

Ephesians 3:14-21
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Know Greater Hope
Father, Teach Us Your Love

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
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¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰ 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, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Today is the sixth Sunday that we've been making our way through the letter to the Ephesians. Back when we started, I mentioned that a very basic outline of the letter would be that in the first three chapters—which we'll wrap up today—the Apostle Paul treats God's eternal plan of salvation, while in the final three chapters he outlines the Christian's response to God's grace by calling for a life of loving service to God and neighbor.

One of the major emphases that Paul has had as he lays out God's plan of salvation, is a truth we heard our that first week in Ephesians 1:13-14. **You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.** That, even in the Gentile city of Ephesus, God's gospel was now being freely proclaimed and souls once enslaved to sin were finding freedom in Christ through the reconciliation He secured on the cross, was such astonishingly glorious news that Paul couldn't help but pray that these Christians in Ephesus would have the eyes of their heart opened and enlightened by God so that they could see all the clearer the depths of His love for them. Paul wanted them to be able to understand even more intimately the love of their Savior God for them.

So he prayed or at least began his prayer in chapter 1 verse 15, but before he can finish, Paul segues into an explanation of how salvation is God's free gift for spiritually dead sinners that raises us up with Christ to a new life, one that has as its purpose the completion of good works which God has prepared for us to do. Then followed that explanation with further details on how the gospel of Jesus is one that destroys barriers. First, removing the barrier of sin between God and man through redemption. And second, dissolving the barrier between Jew and Gentile by declaring them both equal as redeemed children of God.

That brings us to the end of chapter 2 where Paul is reminded of the prayer he had begun, that the Ephesians would grow to grasp even more firmly the breadth of God's love for them. In 3:1 he begins to pick up that prayer once again, **For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles,** but then he stops again, because he wants to explain that he counts himself as blessed—privileged far beyond what he deserved—to have been able to participate in this new chapter of God's salvation history. In no way did he want the Ephesians (or us) to be discouraged that he was in chains, but rather to rejoice with him that the very actions that had led to his imprisonment had led to their freedom from sin and hell.

So, today, as we look at Ephesians 3:14-21, we finally have in front of us the end of this prayer which for us is now five weeks in the making. It really is a beautiful prayer, one that I would even recommend incorporating into your regular prayer life. It doesn't quite flow as perfectly off the page as

some of the other examples of prayer we have, like the Lord's Prayer, so here's my recommendation: take some time this week to look over these eight verses and write out a prayer based on Paul's words here. What you're going to end up with is prayer that's well suited for the beginning of a new day, for times when you are physically or emotionally or spiritually weary, or even to say as you sit down to begin to study God's Word.

I thought we could take the next few minutes to do a practice run together. Paul starts off in verse 14, **For this reason**, he says, **I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name**. And so, just as we do in the Lord's Prayer, we begin with the address of our prayer: *Dear Father in heaven...* We pray to God as our Father with the confidence that He has made us His children through the redemption that comes through Christ Jesus. As his children, we are blessed to bring our petitions before Him knowing that He cares for us and will give us that which is best for our everlasting welfare.

Paul also gives us an example of an attitude and posture that we can follow as we bring our prayers to God. He says, **I kneel before the Father**. Kneeling as we pray, bowing our heads, folding our hands, and closing our eyes, these are all concepts that we're familiar with and they serve a dual purpose. First and foremost, when we do those things we're assuming a posture of humility. We come to our heavenly Father in prayer knowing that He is not only our Father but the one true God, the LORD Almighty, the Creator and Ruler of both heaven and earth. We kneel and bow our heads before Him in submission to His will.

But I also find, and perhaps you have too, that in assuming a posture of prayer I'm able to focus myself more clearly on the petitions I want to bring to my Father. As a single guy, I often find car rides to be a rather quiet time. I take advantage of those moments sometimes to converse with my heavenly Father in prayer. It isn't an opportunity, however, where I have the luxury of folding my hands, closing my eyes, bowing my head, or least of kneeling. As a result, those prayers while I'm driving are often cut short as I'm distracted by another driver, a billboard, or whatever it might be. Or perhaps you've tried to take advantage of the quiet moments you have to yourself as you lie awake in your bed at the end of the day. But again, if you're anything like me, you may find those prayers interrupted by the thoughts that come flitting into your mind or impeded perhaps simply because you're tired and exhausted and it's hard to formulate thoughts clearly as our weariness melts away into sleep. Finding time, then, during the day, when we can collect ourselves and our thoughts and go to our heavenly Father in focused prayer, is a valuable practice worth making a habit of.

