

<b>SCRIPTURE FOCUS</b>	<b>Ephesians 3:14-20</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>09.29.19</b>
	FROM: Mike Smith, Discipleship Minister	First Woodway Baptist Church	
<b>LESSON SUMMARY</b>	Our God is more than able to answer our prayers. This is especially true of prayers for our growth in the faith.		

*all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted*

## ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

<sup>14</sup>For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Since 2:11, Paul has been speaking of Gentile inclusion in God’s family. Now, he offers a prayer for included Gentiles. He prefaces this prayer by referring to God as “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” By speaking of God in this way, Paul once again makes room for his Gentile brothers and sisters in the faith. Ultimately, God is the source of all peoples, and all peoples are now welcomed into his family in Christ! Regarding families “in heaven” I suspect that Paul is alluding to the scope of redemption – God will ultimately redeem *all* things in Christ, whether in heaven or on earth (see 1:10).

As the prayer unfolds, we find either two or three main requests (more on this later). The first, beginning in v 16, has to do with being strengthened by the Spirit and indwelt by Christ. The first thing to know as we examine this request is that the Spirit and Jesus are closely related in Paul’s thought. Strictly speaking, Christ is seated in the heavens at the right hand of God, and the Spirit has been sent to indwell Christ’s people (see 1:13-22; Acts 1-2). At the same time, the Spirit represents the presence of Christ in the believer. As commentator Andrew Lincoln explains, “... in believers’ present experience there is no real difference between Christ and the Spirit. Believers do not experience Christ except as the Spirit and do not experience the Spirit except as Christ.”<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Christ and the Spirit are the same. Rather, they are so closely associated that Paul can refer to both as he talks about the one reality of Spirit indwelling.

Once we understand the relationship of Christ and the Spirit in the Christian life, we can move to the meat of Paul’s request: strength from the Spirit in the inner person so that Christ can dwell in the Ephesians’ hearts through faith. The key here is to realize strength is needed for Jesus to dwell, an idea that may seem strange. After all, aren’t we simply indwelt upon placing our faith in Christ? The answer, of course, is yes. At the same time, we can talk about a continuing and growing indwelling. Think here of moving into a house. At first, you live in an undecorated house with a bunch of unpacked boxes. Over time, though, you unpack, decorate, and make the house your own. In the same way, Christ makes himself at home in us. Importantly, Christ doesn’t usually impose himself on us (there are, of course, times when he speaks in ways that can’t be ignored – think here of Saul on the road to Damascus). Rather, he allows us to agree with and welcome his movement in our lives. In a sense, we “make room” for Jesus in our hearts as we rest in him and obey him. Because Christ making himself fully at home in our lives depends partly on us, we need strength in the

<sup>1</sup> Lincoln, 206.

“inner being” to agree with his movement in our lives. So, Paul prays for God to “strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” That last part refers to the steps of faith we take as we allow Jesus to make himself at home.

One further thing to know as we look at this request is the meaning of “heart” in the ancient world. Lincoln is once again helpful: “...the heart is understood as the center of the personality, the seat of the whole person’s thinking, feeling, and willing.”<sup>2</sup> Christ dwelling in our hearts, then, has to do with Christ molding the center of who we are into a dwelling fit for him.

**And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,<sup>18</sup> 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,<sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**

Paul’s second request for the Ephesians starts here in 17b. The NASB’s translation is truer to the original Greek:

and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

As can be seen, the original Greek leaves us wondering just what Paul is referring to when he references “the breadth and length and height and depth.” Various interpretations have been offered through the centuries (God’s wisdom, God’s mystery, the New Jerusalem, to name a few).<sup>3</sup> For my part, I think that the NIV is right to link the dimensional imagery to Christ’s love. Something like the following translation takes this view while trying to stay closer to the Greek:

...to grasp with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth – to know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge! – that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Importantly, “grasping” and “knowing” here are deeper than intellectual comprehension and assent. Instead, we’re talking about a deep knowing, the kind of knowing that goes to the deepest part of who we are. We might say that Paul is praying for the Ephesians to know the love of Christ in their bones. This deep kind of knowing allows Christians “to know” Christ’s love, which is “beyond knowledge.” Think here of knowing a mother’s love. We can’t really explain it intellectually, but we can experience it. I imagine here swimming in the infinite sea of Christ’s love. We can comprehend its hugeness (breadth, length, height, depth) as we immerse ourselves in it. Combining this comprehension and immersion leaves us in awe.

V 19b (that you may be filled...) can be understood as either the result of knowing Christ’s love (both the NIV and NASB use this interpretation) or as a third request in Paul’s prayer. Though the difference here is slight, I suspect the latter to be the case. If this is true, Paul is praying (1) that the Ephesians will be fully indwelt by Christ, (2) will deeply know the love of Christ, and (3) will be filled to the brim with the fullness of

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<sup>2</sup> Lincoln, 206.

