



Praying for Awakening

Ephesians 3:14-21

Grace Church | 11.21.21

Today is our last week in the book of Ephesians for six weeks, as we take a break for the seasons of Advent and Christmas. We will return to Ephesians in the new year starting in Chapter 4, which is actually a fit place. That is because there is a clear break in the book of Ephesians between what is essentially part 1, chapters 1-3, and part 2, chapters 4-6. We can see this marked by the “therefore” in **4:1**. After this “therefore”, the apostle Paul will move onto several chapters of application and exhortation—encouraging the people of Ephesus and therefore us to respond rightly to the great truths expounded in chapters 1-3. Because we end this first half of Ephesians today, I wanted to provide a quick overview that will also serve as an introduction to our text in **3:14-21**, which wraps up the first part of Ephesians very neatly.

I am not usually prone to visual aids, but the themes of Ephesians we have explored so far may be summed up through an illustration. I’m borrowing some of this from the workbook *Restore* by Robert Cheong that some of our members are walking through. Ephesians is all about reconciliation. There are two realms—two dwellings, two realities. One is primarily physical, the other primary spiritual. We might call them heaven and earth. In Eden, heaven and earth were inseparably linked, as mankind walked unashamed with God face to face. When heaven meets earth, blessing abounds, because the Triune God is there: Father, Son, Spirit, in all his glory. But sin has caused a great barrier between heavenly realities and earthly realities. They intermingle through revelation—God revealing spiritual things through the natural world and his Word—but the truth is that sin has made us completely dead to the blessings of the Trinity. You can see that through our first illustration. Sin has caused suffering, and suffering has caused apathy to spiritual things. For the most part, we see dimly, as if we are surrounded by or underneath the clouds of what Paul calls “mystery”. We witness the things of earth—we experience them everyday. They were part of our story, part of our sin. Remember 2:1, Paul says “you were dead”. How do dead people ascend, rise again, bridge the gap between heaven and earth?



" THE HEAVENLY PLACES "

Glorious Inheritance Fullness of God Household of God Holy and Blameless Immeasurable Power/Authority Peace and Unity

CLOUDS OF MYSTERY
(Sin/Suffering/Apathy)

