

“Deeper Source of Strength”

There is an old story that still causes me to smile and yet maybe suggests a lesson. It is the story of a man who lived near a travel agency that he often passed by. And so one day, in the window, he sees a sign that says, “Cruise -- 100 dollars cash.” He likes the idea of a cruise. He's got \$100, so he walks in and up to the counter. He says I'd like to go on that cruise. He starts counting out his money. When he gets to one hundred dollars, he's whacked on the head and knocked out. He wakes up in an inner tube floating down a river. (Imagine – that's your cruise!) Anyway another guy with a knot on his head floats by and says, “*Hey, do they serve lunch on this cruise?*” He said, “*They didn't last year.*” I know it's a silly story, but it reminds us that we really have to make different choices if we want different outcomes. And that ties into this series Barry and I have started this new year titled: “*Deeper.*” To live more deeply spiritually is almost certainly going to require very distinct choices. The times we live in can easily keep us just kind of bobbing along from one disjointed event to another. Feelings, ideas, opportunities, and responsibilities come and go. We shrug our shoulders when something irritates us and move on to the next thing we need to do. We hear of something that sounds fun and get excited for a moment. Maybe, in the midst of all that, we wonder if this is all there is. Well, this whole series, “*Deeper,*” is intended to counter to that kind of surface-level-stumbling-along-in-life-way-of-life with something different – something deeper.

*The inspired prayer we're looking at this morning in **Ephesians 3** speaks to this idea of going deeper in your spiritual life when it tells us.*

I. THE DEEPER STRENGTH YOU NEED IN LIFE COMES FROM BEING DEEPLY ROOTED IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

Look at how the word “*love*” is used in **verses 17-19**: *I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,* ¹⁸ *may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,* ¹⁹ *and to*

know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. There's something God wants for us. What is it? It is the fullness of God. How does it come? It comes when your life is rooted in the knowledge of a love that surpasses knowledge.

Speaking of this passage, Alexander Maclaren pictures a little child laying his or her tiny palm up against the massive rock face of a cliff at the base of an enormous mountain. The child feels the enormity of it - knows something of it - is connecting to something he or she can never get their hands around, but the connection is real. God tells us that we can know the love of Christ that surpasses our full comprehension.

We need to know the love of Christ to go deeper, and we all need to go deeper. Years ago, we had a drake elm there that was especially beautiful, but then, during one of those seasons when we had multiple hurricanes, the tree was uprooted. We tried to save it. With a lot of bracing and tending, the tree held onto life, and once we straightened it up, you couldn't see the damage because it was under the surface. But the taproot was broken, and the entire root system was damaged, so it was never very healthy again. Sometimes, we look at people, or we look at our own lives, and we wonder what's the matter. We're hanging in there, but we are not thriving or growing. The problem isn't apparent on the surface of our lives. But no amount of pruning, bracing, and watering will cause a tree to thrive unless the roots are healthy. That's the way it is with us. Sometimes, when you struggle, maybe you think you just need to try harder or to learn more or change your circumstances when whatever else you do, the thing you need most, without which nothing else will matter, is to make sure the roots of your life are healthy and that you deeply rooted in the love of Christ. This is not simply a coping mechanism for those who are struggling with the stress of life. This is essential for all the disciples of Jesus.

It's important to notice that the prayer speaks not just of love in general but specifically the love of Christ.

II. THE LOVE OF CHRIST IS THE COSTLY LOVE THAT MAKES US RIGHT WITH GOD.

The scriptures had spoken about the love of God revealed in Christ earlier in **Ephesians 2**. **Ephesians 2:1-3** begins by describing how lost we were. He says we were dead in our trespasses and sins we were following the Prince of the power of the air (Satan) we were children of disobedience destined for wrath. Without Christ, we are lost. Really lost. Deeply lost! But notice this tremendous change that comes into that image in **verses 4-5**: *But God, being rich in mercy, (that's who he is) because of the great love with which he loved us, (that's why he saves us) ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses,(that's how he finds us) made us alive together with Christ—by grace, you have been saved—*. A little later, in **verses 8-9**, we read, *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

There's good reason for confidence but no cause for boasting ever - because salvation, the embrace of the love of God isn't something you achieve or deserve even on the best of days it is the grace of God given you in Christ because the God who is rich in mercy loves us.

