

“The Love of Christ”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 3:14-21; Isaiah 40:25-31

Like the majority of his letters, Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians is divided into two parts. In the first half of this epistle (chapters 1-3), the Apostle sets out a number of important doctrinal issues before making specific applications of these same doctrines to the Christian life in the second half (chapters 4-6). As we conclude the first half of this letter, Paul brings us back to where he began in the first chapter—God’s eternal decree to save sinners “in Christ.” But Paul is so moved by the very thought of how God’s eternal plan has played out on the stage of human history, as well as in the circumstances of his own life, that he wraps up the doctrinal section with a heart-felt prayer of thanksgiving for the glorious inheritance which is ours “in Christ.” Paul wants his readers to both know and experience the glorious reality of the love of Christ.

As we continue our series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we now come to the end of chapter three, which is also the conclusion of the first half of this letter. Here at the end of the third chapter we will find that Paul is quite moved by the very thought of all that God has done in providing for the salvation of his people. In the first three chapters of this letter, the Apostle to the Gentiles has laid out for us in unmistakable clarity God’s plan for those of us Gentiles who were formerly strangers and aliens, without hope, and without God in the world. Paul has told us how we relate to God’s old covenant people (the Jews), and how in Christ, God has done the impossible—he has taken those divided by race, diet, and culture, and made them one people. God has done all of this, Paul says, through the shed blood of Jesus, who, in his death has reconciled God to us, us to God, and Jew to Gentile.

In verses 14-21 of Ephesians 3, Paul wraps up this doctrinal section with an impassioned prayer that everything he’s just told us about the grace of God, the revelation of the mystery of Christ, as well as God’s purpose for Jew and Gentile, would be fully realized in the lives of all those reading (or hearing) this epistle. As an English biblical scholar once put it, “who has not read and re-read the closing verses of the third chapter of the Ephesians with the feeling of one permitted to look through the parted curtains into the holiest place of the Christian life.”¹ This prayer is but one reason why so many of our theological forbears, like John Calvin, identify Ephesians as their favorite book of the Bible.

But in order to understand what it is exactly that Paul is praying for, and what specific blessings he desires us to experience, we need go back to that point where Paul began (Ephesians 1:3-14), and where he returns in Ephesians 3:11. Paul clearly emphasizes that everything he has stated about the mystery of Christ and the reconciliation of God’s people “*was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” God’s eternal plan has been fully realized in the person and work of Christ.

In light of Paul’s strong assertions about the sovereignty of God, it is sad that so many professing Christians find the doctrine of election and predestination so difficult and problematic that they simply won’t talk about it. Others speak openly of God having a plan for everything. But when you press them as to what they mean by this, it is clear that God’s supposed plan does not entail either predestination (God determining whom he will save and how he will save them) or providence (God foreordaining

¹ H. G. C. Moule, *Veni Creator* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 228,

whatsoever come to pass). At the end of the day, what remains really isn't much of a divine plan, but more of a divine reaction. The "plan" is that God responds to what we do as we exercise our freewill. That's not much of a plan—a plan to react to *our* actions?

After working our way through the first three chapters of Ephesians, it is clear that Paul sees things much differently. For Paul, in order for a Christian to fully understand God's love, as well as to live in the hope that God has the power to give to his people everything he has promised them, a Christian needs to step back from their particular circumstances—no matter how difficult those circumstances may be—and consider the big picture of redemption. And this is what Paul does in the first fourteen verses of Ephesians 1 where he describes God's eternal purposes. As he does so, Paul points us to Christ's cross (as the supreme picture of God's love), and to Christ's resurrection (as the proof of God's power).

Paul sets out how God chose us "in Christ" before time began (before the foundation of the world). To make good on his plan (the purpose of his will, as Paul calls it), God sent Jesus to redeem all those who were chosen by the Father. God sends the Holy Spirit to call to faith all those whom the Father has chosen, and for whom the Son has died. Furthermore, the Spirit calls God's elect to faith through the preaching of the gospel. This means that God not only has determined the end for which we have been created (redeemed sinners whom God sees as already seated and raised with Christ in heavenly places), God has also determined the means by which he will save his people (the preaching of the gospel). This is why anyone who claims to believe in election and predestination must also be zealous about the preaching of the gospel. The one (election) is the foundation for the other (evangelism).

This Trinitarian conception of redemption is a sort of Reformed credo—redemption decreed by the Father, redemption accomplished by the Son, redemption applied by the Holy Spirit. All members of the Godhead work in perfect unison to accomplish God's eternal decree in a wonderful symmetry.

