

11/3/2019 - Ephesians - 3:14-21

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Preacher: Benjie Slaton

- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Odo. You can find out more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. Okay, welcome again to Grace and Peace. If you're new with us, I'm especially glad that you're visiting with us. My name's Benjie. If I have not met you, I'd love to meet you after the service. Please come up and get to know me. We've been, if you have been with us, we've been walking this fall through Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. It was a city on the Turkish coast. In the news a lot this recently, the Turkish empire has not been as Christian as it was, as it has been since 2,000 years ago when Ephesus was at the height of its church life. And so it's an interesting book. And it's got all these amazing things. Paul talks about the mystery that we are invited into, the mystery of his grace, which we just even sang about.
- [1 : 1 2] The passage that we're going to look at today is a prayer. And the prayer has a certain shape. It starts off with Paul kind of describing his own prayer. He's kneeling in prayer. And then he has a few requests, which we're going to look at. And then he ends with this kind of praise and this doxology. But actually, it's not that clear of a passage. I kind of think of this passage as being like one of those mansions that you might see, you know, like the Rockefeller mansion, something that's on, you know, the coast of Long Island that Roosevelt might have lived in or something like that. You know, you can go and visit those kinds of places now. And you can stand outside and there will be a tour guide. And they might even give you a floor plan map of what that mansion is inside. But you don't get a sense for the mansion unless you actually go inside and wander around and see what it feels like inside. And sometimes you even get lost in the midst of it.
- [2 : 1 1] That's kind of what this passage is like. It doesn't do a whole lot of good to stand on the outside and just look at the floor plan. You got to get into it. And you got to walk around. And you got to sometimes get lost in it. And you got to feel what's going on in this passage. You can't do it from a distance. And so that's what we're going to do this morning is take a look around. So give your attention to God's Word from Ephesians chapter 3. It's printed in your bulletin. 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 might 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 the length and the height and the depth, and to know the love of God 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 we ask or think according to the power at work within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

Amen. Amen. This is God's Word, and He gives it to you because He wants you to love Him and to know Him. So let's pray and ask His blessing on it. Father, we do ask that You would send Your Spirit to us.

[3 : 50] Open our hearts to know You, to experience Your presence, to know Your love, to see, to be filled up with You.

We pray that You would do that. In Christ's name, amen. You know, there are days in sermons, we don't get, I don't talk this way in a lot of sermons, but there's just a time to just kind of get straight about some things.

And you just should know that on Wednesday this week, I slept in until 10 o'clock in the morning. I probably haven't done that in like 20 years. But I told you last week, I told you that I was exhausted.

My wife and I, we took all of our youth on this youth retreat, and that had followed up this really, you know, it's been an amazing fall, and busy with church as well as our family, and I was just exhausted.

I went home, I took a nap on Sunday, but that didn't really help. And by Tuesday night, I was exhausted, and I told Natalie, as we were going to bed, I said, look, don't wake me up. I'm not getting up.

[4 : 53] And, you know, I'm not helping with the kids in the morning. I'm not doing breakfast. I'm not doing anything. You've got to just let me sleep. And she did, and I didn't get up until 10. It was amazing. And then, so I felt a little bit better, but I was still just kind of, I've been just dragging all week.

And so I got up Thursday morning at my normal time, and I sat down to pray and to read the Bible a little bit, and I realized Thursday morning was the first time since Sunday that I had sat down and read my Bible and prayed without other people being there.

What? Like, this is what I do for a living. This is what I ought to be spending all my time doing. And I realized that I had gone the better part of a week being tired, worn out, distracted, and the first thing to go in my own life was reading God's Word and praying, being in God's presence, quiet with Him.

Now, I talk to many of you, and I know that you can relate to that because you might not have a few days' worth of prayerlessness. You might have a few weeks or months or longer of prayerlessness and times of just not having a whole lot of spiritual life going on at all.

In fact, the very idea that I would talk about growing in your spiritual life all of a sudden gives you kind of the creepy crawlies. You kind of begin to feel those feelings of powerlessness and maybe a little bit of shame, like, I should be a better Christian.

[6 : 21] I should be doing better stuff. And yet you haven't, and you feel terrible about it, and you wonder why, what's going on with you that you haven't done all of that. I have this quote that this mentor used to tell me in seminary.

