



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Ephesians 3: 14-21

Winter 2023-24

"Paul's Priestly Prayer"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Book of Ephesians, and we're in chapter 3, verses 14-21, which happens to mark the middle of the book. So Ephesians chapter 3, verses 14-21,

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, ¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, ²¹to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3: 14-21

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time of study in it together. Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, we thank You for this time together, this is very important and Paul reminds us in this text of how important it is, that we learn together as a people. And this is Your design, to have Your people assemble in the church on the LORD's day and to listen to the Scriptures read and expounded, and it's how we're built up in the faith. And so this is a necessary time and it's a privilege for us. We have Your revelation to contemplate; and specifically in this occasion, the emphasis is placed on the love of Christ and having that abide within us.

And so Father, we pray for that and pray that this will be a time of real learning and advancing in the faith; and that the love of Your Son will take root, deeply, in our hearts and be manifested to those around us. So LORD, build us up in the faith, strengthen us, make us witnesses and caring saints for one another. Father, we have a great privilege in prayer—that we can ask Your blessings upon us in this hour, but that we can also ask Your blessings upon Your people; now and throughout the week, and throughout the month.

And LORD, we hear about a person we have known for some time, passing away, and it should remind us, that that's us as well. We face the end at some point. We are “just a vapor”, as James said. (4:14). We're here and gone—and life is short. Moses spoke of that in Psalm 90, “...teach us to number our days.” (vs12). Help us to reflect upon that and to redeem the time that we have—and may we redeem the time we have in this hour to think and to reflect deeply upon the things that Paul instructs us to do, that we might grow, and benefit, and advance in the faith—and be prepared for that day when we leave this world and enter Yours. And we look forward to that—that's our hope.

And it's our hope because of what Your Son has done for us. We thank You for Him and His death on our behalf. And it's in His name we pray. Amen.

(Message) One of the great contributions of the 16th century reformers, of Luther and Calvin and others, is the doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers’. It was lost from

almost the earliest days of the church—and even now. People have divided the church into two classes: Clergy and laity; pastors and sheep; professionals and amateurs.

When the reformers came along they said, 'No, we are all ministers, we are all saints, we are all priests.' It wasn't revolutionary, it was simply a rediscovery of the apostles' teaching. That's really what the reformation was, a rediscovery of Paul and the apostles.

Peter called Christians, "a holy priesthood." (1Pe 2:5). In Revelation chapter 1, verse 6, John wrote that Christ, "...has made us to be a kingdom of priests." We are all, individually, 'priests of God.' That doesn't mean that we are our own priests, and we don't need another. —It means that we are, 'priests of one another.'

The two main functions of a priest were to offer sacrifices and offer prayers. So we are to present our bodies, "a living and holy sacrifice", (Rom 12:1), and we are to be praying for one another, as well as for ourselves—praying continually.

Paul did that for the saints. He told the Romans that, 'unceasingly he made mention of them in his prayers.' (Rom 1:9). He prayed for the Thessalonians, "night and day, most earnestly." (1Th 3:10). And here in Ephesians chapter 3, verses 14-21, Paul prayed for the saints of Ephesus—and he gives us a good idea of what he prayed for all the saints, everywhere. It's a model prayer for us.

Largely what he prayed for here, is that the Ephesians would 'know Christ more', and 'know His love'. That they would have more of Christ's life and His love. We see that in verse 17, "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts..." The idea is, 'dwell in the hearts more and more.'

And the prayer follows naturally from all that Paul has been teaching in chapters 2 and 3: That Christ has reconciled Jews and Gentiles together into one body, and reconciled both of them to God. We are all equally in Christ, joined in a vital, life giving relationship with Him.

And because of that we have open access to God the Father; verse 12, "...we have boldness and confident access..." And so in verse 14, Paul uses his access to the Father to pray for the Ephesians. He said, "For this reason", (that is, 'Because we can come freely to the Father', we can come boldly to the Father, and Paul did that for them). And he did so humbly, "...I bow my knees before the Father...". 'I kneel in prayer to God', he said.

Now, that is noteworthy because that was unusual at that time. Commentators have pointed out that the normal posture of prayer was *standing*. You see that, for example, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke chapter 18. Jesus said, "The Pharisee *stood* and was praying..." (vs11), while, 'the tax man *stood* some distance away.' (vs13). Both are in the temple, both are praying, both are *standing*. —But now Paul is on his knees. Calvin commented that, "Prayer didn't always require kneeling, but it was a sign of reverence, and it became common when prayer was serious...", he said, "...rather than perfunctory, just a formality."