Sometimes, we think of God primarily as very holy and demanding, and the way you have a relationship with him is by trying very hard to obey his laws and do the right things. When we think like that about our relationship with God, we may, at times, shed tears of frustration but we will rarely be overwhelmed with the sheer goodness and greatness of God. As holy as such a God is, his love seems unattainable – out of reach – it gives us little strength..

Then, sometimes, we are tempted to downplay the holiness of God and think of God as just some sort of soft love muffin in the sky who indiscriminately accepts everyone and tolerates everything all the time. But if you think like that about God, you tend to take his love for granted. It's a superficial view of the love of God that may offer a little sweetness but doesn't offer great strength.

What Scripture teaches us is different. The love of Christ is uniquely powerful precisely because it is a love that surpasses knowledge, which comes from a God who is infinitely holy. The

love of Christ imparts a deeper strength and changes your life to the degree that you take to heart the truth that God is so holy that he could not shrug off evil and sin as if it didn't matter, and yet he was so loving that he made the sacrifice to redeem us. God revealed the depth of his love in Jesus when Jesus died for our sins.

Now Christ the risen Savior says, *“Come to me, trust in me.”* If you've never done that, it's absolutely critical that you turn to him and trust in him. Do it today, here now, this morning. If you have received him, it's vital that you sink the roots of your life deeper into his love. **Ephesians 3:18** speaks of the width, length, height, and depth of the love of Christ. How wide is it? It is wide enough to include every person, every sin, and every kind of sinner. How long is it? It never ends. How high is the love of Christ? Think of the heights to which God promises to take us. How deep is the love of Christ? ***It is absolutely unfathomable.***

It is also profoundly fruitful. After Paul prays like this, he begins the next chapter of Ephesians by saying; *therefore, walk worthy of your calling in Christ.* The rest of Ephesians shows us that the love of Christ empowers change in every area of life. All kinds of issues are addressed: relationships, morality, emotions, substance abuse, time management, the words we speak, home and family life, our work ethic, and even spiritual warfare! All the positive changes in all the many dimensions and gritty, down-to-earth issues of life are the fruit of a life deep-rooted in the love of Christ.

III. HOW DO WE GET THIS DEEPER STRENGTH TO BECOME, IN PRACTICE, A SOURCE OF STRENGTH FOR US?

*Four images in the key words of **Ephesians 3:16-18** can help us.*

1st The first word is “rooted.” In this image, you are like a tree whose roots go deep down into the love of Christ to draw spiritual nourishment, strength, and stability. To be daily, intentionally drawing strength, by faith, from Christ's love is powerful. What we're doing this morning is part of it - coming together to worship - to sing and hear his God's word and take communion together. We need this in our daily life also. We need time to pull away, worship, read, go for a long walk,

pray, reflect, meditate on the word of God, take to heart the promises of God in Christ, and listen deeply.

2nd The second word is “established.” This brings out a different emphasis. It stresses that the love of Christ is not just a feeling that comforts you or even nourishes you. The word *established* tells us that the love of Christ is a foundation you can count on and build on. When feelings waver, you can fall back on this truth – this reality – the love of Christ. It is not just a comforting embrace. It is an absolutely immovable foundation that remains steady and reliable. Count on it.

3rd The third keyword is “grasp.” In **verse 18**, The ESV translates it “comprehend” but this word is often translated “grasp.” **Verse 18**, that you may *grasp the love of God that surpasses knowledge*. While it can mean to grasp or comprehend something intellectually it's a strong word that implies activity. This same word was even used of a wrestler grabbing an opponent and wrestling him to the ground. This word challenges us to actively fight for a life deeply rooted in Christ. To wrestle with the issues of life in a way that takes us deeper into him and His love. To find that deeper strength in Him. In the most dramatic moments of this earthly life and sometimes in the long, undramatic routines of everyday life, the most radical demand of Christian faith lies in summoning the courage to say, *I believe, and I choose, in faith, to go deeper into the ultimate source of my strength, the foundational truth of the reality of the love of Christ.*

4th The fourth word is “dwell.” **Verse 17** begins so that *Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*. When I was in college, I read a little book titled *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. He was a wounded soldier who became a spiritual mentor. He worked as a cook but learned to bring a believing awareness of God's presence into everything he did: cooking and washing dishes and talking with friends. His goal was to keep up a continual conscious connection with Christ - Christ dwelling in his heart by faith every day and in everything. That's really what this prayer is about: an active conscious faith in Christ practices the presence of Christ.

