

It's All About Who You Know

Ephesians 3:14-21 August 16, 2023

Ephesians 3:14-21 - ¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. ¹⁶I pray that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, ¹⁹and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us—²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In songs, oxymorons can make sense even when they shouldn't. Simon and Garfunkel gave us the *Sound Of Silence*. Huey Lewis & The News let us know it was *Hip To Be Square*. The Mamas and the Papas said they were *Glad To Be Unhappy* and Jeff Beck said *Definitely Maybe*.

In our text tonight Paul opens a sweet window into his personal prayer life. But, it sounds like there's a big oxymoron in what he prays. He says, "I want you know to know what can't be known."

We know Paul was a songwriter,¹ but these aren't the lyrics of a melancholy artist. We can feel the joy and excitement radiating from our verses, which are some of the most famous in the book.

These are the words of someone who understands the love of God on a profound level and who wants others to understand as well. That's really the whole point of the book - that the Church would understand who we are, what God has done, and how to walk in His power.

The first three chapters are what we might call the *doctrinal* section. The next three chapters are very *practical*. What an encouragement it would've been for the original hearers because, as Paul moves into the "here's how to live it out" section, he first says, "I'm praying for you. I'm talking to God about you. I'm doing what I can to help you receive what God wants to give."

Ephesians 3:14-15 - ¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

For *what* reason? All that's come before. *Because* God has revealed mysteries to him, *because* God has a plan for Christians, *because* of His riches and His calling. For *these* reasons, Paul goes to prayer. It was *God's* purposes that made Paul pray, not *man's* purposes.

¹ Ephesians 1:3-14 is a hymn in three stanzas. See *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*

Paul understood things about God's care for humanity and he thought, "Ok, now I am going to go to prayer, knowing what I know, and orient my prayer according to God's will and God's purposes, *not* just according to what I feel like I want or need in the moment."

Now, God is fine with us praying about things we need in the moment, but our prayer lives need to be oriented around *His* purposes more than our own. *Thy* Kingdom come, *Thy* will be done.

Paul said, he knelt. Kneeling was not the normal prayer posture for Jews or Christians or Romans at the time.² For some reason, Paul decided to kneel. You don't *have* to kneel in prayer. God gives us freedom to be sensitive to the what and how. But imagine Paul, chained to a Roman soldier. He gets up from his chair and kneels down and starts to pray, maybe silently, maybe out loud.

These soldiers were real guys. A lot of them were won to Christ. But some of them were probably a little more gruff in their dealings with prisoners. Paul's chain may have been just 18 inches long.³ So, Paul kneels down... "What are you *doing*?" "Oh, I'm praying for my friends in Ephesus." "You've been to Ephesus?" "Yeah, I was there for three years." "Didn't they burn, like, millions of dollars of magic books there a few years back?" His kneeling could be evangelistic.

It's also possible that it was an act of devotion and respect. It's also possible that Paul was thinking about how, one day, *every* knee will bow before God and he was making it so in his own life. There's a ribbon of "on earth as it is in heaven" running through this letter that we've seen before. Christians don't have to wait till the end of the world to apply God's truths to our lives - we apply them *now*. We live in the realities Scripture shows us, whether the world around us believes or not.

Paul spoke to God as Father. That would've stood out in the first century. In many inscriptions, the emperor called himself the "father of the fatherland."⁴ Throughout this letter, Christianity stands apart. Rome is not our kingdom. Caesar is not our god. Believers had tact and humility, but they were bold to speak the truth, even when it could bring real consequences.

God the father has *named* every family on earth and in heaven. This speaks of God's authority and ownership. He is the Creator. But, it's more than that. He has made us a part of His *family*. If you're a Christian, you've been adopted as a son or daughter and brought into His house. In God's house, we behave a certain way. Maybe at one point your dad said something like, "In this house we don't talk to people like that." Or when you're playing games, you have house rules. God has a way of doing things and He's the Decider. It's *His* family, His house, His economy.

Paul says the Lord has *named* us. What's that about? Well, naming demonstrates ownership, but one commentator pointed something out that's important. God doesn't just *label* His creations, He gives them *identity*.⁵ Our culture is obsessed with constantly changing our identity, finding it in human behaviors, in identifying *ourselves*. But the Lord says, "No, *I* am the One who gives you your

² Stephen Fowl *Ephesians: A Commentary*, Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*

³ Mike Riccardi *Taking Advantage Of Evangelistic Opportunities*

⁴ Witherington

⁵ *ibid.*

identity. I tell you what it means to be human, what it means to be male, what it means to be female, what it means to be a husband or a wife, what it means to be a citizen and a worker and a member of your community."