You can just imagine Paul, (remember, he's in prison in Rome), you can imagine Paul chained to a Roman soldier, getting down on his knees and praying for the saints, (and he must have done that frequently because he prayed often for the churches).

So Paul is praying to the Father, verse 15, "...from whom", he wrote, "every family", (or 'the whole family'), "in heaven and on earth derives its name." So the whole church, living and dead, on earth or in heaven, is God's family. He named it that because He made it His family through the sacrifice of His Son. And now, since we are His family and He is our Father, we can look to Him in prayer and trust Him, as our Father, to supply our needs—as a good father would. And there's no better Father than the Lord God.

Paul then prayed for three things: 'More strength', 'more of Christ', and 'fullness'...all the fullness of God, which is the fullness of Christ—and specifically, His love. *First* Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be *strengthened*. Verse 16, "...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts..." (vs16-17a).

When we think of strength, we naturally think of physical strength—strengthening the outer man. But Paul intended an analogy here between physical strength and spiritual development. Just as a weak body needs strength to be productive, so too, we need to be empowered spiritually to be active and to be productive spiritually.

Now this occurs through sanctification. It occurs through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, in our minds, our thoughts, our will and affection, to change us and incline our minds, incline our hearts to the LORD, to purify us, to give us increasing devotion, and a will to seek His will, and do His will.

Now that is God's work. That's why Paul prays to Him to do it. He grants strength.—He gives it. And the supply is more than enough for us to accomplish what he prays for; '*more*', because of the rich reservoir from which it comes. 'It is' he says, "according to the riches of His glory." (vs16a). Not, '*out of*' the riches of His glory; but "according to" them—'in proportion to them', 'on a scale with them'. And since they are inexhaustible riches, it is more than enough power to changes us, to strengthen us for the task and the challenges that we face as we look to the LORD and as we seek it from Him.

Paul spoke of this process of sanctification, of "transforming us", in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, in verse 16, where he wrote, "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." Physically we are on the decline; the best of us is dying daily, wasting away, decaying. Somebody said, "Time is a great healer, but a lousy beautician." [*Laughter*]. We can all appreciate that. And we know we can't turn back the clock, as much as we might like to—and really, we shouldn't want to because at the same time our inner self is being *renewed*, (given life, empowered), so that we can enjoy Christ and be full of Him.

Paul prayed for that in verse 17, "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith..." Now this word, *dwell*, has the idea of 'settle down in', 'really make a home within'; and that 'He would become established in them' is what he's saying. Now, Christ

does *dwell* in us; He is *established* in us. And He's in the believer, permanently. We are sealed 'in Him' with the Holy Spirit. Chapter 1, verse 13.

So, this prayer was for a more personal, expanded relationship instead of a rather casual one. It is spiritual, 'in the heart', the place of our thoughts, the place of our affections and our will. It is in the heart that the decisions of life are made and the course of our life is decided. From the heart flows "the springs of life", the Proverbs tell us. (4:23). So Paul prayed that their minds would be 'full of Christ'; that He would increasingly have control over them, be the object of their thoughts and affections—and that His power would be their power.

Now that should be the prayer of each one of us; for ourselves and for one another: That our knowledge of Christ would grow and would have increasing influence over us in the way we think and the things that we do.

But it does not just happen. It is, as you'll notice Paul says, "through faith." (vs17). We grow in proportion to our response to the Holy Spirit's prompting, His leading, and our study of Scripture. It is the Word of God that nourishes our soul; it increases our understanding and it causes us to grow in our faith—that's Romans chapter 10, in verse 17. If we are casual about the Christian life, if it is rather secondary to us, then that will be reflected in our growth—which will be small and insignificant.

So Paul prayed that Christ would increase in their hearts—and that would inevitably cause change in them. They would understand Christ and His love; and then increasingly have love for one another. I think it's proportional: As we love Christ, we'll love Christ's people; we'll be a loving congregation; a warm congregation; a welcoming congregation. It is essential that we know Christ.

Love is the great Christian virtue. Jesus said that, told His disciples, 'They will know you by this, that you love one another.' (Jn 13:35). It's the mark of the Christian. He wanted them to understand it, experience it—and live it! We have all been, "rooted and grounded in love", Paul said. (vs17b). That is the absolute reality of every Christian life.

Our new life is established firmly *in* and *on* the love of God. Paul indicated that with two metaphors, first from agriculture and then from architecture. It is like the root deep in the soil that keeps a tree firmly in place; and it is like the solid foundation that securely keeps a building from moving.

