

Introduction

There is something about a significant tragedy or natural disaster that brings people together. You may recall, for example, the devastating earthquake that shook West Michigan back in 2015. I was in the Conference Room and I swore a *very* large truck rolled by—but no! It was an earthquake that quickly galvanized my fellow citizens together to recover from the, uh, disaster.

West Michigan residents banded together to rebuild what had been destroyed. We are blessed to live in an area with few natural disasters. We can have mosquitoes the size of blue jays, and we can have late winter / early spring snow storms, but it is rare that we have true disasters.

Anyone remember what you were doing seven months ago? Many of us were without power for a few days as seven tornadoes touchdown across West Michigan, causing a fair amount of tree damage. These falling limbs and trees tore down power lines and damaged houses. For weeks you could walk through my neighborhood and see fallen limbs and trees everywhere as workers were still struggling to clean it all up.

Dawnae and I were amazed to see so many trees that had stood for decades simply pushed over with massive root systems just pulled up. Many of these trees were so large you couldn't wrap your arms around them. These storms traveled across the state. My kids got me Boston Celtics tickets for Christmas for Friday's game against the Pistons and so Trey and I went and on the way saw the damage to entire copses of trees along I-96. It was as if a giant simply reached down and snapped them in half or pulled them up like a five-year-old pulling on a dandelion.

A tree's security and on-going permanence depends on a number of factors such as the fertility of the soil and the availability of water. The more extensive a tree's roots are, the more healthy and secure that tree will be. Not only must a tree's root system support the weight of the tree and its crown filled with leaves, it must also enable the tree to stand firm against the wind that pushes so strongly against it. This is what made the storm so very damaging: the wind simply overpowered root systems that had been growing for decades.

People are similar to trees. We must be planted close to nutrients and good water, so to speak. This enables our roots to grow deep and to give us the necessary security to withstand whatever this life brings. If our roots are tapped into poor soil—the wrong things—we won't be able to withstand much pressure at all. Only when our roots are firmly embedded in the soil of the gospel can we hope to stand firm. To stand, however, we must first sit.

This has been Paul's point for the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians. I want to remind us that he has not issued a single command in these first three chapters. That will come in the next chapter. Any obedience to the Lord must come out of the truth of the gospel. It must be rooted entirely in who Jesus is and what he has done or it will be doomed to fail. I don't mean you won't be able to obey the Lord in an external way; I mean your outward obedience will not actually honor the Lord. Only when we first sit in

the gospel can we walk for the Lord and then stand against whatever forces array against us. We're in Ephesians 3.

Eph 3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so 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.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:14–21

For This Reason

In verse 14 Paul picks up his thought from verse 1. There he began to pray for the Ephesians but went on a lengthy digression to explain further “the mystery of Christ” and his role in that mystery, which is God’s eternal purpose in Christ to unite all things together in Christ—including his diverse peoples. Gentiles—including the Ephesians—are fellow heirs with the saints of God and are members of the same household. He returns to his prayer in verse 14.

For this reason, he writes. That is, because God’s eternal purpose in Christ has been to save his diverse people from every tribe and language and people and nation and unite them *in one body*, Paul bows his knees before the Father. Bowing the knee may be literal, but it’s also metaphorical. His posture during prayer is one of humble reverence and while he just wrote about the boldness we have to speak directly to God in verse 12, this does not mean we come to God flippantly and without reverence. Boldness here refers to the level of access we are granted.

Paul specifically prays to the Father. The word “father” conjures up all sorts of notions in our minds, for we all have different experiences of human fathers. For many, it is a largely positive experience, though for many others it is either a largely negative or non-existent experience. The trouble is we fail to recognize that our experience of God as Father is meant to illustrate what human fathers ought to be like, rather than beginning with human fathers and transferring those experiences onto God.

When Paul calls God “Father”, he doesn’t mean father in the sense of maleness, for God the Father is neither male nor female. The term “Father” is meant to indicate God as the source or the origin of us all. “Father” is meant as the source of love and protection and security. If this is not your experience with a human father, it is the human father who is lacking and we must not take those human attributes and place them on God.

We miss a connection in English. The words for “Father” and “family” are directly related to each other in Greek: *πατήρ* and *πατριά*. By seeing this connection we see Paul’s point: every family in heaven and on earth is “named” by God the Father. That is, God is the source or the origin of all creatures, and especially of humans. With this one statement

Paul destroys any basis for racism whatsoever. The reason for unity in Christ is God is the Father of us all, which means we are all his children. It doesn't make sense to hate your brother or sister for you have the same Father.