WHERE WE TEND
TO BELIEVE WE
DWELL

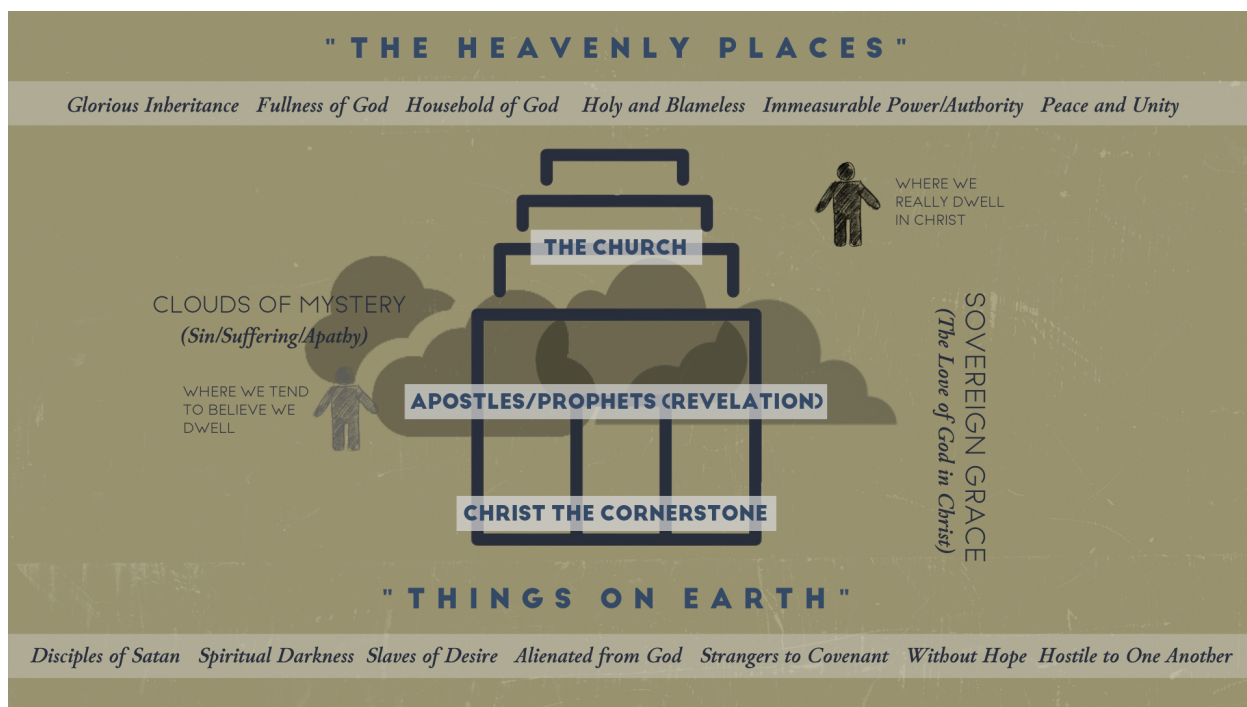


" THINGS ON EARTH "

Disciples of Satan Spiritual Darkness Slaves of Desire Alienated from God Strangers to Covenant Without Hope Hostile to One Another

This is where the gospel truth of Ephesians 1-3 comes in. We get the good stuff first, a description of Christ's work in 1:3-14. We are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **1:3**. And not only that, he is uniting *all things* in Christ, **verse 10**, things in heaven and on earth. In Christ, the church is together playing a part in the reconciliation of heaven and earth. How does this happen? The text tells us it happens through the building of a new temple, a temple where God can dwell. In the incarnation of Jesus, heaven invades earth in order to build this temple. At Babel, mankind tried to build to heaven and were scattered. In this new temple, God will build to heaven and unite all tribes and tongues. The foundation of this new temple is Christ the cornerstone, in his person and his work. The temple is built on, as **2:20** tells us, the foundation of the apostles and prophets, a truth that was reaffirmed last week as Paul shared he is a steward of the mystery of God, the revelation of the new temple God is building where both Jews and Gentiles have access to God by the Spirit. All of this is made possible not because of the work of man, but by the God, so that no one may boast. It's the love of God in Christ, the gospel of salvation, that bridges the gap between heaven and earth—reconciling all things in Christ, and reconciling all in Christ to our Triune God and to one another. The reality for those who repent of their sin and put their trust in Jesus Christ the Son of God alone then, is that in Christ we dwell with God—we are his temple, his building, his workmanship—and all the spiritual blessings of God's heavenly presence are ours. We are filled, as **3:19** says, with all the fullness of God. We no longer dwell in the clouds of mystery of sin, suffering, and apathy, but rather above the clouds with God himself—destined for an eternity with him. We are sons, heirs, members of the household of God with a glorious inheritance. This is the truth of Ephesians 1-3.





But here is the problem. Ephesians was not just written so that we could cognitively understand the glory of the gospel, this great reconciliation of heaven and earth in Christ together. That understanding is extremely significant, and it's so important it's what Paul prays for in **1:15-17**. We cannot be naive to this great mystery revealed, the gospel must reach our minds to the point of true understanding. Acknowledging these truths—that by the work of Jesus in his death and resurrection we have been made alive, cleared of the curse of sin, and seated with God in Christ—is part of what it means to be a Christian. It's the belief that is necessary, the truth that saves. We must know this truth—but there are two kinds of knowing. There is a knowing that is in the head, and a knowing that is in the heart.

There is a difference between having an opinion, that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness.”¹

The reality is that because of the sinful world we live in, and because our sanctification is not complete, we are prone, even while in Christ to have “rational judgements” of the gospel, but not really to *taste* the gospel. We walk through life—through pain, anxiety, stress, monotony, frustration—and while we know that all the blessings of God are ours in Christ, that all the walls have broken down, we don't *know* it. Paul knows this is true, which is why he prays again in **verses 14-21**. Look at **3:1**. The typical posture for a Jewish prayer was to stand in reverence. For Paul to bow shows the serious emotional state of his heart, it's a posture of intense humility before God.

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *A Divine and Supernatural Light*



He is praying first to the Father—the giver of life, from whom every family is named, including the new family God creates in Christ. What is the central thrust of his prayer? Because God’s glory is so rich, so unfathomable, he prays that God would grant us a spiritual strength, power coming from the Holy Spirit of God, to, **verse 18**, comprehend the length and height and depth of the love of God in Christ. See the trinitarian nature of this prayer. The Father would grant us by the Spirit to see the love of the Son. But what is important is that this comprehension is not in our head, but **verse 16**, in our inner being. This is what Paul means in **verse 17**, that he prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. It’s not as if Christ is not dwelling in the hearts of believers already, no here he is praying for Christians who are in Christ. He is asking that those who dwell with Christ in reality may really dwell with Christ experientially. That word dwell there means to make a home with, the implication is that Paul is praying that the Ephesians would be at home with Christ, that they would have a relational and intimate knowledge of Christ, that the risen and glorious Jesus might be to us more real and closer to our heart than anyone or anything else.