That's God's eternal love—unshakable, unconditional; that's grace. We have all experienced it. Every believer in Jesus Christ has experienced it—and so we should now understand it, grow in it, and show it. And with Christ increasingly growing in these Ephesians, that is what Paul expected to happen.

It's what he urged next in verse 18, "That you may be able...", (and here again, he's *already* prayed for them to be strengthened; to be enabled), "...to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth..." 'of this love.' (Now Paul didn't actually say *love*, but it's clear from the context.) He spoke of Christ's love in the next verse, verse 19; so the New International version interprets it that way, "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." Paul wanted them to think hard on that love, "to comprehend" it—because that leads to practicing it. Comprehending it, leads to practicing it.

Thinking is important in the Christian life. Paul was a thinker. You see that in the conjunctions that he uses, the connectives that he uses; like *therefore*, and *in order that*. He's very logical in his presentation of the truth; and Paul urged Christians to think. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones commented on the importance of thinking clearly, theologically. He wrote, "We agree that the practical is most important." (In other words, 'What we do is important'; he wasn't denying that.) "But," he wrote, "the men who have accomplished the most in this world have always been theologically minded."

If we're going to practice the Christian life correctly, (do the right thing in life), then we must understand the Christian faith. And that takes some thought—and that takes time. And that's what Paul urged here, that we "comprehend", which means that we *seize*, or *to lay hold of* the truth. That word is used in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 24, of an athlete, a runner, winning a prize—which takes real effort. So the effort of an athlete is

to be seen in the effort that we, as Christians, make in thinking, and learning, and understanding the truth. Now Paul wasn't asking us to wrack our brains over some difficult problem, some theoretical issue. He wanted the Ephesians, and us, (and believers down through the centuries), to think on something glorious: To reflect deeply on the love of God and make it our own.

And to help us do that, he presented God's love in a four dimensional way—like some beautiful object, maybe a precious stone in which we are to examine it and look at it in various ways. 'First', Paul said, 'comprehend Christ's love for us in its *breadth*.' It is broad enough to include all kinds of people, 'not just Jews, but Greeks as well, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free', Colossians 3, verse 11. And Paul makes this point more than once in his writings—'That's how broad the love of God is.'

John saw its breadth in heaven, and he recorded it in Revelation 5, verse 9, when he wrote, Christ, "...purchased for God with His blood some out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation." That's 'the world' that Christ saved. And John saw the breadth of it in Revelation chapter 7, "...a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation, and all the tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne...clothed in white..." (vs9).

The love of God includes all kinds of people: It is *broad*—and it is *long*. It goes back into eternity, has no beginning; it's everlasting. That's how the LORD spoke to Israel in Jeremiah 31, verse 3, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." That's '*electing love*'. It didn't begin in time, didn't suddenly come into being, and it isn't caused by us. It is God's eternal, unconditional love that chose a people for Himself—and a vast, vast people for Himself.

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, then your name was written "in the book of life", (Phl 4:3), from "the foundation of the world". (Eph 1:4). That's stated twice in the Book of Revelation. You were known and loved before the ages began, from all eternity. Everlasting love doesn't vary. It doesn't change. It is completely reliable.

"Jesus Christ", the author of Hebrews wrote, "is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (13:8). He's not hot or cold toward us. He doesn't have a fickle love for us—a vacillating, unpredictable love. It's always the same. Which doesn't mean it's static, it means it's infinite. And if it's infinite, there's no end to it, no boundary to it; it can't change; it's unchangeable.

And when we fail, He doesn't fail or forsake us. His love is *long*, and it is *deep*, deep enough to reach down into the vilest of sinners. And sinners, the guilty, are what the church is made of—every one of us. Not one of us had the merit to earn God's favor; not one of us had one scintilla of merit to gain His favor. That's His love.

Still, by God's grace, (His undeserved favor), we have been chosen, we have been redeemed, we have been forgiven and justified—declared righteous and treated as righteous in God's sight. God gets all the glory. And if you understand that, and it really takes root within your heart, you say, 'Glory to God!' You are enraptured by the fact that He did it all.

