

Love that Surpasses Knowledge

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Bible Text: Ephesians 3:14-19

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Would you open your Bibles to the book of Ephesians, please, chapter three? I want to begin reading in verse seven. I am going to read all the way through verse 19.

Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him. Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.¹

I suppose that many people, if they were to give a personal testimony might say, "I feel less than full tonight."

Many reasons would account for that. We are finite beings. Our strength is limited. Our wisdom is imperfect. Our knowledge is flawed. So many areas of life that we would look at and very quickly acknowledge, freely acknowledge that we are inferior.

¹ Ephesians 3:7-19.

That leads us often to feel that our lives, even our Christian ministry, the work that God has called us to pursue is much less than what he desires or expects.

And some of you even tonight feel that God himself must certainly be very disappointed with your failing efforts that perhaps even he himself is ready to give up on you and that his affection for you is diminished. And you know that he is long suffering. You know that the Scriptures teach that he bears with imperfect people.

But if you were also very honest and transparent, some of you would step forward and say, “I am not sure how much longer the Lord will be patient with me.”

I am not speaking to those in particular who are immersed willfully in sin. I am speaking to those who struggle, who war against that sin that remains within, who war against their own flesh and yet almost feel day by day they make no progress.

[off mic voice]

...is so inferior to those around you that there really is little if any point in serving him.

I believe Paul’s prayer here in Ephesians three is for people just like you. When he wrote the letter to the Ephesians between five and 10 years had elapsed since he had left that church in the hands of the Ephesians elders. You can read Acts 20 to see exactly what I am talking about. And it is obvious from the content of this letter that they are struggling with making the real life connections, the day to day connections between the great doctrine they had been taught and day to day living. The congregation was struggling.

Just a few years after he wrote Ephesians it seems to us from the other evidence of the Scriptures, specifically from the letters written to Timothy—1 and 2 Timothy—that he had sent or at least been a part of encouraging Timothy to go and pastor that work.

Well, we would think that a congregation that had received such a powerful letter and had been planted by the apostle Paul himself would really have their Christian lives together. But that wasn’t the case.

Approximately 30 years after this book was written the Lord Jesus sends another letter to the Church at Ephesus. He wrote it through the hand of the apostle John. You would find it in Revelation two and in verses four and five he says:

I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.²

² Revelation 2:4-5.

They had many things he commended them for, but there were still some things they were struggling with. And at that point their love, their first love had grown weak. It had grown cold.

As you read through the book of Ephesians and look at Paul's points of emphasis, you see that before he writes one word of command or instruction concerning putting off the old man and putting on the new man or handling sinful anger or lying or stealing, before he exhorts wives to submit themselves to their husbands or commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, before he instructs children to obey their parent or slaves to be subject to their masters or any of the other scores of commands that are present in this book, he bathes them, he immerses them in the love of Christ.

In Paul's prayer he points us to something that I believe is key for us to set our hearts upon. It is a right prayer for us to pray, to offer to the Lord even tonight as we prepare for this communion table. It is something that we must meditate on through the day and night of our Christian living.

Paul says explicitly, "My prayer," and look at verse 18, is that you would be able to comprehend, that is, to lay hold of with your mind, "with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know..."³ That word speaks of an intimate experience of something and that something is the love of Christ.

For just a few minutes I want to take Ephesians and some of the internal pointers that help us understand the boundaries of Christ's love for us. Paul speaks, first of all, of knowing the breadth.

The breadth of something is the distance or measurement from one side to the other. How do you begin to measure the breadth of Christ's love for us? I think Ephesians gives us some compass headings. These are not the boundaries that place limits on the love of Christ, but they are directional. They show us that side that that measurement, one side against another.

Look at chapter two with me for just a moment. Notice that as Paul begins to work through some truths here he has not gotten to any commands or exhortation at this point. But he does say at verse 11

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.⁴

³ Ephesians 3:18-19.

⁴ Ephesians 2:11-13.

He goes on to explain in verse 14, “For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us.”⁵

And you begin to see something remarkable unfolding here, that ethnic groups, people groups that could not, and even to this day could not bring themselves together by political policy or by hammering out some sort of personal agreement, Jesus Christ spans that gap and brings them near. Jew and Gentile could actually be brought into an assembly like this and be at peace. It is not merely that Jew and Gentile who might have a common citizenship in Greenville, a community that is relatively at peace would find a common place to worship and serve and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. You must think in terms of groups of people that were once hostile to each other.

