, meaty passage. But as we'll see by tracking the progression of the "so that" clauses, Paul's prayer is building toward a very particular purpose. So I want us to spend the most time considering the climax of this prayer. It's like we're going spelunking, and we'll need to zip down into the depths of the cave without exploring the mouth of the cave as much, even though the mouth of the cave possess its own holds its own wonders. So I want you to think of the first couple verses in this passage as the mouth of the cave that give us access to the riches that we'll discover further down and further in.

In verse 16 we encounter the first "that" clause. Paul is praying THAT God's Spirit would strengthen them in their inner beings. The "inner being" is the core of a person: It's the center of one's personality; it's what makes you uniquely you. The inner being is like a combination of the heart, mind and gut. So Paul is asking that the deepest core, the most central part of what makes a person who they are would be strengthened by the Spirit of God. The means of this strengthening is what Paul addresses in the next verse, when we see the second "so that" clause: I pray you would be strengthened ... **SO THAT** Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. The indwelling of Christ in the believer is the second aim or goal in Paul's prayer. The language used here for "dwelling" suggests a permanent residence, along the lines of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of John 1, in which he describes the Word dwelling among us by "moving into the neighborhood." What Paul is getting in verses 16-17 is a desire that the deepest parts of the believer be softened and opened for the sake of God's presence. As Christ "moves into the neighborhood" of a person's inner being, she becomes strengthened by God's Spirit. And that strengthening, as we shall see later in the passage, is for a specific purpose.

Continuing through this text, we encounter in the next phrase a favorite biblical image: that of being rooted and established in love. Davin and I used the Colossian parallel to this reference as a theme in our wedding. It's poetic, and it's something we readers can easily grasp.

The words rooted and established draw on two different metaphors. As you can probably guess, being rooted comes from the world of agriculture.

This past Tuesday it was raining like crazy. The power went out in the C building here at church, and the ceiling in my office sprung another leak! When Davin and I got home, there were leaves and branches all over our driveway and yard. I noticed that the stalks of the squash plants in our vegetable garden were strewn every which way, blown into disarray by the wind. We only planted the garden a few weeks ago, so based on how everything was strewn about, I was pretty sure that the tender squash plants had been pulled up from the ground. I was surprised to find each one still embedded in the soil. Nourished by sunshine and by plenty of water over the last few weeks, these plants had been *caused to root* in such a way that the wind did not pull them up.

While rootedness has agricultural connotations, being established is a metaphor from the world of architecture. It refers to the laying of a foundation.

On the high school mission trip to the DR a few weeks ago, I was impressed by how hard the students labored each day under the hot sun, engaged in something many of you have participated in, the infamous bucket line. Our students spent hour after hour at Mission Emmanuel passing buckets of slopping cement to pour into the foundation of a house that was being built. The more cement poured, the stronger the foundation that was being established.

This is the imagery of verse 17 – deep roots being grown, a firm foundation being laid. The love of God in Christ is the rich soil into which believers are rooted, and the firm foundation on which they are established. Both terms here are passive: the passive sense of “rooted” is *to cause to root, or to become firmly rooted*. The passive sense of “established” is *to lay a foundation*. And the passive tense is interesting because it indicates that this rooting and establishing is something that is done TO us, not BY us. It is not something we accomplish by our own strength or effort, but rather, as the Spirit strengthens us, we become more deeply rooted and more firmly established in Christ's love.

This leads to our third “that” – in the progression that will lead us to the climactic purpose of the prayer. In verse 18, we read Paul's prayer THAT the believers may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. To summarize the progression so far, Paul prays THAT the believers would be strengthened, SO THAT Christ might dwell in them in a way that roots and establishes them in love, SO THAT they might grasp the love of Christ. Now, this is surprising to me, because I would guess that Paul's prayer would be for the believers to be rooted in Christ's love SO THAT they can share the love with others. But, instead, it's for the purpose of knowing Christ.

To know Christ. We all go to school for years and years in order to gain knowledge. Similarly, we study Scripture and participate in Christian community as a means of coming to know the Triune God more deeply. But intellectual or academic knowledge is not the primary concern here. Immediately after petitioning God that his readers grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, he writes, “<sup>19</sup>and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”

Let's pause for a moment. To *know* the love that *surpasses knowledge*. This is ridiculous! It's a total oxymoron. He's praying that you would know the unknowable, that you would comprehend the incomprehensible, or like Vizinni, Inigo Montoya, and the Dread Pirate Roberts in the movie the Princess Bride, that you would conceive the inconceivable.

I think this is why the writer uses the language of width, length, height and depth to describe God's love. He's trying to capture the vast, expansive, immeasurable mystery that is God's love.

I don't know how many times I've sat on a rock overlooking the sea and pondered just how far it actually is to the other side. The ocean looks like it goes on forever. Sometimes I have flopped down onto my back in the warm summer grass and watched the clouds sail across the stretched blue canvas. The sky has always been an utter mystery to me. Why is it blue? How far does it reach? Where does it start? The song the band led for the offertory is called *The Love of God*, and it starts like this: The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen could ever tell; it goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell." I love how this lyric captures what is expressed in verse 18: that God's love is so deep, like the oceans, it hasn't even been plumbed, and that it is so high that even the incomprehensible height of the heavens is too small to compare. This love is so vast, so expansive, so mysterious, that the writer says it "surpasses knowledge."