And He did. Christ accomplished that at the cross, through His sacrificial death. As Paul put it in chapter 2, verse 13, Gentiles, "who were far off have been brought near by..." ...What? By their faith? By their good works? No! "...brought near by the blood of Christ." That's the great magnet; it draws men to Him. And His love is *high*—high enough to exalt us to heaven where we have been "seated in the heavenlies." (Eph 2:6)

Now Paul wants us to "*comprehend*" this with all the saints. We learn as a community. Listen; I can vouch for this and I think many of you can as well: Serious study is solitary. We have to get alone and read—and think. And even though our lives are busy in all kinds of different fields, nevertheless, we must find time to get alone and think, and read, and study.

But the church is a body, and we also learn together as we gather together on Sunday and read and study together; and function together; spend time together; and

are exhorted and are admonished together. We need to be together to learn. That's what Paul is saying, and that's what the other writers of the New Testament emphasized.

The author of Hebrews in chapter 10, verse 25, admonished those readers to, '...not forsake the gathering together of the saints.' It's necessary; it's essential that we be together, that we learn together, and know one another, and be able to help one another advance in the faith.

As the poet John Donne put it, 'No man is an island entire of himself. Each is a piece of the continent.' Now he was speaking of mankind; and we are all joined together in Adam. But that is even more true of the church, and an emphasis of Paul in chapters 2 and 3. It is *the mystery*, that we, Jews and Gentiles, have been joined equally into "one new man." (Eph 2:15). 'We are fellow citizens of the saints of God's household...growing into a holy temple in the Lord.' (Eph 2:19-21). So we are joined together in a body, in a building, in the various ways Paul describes it, but we're united together and we need one another in order to learn and function well.

Paul's desire was that we "*comprehend*" God's love for us—specifically Christ's love: How *wide* it is, how *long* it is, how *high* it is, how *deep* it is that we might grasp it with our mind and also with our experience. That's the idea of, "to know", in verse 19. "...and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." And what a prayer that is, "the fullness of God"!...Filled up with it!

Charles Hodge called this knowledge, "experimental knowledge": What is known in our experience as well as in our mind—in our experience as well as our thought. So, Paul prayed that we would know, *deeply*, the love of Christ.

Now we can never know it completely, or experience it fully; it "surpasses knowledge", Paul said. We will spend eternity learning of its vastness and marveling over the fact that He died for us. That will never lose its appeal and the amazement of it. And we will consider it, and consider it, and consider it all through eternity, 'world without end'.

Still, even now we can know something of it. The fact that it's beyond us ultimately, doesn't mean that we can't know something of it now. —And we can, and we should as we live by faith—and we live in fellowship with others and we learn from one another. After all, as we made the point at the beginning, we are all priests of God and we have a ministry with each other.

And this knowledge leads to something more, what Paul gives as his final request, "...that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." (vs19b). It's a way of saying that, 'You may be like Christ.' The word *fullness* is used in Colossians chapter 1, in verse 19, where Paul wrote that, 'God's "fullness" dwells in Christ'; meaning God's perfection, His attributes, dwell in Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

And that's the sense here; that we would have God's *fullness*—His attributes, (His communicable attributes, not His incommunicable attributes,) but His attributes. And here, I think especially because of the context, His love; and that the life of Christ would increasingly fill our lives.

And so, there is a connection in all of this. Our understanding of Christ's love leads to the experience of His love, which in turn leads to the transformation of our lives. And the goal of that transformation is Christ's likeness—becoming *like* Him.

Now we can't fully attain to that in this life. We are always in a state of progressive sanctification—of transformation. The process is never completed in this life, but we are always striving for it, (or we are to be striving for it), and if we aren't, then the LORD must discipline us and put us on that path. But that's the ideal: Striving continually for this sanctifying work that is of the Spirit and that we respond to. And we can increasingly show more and more of Christ's life and love in our lives as we grow in the Christian life. But that is rooted and based on Christ's love in us—and increasingly understanding it.

Love is a powerful force. Paul spoke of it that way in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 14, "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all,

therefore all died." The driving force in Paul's life was the love of Christ. Not Paul's love for Christ, (though that was part of it, inevitably), but in this text, in 2 Corinthians, it is Christ's love for Paul and all the saints.

That impressed him. That affected him as he reflected on what Christ did: Died for us, so that our old self died when He died, and we were made new and clean as a result of His sacrifice for us—that had a profound effect upon the apostle. Christ's love for him, a love that was unto His death, unto suffering hell in Paul's place, so that he, a persecutor of the church of all things, could live.

That moved the apostle to live sacrificially for the Lord—to live obediently. It's all about substitution—that Christ took his place, that controlled him; that constrained him; Christ's love for him—and Christ's love for you. Christ had you personally on His heart when He hung on the cross—He came for *you*, and died for *you*. And Paul knew that as these Ephesians thought deeply about it, deeply about the sacrifice of Christ and His love for them, that that would have a *controlling, constraining* effect on them—and on us, as we do that.