Sometimes God enlightens us to our lack of heart knowledge in a special way. Just this week I was talking to a member who recounted a specific time where he was praying for a friend who was clearly succumbing to the pulls of pride. As he prayed for his friend to have humility, he suddenly realized that the prayer was coming itself from a place of intense pride and self-righteousness, like the Pharisee thanking God that he was not like other sinners. What was going on? He knew the gospel, the truth of God. He knew it enough to recognize sin in another. He was not lacking saving faith, he was a Christian. But in that moment the Holy Spirit of God gave him a knowledge not just of the head but of the heart—a conviction of the truth of the gospel that he could taste. In this conviction, as he grasped the depths of his own sin and pride, the truth of God’s love for proud sinners exploded in his heart and emotions, stirring him to action. This experience was so powerful that our friend likened it to a similar feeling as conversion—a heart awakening to the gospel all over again. This significant awakening caused him to go on a hunt for reconciliation, to ask forgiveness for old hurts he caused, to seek more ways to humble. This is Paul’s prayer, for a continual dwelling of Christ in our hearts through faith.

This is not just nebulous emotion, it’s specific knowledge. We can hear that God is kind and slow to anger, forgiving us in Christ. But how often do our hearts leap at the prospect of the love of God? This is not a circumstance either, as if we just need the right environment to get an experience in the heart of the love of God. Note the prayer of Paul has no mention of the experiences of the Ephesians. He does not pray for their safety, for their provision, for their sickness. Good prayers surely, but he does not pray them because to comprehend in the heart the love of God is made possible by the Spirit, not the right circumstantial setting, not the dimming of the lights or the strumming of the guitar, not the money in the bank account or the stability of the political situation.

So how do we move from a head knowledge to a heart knowledge of the gospel? How do we move from understanding to experience, from spiritual knowledge to true spiritual strength? Simply put, we start with prayer. We come to God on our knees, asking for spiritual strength from the only one



who can truly give it to us. What do we pray for? This text gives us two things, which are summed up as being “filled with the fullness of God in **verse 19**:

1. To be rooted and grounded in God’s love.

There are potentially two ways that Paul is speaking of love: rooted and grounded, a botanical image and a architectural image. To be rooted in the love of God is far more than intellectual knowledge. It’s also far more than emotion. It involves both of those things, but it’s more. Pure emotion cannot be described as *rooted*, it’s fleeting. It comes in waves, there and then gone in an instant. But to be rooted in the love of God is to be like a gigantic tree, a sequoia of love. That you go down all the way to the roots, to the source, to the fountain, and you ask the question: “what drives me? What controls me? What compels me? Is it the love of God in Christ? Paul describes it like this in 2 Corinthians 5:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

That is what it means to be rooted in love—that is the prayer of the Christian. If you want to move from knowing God to *knowing* God in your inward being, the love of Christ must control you, compel you, it must be your root.

But the love of God in the gospel of Christ is also the grounding of the Christian prayer. If to be rooted in the love of God is to be controlled by it, to be given life by it, to be grounded on the love of God is to allow it to be the basis of every decision, thought, and action. Paul is praying that we would be *built* on the love of God. See, knowledge of God in the inner being changes our actions. Remember our example of the church member who found a renewed conviction in prayer? What did he do? He was compelled to action—all of a sudden, the love of God in Christ became so real to him that it became the basis for his action, the grounding of his life. It’s like Zaccheus, you remember him? He was forgiven much, showed the love of Christ, and he allowed it to ground his life to the point where we in turn went and sought forgiveness from all he had wronged, giving away his possessions for the sake of showcasing the love of Christ.

Listen closely here: there should be no distinction in the church between thinkers and feelers. Sure, we all have different personalities. But our prayer should be that the love of God in Christ is so deep down and so foundational for our life that we know it, experience it, and live in light of it. I’ve heard our church described as an intellectual church. Am I ashamed of that? No, as long as it doesn’t stop there. The gospel is a whole-being reality.