Before getting into the content of his prayer, Paul again reminds the Ephesians of the gospel he has just explained more fully: in Christ God is reconciling all things to himself, and therefore his people to each other. There is no distinction between people groups in the church of God. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, neither young nor old, neither rich nor poor, neither Republican nor Democrat. In Christ we all have God as our Father which puts us in the same family.

Paul is further alluding back to his clarifying comment that God is the creator of all things. The act of naming every family indicates his sovereign authority, for in the Jewish mind naming indicates this authority. This is also why he bows his knee before the Father. Paul is referring to Isaiah's declaration:

Is 45:22 "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. ²³ By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'"

Isaiah 45:22-23

This finds its fullest expression in Christ, for God has given him the name that is above every name and one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. This is why we pray to God and to no one else, for only he can hear us and answer us.

According to His Riches

After introducing his prayer Paul gets to the substance of his prayer for the Ephesians in verse 16. The word "that" indicates purpose or the aim in the prayer. Notice closely what he says. He prays for them with this goal in mind, that God would grant them strength *according to* the riches of his glory. Did you catch that? Paul does not pray that God would grant them strength *out of* his riches, but *according to* his riches.

In prayer Paul is calling on God to act according to his nature, and part of his nature is his profound generosity. God does not give out of his mercy, but according to his mercy. He does not supply materially out of his great wealth but according to his great wealth. He does not give grace out of his limitless supply but according to his limitless supply.

As of March 1 Elon Musk is once again the world's richest man with a net worth of \$215,000,000,000. Elon Musk could make every single resident of Grand Rapids a millionaire—that's 200,000 people—and he would still be worth fifteen-billion dollars. He has *a lot of* money.

If Elon gave a million dollars to a charity, by nearly any measure, that's an incredible donation! When compared to his actual wealth, however, it's not all that great. It would be akin to me finding loose change under my couch cushion and giving that. He could give that charity the same gift two-hundred thousand times, and still be incredibly wealthy—so wealthy that giving away \$200,000,000,000 wouldn't change his lifestyle.

When God gives he does not give his loose change. He gives *according to* his riches. This isn't some prosperity gospel. I'm not saying God is going to make you rich or give you perfect health. I'm saying that God's gifts are commensurate with his nature. Paul is specifically praying that God would grant the Ephesians to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in their inner being.

This strengthening is according to the riches of his glory. Listen carefully: there is no amount of strength you need God is not willing to give. The amount of strength you need is nothing compared to the amount of strength he has to give, and there is no limit to his willingness to give! Notice also this strengthening is in your *inner being*. Paul doesn't mean God will enable you to squat 400 pounds. In your inner being God will give you all the strength you need.

This gift according to the riches of his glory is the very promise of the new covenant. God promises to transform his people from the inside out. Your outer self may waste away, but your inner being will not. He says this to the Corinthians:

2 Cor 4:16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

2 Corinthians 4:16

Barring his return, each one of us will grow old and our bodies will become frail and they will waste away. Our salvation, however, is eternal life, and the inner self, the inner being, is being renewed day by day. This is the work of God in Christ *through his Spirit*. This is the Spirit's work in us. In Romans 12 Paul tells us to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind". In Titus he says God saves us "by the washing of regeneration and the *renewal* of the Holy Spirit" and—get this!—he says the Spirit was "poured out on us *richly* through Jesus Christ our Savior".

He tells us the purpose of this strengthening in verse 17: we are to be strengthened "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith". He's not saying Christ does not currently dwell in their hearts so he prays Christ will one day. Christ does dwell in their hearts. He's praying they will be strengthened that Christ may continue to dwell in their hearts through faith. Paul wants them to persevere in their faith and their perseverance is only possible through the strength of God's power of which there is no amount he will not give.

Strength to Comprehend

Paul continues his prayer. As we've seen throughout this letter Paul loves to pile up his words and write really complex sentences. His prayer is that the Ephesians would be strengthened by God according to the riches of his glory through his Spirit, causing Christ to continue dwelling in them for a purpose. For ease of translation the same "so that" we saw in verse 16 is moved into verse 17 but it properly belongs in verse 18. This limitless power to strengthen them in their inner being is for this purpose: that as Christ continues to dwell in their hearts they may have the *strength* to comprehend with all the saints.

Did you catch Paul's idea of community here? He doesn't pray they will comprehend *as individuals* but *with all the saints*. Paul is writing to a local church and those in the local church can only really and truly follow Christ *together*. The idea of a follower of Jesus

remaining uncommitted to a local church *long term* was incomprehensible to Paul. Obviously Paul himself had changed home churches. He was in the church in Damascus for a while, then one in Arabia, another in Tarsus, and finally in Antioch, but Paul always committed to a local church.