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln, 207-213.

God. Here we once again see Paul playing with the concept of indwelling, though now in terms of being filled by God's fullness. When we speak of indwelling, Father, Spirit, and Son are closely linked.

A few last things to notice about this passage: (1) Our knowing Christ's love assumes that we are "rooted and grounded" in love. (2) Paul prays that the Ephesian Gentiles will know Christ's love "together with all the Lord's holy people." Once again, his language points toward inclusion. The prayer is that the Gentiles will not be left out.

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

Paul ends his prayer with a doxology that highlights God's power. Though this picture of God being able to do more than we can ask or imagine in prayer can apply to all areas of the Christian life, Paul's use of the imagery here underscores God's ability to accomplish what he has just asked and more. In the end, Paul assigns glory to God in the church and in Christ forever.

## TEACH THE TEXT

Though this passage is short, it can prompt rich conversation the following topics: mutual indwelling, knowing Christ's love, and prayer.

### MUTUAL INDWELLING

Though it doesn't come out in this passage, much of Ephesians has majored on the idea of Christians being "in Christ." By this, we mean that Christians are spiritually bound to Christ upon conversion. In the current passage, we find that indwelling goes both ways. Not only do we find ourselves "in Christ" through faith, but through faith Christ also takes up residence in us. We can think of this in terms of security and growth/relationship.

When it comes to security, being in Christ is the most important thing about us. To be in Christ means that we have been spiritually bound to him and that we share in his story. Thus, we are covered by his righteousness, and we share in his triumph. These are objective realities that speak to our standing before God and our destiny. To be in Christ is to be completely secure in God's grace and mercy.

Moving to growth and relationship, Christ in us is key. As noted in the previous section, Christ makes himself more and more at home in our hearts over time as we take new steps of faith. As this happens, we come to know Jesus better and become more and more like him in our characters. Importantly, we are not lost in Christ, as if he takes over our personalities. Instead, who we are is brought into agreement with who Jesus is. In a real sense, we become the people God always intended for us to be.

## KNOWING CHRIST'S LOVE

To know the love of Christ deep in our bones is to *experience* the security that we spoke of a couple of paragraphs ago. Like a child resting in her mother's arms, we learn to rest in the love that has redeemed us. More than this, knowing Christ's love moves us to trust him and love him in turn. No wonder Paul prays that the Ephesians will know the unknowable love of Christ!

But how do we come to know Christ's love? In one sense, this is a gift from God! That's why Paul prays in this direction. In another sense, we can deepen our knowledge of Christ's love by reflecting on it. Memorizing scriptures like this one, Romans 5:6-8, and Romans 8:31-39. We might think here in terms of making our actions match our prayers – we pray for God to enlighten our hearts as only we can even as we do everything we can on our side of things to prepare ourselves for that divine work.

## PRAYER

Vv 20-21 are two of the most powerful verses in the NT about prayer. They remind us that God is powerful enough to answer all of our prayers and more! A question to ask your group is how knowing this might change the way they pray.

On the other side of things, we need to address unanswered prayer. After all, if God is able to do so much more than we ask or imagine, why doesn't he in situations where we feel like we need him most? Here it is important to talk about hope and trust. Hope reminds us that all will be well in the end. God is creating a new heaven and new earth in Christ, and this is our inheritance! Trust means that we believe in God's goodness in the present tension between how things are and how they will be. Sometimes God brings new creation into existence in the here and now. Other times he leaves off until Christ returns. Ultimately, we can't know the mysteries of God's wisdom on this side of eternity. Trust and hope sustain us in the meantime.

A further consideration here is the direction of our prayers. Jesus tells us in the gospels that we will be granted anything we ask in his name. By this he means that we will be granted anything that conforms to his will and glory. So, what do we know about what Christ wants to accomplish in us? Beyond a shadow of a doubt, he wants to make himself at home in our hearts and transform us to be like him. We can be confident that prayers like this will be answered, though we need to embrace trusting patience as God works all things out for our good.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### Vv 14-17a

1. What is the "reason" Paul mentions for his prayer?
2. Why do you think he speaks of God as the one from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name?
3. Why do we need strength for Christ to dwell in us?
4. What does it mean for Christ to dwell in us?
5. How do the Spirit and Christ fit together when we talk about divine indwelling?

## Vv 17b-19

1. What do you think it means to be rooted and established in love?
2. How can we know the unknowable love of Christ?
3. Why does it matter for us to know Christ's love?
4. What does it mean to be filled with the fullness of God?

## Vv 20-21

1. How would our prayers change if we really believed what Paul says in these verses?
2. If God is able, why does he sometimes say no or leave prayers unanswered?
3. Are there any prayers that we know God will honor?

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