God's naming is a big deal. He's giving you identity. He's making you part of what He's unfolding. "Naming" doesn't just mean you were called Saul, now you're called Paul. The term can *also* mean "installed in a position."⁶ Remember from last week: You are part of God's eternal, cosmic work.

A quick extra before we move on: Paul references families on earth *and* families in heaven. It's easy to think that in heaven there are angels and God and that's it. But does that make sense? Think of how many different creatures there are on earth. I think heaven is going to be packed with *all sorts* of heavenly beings. Paul seems to indicate that there are lots of different "families" in heaven.

Ephesians 3:16 - ¹⁶ I pray that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit,

More than safety, more than affluence, more than political power, more than physical health, we need *spiritual strength*. Paul prayed that the Christians in Ephesus would be strengthened out of the wealth of God's supply by the operation of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

It's sad that, on the one hand, whole branches of the Church effectively *ignore* the Holy Spirit, while some others totally misunderstand the way He does things. I'm not suggesting we know everything we need to know - we don't - and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is a hard topic in the Christian life. But *He is* active and wants to invigorate your life day-by-day. At the same time, He doesn't have to be conjured or convinced to come and do crazy things. He's not Tinkerbell, where you have to rev Him up and clap Him into activity.

The Holy Spirit is a Member of the Trinity, just like God the Father and God the Son. He loves you and wants to help you in your prayer life and in making decisions and in understanding the wisdom of God and in showing you opportunities God is giving you and all sorts of other ways.

Strengthened here can be defined as "ability to perform an activity."⁷ We need spiritual strength to be built together as God's dwelling. We need strength to shine the light of His Gospel in a dark world. We need strength to be His Body and share one another's burdens and to exercise our faith.

The good news is that this strengthening can happen even if our physical lives are defined by weakness. In fact, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "*Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.*" God has strength for you tonight, no matter how weak you feel.

Ephesians 4:17a - ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

⁶ Markus Barth *Ephesians 1-3: Introduction, Translation, And Commentary*

⁷ *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*

About ten years ago it was popular out there in Churchland to be against the idea Jesus living in our hearts. In 2013, J.D. Greear, the president of the SBC, wrote an article titled, *"Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart."*⁸ Around the same time, David Platt put out a video titled, *"Why 'Accepting Jesus In Your Heart' Is Superstitious & Unbiblical."*⁹ It's always easier to tear down than to build up.

But here's Paul saying, "I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts!" But wait, aren't we in Christ? Yes, but the Bible presents Christ as wanting to dwell in us. This is an image the Bible gives us more than once: Christ wanting to come into your heart and dwell with you. Jesus said in John 14, "You are in Me and I am in you."

Now, in Ephesians 1 we were told that Christ "fills all things in every way." And yet, God has given human beings the freedom to bar the door and keep Christ from coming into our hearts. In Revelation 3, the Lord says, "I'm outside the door of your heart, knocking, and I hope you'll let Me in to come and have a meal with you." Here we see it's not just a quick visit. Paul's term for dwell means a longterm habitation.¹⁰

This is an amazing situation we find ourselves in. God, Who can do whatever He wants, has decided He wants to dwell with you and interact with you every single day. And the way for us to engage with this incredible offer is to *believe*. "Through faith." Do I *believe* God, or do I think I have to *convince* Him to love me, to work in my life, to help me in some way?

Another little extra: These verses give a great view of the Trinity. We see Father, Son, and Spirit all in operation. You can tuck that away for the next time you talk to a non-Trinitarian family or friend.

Ephesians 3:17b-18 - I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love,¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love,

Paul's words remind us of Psalm 1 where God's people are called trees planted beside flowing streams, bearing fruit. The *New Living Translation* gives us verse 17 this way: *"Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong."*

Paul prays that all of us would have a "lifestyle of love."¹¹ If that's what our lives are rooted in, then we will bear the fruit of love. Not pride. Not hatred. Not greed. Not vengeance. Not resentment.

The Shepherd's Tree is native to deserts of southern Africa. It can grow to be 30 feet tall, but is usually much shorter. It's evergreen, despite the harsh conditions it lives in. Its claim to fame is that no tree has deeper roots. They've found them going over 220 feet into the ground.¹²

⁸ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/stop-asking-jesus-your-heart>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPhEEzjU8xQ>

¹⁰ Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boscia_albitrunca

Our spiritual lives can have roots that go deeper and deeper into our Shepherd's love. Paul wanted all of us to *comprehend* just how long and wide, deep and high God's love is. Comprehend can mean "to hold as one's own."¹³ All these things he's talking about aren't just some philosophic theory. God really wants you to have a personal relationship with Him, where you are *connected* to His heart and His grace and His power and His limitless love.