It is they kind of thing where Palestinians and the Israelis are brought together in Christ.

But even beyond that he is speaking of that great expanse that Jesus Christ himself through his blood has bridged between hostile, rebellious sinner and holy, righteous God.

And someone would say, “What is the breadth of Christ’s love for his people?”

We see what that love has done and the expanse of it as it spans barriers and closes gaps that mankind even with their best legislation and most creative solutions could not cross. The breadth of Christ’s love for his people spans the great gulf of our sin against one another and it spans the great gulf our sin has created between God himself and us.

It is directional. Those still are not the boundaries of the breadth of Christ’s love, but they begin to show us a mighty expanse that his love bridges.

What about the length of Christ’s love? The length of something is the distance along something from end to end. The love of Christ back in Ephesians one verse four begins to, again, establish some directional concept for us when the Scriptures tell us that, “He hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world.”⁶

Those are amazing statements. We understand that conceptually, but we really don’t understand that experientially.

We can fathom something beginning, but really exercise your mind and do your best to put the arms of your mind around that concept that God always was, that there was a point where time was not. That is as shocking to me and stunning and difficult to understand as any concept out there. Our finiteness makes it impossible for us to understand that point of origination.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit working before the foundation of the world.

⁵ Ephesians 2:14.

⁶ Ephesians 1:4.

In Ephesians two verse seven Paul gives a purpose that the Lord had in mind for the demonstration of this great grace, this redemption, this mighty work of salvation. And he says, “That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace.”⁷

And then in chapter three and verse 21 at that great climax of his prayer and this benediction that we love so dearly he speaks in these terms, “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”⁸

I think a more literal reading of that would go this way. “Into all the generations of the ages of the ages.”

Paul just heaps up terms that we understand to try to convey a little something of a concept we cannot understand. A world without end into the generation of the ages of the ages?

The point is: There is no point of termination in our existence, in our relationship with Christ. Again, these are merely directional headings that point us backwards and forwards and that, beloved, begins to unfold for us something of the length of Christ’s love for his people.

What about the height? The height is the distance between a low point and a high point. Your height is determined by the distance between your lowest point, the soul of your foot and the highest point, the top of your head. Mountains, tall buildings, a blade of grass.

Well, again, let’s just look at a few of the verses here in Ephesians that speak in terms of height.

Go back to chapter one, look at verse three as Paul recount the blessings that are already ours. He says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”⁹

Look at verse 20. He is speaking of this mighty power that raised Christ from the dead. It says here he worked, he wrought this power, “in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places.”¹⁰

Now go to chapter two and verse six. Here the Bible tells us that God, “Hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”¹¹

⁷ Ephesians 2:7.

⁸ Ephesians 3:21.

⁹ Ephesians 1:3.

¹⁰ Ephesians 1:20.

¹¹ Ephesians 2:6.

And the point is that God has presently, it is already done, seated people like you and me with Christ in the highest royal position in the universe. And the height of Christ's love for his people ascends to the highest throne itself.

I have touched on this before. I remember coming through school, one of my professors noting that in heaven there is nothing above God. The angels don't fly over his head. And you look at the descriptions—and this is consistent. They are seen around the throne. God himself rests, sits, if we can say that, at the pinnacle.

The Scripture tell us seated at his right hand immediately next to him is our Savior. And in a very real, albeit spiritual sense at this point, we are seated right there. How high does Christ's love reach? It reaches to the pinnacle of the known universe.

Now that becomes all the more staggering when it is positioned against the depths of his love. And I think there are some clues here in the passage for our blessing and our encouragement that help us understand the lowest point of mankind's existence.

Look at chapter two verse one. The Scriptures tell us we, “were dead in trespasses and sins.”¹²

Verse five. “We were dead in sins.”¹³

Are there degrees of dead? No. We may speak of someone being near death's door, but we would never say he is partially dead, almost, fully dead. It is an absolute condition. And in between those two verses the Scriptures give us a clear understanding of what that spiritual deadness looked like. It tells us that we walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air. We all had our conversation in times past, that is our lifestyle, the way we lived in times past, in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind and were by nature the children of wrath. That is, we were men and women exposed to divine wrath. Had not yet descended to that final place of condemnation and judgment, but we, in a sense, were one step away.