The reason for this commitment is Paul was rooted and grounded in love, as he puts it in verse 17. He prays for this same rootedness for the Ephesians. This will only come about by comprehending the “breadth and length and height and depth”. Paul is referring to the love he prays will cause them to be rooted and grounded. He wants them to comprehend the enormity of what it means to be fellow heirs of Christ, members of the same household of God. He wants them to comprehend with all of God’s people the wonder of what it means to be God’s people.

This is a shared corporate knowledge. Again, Paul is not writing to an individual believer about life with just him or with just her and Jesus. They must comprehend *with all the saints* the wonder of being—together—God’s people. Paul pushes this further in verse 19: “and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”.

How can you know what is beyond your ability to know? Paul has used similar concepts already. In verse 8 he speaks of “the unsearchable riches of Christ”. As one searches them, one discovers they are unsearchable because there is no end to the search! You can never search the entirety of the riches of Christ for there is no end to them. Paul prays for the Ephesians to know the love of Christ even as the love of Christ is beyond knowledge. God’s love to us in Christ is infinite; we are finite. Even as we can *know* this love, we cannot fathom the fullness of it.

Follow Paul’s prayer. He prays they will be strengthened in order that Christ would continue to dwell in them, in order that they may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints the enormity of what it means to be loved by Christ, in order that they “may be filled with all the fullness of God”. What does he mean to be filled with all the fullness of God? What is the fullness of God?

Col 1:19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:19–20

He later says this:

Col 2:9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Colossians 2:9–10

The Fullness of God

Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians comes down to this: he prays for their lives to be rooted and centered entirely in who Jesus is and what he has done. He wants them to live a gospel-centered life, for God’s fullness is in Jesus. As Paul draws this first half of his letter to a close, he’s simply pointing to the entirety of the gospel of Jesus he has outlined in these first three chapters.

He began the letter by declaring the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us *in Christ*. This blessing is seen in him choosing us before the foundation of the world *in Christ*. In love God predestined us for adoption as sons *through Christ*. He has blessed us *in Christ*. He has lavished on us the riches of his grace *in Christ*. We have obtained an inheritance *in Christ*. We were sealed by the Holy Spirit *in Christ*. Listen, I'm only halfway through the first chapter!

Throughout this letter Paul has been showing us the fullness of God. The Father initiated the work of salvation and determined the means of salvation. The Holy Spirit applies that salvation and works in the lives of God's people to bring about the fullness of that salvation. The Son purchased that salvation and demonstrates the love of God as the very fullness of God. God in Trinity works to save his people.

When Paul prays that they be filled with the fullness of God he means for them to be filled *with Christ*. It is this fullness, the length and breadth and height and length, that causes God's people to be rooted and grounded in love. His prayer is for them to be able to comprehend that which is incomprehensible: the love of God to us in Christ. You cannot truly comprehend it—you can merely experience it. Paul prays for them to grasp more and more of the love of Christ.

Paul knows grasping this love is only possible in community. This is why he prays this for the entire church. This is why he prays that they—the whole church—may be filled with the fullness of God. We must keep in mind the context of this. He's been writing of the unity that is theirs in Christ. Though the church is comprised of a diverse people, they are one in Christ, and being one in Christ they demonstrate the goodness of God.

Here's the thing: when Paul tells them of their unity in the midst of diversity, he's actually pointing them away from themselves and toward Christ. Their diversity, their individual and even group identities, is what sets them apart from each other. They really were Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. They really were rich and poor, young and old. By reminding them of their unity in the midst of these differences, they were pointed away from themselves and toward Christ. You cannot be focused on Christ and focused on self. You will either be full of Christ or you will be full of yourself.

We tend to want to hold to what we think gives us meaning and value, and that often comes from our particular tribe, whether that tribe is made of those in our particular political party or our social class or our educational background. Our tribe may simply be those who look just like us. Our "tribe" may even be just ourselves, for who could measure up to the wonder of who *I am*, such that he or she could be allowed to join my army of one?

When Paul tells them in chapter 2 that Christ has torn down the dividing wall of hostility, he means the very thing that separates us into tribes in the first place. Paul didn't say Jesus opened a gate in the dividing wall of hostility. He didn't say Jesus gave us the means for climbing over the dividing wall of hostility. Jesus didn't provide a way around it. Jesus tore down this dividing wall and created one new man out of two groups that are hostile toward each other. Outside of the church Jew and Gentile were still in open hostility. In Christ, however, ethnic identity and social class and cultural preferences are outmatched by unity together *in Christ*.