Paul says, "*with all the saints*," in verse 18. Your relationship with God is personal, *but*, there is a communal aspect to Christianity as well. Ephesians brings this home again and again. Christianity cannot be separated from Church - meaning the gathering of believers together. Together we comprehend, together we take hold of these things, together we're built up and put into operation. It's not the *only* way God works in our lives, but it's an *essential* way. One commentator writes, "*At every turn, Christianity is a corporate religion.*"¹⁴ We live in a time where many Christians are content to cut themselves off from churches because of something that's happened in the past or because of some book they read or some other reason. Churches aren't perfect, but they are necessary. If we want to be operational, if we want to be mature, then we *must* be regularly connected with a gathering of believers in a local church. Christianity is a team sport.

Ephesians 3:19 - ¹⁹and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul, how can we comprehend something that *surpasses* knowledge? Are you familiar with the social media hashtag #IYKYK? If you know, *you know*. Part of Paul's message is that the things of God *cannot* be known outside of a relationship with Him, but once you are in Christ and Christ is in you, God then reveals mysteries and increases your understanding as you walk with Him.

There's always more to comprehend. Think of a person who has a PhD in oceanography and marine biology. Give them *four* PhDs. They know a *lot* about the ocean. And yet there's more they *don't* know than they could ever learn, right? God's love is like that. It surpasses our ability to know.

But, there's also this aspect to what Paul is saying: Knowing God, being a Christian, is not just an intellectual exercise.¹⁵ Understanding a list of doctrines doesn't make you a Christian. Our faith must also be put into operation. We're to *experience* these realities. A genuine Christian life is one where you don't just *memorize* Psalm 23, but God walks you through your own Psalm 23. Where we don't just hear that God fills people, but that He fills *us*. That we don't just stand beside the sea of His love, observing, but that we become saturated with it ourselves.

This is a lifelong experience. Paul told the Corinthians "right now I know in part. In heaven I'll know fully." But, see, the Corinthians thought they knew everything already.¹⁶ What was the result? Infighting. Selfishness. Spiritual weakness. Misapplication of Scripture.

¹³ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

¹⁴ Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

¹⁵ Thomas Neufeld *Ephesians*

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 8:2

We're invited to an ongoing life of maturing and taking hold of the love of God. Not just apostles, not just missionaries, but every Christian.

Ephesians 3:20 - ²⁰Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us—

The first three chapters of Ephesians it's like Paul keeps saying, "But wait, there's more!" And he does it again here. The terms he uses for what God is able to do mean "infinitely beyond,"¹⁷ "very much in excess of,"¹⁸ and "to outdo superabundantly all we ask."¹⁹

God, with all His power, with all His freedom, has oriented His attention, His affection, His activity toward you - to adopt you, to revolutionize your life, to make you a part of His unfolding plan. It's not just a *potential* thing He *might* do, it's a work that *is working* even now in us.

If we're honest, we don't always see it and we don't always feel it. I know that's true in my life. Rather than be discouraged by how we fall short or by the things we don't understand, let's do what Paul does and *pray* for these plans of God to be made more real to us. Pray for strength, pray for power, pray for a greater capacity to receive and to comprehend what God has revealed.

Ephesians 3:21 - ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

After three chapters of talking about the wondrous things God has done and is doing through the Church, Paul focuses our attention on the One Who does it. Christ is the focus. It's *His* glory. It's *His* plan, *His* power, *His* goodness, *His* Body. My life is not really meant to be the focus of my life. *God's glory is!* The focus of my life should be the presence and glory of God. Because my life is His home. My heart is *His* throne. My situation is a position God allows me to be in so that I can know Him more deeply and bear fruit and be a conduit of grace and a beacon of His glory.

And, again, Paul wants us to know that this doesn't happen in an individualized, spiritual cubicle. "to Him be glory *in the church.*" Darrell Bock writes, "*The church is where God is expressing himself most visibly in the world, which is why it is imperative that the church reflects the enablement Paul is asking for here.*"

This Christian life is all about Who we know. Do we know the Lord, personally? And do we know who He has placed us beside to be built up together with? These are the paths to fullness and strength and power and eternal identity. Let's take root deeper together.

¹⁷ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

¹⁸ Bock

¹⁹ Barth