It's one of those love-hate relationships that you have with a quote. It's by this old Puritan named J.C. Ryle. And here's what he says. You are never going to become what you are not right now becoming.

You're never going to become what you're not right now becoming. You know? You're never going to become a great basketball player if you are not right now practicing to become a great basketball player.

You are never going to grow in your spiritual life unless you are practicing those things which help you grow in your spiritual life. It's obvious, but I hate that quote.

You know, thanks a lot, J.C. Ryle. Thanks a lot for making me feel terrible about myself once again. And I think a lot of us feel that way. You know, we want to grow up. We want to experience the fullness of God's life.

[7 : 29] We want to be people who pray, you know? But we don't do it. And we have trouble doing that. Oftentimes, instead of feeling full of God's presence, we feel completely empty.

You may feel empty of emotion, empty of discipline, empty of prayer, maybe even empty of faith. If that's what you feel, this passage is for you.

That's what this passage is all about. It's Paul reflecting on everything that he's written to this point. This is actually a transitional passage in the book of Ephesians because from here, he goes to chapter 4, and he's going to start getting into some of the practical suggestions that he wants to give to his church.

And so he's reflecting on everything he's given them, and he's praying for his people. It's actually a prayer that is something about prayer. It's a prayer about praying, we could say.

There's actually something a little bit more even going on. Now, you have to remember the context of this. I may have told you before that this is the group of Christians who are in Ephesus. Paul has planted that church.

[8 : 37] He started it. They started with a small group. They've grown. It's probably a number of house churches. Paul has been now traveling around planting other churches, and he's writing back to them. They've got good leaders.

Things are going well for the Ephesians. But what we find out is in about 30 years, things are not going to be good for the Ephesians. The apostle John, who his home base was around Ephesus, he writes in the book of the Revelation, he writes to the Ephesians about 30 years after Paul is writing, and he says, you guys have lost your way.

Not only have you lost your way, what he says specifically is, you've lost your first love. You've lost your love for God. You've lost your love for His grace. And I wonder if in the back of Paul's mind as he's writing this, I wonder if he's got a little inkling.

A little inkling that there are the seeds in his people of losing their love for God, of losing that sense of intimacy. And he's walking along with them and showing them the path.

What does it look like for you to follow Jesus, to stoke those fires of love, to be in His presence, to follow Him, to become the people that you want to become?

[9 : 57] And as he does that, I think it's really instructive for us to hear what he's praying, why he's praying it, and how we can kind of get in on that.

Here's the whole deal, is that he's saying that the spiritual life begins and matures in our prayer to God. The spiritual life begins and is matured as we pray to God.

That's the focus of the passage. Now, I'll look at the beginning and the end in a few minutes, but I want to focus on these kind of requests that he makes. He makes four requests in this prayer that we'll look at.

But how to get at them? Well, think about that mansion, the Roosevelt Mansion. You can think about these four requests almost as floors in that house.

They are ascending floors. They build on one another. They're similar, but they're a little bit different and building on one another. And so you can begin to see that there's almost a logic to the way that he goes about praying for these.

[11 : 04] And we want to walk through each of these four floors. We'll stop for a minute. We'll look around, and then we'll go to the next floor and turn. And then once we get to the top, we'll look over the balcony and see the whole house, see the whole interior of the house.

So that's what we'll do on our little tour here. The four things are that he wants them to have strength, to have love, to have knowledge, and to have fullness. Strength, love, knowledge, and fullness.

We'll look at these briefly. Strength. Let's start at the beginning of the passage. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

You notice he's bowing in prayer. We'll come back to that in a minute, but I just want to note that he's bowing in prayer. Verse 16. That according to the riches of his glory.

Paul loves that word riches. God has his riches that he is giving to you, lavishing on you. The riches of his glory he may grant you. Okay, what is God going to grant?

[12 : 04] There's two things. Grant you to be strengthened. Strengthened how? First, with power through his spirit in your inner being.

Strengthened with the spirit's power in your inner being. Okay, what's the second thing? That you, I'm sorry, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

So being strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts. Spirit, Christ, dwelling.

Those are two different ways to say essentially the same thing. What Paul is trying to get at is that he's praying that you would be strengthened by God's presence in your life.

Well, that seems kind of obvious. You know, if you grew up in American evangelicalism, what did somebody tell you in order to get saved? What did you have to do to become a Christian?