The Ephesians, like every single local church, ever, struggled to see their unity. Paul knows they must find their identity rooted entirely in Christ. As Paul prays, they must know the love of Christ and be filled with the fullness of God. Our default mode is to point

to ourselves, to see in us what we want others to see. We want to point to our status or to our accomplishments or to our zeal for following the Lord. We want to stand out, but either we will stand out or Christ will. We can't both be glorious.

Application

This series in Ephesians is our 29th sermon series as a church. I generally preach through whole books of the Bible. This prevents hobby horses in preaching and forces me to preach on topics I would never *choose* to preach about. There have been a number of times on a Monday morning that I've opened my Bible and thought, "Oh. *That's* the next text?!" We do have topical series, however. These tend to be significantly shorter and tend to be during the summer. Out of the 29 sermon series, fifteen have been topical. That's more than half—sort of. Because these series tend to be significantly shorter, only about fifteen-percent of our sermons are topical, which means about 85% are through a book of the Bible.

Every one of those topical series has been about the church in some way, whether what the church believes or about spiritual gifts in the church or about life in the church. I believe this is necessary because we need to see what God thinks of his church. Too often we approach the church from our own perspective that has been formed by prior experiences, whether good or bad. We have been taught what the church is and what the church should do and what the church should be about and how the church should be organized. Rarely do we—and I mean "we" very broadly—concern ourselves with what God's view of his church is.

Just like we shouldn't take our experience of human fathers and place that understanding on God, so we shouldn't take our experience of church and place that understanding on the church that Jesus is building. Far too many of us have been "discipled" into thinking of "church" in a particular way. I am quite sure that if Paul could speak English and could time-travel to the 21st century, he wouldn't recognize what many assemblies are doing—and I don't mean just on Sunday mornings.

The reason I preach about the church so frequently is because I have so much material available to do so. Paul found it necessary to frequently and consistently teach the churches he himself planted about what it means to be the church. Over and over again we see that it starts and ends with this: the gospel of Jesus. When he wrote to the Corinthians he told them his basic approach to ministry:

¹ Cor 2:1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2

Paul doesn't mean the only thing he ever talked about was the crucifixion of Jesus. Obviously not every sermon was about the death of Christ. I have a standing rule with Ray and Erik about our song of response each week. It's a simple rule and it keeps me grounded: if ever I preach a sermon for which the song "All I Have Is Christ" would not be an appropriate response, I would have failed in my primary responsibility. This is what Paul

means. He preached and taught and served the church in such a way that he gave them the gospel of Jesus.

Just read through any of Paul's letters and you will see this on display. When they need wisdom he points them to Christ. When they need encouragement he points them to Christ. When they need correction he points them to Christ. When they need exhortation he points them to Christ. When they need understanding he points them to Christ. When they need endurance he points them to Christ. When they need hope he points them to Christ. When they need comfort he points them to Christ.

He doesn't point them to Christ as a panacea, a magic pill that automatically takes their troubles away. Not at all! He points them to Christ for only by being filled with Christ can they endure. Only by being filled with Christ can they be faithful. Only by being filled with Christ can they live for and honor the Lord.

This is what Paul has been doing in the first half of this letter. The church in Ephesus—*New City*—must be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. We must cling to the gospel of Jesus. We must sit in this truth of who Jesus is and what he has done. Here's how Watchman Nee put it:

Sitting is an attitude of rest. Something has been finished, work stops and we sit. It is paradoxical but true, that we only advance in the Christian life as we learn first of all to sit down.

...

What does it mean to really sit down? ...In walking or standing we expend a great deal of energy, but when we are seated, we relax at once, because the strain no longer falls on muscles and nerves, but upon something outside ourselves. So also in the spiritual realm, to sit down is simply to rest our entire weight—our load, ourselves, our future, everything—upon the Lord. We let him bear the responsibility and cease to carry it ourselves.

Watchman Nee, "Sit, Walk, Stand"

These first three chapters of Ephesians have called us to sit, to rest, to allow the Lord to fill us with the knowledge of him and his gospel. As we sit in this truth of Jesus we are filled with the fullness of God. The love of Christ that surpasses knowledge gives us the strength to face whatever comes our way. The outcome of all this is we will praise him, even in the midst of trials. This is why Paul ends this first half the way he does: in praise and worship.

To him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. The right response to who Jesus is and to what he has done is worship. In a world filled with magic and spells that could harm and hostile evil spiritual forces that seek to destroy, Paul points the Ephesians to the one whose power is far above all other rulers and authorities.

Paul ends this section by once again emphasizing that we cannot fully grasp how great God's love to us in Christ is. All you and I can do is sit in this truth and know Christ.