*(Talk here about class at Tall Timber Ranch during January, and then standing in a snowy meadow in front of gleaming, snow-covered mountains, with starry gems littering the night sky above me, and feeling so small, so overwhelmed, and so loved. Have you had an experience like that, in which your mind has been completely blown and your breath is stilled inside your lungs, when you can feel majesty itself sinking into your bones and you know you are in the presence of something greater, something so beyond comprehension that you can only feel it and sense it as sends shivers racing up your spine.*

This is what Paul is praying for. He desires that all the Lord's holy people, together in the capital-C Church universal, would be able to grasp the mind-blowing dimensions of the all-embracing love of Christ,

It reminds me of the way a couple brims with excitement upon their engagement because "they just know." It's reminiscent of the inexplicable love a pregnant woman has for the unborn child she is eagerly waiting to meet. It is a knowing beyond knowledge, it's something you can understand without being able to explain. And this is the sort of knowing-beyond-knowledge that Paul desires for his readers.

It's important to note here that this not advocating anti-intellectualism. Paul's point is not to give up on knowing and understanding God in an intellectual or academic way. Heck, I've spent years of my life studying theology in an intellectual, academic setting! Rather, the point made here is that an understanding of God goes beyond our intellect. Knowing God is something wholly different than knowledge of God. That bears repeating: **Knowing God is something wholly different than knowledge of God.** Paul prays for us to know with deeper intimacy the complexities of Christ's love.

So finally now we have reached the climactic purpose of the prayer. This is what all of the *thats* and *so thats* are leading toward: Paul desires that a deeply personal and experiential encounter with God's love would cause each believer to be filled to overflowing with all the fullness of God. The fullness of God is *all that God is*: it's the completeness of His presence, His power and His love. It's the very life of God. Paul desires that each believer experience to the very brim of her capacity the life and power of God. This is simply mind blowing. All that God is – the power, the wisdom, the incomprehensible love - completely filling you, and completely filling me.

We see now, having followed the *so-that* clauses to their ultimate purpose, that this giant run-on sentence does indeed all hangs together. We need to be strengthened by the Spirit in order for Christ to dwell in us in a deep, rooted way, so that we can intimately and profoundly experience God's mind-blowing love, and all of this for the purpose of being filled to the brim with all the fullness of God: in other words, to be filled with the life of God.

After taking a deep breath, and letting this settle, we look ahead to the conclusion of this chapter, and we see that the way Paul ends the prayer is really the only thing that makes sense given the enormity of what he has just penned: he worships God. To God be the glory forever and ever!, he writes. O God, you are immeasurably great and can do far more than we ever ask or imagine!

Paul is modeling the response he desires for his readers: first, to encounter the overwhelming love of God that strengthens and roots and fills them to overflowing, and then to respond by worshipping God with thanks and praise.

Maybe worshipping God feels stiff or forced for you. Maybe worship seems insignificant. Maybe the Triune God feels small, and tucked away into some remote corner of your life. Maybe you aren't sure if this God exists. My friends, it is ok to name those things. It is ok to grapple with disappointment or dryness or emptiness in the way you experience God. But what we see unfolding in this prayer for the Ephesian church is Paul's belief that a deep and personal experience of the mind-blowing presence and love of God cannot but help transform a person's life in such a way that it emanates and radiates worship. If worship feels stiff or forced to you, or a profound encounter with God's love feels far away, I encourage you to cling to the words of verse 19, that God can do infinitely more than we could ever ask or imagine – not if you create the right environment for it, not if you are good enough, not if you raise your hands high enough or close your eyes tight enough, but rather if you kneel in prayer before the Father, and ask for it.

So in the pattern modeled by the writer of this prayer, we are going to spend time together in community, as holy ones of the Lord, praying this same prayer for ourselves and for each other. Let us create space to consider the immense height and depth and length and width that God has demonstrated for us through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ. Let us ask the Spirit to soften our hearts to feel and experience the presence of the Triune. Allow yourself to not only think about God, but to be swept up in an experience of his unfathomable love for you. If you'd prefer to stay seated and close your eyes, please do that. If you'd prefer to pray Paul's prayer from Ephesians 3, the words will be projected on the screen. If you prefer to go to come to the front or to one of the wings to kneel and prayer, please do that. This is time for each of us to let down our guards, and to worship God with heart, soul, mind and strength. So, with the writer of the hymn, The Love of God, let us proclaim that even if we could fill the entire ocean with ink, and if the sky was made of parchment, and if every stalk on earth were a quill, and everyone a scribe by trade, to write the love of God above would drain the oceans dry, nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky. Friends, this is your time, and I pray that you would be empowered to grasp how high and long and wide and deep is the love of Christ.