I love the description that Jonathan Edwards so beautifully paints in that famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Do you remember how he described the sinner suspended over the fires of hell by just a little spider thread? And we must never think that we were far removed from that condemnation and judgment. But we were already exposed to divine punishment. We were the one working all kind of evil and wickedness. We were the ones who by our sin wrecked this world and brought a curse upon all things.

In chapter four verse nine the Bible tells us clearly Jesus “descended first into the lower parts of the earth.”¹⁴

I think the point there is he descended into the lower part which is the earth.

¹² Ephesians 2:1.

¹³ Ephesians 2:5.

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:9.

It will be difficult for us to appreciate the humility of our Lord until we stand in heaven and behold the Father's glory and see the angelic host who have always served immediately and willingly and joyfully. It will be difficult for us to contemplate the descent our Lord made expressing his love until we behold all that the trinity enjoys by way of perfect fellowship. But our Lord turned his back on that in one sense and descended to the lowest point which is the earth, a place that he initially created perfect, under his control, under his dominion and power, setting his image bearers there to declare his glory. But they turn their back on him and wrecked and ruined a beautiful world and brought a curse upon it and darkness descended and death and sin fastened its grip upon mankind.

And that lifestyle this passage describes, that character of our own hearts exposed us to divine punishment and wrath. We had willfully descended to the last step in the caverns of our sin and teetered on the brink of eternal condemnation and judgment. But at that lowest step Jesus himself descended and laid his sovereign hand on us.

It is precisely at that depth that our Lord reached us and that these Scriptures wonderfully tell us made us alive together with Christ and raised us up together with him.

Beloved, the depth of Christ's love for his people reaches into the vilest caverns of sin and depravity and saves them utterly. That depth of depravity is what makes the measurement of Christ's high love all the more astonishing.

Would not it be reasonable if he had simply restored us to that first created state? Would not that be a gracious act?

We are among those that are seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. No wonder the apostle Paul explained it is by grace we are saved through faith and that not of ourselves. It is the gift of God, not of work lest any man should boast.

Those points are like compass headings that say, "You want to discover the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love? You start meditating and exercising your heart and soul in these directions."

Wonderfully, the Scriptures go on to tell us, go back to Ephesians three and verse 19. Paul's prayer is that we would know the love of Christ which passes knowledge.

There is a concept here that speaks of something that exceeds, extraordinarily exceeds the known boundaries or limits. I love this. There are, in a sense, compass headings that point us to the horizons of what we as finite beings know and understand of our Lord and yet if you could reach those distant point exercising your mind and experiencing personally all that the Scriptures teach us is true about Jesus Christ, if you were to reach those points, the horizons of Christ's love would continue to spread as far as you could see.

It is possible to reach the end of human love. Spouses sometimes say to one another, “That is it. I have had it. I can’t deal with this any longer.”

Parents have said to children and children to parents, “I am leaving,” or, “You need to leave. We are no longer considering you family.”

Friend would even part company because they have no more love for one another. But, beloved, it is impossible to reach the boundaries of Christ’s love for his people. You may experience Christ’s love fully, but you will never come to the end of it. You may travel the immense span of Christ’s love, but you will never reach the outer limits. You may travel the immense span and chronological path so to speak of his love, but you will never find the actual point of origination or termination. And you may breathe, in a sense, the rarified air of Christ’s high peaks of love, but you will never summit the pinnacle and you may be immersed in the depths of Christ’s love completely, but you will never touch the bottom.

No wonder Paul would say before he launches into one command, one exhortation, one truth or principle that must be practiced in life, “I bow my knees before our God and Father and pray that you would be able to comprehend with all the saint the breadth and depth and height and length of the love of Christ Jesus.”

No wonder Christ has to dwell in our hearts by faith, not merely human reason.

You can’t contain this great Savior in your reason. He is reasonable. Don’t misunderstand me. But finite minds don’t contain the infinite Christ. He is too big. His love is too great, too powerful, too vast for us to hold him in our heads and hearts any other way.

But Christ’s love is the very thing that roots us and grounds us so that in all that this world and the devil and our flesh would hurl against him and against us, we stay fast.