[13 : 02] You had to ask Jesus where? Into your heart. There's something a little bit... That's not the full story. Let's just say that.

But it isn't totally wrong either. That's part of what salvation looks like. And it is true that when we are redeemed by Christ, when we become God's child, that the Holy Spirit indwells his people.

The problem is, if you've been a Christian for a little while, what you realize is, God's presence is not equally experienced at all times in all people.

There's a variability to it. Right? It comes and goes a lot. It is something that comes by degrees.

One theologian says that what Paul is praying here is that they would know God's presence and be fortified, braced, and invigorated by it.

[14 : 05] And I think that's interesting that the ground floor, the first floor in this mansion that Paul is envisioning, or this prayer that we're envisioning as a mansion, is to be strengthened.

That's where God starts. Why does... Or where Paul starts. Why does Paul start there? Because he knows you're weak. Because God knows that you are needy.

God does not take it for granted that you have your act together. In fact, he assumes that you don't. Paul is talking about the logic of God's grace means that God is entering into a people who are weak and who are vulnerable and who need his presence with them.

And so it's a prayer for strength, for you to be renewed in your spirit, for you to have his presence with you. One of my favorite memories growing up was in those very rare days that we had snow days in North Texas, in the Dallas area.

It did not happen very often, but occasionally. And, you know, we didn't have good gear, so we'd just, you know, get on whatever we had. And me and my best friend lived down the street from me. And we would go outside and we would make snowmen and we would throw snowballs.

[15 : 24] And in a very short time, we would be wet and cold and we would play until our hands felt like they were going to get frostbite. And then we would come back in. And if my mother was there, we'd have a fire going in the fireplace and we'd take off our gloves and our wet clothes and we'd put them by the fire to dry out and we'd drink some hot chocolate and we would get warmed again.

Just enough time to get dressed back up and go right back out into the cold. That's, in a sense, what Paul is praying for you. He's saying that in prayer, as you come and you submit yourself to the Lord, what you find is that you are strengthened for the challenges ahead.

You're strengthened in your weakness. Isn't that exactly what you want? I don't know what your challenges are. Challenges at work, challenges with relationships, challenges with money, challenges with your children, challenges with your own soul, challenges with sin issues in your life, indwelling sin or sin that remains with you.

I don't know what your challenge is, but the first thing you need to do is to submit yourself to Him in prayer and seek His strength. Okay, that's the first thing.

Paul's praying for strength. The second thing he's praying for is love. This is the second floor, in a sense. Look at verse 17. So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith that you being rooted and grounded in love.

[17 : 05] Rooted and grounded. That's kind of a weird phrase because he's using two images and kind of squishing them together. Rooted is like a tree. You know, it has roots.

Those roots go down. They dig down. That's where they get nourishment. Right? They're rooted. But then grounded is actually a word that has an architectural context.

It's talking about the foundation of a house. It's something that you're building up from. So he's talking about the rootedness. Love needs to be at the rootedness of our lives.

But love needs to also be as we grow and as we build. You can say it this way. Love needs to be at the root, but love needs to also be the fruit of our lives.

Love at the root and love at the fruit. I like that. Sounds right. Love at the root and love at the fruit. What Paul is saying is as you are strengthened by His presence, it will necessarily lead to actions of love for God and for other people.

[18 : 12] That's the second floor. It's an indispensable thing that once we experience God's presence, it actually leads to love.

Actions of love. And look, the Ephesians need that. The Ephesians need to learn how to love one another. This was not an easy group. You know, they were a minority church in a culture that was antagonistic to Christians.

Christians. They had, this was a group that had, when Paul planted this church, it gathered together all kinds of different people. Different people with different socioeconomic classes.

With different cultural identities. With different racial distinctions. With different ways of just interacting in the world. Different languages even. And he's pulling these people together.

And the only thing that is going to give them the ability to deal with that is to be rooted and grounded in love. That love is at the root of their lives and at the fruit of their lives.

[19 : 19] Okay, let's keep going. Strengthened. That they would have love. Knowledge. Is the third thing. Okay, look at 18.

Rooted and grounded in love. That you may have strength. There's strength again. That should be a clue for you. Strength to comprehend.

To understand. With all the saints. That means this is common to every Christian. Strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and the length and the height and the depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

Okay, that's pretty cool. There's a complete contradiction. To know the thing that surpasses knowledge. To know God's love that you can't possibly know.

