

The Love of Christ

Ephesians 3:17b-21

July 24, 2016

Last week, we looked at the 1st ½ of Paul's prayer for the Ephesian believers in Ephesians 3:14-17a. We talked about Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith. And we learned about being strengthened with power in our inner being. I was thinking about this idea of inner strength as I saw the incredible impact of this week's storms. Some of the trees were actually snapped off (pic) while others bent but did not break. It illustrates what we learned last week about inner strength. The tallest tree in our yard may seem strong and healthy, but it's inner strength or weakness is revealed by the storms of life. Likewise, our Christian faith is not about how we look on the outside but rather by how we are strengthened in our inner being by the Living Christ.



Today, we'll look at the 2nd ½ of Paul's prayer. He continues to talk about strength and power. But this time it's a different kind of power. It's about the power to understand, to grasp something with our minds, specifically the love of Christ.

A believers starting point is being rooted and established in love. Paul begins in Eph. 3:17b, "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love." This is the foundation of the Christian faith. "Rooted" and "established" are both Perfect Passive Participles. ¹ The perfect tense refers to an action that was completed in the past but has present ramifications. Therefore, when we first came to salvation, God rooted/established us in His love. That past action brings our present situation of being people who continue to be rooted/established in Christ's love.^{2 3}

The starting point of our relationship with God was when He took action in our personal salvation and individually established each one of us in His love. God rooted us in His love, so that we would have a firm foundation on which to live out our faith.

"Rooted" and "established" are also in the passive tense which indicates that God did the work, not us. It's not so much about me rooting myself in His love, but rather me understanding that He has rooted me in it; planted my roots in His love. It is from this foundation that my relationship with Him grows and develops into the future. This is not really any different than what we try to do for our own children. We try to give them a strong foundation of security and love. We want their roots in our family tree to be strong. No matter what else they may learn from us, we want them to know that their parents love them.

Apart from that foundation, life gets awfully scary and uncertain for us as human beings. So, for some of us, who did not get that rooting and foundation from our earthly parents, the love of Christ becomes all the more needed and attractive in our lives. You are loved by your Heavenly Father. Believers in Christ need to understand that God planted our roots in His love, so that, we could live out our present-day lives with strength and joy.

Being rooted is a biological term. Again, with this week's storm fresh in our minds, we can't help but consider how we sometimes become uprooted. According to the Bemidji Pioneer, winds blew to over 100 mph. This was enough to set off the storm siren. It is such a sobering experience if we come to realize that we've been rooting our lives in something less than Christ's love. The strongest root is only as good as the soil in which it grows. The love of Christ not only nourishes the one planted in it but also holds him/her fast and establishes them in good, strong soil.

Being established is about being grounded on a strong foundation.⁴ It makes me think of a good old tug of war. (pic) A tug of war requires good footing on a good foundation. That's why it's more fun to watch a tug of war in the mud!



¹ The perfect tense "indicates a completed action which has consequences in the present." ("present from the point of view of the speaker") See William B. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, Zondervan 1999, p. 272.

² In fact, even before our salvation, Eph. 1:4-5 says, "...in love he predestined us for adoption to sonship..."

³ In fact, this past action by God, was originally prompted by His great love for us. Eph. 2:4-5 teaches us, "But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions..."

⁴ Note the ESV "grounded in love."

But in life's "tug-of-wars," slipping around in the mud is unsettling at best; often it's frightening and dangerous. It's easy for us to imagine in this tug of war that we are on one side of the rope and all of our fears and worries are on the other side tugging away at us. Depression and sadness can sometimes dig in their heels and really try to pull you down. If we are tugging on our end of the rope and we have our feet on anything less than the foundation of Christ...well, we don't have a prayer of winning.

Christ's love is not designed like slippery mud. It's a solid rock on which we can stand; the one sure and strong foundation for our lives. All others will fail.⁵ Col. 2:6-7 urges us, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."

Out of this foundation of love, Paul prays for power to grasp the dimensions of the love of Christ. In Ephesians 3:18 Paul asks that they, "may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." Paul prays for power, AGAIN!⁶ But this time, not for power in their inner being, but power to understand.⁷ The very fact that Paul prays for this kind of power "implies that divine enabling is essential."⁸ The phrase "may have power" is a subjunctive, so this is what Paul wants for them. It's his prayer wish for what they don't yet have.

And this power is to help them grasp. What an interesting word. It brings up connotations in the English of something elusive, something that might get away from us. And perhaps it is. The brokenness of sin and shame can cause us to doubt the love of Christ. To wonder if it's really true or, at least, really true for us or is it just for everyone else...?

The phrase, "to grasp"⁹ is actually talking about processing information so that we can better understand something.¹⁰ So, it is not talking about grabbing something with our hands that is trying to slip through our fingers. Rather, it's talking about coming to a fuller understanding of an important truth that might be currently eluding us. Paul's prayer, for power to grasp the love of Christ, reveals that apparently, it's not so easy for us to understand as people. And that's why Paul knows that he needs to pray.

The range of meaning for "to grasp" can even include "to make something one's own." And it carries the idea of internalizing this truth. In fact, "to grasp" (καταλαμβάνω), was used "to describe 'a fight against a strong opponent.'"¹¹ So if you find yourself in a struggle to internalize the truth of Christ's love, don't be surprised. In our brokenness and sin, it can be somewhat confusing and difficult. Don't become overly discouraged. Rather, pray. Pray as Paul prays: for power, the power to grasp a clearer understanding of the love of Christ!