Instead of seeing election, predestination, and particular redemption (Christ dying to redeem those whom the Father has chosen) as problematic, Paul sees God's eternal purpose in choosing, redeeming, and calling his elect as the basis for a believer's confidence in God's favor toward them in Christ. What God begins in us, he completes. He chooses us in eternity past with the intention of redeeming our bodies at the end of the age. Paul doesn't see these doctrines as a problem, in fact, he sees them as the basis for a believer's hope. God doesn't merely want people to be saved, and then leaves it up to them as to whether or not they take avail of his grace. Paul never implies (as so many believe today) that Jesus died so as to make salvation possible for everyone, if only they would take that first step toward God. Nor does Paul ever say, or even remotely imply, that the Holy Spirit is a gentlemen who waits for us to open the door of our hearts, and that he will not come into our hearts unless we allow it. While many Christians think in these terms, it is impossible to find this notion anywhere in Scripture.

The vast difference between Paul's approach to the gospel and that of much of American evangelicalism is apparent in the opening chapter of Ephesians—God chooses specific individuals whom he will save, Jesus' death actually and effectually redeems those given him by the Father, while the Spirit effectually calls the elect so that they believe and then seals them unto the day of redemption. There is not one hint in Paul's writings that the plan of salvation focuses on the world in general, and no one in particular.

The reason why Paul's gospel is not one in which God merely makes salvation possible for all those who want it, while God then waits for people to "accept Jesus" without violating their own free will (an all-too-common opinion), is the fact the people who are dead in sin and who are by nature children of wrath do not want to "accept Jesus." Paul knows nothing of a "plan of salvation" in which God does what it

takes to save someone, and then waits patiently for that person to save themselves, occasionally wooing them to come to Jesus if they show some interest in spiritual things. If the human predicament is as dire as Paul says it is, then it is clear that unless God chooses us “in Christ,” sends Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sins, and his Holy Spirit to call us to faith, God would have to wait a very long time before anyone “decided” to become a Christian. Sinners are terrified by a Holy God. Sinners don’t want their sins exposed, and they are unwilling to repent of that (their sin) which they love more than Christ.

There is no way Paul can pray the kind of prayer he prays in Ephesians 3:14-21 without this glorious plan of redemption firmly in his mind. After all, if this is about some sort of self-salvation, then prayer is more or less thanking God for his help. “Thank you Lord for giving me what I needed to save myself.” But if God saved us while we were dead in sin, and still enslaved to the desires of our flesh, both unwilling and unable to come to him, this changes everything. That Paul is mindful of both God’s love and sovereignty is clear from the impassioned content of his prayer.

Not only is the sovereign and gracious nature of God’s plan of salvation in Paul’s mind when he prays in these verses, so too is God’s call of Paul to be apostle to the Gentiles. Paul may be in a Roman prison for the sake of the gospel, but it is well-worth his current hardship because through preaching the gospel revealed to him by Jesus himself, God has done what no earthly society ever could. God has united believing Jews and Gentiles together into a spiritual temple, the church, the household of God. While the Jews had every redemptive-historical advantage even as the Gentiles were strangers to the covenants and aliens to the people of God, Jesus Christ brought the two peoples together. That same Jesus not only called Paul to faith, but called and equipped him to serve Christ’s ever-advancing kingdom as apostle to the Gentiles. Preaching this gospel, as we have seen, landed Paul in jail. But preaching this gospel is the way in which countless Gentiles have been brought into the household of God. And so even while Paul awaits his audience before Caesar while in Rome, he rejoices knowing that the gospel is being preached.

No doubt, all of this is in Paul’s mind, when he resumes his prayer here at the end of chapter three—a prayer which Paul he has started twice, but from which he has broken off both times. This time, Paul will conclude it.

Having set forth one of the most remarkable “big picture” depictions of redemptive history in all the Bible, it is important for Paul that all those reading this letter have personal (and experiential) knowledge of the grace of God he’s just been describing. Paul simply wants us to know the love of Christ. In light of the fact that in the gospel the mystery of Christ is revealed in history (for all to see), coupled with the fact that God’s saving purposes include the uniting of Jews and Gentiles together in the church, it is obvious that Paul is not speaking of “knowledge” in the way in which gnostics speak of knowledge—as the revelation of something secret to an enlightened few.² Paul’s entire effort in proclaiming the gospel as “good news” about what God has done in Christ to save us from our sins amounts to a frontal assault upon the gnostic emphasis upon things hidden. Paul wants us to know the love of Christ by trusting in what Christ has done for us, and then to experience (through our faith in Christ) that same love which motivated God to do this on our behalf.