That's what Paul is praying right there. He wants you in your weakness to be strengthened as you live out of love. To then know the love of Christ that is so great and so high that it surpasses your ability to know it.

[20 : 27] He wants you to know it. In the passage right before this he talks about the mystery of God being revealed to him. I think it's a similar idea. He wants the spirit of God to show you what God's love for you looks like in Christ.

And it's interesting the order that he's talking about them. Normally we would think and the scriptures do talk about this, you know, for Christ, we love because he first loved us, right?

The order is, God loves us, therefore we love other people. But he seems to have kind of switched that in his mind here. Why is that? Well, John Stott has a great little phrase talking about this.

He says this, that it is partially in loving that we learn the meaning of Christ's love. It's partially as we make the decision to love other people, we learn Christ's love.

Anybody who has been in a long marriage, healthy marriage, will tell you this is true. You learn about love as you make the decision to act in love.

[21 : 41] What you find is you may not feel a whole lot of affection for that spouse of yours at that moment and yet you make the decision to love them and you find that your feelings come along.

You know? They follow in some sense. And so what that means is that comprehending Christ's love is not a matter of some sort of abstraction.

You don't get Christ's love in a Bible study. We can say it that way. You can know something about it but it has to be lived. It has to be experienced. God has to open it up to you to take your knowledge and actually put it into practice.

Let's put a real fine point on it. It is not good enough for you to have a crocheted pillow that says, for God so loved the world. That doesn't work.

That's not going to make you love the world. What will is if your heart breaks in prayer for the brokenness of the world, the people and the places of our world and of our neighborhood.

[22 : 47] And as you bring them into prayer, what you're going to find is that the truth of God so loved the world becomes so much more real. It becomes the thing that actually animates your life.

That's what Paul is getting at. That kind of, that's the dynamic Paul wants to see in us is that we begin to live out of that strength that he prays for us. We begin to act in love and what begins to happen is we begin to see that love.

And he even gives you a picture of what it looks like. The height and the depth and the length and the breadth. You know, it's actually, it's kind of cool to read about what people have thought Paul is envisioning here.

You know, Augustine, St. Augustine, he thought that Paul is talking about the dimensions of the cross. You know, high and to the ground and this wide.

Other commentators, other early church fathers thought that he was talking about the full length of God's love. That it reaches from heaven to the earth. That it goes as wide from shore to shore.

[23 : 57] That it encompasses all people. That Christ's love is unbounded. That it is unquenchable. That it is, you know, unceasing.

And he's just trying to grasp those dimensions. Maybe it's one. Maybe it's both. I don't know. If you find that your spiritual life is cold towards other people, that's a clue that you are not living out of the warmth of the love of God in Christ that Paul is envisioning for you.

Okay, so that's the third thing. So strength, love, knowledge, fourth, fullness. And to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Filled with all the fullness. Fullness is an interesting idea. Paul likes this kind of language. He talks about the fullness of God dwelling in Christ. And the fullness of Christ dwelling in us.

What does it mean here that he wants the fullness filled with all the fullness of God? Well, there's lots of jargon here on what Paul might mean.

[25 : 17] But let me just boil it down to this. Paul wants whatever it is that fills God up. You know, what is it that makes God, God?

Whatever that is, his perfection, his goodness, his holiness, his beauty, his truth, whatever that is that fills God, he wants to see us filled with that same thing.

The fullness of God filling his people. I mean, that's a ridiculous idea. That Paul envisions that you would become full of who God is and what he is like.

That you would reflect his beauty and his glory and his power and his majesty in a small way. That's what Paul envisions you being filled with.

Okay, so if these are like four floors of this house, you can kind of get a sense. Really, this passage is less apt for like one sermon.

[26 : 23] It's more apt for like a five-sermon series where you just kind of dig around in each one. But let's be honest, nobody really wants a five-sermon series on six verses. So, what I want to encourage you to do is to go and sit with this passage.

This would be a great passage for you to memorize. To just walk around in it. Take a tour in it and let to see a little bit more about it. Okay, so seeing that, I want to make two observations about this prayer in general that might help us bring this all together.

The first one is from the beginning. It's Paul's posture. I said that he bows his knee in verse 14. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father. This is actually a pretty big detail.