Paul tells us that the love of Christ is vast; it's wide, long, high, and deep! We can't measure it with a mere ruler, yard stick, or tape measure. Immense dimensions like this require more. There are no set ends or boundaries for us to measure from. It's like trying to measure the distance between the east and the west. "Just keep going. When you arrive all the way to the end of West, give me a call and we can measure from here to there." You see, it's impossible and we'd find ourselves continually circling the planet. This east/west idea brings to mind Ps. 103:10-12, "he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

There are SO MANY verses in Scripture that try to teach us about God's love. Jn. 3:16 tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not

⁵ See Pr. 24:10

⁶ See also Eph. 1:19, 3:7, 3:16, 6:10

⁷ Power ἐξισχύω = to be fully capable of experiencing something, to be able or strong enough. See Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 350). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 1999, p. 261.

⁹ (καταλαμβάνω, καταλαβέσθαι)

¹⁰ See Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 519). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹¹ See O'Brien p. 261 where he quotes Arnold in footnote #169.

perish but have eternal life.” God loves us SO MUCH! But still, we struggle to grasp it. And this is why Paul PRAYS.

In fact, as Paul continues his prayer, he teaches us even further how hard it is to know the love of Christ. In Eph. 3:19a he prays, “and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.” Now that’s an oxymoron, “to know what surpasses knowing.” Therefore, prayer is required in order to know this love that surpasses knowledge. When I was first reading through this text, I thought “know” must mean “know by experience.” But as I studied the definition for “know,” it actually indicates here to “know it in your head.” Know = “to grasp the significance or meaning of something, to understand or comprehend.”¹²

And so Paul is still driving at this same idea; he wants us to get it through our thick skulls. But it’s not about us being unintelligent. It’s a prayer for supernatural revelation like he prayed back in Ephesians 1:17, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.”

Paul assumes that they don’t know this love well enough. “This is not a petition that they may love Christ more...rather, [it’s a petition] that they might understand Christ’s love for them.”¹³ And what he means is that he wants them to keep growing in their knowledge of Christ’s love. It’s something that we’ve been learning since we were very little. Can you remember the last time you sang, “Jesus loves me?” In solidarity with Paul’s prayer request, will you sing it now?

“Jesus loves me this I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little ones to Him belong
They are weak but He is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves ME!
The Bible tells me so.”

The entire prayer, in vv. 14-19, is summarized in the fullness of God.¹⁴
Paul has prayed:

1. For power in their inner being. (which we talked about last week)
2. For power to grasp the love of Christ. (which has been our focus today)

These are summed up in the fullness of God: the fullness of God is about spiritual power. It’s about getting to a place of spiritual maturity. This is a place where we experience God’s power and love in our daily lives; where it is demonstrated on a regular basis by the way we live out our faith. When Paul prays, he prays BIG. He isn’t demanding from God. I’m sure his prayer is with an attitude of “thy will be done.” But he prays BIG!

But, has he gotten carried away? In chapter 1, he praised God for giving us so many spiritual blessings. In chapter 2, he celebrated God’s kind and gracious gift of salvation. In chapter 3, he told us how God gave Gentiles an inheritance with Israel. NOW Paul has the audacity to ask for more? For power in their inner being. For power to grasp the full meaning of the love of Christ. AND NOW, in Eph. 3:19b he prays, “that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Who does Paul think he’s talking to? The answer is in the closing doxology. This prayer leads to a doxology for “Him who is able.” In Ephesians 3:20 Paul is talking, “...to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” When we pray, this is who we are talking to. Paul’s boldness in prayer challenges us to consider: Are we praying too small? Our God is so BIG! His desire for us is spiritual FULLNESS!

Ephesians 3:20 states, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” God is able to do all we ask for in prayer. God is able to do all we ask for or imagine in prayer. God is able to do even more than all we could

¹² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 200). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹³ O’Brien p. 264.

¹⁴ O’Brien p. 253.

ask for or imagine. Therefore, if you take all of the things that you and I could possibly ask for in prayer or even imagine to ask for, God is able to do even more than that. In fact, He can do so much more than that, we can't even measure it! I guess Paul's prayer isn't so audacious after all!

vv. 20-21 are a fitting close to the prayer of vv.14-19 but they are also a shift in Paul's letter from what we consider more theological concepts in chapters 1-3 to what will become more practical action items in chapters 4-6. Chapters 4-6 will get intensely personal and practical. They include a specific call to things like unity/humility/gentleness/patience. They also include a call to Christian living with subjects like anger, stealing, and unwholesome talk as well as sexual immorality, marriage, and parenting.

All that has already happened in chapters 1-3 was made possible by God's power at work in His people. AND, all that is coming in chapters 4-6 will be made possible by that same power! So Paul has prepared us well for the challenges of Christian Living that he is about to address in the 2nd ½ of his letter to the Ephesians. Apart from the fullness of spiritual maturity, we will have little hope of living out the truths of chapters 4-6. But, strengthened in our inner being and rooted in the love of Christ, we can have every confidence of living out an abundant Christian life. We can do all of this according to His power that's at work inside of us.

In Ephesians 3:21 Paul ends the chapter by ascribing praise to God: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." Anything that God has done in previous generations, He is able to do in our generation today. And He will continue to be able in the generations to come. No matter how many storms come. No matter who our next youth pastor is for the next generation of believers at Bemidji EFree. No matter what happens with future generations in terms of our economy or politics or global terrorism. Throughout all generations, God's power will be at work in His people!

Ending v. 21 with an "amen" was Paul's invitation to the Ephesian believers to voice their agreement with all that he's taught so far. Today, it is also an invitation to Bemidji believers. So let's join in with our brothers and sisters in Christ from Ephesus. Let's add our own "amen," as we agree together: To God be the glory! Amen?

Read this doxology out loud and voice your agreement and solidarity:
"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen."

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