And so as we take up this final portion of chapter three, we are immediately reminded that Paul is returning to that prayer which he has twice broken off. As he writes in verse 14, “*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father.*” The reason is everything which Paul has just spelled out in the previous

² Bruce, *Ephesians*, 324.

chapters. Although the normal Jewish posture for prayer is standing,³ bowing to his knees before the Father reminds us of Paul's submissive attitude toward his gracious heavenly Father who has brought all of these things to pass. Paul has already pointed out that this God is "*the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (v. 3), who Paul identifies in verse 15 as that one "*from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.*" In speaking of the Father in this manner, Paul both reminds us that all human fatherhood derives from God's own eternal fatherhood, and that (as Paul implies) through Christ, the Holy God is now our heavenly Father. In other words, through Christ's saving work, we who were sinners, aliens, and outcasts, are now adopted as beloved members of God's own family.

We see the fruit of this relationship described by Paul in Galatians 4:6. "*Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" Through his own prayer, Paul reminds us of the glorious privilege of knowing that the Holy God is now our father. Because of the reconciling work of Christ, our sin no longer drives a wedge between us and God. In Christ, the Father as been brought near, so that we, in turn, may draw near to him. The angry judge is now our heavenly Father to whom we cry out in prayer with the knowledge that he hears us and delights in our pitiful efforts. This is what Paul wants us to know and to experience ourselves.

Since God is the source of all good things, and since we are needy beggars, Paul directs us in verse 16 to the very source of spiritual life and vitality. "*According to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.*" As the prophet Isaiah foretold (and as we saw in our Old Testament lesson in Isaiah 40), one of the features of the messianic age would be that God would give to his people a spiritual power and strength that would transcend anything known in Israel. They would not grow tired and weary as they had before. While the prophets (and others) experienced these things in a limited and temporary way, this spiritual endowment will be something all of God's people will experience in the messianic age. No doubt, this prophecy is in Paul's mind as he frames this particular prayer, as Isaiah's words are echoed by Paul.

In essence, Paul is asking that God will grant to his people the strength we need to persevere in the Christian life. Although in one sense we are already seated and raised with Christ in heavenly places, we are not there yet. The journey (however long that may be) is still ahead. And let us not forget that we are people who were dead in sin, we are by nature children of wrath (if God gave us what we deserve, we would be punished), and that before we came to faith, we were enslaved to our sinful nature. In other words, not one of us has the strength, the resources, or the ability to live the Christian life on our own. God must continually strengthen our "inner being," which is very likely a reference to the new nature given us by virtue of regeneration.⁴

At this point, many people get confused about Paul's doctrine, because when we speak of being born again, or being regenerated, it is easy to think that God creates something new in us which was not there before (i.e, a "new spirit"). When Paul says we were dead in sin, he means that the sinful nature with which we were born so dominated us, that we could not do good, nor trust in Christ. We can thank our first father Adam for this. But when God calls to us faith in Christ, he regenerates us so that we have new desires and new abilities. To paraphrase our Lord, in regeneration, "God turns us from bad trees which produce sinful fruit, into good trees that produce the fruit of faith." So, God doesn't add anything

³ Stott, God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians, 132.

⁴ Bruce, Ephesians, 326.

new to us when he regenerates us. Rather, he changes us from people who were dead in sin, into people who are now alive “in Christ.” Therefore, while God doesn’t add something to human nature we didn’t have before, he does raise us from the dead to newness of life.

Since we still live and think like the sinful people we once were, and since we live in a world filled with people who are still dead in sin, the Christian life is (in many ways) learning to live like someone who has been raised from the dead, and suddenly set free. The analogy which is often used (and which is both biblical and helpful), is that we were once slaves to sin (the cruelest master imaginable). Through the work of Christ, we’ve been set free (we are justified—which in many ways is like being emancipated). But we still live and think like the slaves we were, especially when we live in a world still in bondage to sin. The Christian life is learning to live like a freeman. We’ve been set free, but we don’t know what to do with our freedom. And part of the way we learn to live this new life is to realize all of the benefits that are now ours in Christ—those things set out by Paul in the first three chapters of this epistle.