Jews at this time did not bow to pray. That was not done. They stood to pray because standing connotes respect. In fact, when they had a teacher come, the teacher would often sit in the middle of the room and everybody else would stand.

It was to honor that teacher. But, the scriptures do have a few places where people would bow. But it was always bowing in desperation. Bowing before a superior.

[27 : 35] And Paul loves the language of bowing. Did you notice when Robert read from Philippians 2 that every knee should bow? That that great day where Jesus comes back, what is going to happen?

Every person, every person, without exception, will bow on their knees to God because He is the superior, the ruling, and reigning one.

And Paul's whole vision of a life of prayer is in the context of that great day. Of that reality of who God is and His ultimate return to make things right.

That's where he starts in prayer. If you feel like you have no idea what praying means, start there. Maybe you even actually need to physically change your posture.

There's all kinds of ways that you can pray. Kneeling is a very powerful one. Walking is another good one. Sitting's fine. Stand if you like.

[28 : 41] But start there. That's where Jesus starts in His prayer. Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done.

He is the King. Approach Him that way. That will help order your heart in the right way to begin to think through these various floors of prayer.

So that's the first thing. Posture. Paul's posture of kneeling. The second thing is this doxology which is wonderful. In fact, we're going to close our service with the doxology that he uses here.

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think according to the power at work within us. When I was growing up, I had to, you know, we did, the church I went to did all kinds of Bible memory things.

We had to do sword drills. Anybody do that? Oh yeah, sword drills. But the version that I learned back in those days was this.

[29 : 44] See if this reminds you of anything. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, more than all that we ask or imagine. Exceedingly abundantly.

That's actually a pretty good translation of what Paul is doing here. He's got this like super superlative. It doesn't make any sense in English. What does it mean to be exceedingly abundantly?

It's just heaping on words that Paul is just trying to say, oh, I just want you to see how great this is. I just want you to grasp in some way something that will make you turn your heart again to Him.

Whatever place that you are in, whatever struggle, whatever weakness, whatever failure, whatever uncertainty, whatever sin, whatever, wherever you are, Paul is saying that God in His mercy has exceedingly, abundantly more for you than all you could ask or imagine.

How? according to the power that is at work in you. What Paul is trying to tell you is before you even recognized your need to turn back to Him, He was already at work in you by His power.

[31 : 11] God is at work in you right now according to His power. the power that raised Jesus from the dead and He's calling you to come to Him.

You know, how do you deal with a week like this week for me? A week that you feel distracted and weak that you find that you're just doing the busyness of life.

You know, so often, so, so often, I heard, growing up at least anyway, I heard people calling out, what you need to do is you've just got to buckle down. You've got to figure it out.

You've got to get it right. What about a week where you just can't figure out how to get it right? What happens then? Here's what God does.

He changes the order on you. And what He says is I want you to see that I was already at work this whole time. And all you have to do is respond to Him.

[32 : 21] That's it. You just have to turn and pray. Not in some sort of grand prayer that you're going to share with everyone, that you're going to do publicly, but in the simple, quiet place of your own home to turn to Him in prayer.

because what you find is that His grace is there to meet you. And the first thing that He will do is He'll strengthen your soul.

He'll strengthen you for the road ahead. And then He'll begin to give you a love, to begin to act in obedience and love. And then what He's going to do is He's going to give you a greater and a deeper revelation of who God is and what He's like.

He's going to show off to know the love that surpasses knowledge. And He'll fill you.

That's what Paul wants you to see. And we're not good at that. So here's what I want to do. It's really easy to take something like this and to just move right on past it.

[33 : 28] I don't want to do that. I want to do something that you might find to be a little bit awkward, but we're going to do it anyway. We're just going to take a couple of minutes to pray. I want to give a couple of quiet moments, maybe two minutes.

Josh, maybe I'll ask you to come up and just play a little, you know, background music and, you know, give us some licks. And licks, that's like one of those music terms that I don't use.

And I just want you to spend a couple of quiet moments in prayer to the Lord, wherever you are. And if you don't know how to pray, if you just have no words to pray, that's okay.

It's okay. What I want you to do is just take this passage, this prayer of Paul's, and make it yours. Use it for yourself.

So let me close us in prayer and that will be your cue to start and I'll bring us back together. Our Father, we need you to lead us to you.

[34 : 31] We need you to lead us in your truth. We need you to give us your life. Lead us towards prayer this morning, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.