Oh, beloved, is it your prayer tonight not only for yourself, but for this congregation, that we would know this love of Christ, that extraordinarily goes beyond our knowledge?

The Lord’s Table actually helps us understand something of this. This continues to be a very strange thing to me, but a marvelous thing. It is so simple that even a young child can understand it, yet there is such rich depth of meaning here that even the oldest saint, the most seasoned believer comes with a sense of awe and we say, in a sense, “What is this that we are doing?”

Well, among other things the fellowship with our Lord by faith. He broke that first loaf of bread, distributed it to his beloved disciples and said, “Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you.”¹⁵

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:24.

In like manner he took the cup after they had eaten and he said, "This is the cup of the new covenant. It is written in my blood for you."

Marvelous, marvelous gift from our Lord. This is a wonderful and sweet reminder that our Lord loves us to the uttermost.

We invite all of you who are believers to join us at the Lord's Table. It is not a time reserved for members of Heritage Bible Church. It is reserved, however, for believers who, to the best of their knowledge are walking in fellowship with our Lord. We want to eat this bread and drink this cup with care. We do it in faith. The qualification is not a perfect self-righteousness. The qualification is faith in the gift of Christ's righteousness, clean hearts, a pure heart, a clean walk and lifestyle.

Some of you may say, "I am not yet ready."

Well, there is good news for you even. We are going to have a little bit of time while we are preparing and serving the congregation and that is a time for you to just pray quietly and seek the Lord's cleansing. Confess the sin that you are aware of. Confess that there are offenses you have committed against him that you don't even know you have offended him with. But plead the blood of Christ over your heart and life tonight and enjoy what the Lord offers you. He has loved you from eternity past. He loves you now and will love you into the generation of the ages of the ages. So come with confidence. Come with boldness. Come with joy to the table the Lord has spread.

I am going to ask our elders and deacons to make their way to the front and then while they are doing that I am also going to ask folks on the outside sections to slide into the middle. That means everybody just needs to move towards the center section. It is always special for us if we can close up some of the gaps and be served a little closer proximity, much like gathering around your own kitchen table where you pack things up.

And then the second thing I want you to do in preparation for this, I want you to keep a hymnal handy there and I am going to ask that we sing number 319, *Just as I am*. And we may not be able to sing through the whole hymn as the bread is being served, but I think that would be a sweet meditation for you and a reminder of how we come to the Lord's Table tonight as an old familiar and actually one that we don't sing as often as we should. But we pray that that would be a blessing to you.

So you can go ahead and turn to number 319 and if you would rather pray quietly or meditate on the Scriptures. That is fine as well. Please don't feel obligated to do exactly what I am requesting. It is a suggestion, but one I think that will be helpful.

So let us come near with pure hearts made pure by the blood of Christ and confident hearts because of our Savior.

Shall we pray?

Father in heaven, we love you because you first loved us and even our greatest love is so inferior to your love for us that we would be embarrassed to offer it as the reason we should come into your presence. It is not. We come into your presence by faith in Jesus Christ as at this hour we celebrate our Lord, his life, his death, his resurrection. And we want to set our hearts upon him once again and thank you for these tokens, these visible symbols of the broken body and shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. We praise you not merely for physical bread, but we praise you for our Lord and Savior. He is the bread of life. And we have taken him into our souls by faith that we might never die. So help us, we pray, to savor the Lord Jesus tonight, cherish him and to go from this place more consecrated to him because of his absolute, perfect devotion and love for us. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

[singing]

There are wonderful words to express the faith of our hearts, are they not?

1 Corinthians 11. Paul reminds us:

That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:
And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my
body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.¹⁶

Shall we pray?

Father, we give you thanks for the precious blood. And because the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ has been shed we have forgiveness of sins, complete, full, eternal. We praise you for this. Our sins are many. The expense is great. We deserved hell, but you have given us light. Thank you for our Lord Jesus. It is in his name we pray. Amen.,.

“After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.”¹⁷

Take your hymnal, please, and turn to number 243, number 243 and we will sing stanzas three and four to conclude our service this evening as a testimony of our faith in Christ, our consecration to him, number 243, standing, please. We will sing together stanzas three and four.

[singing]

Praise God for the Son, the Son who loves us to the uttermost. Good night. God bless you.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:23-24.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:25.