2. To have strength to comprehend the depths of God’s love.

Once we pray to be rooted and grounded in love, the example moves to comprehension of God’s love. That word “comprehend” is a bit tricky. Again, it’s not just mental ascent. It actually means to



seize, to overtake, to catch—it has the connotation of wrestling. This is another way of showing how important it is that the seemingly abstract blessings of the gospel make their way into the depths of our heart. We must be a church who prays that God would give us the strength to seize and wrestle his love into our hearts. This is not an overpowering of God, but rather an overpowering, an overtaking, a wrestling with our own hearts. It's a determined effort to pray ourselves hot, it's why we are praying for "strength". We need spiritual strength to look at our circumstances, our sin, our apathy, and to then take the truth of the gospel and wrestle it into our stubbornness. But that strength can only come from God! We talked about this in my group this week—I shared, along with others, times where we felt really frustrated, really angry, just a bad day. What do we need in those moments, where our emotions overtake us? We need spiritual strength. We need to learn to be entirely unsatisfied, entirely unable to move on from a moment of weakness, until we have effectively prayed for God's strength. Spurgeon says, "The next best thing to living in the light of the Lord's love is to be unhappy until we have it." Our hearts are fickle—God give us strength to wrestle them to comprehension!

Often we've called this "preaching to ourselves." It's the moment where we stop listening and start speaking, like David in Psalm 42 when he asks his soul "why are you so downcast within me?" And this is not something we do alone. We comprehend "with all the saints". We need each other to preach when our voices are too weak. But what is it that we preach to ourselves? It's the rest of **verse 18**. The breadth, length, height and depth of God's love.

We are very prone to abstract the love of God. We make it into a feeling, or a cold fact. You see this in skeptical Christians too. They say things like: "I believe God is love, but the Christian God doesn't seem to match that." Their definition of love is not grounded, it has no basis, it's just their perceived bias, presupposition, or opinion. And we do the same thing: we think we know love. But that is not Christian. He we are shown the love of God—it's broad, it's long, it's high, and it's deep, and where is it located? **Verse 1**, it's the love of Christ.

What truth do we preach to ourselves, how do we wrestle our heart down to comprehend God's love? We preach the truth of the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ is where the immeasurable love of God was measured. The ancient Father Gregory of Nyssa outlines for us:

The worship of the cross is viewed in relation to the fourfold figure of the cross. The heavenly order is symbolically paying it's devotion to the Lord in the upper part, the cosmic order in the middle part and even the infernal order in the lower part. ²

In the image of the cross you see four points. At the cross, Jesus showed the breadth or width of his love. Imagine the arms of Christ, opening wide at the cross: no matter your sin, no matter how wicked and evil and wide-reaching—this love is infinitely wider. You cannot out-sin the love of God in Christ. At the cross, Jesus showed the length of his love. What are the lengths you would go for that which you love? Christ went further. You were far off in your sin, but his love reaches to the

² Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*



lengths of eternity, casting your sin by the blood of the cross as far as the east is from the west. In the middle frame of the cross we see the love of God stretching out across all time and space, all the comic world and realities, united all things in him, bringing in people with all kinds of sins and all kinds of identities. There is no limit to the length and breadth of God's love, there is no beginning and no end—it reaches forever and will forever keep you.

At the cross, Jesus showed the height of his love. He reached up to God, to the very heights of heaven, and was offered as a pleasing aroma to God. The cross is the great reconciliation of heaven and earth—Christ loved you so much that he bridged the heights for you. And his love is so deep that it went all the way down to death—Jesus Christ took on sin itself at the cross, and descended to Hell itself to proclaim his great love. There is no depth he would not go to showcase his love for sinners.

This is what we pray, on our knees, with all our might, to grasp. This is our meditation, our very life. The love of God in Christ. Our prayer is continually this: that we would be filled with all the fullness of God. And that prayer is only answered in the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Without him, without bending your knee to him, there is no fulness of God. There is no indwelling of the Spirit. Today can be the day of fullness. How do I know? Because we don't pray to an ambivalent God. We pray to a God who answers prayer. Look at **verse 20-21**, this great benediction.

God loves to answer prayer, especially when that prayer is that he would take us further up and further into a true knowledge of his love in Christ by the Spirit. And he loves to answer that prayer more abundantly than we can even ask or dream or think. He is doing it now, he is at work within us, showcasing his glory in the church. And he will keep drawing us up into his love forever. There is no end to this. In the new heavens and the new earth you will not be bored with God. You will not fully comprehend him. But your whole being, your whole mind and heart, freed from sin forever, will be fully alive to the infinitely deep well of his glorious love. The total reconciliation of heaven and earth: that is what is coming, and we can pray for it now. Amen.