So, let's get to it! We have our address, *Dear Father of all...* Our first petition then, we get from verses 16 and 17 where Paul says, **I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith**. In short, the first request of our prayer is for strength. Not physical strength, or emotional strength but rather spiritual strength. It's the strength and power that is the express work of God the Holy Spirit. Through the gospel means of grace—God's holy Word and Sacraments—God the Holy Spirit creates power in your inner being.

That "inner being" is the new creation that God has brought to life in you by faith. It's the "new man" that was raised to life in you as you—through the miracle of God's grace—were connected to the resurrection of Jesus. That strengthening or confirmation results in certainty and confidence for us in the salvation God has given us. That happens, as our hearts become dwelling places for Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Now, we sometimes use phrases like, "you're in my heart" or "I'm with you in spirit," to convey to someone how much we love them and to try to figuratively describe the intimate relationship we have with them, but what we have here is something even better than that. There's nothing figurative about it! By the miracle of God's grace, as you are strengthened and empowered by the Holy

Spirit you literally become the dwelling place of Christ. He is in you, filling you with the comfort and peace of His forgiveness and working through you to share that love with those around you.

Dear Father of all, set your Holy Spirit to work in my heart today. Through my Baptism, through Your Word, and through Your Holy Supper, strengthen me to be the dwelling place of Your Son on earth.

Our second petition is a petition for knowledge and understanding that we find as Paul continues in verse 17-19: **And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 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, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.**

There are two beautiful illustrations here that we find elsewhere in God's Word as well. The first is that of being rooted in Christ's love. Like a plant that sends down its roots into the soil is able to withstand winds and rains, we as Christians planted in the love of our Savior are able to withstand the storms of trial and loss, sickness and disease, temptation and guilt.

Paul also describes it as being established like a building with a firm foundation. And this second illustration has a whole new depth of meaning. When we are built up on the foundation of Jesus, we aren't like one lone shoot springing up out of the ground but instead like one of so many stones or bricks built upon the cornerstone of Christ, yes, but also built together with all the Lord's people. These relationships we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ just like our relationship with the cornerstone Himself are able to help us weather the storms of life by pointing us to God's love.

Rooted and founded in Jesus and surrounded and built up together with others who are His dwelling place on earth, Paul's prayer is that we may **grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.** With our foundation in Jesus and in His love, we pray that we would come to know and to understand the vast dimensions of His love for us even as we acknowledge that it is a love that surpasses our human understanding.

Have you heard the expression, "the more you learn, the less you know"? The idea is that as we dig into a subject and begin to learn more about it we start to appreciate just how complex it is and to realize how much more there is to learn about it. Nowhere is that truer than with the love your Savior has for you. There is no degree that you could get from any university or seminary in the world that would give you a total and complete knowledge of all the intricacies of God's eternal love for you. But that doesn't mean we cannot try! Part of our life as disciples of Jesus is that we continue to grow in our faith through the study of God's Word and we pray for His blessings in that endeavor. *As You have rooted and established me in Christ's love, help me to continue to grow together with my fellow believers in an understanding and appreciation of that incomprehensible love.*

Finally, in our third petition, Paul leads us to pray not just for a partial answer to our prayers, but rather **that [we] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.** *Fill me, Father, to overflowing, with every blessing and good thing that You have to offer.*

And in case we might feel ashamed to be so bold in our requests to God, Paul closes with a doxology reminding us not only is well within God's power to graciously give us all we ask for and more, He does so to His glory, caring for and blessing His people that they might serve and worship Him as their God. **Now to Him, Paul closes, 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!**

Dear Father of all, set your Holy Spirit to work in our hearts today. Through our Baptisms, through Your Word, and through Your Holy Supper, strengthen us to be the dwelling place of Your Son on earth. As You have rooted and established us in His love, help us to continue to grow together with our fellow believers in an understanding and appreciation of that incomprehensible love. Fill us to

overflowing with every spiritual blessing and good thing that You have to offer. All this we ask with the confidence that You do indeed hear us and that You are able to grant us more than we could ever ask or imagine. May all glory be Yours, through Jesus Christ and through us, His body, Your Church, forever and ever. Amen.