Conclusion

Saturday morning, a book on my bookshelf caught my eye - one I hadn't read for years. I pulled it off, and it fell open to the story of how the apostle John at the Last Supper, in **John 13**, described himself as the disciple *Jesus loved* and told how, at the Supper, he reclined next to Jesus and leaned back on his breast. We live in an age where people are very obsessed with their identity. At the end of the gospel of John, the apostle John referred to the memorable night of the Last Supper and affirmed his core identity with these words. **John 21:20**, *Peter turned and saw the disciple Jesus loved following - the one who leaned back against him at the Supper.* John was not implying that Jesus didn't love the other disciples. He knew he did. He was simply saying this was his core identity. He was making it personal, real, and powerful. Here's the thing that will help you go deeper: it's believing that the Christ of faith is no less present to us spiritually than the Christ of history was to the disciple who leaned on his breast.

The author writing this told the story of an old man dying of cancer. His daughter asked her pastor to come and pray with her father. When he arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside the bed. The pastor, looked at the empty chair pulled up right by the bed and said, "Oh, were you expecting me?" The old man said, "No, who are you?" And so he told him he was a pastor his daughter had asked to visit. So the old man said, *"Well, I'll tell you about the chair. I've never told anyone about this, not even my daughter. But for much of my life, I struggled to know how to pray. I never felt comfortable, much less close to God in prayer. But one day, about four years ago, my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just having a conversation with Christ. Here's what I suggest: sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and then don't think of it as sketchy because Jesus promised, I'll be with you always and then just speak to him and listen just like you're doing with me right now.'"* The old man said, *"So, pastor, I tried it, and I liked it so much that I sometimes do it for a long time every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter or anybody saw me talking to an empty chair, they'd probably think I had lost my mind."* The pastor loved the story. He read

Scripture and prayed with the man and then went home. Two nights later, the daughter called to tell the pastor her father had died that afternoon. He asked did he die in peace? She said, *“Yes when I left him around 2:00 pm on an errand; he called me over to the bedside, told me a corny joke, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back about an hour later, he had passed away. But there was something strange, in fact almost weird; apparently, just before he died, he leaned over and rested his head on this chair that was right beside his bed.”*

The author said that story reminded him of the apostle John leaning back on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper. He thought of how the Christ of faith is no less present to us spiritually than the Christ of history was, in his humanity, to the disciple who leaned on his breast. The apostle John himself in **John 14:16-18**, recorded how Jesus promised he wouldn't abandon us. He would come to us in the person of the Holy Spirit and live in us always. Christ is not just beside us but within us

If we want the difference of a deeper life in him, the strength and resilience that comes from being deeply rooted in him, we have to make the choices that lead to that. No matter where you're at today in your relationship to Christ, commit to go deeper. Make his love your source and your foundation. When the issues of life confront you fight the good fight of faith. Fight to go deeper to grasp more firmly the love of Christ. Then practice his presence. Don't worry whether you can do it perfectly with unbroken conscious connection and communion with him just see if you can't go deeper a little deeper every day.

Amen

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Almighty God, I am deeply thankful that you, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which you love us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, make us alive in Christ Jesus! I need your great love and mercy for my sins are many. So, I am turning to Christ, trusting not in myself or my works but in his dying to pay for my sins and rising from the dead as my Lord. Thank you for the grace that saves and keeps me. Amen

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

In light of Ephesians 3:16-19, I pray that according to the riches of your glory you may grant me to be strengthened with power through your Spirit in my inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in my heart through faith—that I, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that I may be filled with all the fullness of God.