I often quote this man: The Scot, Thomas Chalmers. I love that statement, when he spoke of, "The expulsive power of a new *affection*." The love of Christ creates within us, within the thoughtful Christian, an *affection* for Him that crowds out of our heart affection for other things—for the world and all that attracts us to it.

There are warnings in the Bible *about the world* ; they are real, they are influential, and they are not to be ignored. But I think it was Paul's belief that, 'Nothing is as effective and life changing in the believer than the love of Christ.'

Now let me illustrate this from an old story, (a story you've heard me tell before if you've heard me long enough), but it's a familiar one. It's in one of Aesop's fables: The North Wind and the Sun argued with each other over which one was strongest, and so they held a contest. The Sun suggested that they see who could take off the coat of a man on a road down below. The wind believed that he could blow it off. But the more he blew the colder the man got, and the more the man wrapped himself tightly in his coat.

Then it was the Sun's turn. He just shone on the man, and the man became gently warmer and warmer until he felt so warm he took off his coat. He wasn't forced to or scared—he wanted to take it off.

The moral of the story is, 'Force is not the best persuader. Love is.' And as the love of Christ shines on us and in us, as we understand it and feel the warmth of it, we will want to put off the old life and put on Christ and live for Him. Paul did—he knew the Ephesians would.

That was Paul's prayer for them—this magnificent prayer for knowledge that transforms us. It's a prayer that ends with a doxology that also gives great encouragement. Verse 20, "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him *be* the glory..." In other words, Paul gave the glory to God whose capacity to answer our requests far exceeds our capacity to make requests.

We tend to limit our prayers by what we think is possible. We pray as finite beings. God's not finite, God is infinite, He has no limitations, "He is able to do exceeding abundantly...", (or as it can be translated), '...super-abundantly above all that we ask or even imagine.' His answers often exceed our requests.

The prodigal son is an example of that: He wasted his inheritance on riotous living. When he came to his senses, he decided to return home and ask his father to make him a servant in his household. But when he arrived his father didn't give him the opportunity to ask; he embraced him; he put the best robe on him, a ring on his finger, and gave him a banquet—and called him 'His son!' " 'For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate." (Luk 15:24).

That's God. That parable is about God. He is so full of goodness for His people that He won't allow our narrow perspective or our defective theology, or even our sin to keep us from His blessings. He loves to bless us because He loves us.

He is blessing us now in ways that we're not even aware of, every day, through His providential care. When we get to heaven, and we see our lives in full picture, like a great portrait, or a great panoramic picture, we'll see how God was intervening in our lives and providentially blessing us in ways we were completely unaware of. Every day, every moment, He is taking care of us. So, to Him, Paul gives praise; "...to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." (vs21).

And with that, Paul ends the first half of the Book of Ephesians. I called it, 'His priestly prayer,' and 'A model prayer for us.' We are all priests for each other; we are to pray for each other. We are to pray what Paul prayed here, that the LORD would strengthen our souls so that we may be filled with Christ, to know His love, and to show it in our lives. That should be our concern for each other: That we love Christ more, and become increasingly like Him.

And the ultimate purpose of that is that God be glorified in it. As believers in Jesus Christ, as priests of God, may our lives be a living and holy sacrifice with prayers of thanks to God, and prayers for the saints, for each other. May we have that love and concern for each other.

But if you're here without Christ, if you don't know Him as your God and Savior, we invite you to come to Him. He invites you to come. In Isaiah 65, verse 2, the LORD describes Himself as, 'spreading out His hands all day long to a rebellious people', patiently inviting them to repent and come to Him. So repent; come to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the great high priest who has made the final sacrifice so that all who believe in Him, even the chief of sinners, would be saved. He receives all who do.

(Closing prayer) Father, we do thank You we have a Redeemer, and we thank You for the love of that Redeemer which is the love of the Triune God that would save sinners such as us. There's no merit; we have no merit at all. But You've set your infinite, eternal, unconditional love upon us from all eternity, and then sent Your Son into this

world to purchase us—and He did, and we are Yours. LORD, help us to understand the love that moved You to do that increasingly in our lives, that it would affect the way we think and the way we live. And that we might be a church that is known for its love for one another, and known for the knowledge that we have of that love and of Your goodness to us, who You are. LORD, we thank You for that and pray you'd continue to bless us.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

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