This is why Paul prays that we be strengthened in our “inner being.” He knows how weak we are, and how desperately we need God’s power to be manifest in our lives. Paul also knows that God’s riches are boundless, and that it is the indwelling Holy Spirit who does this work in the hearts (the “inner being”) of God’s people. It is the Spirit who imparts God’s power to us. It is the Spirit who strengthens us. And how does the Spirit strengthen our inner being? The indwelling Spirit ensures that “*that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*” For Paul, to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit—which happens when we are called and then sealed unto the day of redemption (Ephesians 1:13-14)—is to be indwelt by Christ. They are one and the same. When Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith (which happens when we come to faith), Paul is asking for the same thing as that we would be strengthened in the inner being. To have Christ dwell in our hearts, is to have the Spirit empower us. To have the Spirit empower us to live the Christian life, is to realize that Christ himself dwells in us.⁵

To put it a different way, Paul is asking that we would come to understand that God both gives us faith (when we are first converted through the preaching of the gospel) and that God continues to strengthen that faith through the indwelling Spirit. And if Christ lives in our hearts, we have his promise that we are “*rooted and grounded in love.*” Again, another caution here. Too often people use this verse in a sincere but misguided attempt to find the assurance of our salvation by looking within, and to our experience of “Jesus living in our heart.” On any given day, we may feel (or not) that we are Christ’s. But we know we are Christ’s not by turning inside ourselves to see if we feel like Jesus is living in our hearts—although he does. The experience Paul is talking about does not arise from turning inward. This experience is the result of the knowledge of the gospel which has been continually preached to us.

When we consider what Jesus has done for us—his death for our sins, his life of perfect obedience, his conquering death and the grave, his present rule over things temporal and eternal—then we will experience Christ’s love and presence with us. Where do we look for Jesus? In our hearts? Or do we look for him in his word and sacraments, and then experience what he has promised in our daily lives as Christians? Throughout this epistle, Paul has done the latter. When we hear the gospel, and its promises are signified and sealed in the gospel sacraments, our faith in Jesus is strengthened through the indwelling Spirit, who works primarily through these means.

Because the indwelling Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, Paul can petition the Father that we

⁵ Bruce, Ephesians, 326.

(God's people) "*may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*" This is what it means to be strengthened in the inner being by the indwelling Christ and the indwelling Spirit. We would come to know the limitless love of Christ—which exceeds human knowledge. While we see God's love for us in the sufferings of Jesus for us, it is when we begin to realize that Jesus suffered these things *for us (for me, for you)* in our place, that we quickly realize how words fail to express what has been done for us. This is one of those places where the more we say about the experience of these things, the more we ruin the whole point. Let me just simply paraphrase Paul's point—the love of Christ for us is beyond description. Paul's prayer is that in some small way, we may experience that which the apostle cannot fully describe in words—the love of Christ.

It might help to consider several other places where Paul discusses how sinners relate to Christ's love. In 1 Corinthians 8:3, the apostle writes, "*But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*" Our love for Christ, is a response to God's prior love for us. That is pretty much Paul's point in chapters one and two of Ephesians. In Galatians 2:20, Paul puts it this way, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" It is Christ's love which lies behind his sacrificial death for sinners. And then, in Philippians 3:8, Paul adds, "*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.*" This is what Paul has in mind when he acknowledges that Christ's love surpasses all knowledge. There is no way we can put this into words.

His heart now filled with praise, Paul pours out a glorious doxology. "*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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*" With the big picture of redemption before us, like Paul we too should be moved to praise our merciful God who saved us precisely at that moment we could do nothing to save ourselves! If this God directs all of human history toward his divinely appointed end, and since our heavenly Father has shown us both his love and power (through the work of Christ), then it should be abundantly clear that God is able and willing to do far more for us, than we can even think to ask. He is not only able to do all things, he is willing to grant us everything he has willed for us. The very fact that he has displayed his great power in us by calling us to faith, giving us his Spirit, sealing us until the day of redemption, seating and raising us with Christ, means that we already have before us unmistakable evidence of what God can do on behalf of his people. We see it in Paul, who was a zealous persecutor of Christ's church before God turned him into the Apostle to the Gentiles. We see it in our own lives, as we who were once dead in sin, are now God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

Just thinking about these things moves Paul to a final ascription of praise. "*To him be the glory in the church,*" indicates that as God's people (Jew and Gentile, and from every race, culture and language) gather together, we are the temple of the living God now filled with the glory of God's indwelling Spirit. We are God's household, filled with his Spirit, and reflecting his glory. Paul knows that this glory will be manifest wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached. This is something Paul prays will continue on until the end of the age. In fact, Paul's prayer is answered even on this Lord's Day in Anaheim, some two thousand years later, and many thousands of miles removed from the city of Ephesus, as we gather to hear that same gospel, receive those same sacraments, and offer our praises to that same merciful redeemer who lives in our hearts and who has filled us with his Spirit. And this, beloved, is what Paul had been praying for, and what we've come to know and experience in our own lives—the Love of Christ Jesus our Lord.