

Your sustained interest in Ephesians is heartening, and the summer is hot, and I think we should lighten up this morning by starting with a joke. One of my seminary profs, Dr. Stanley Toussaint, was famous for parrot jokes. So, we are going to start this sermon on Ephesians 3 with one of his parrot jokes.

“A lady went into a pet shop to buy a parrot. The finest parrot in the pet shop formerly belonged to a sailor. It was a male parrot. The pet shop owner warned her that the only thing the parrot would say was, ‘Kiss me, baby.’ It was such a fine parrot she bought it anyway, convinced that she could teach it some new vocabulary.

“But try as she might the only thing the parrot would say was, ‘Kiss me, baby.’ There was a deacon in her church who had a female parrot and all it would say was, ‘Let us pray.’ So they thought it would be good to get the two parrots together in hopes that they would teach other some new vocabulary.

“The lady put the male parrot into the female parrot’s cage. The female parrot said, ‘Let us pray.’ The male parrot said, ‘Kiss me, baby,’ and the female parrot exclaimed, ‘My prayers have been answered.’” (*Dallas Connection*, Spring 2013, Vol. 20, No.2, p. 33)

It is possible to be a snob and say, “That’s a lot of fun, but that is a selfish way to pray. Is there nothing more pressing to pray for than a man?” I suppose that way of thinking has a certain air of spirituality about it. I do not recommend it. A quick look at the gospels turns up an embarrassing number of people whose only clear motive for being interested in Jesus was His ability to take care of their personal needs. The Gospels report very few people who came to Jesus with clear spiritual concerns. Uncounted people came to Him with concerns as personal as finding a mate or regaining health.

But there is another side to the story. Jesus Himself offered a profound way of praying – the Lord’s Prayer – that focuses on God. The New Testament offers other examples of that kind of prayer. Both kinds have a place in your devotion to God.

Ephesians offers two prayers of the second kind. We read the first one in Ephesians 1:15-20. I called that prayer a Prayer for Wisdom. We read the second today in Ephesians 3:14-19. It is a Prayer for Love. You will be a better person just for being here this morning and being exposed to this prayer. Wisdom and love require us to know God better. Before we engage the prayer in Ephesians 3, it’s good to remember something we said about knowledge, when we talked about Paul’s first prayer.

### **Preamble**

I am bewitched by the process of knowing anybody, especially God. Think about your experience of knowing another person – your spouse, child, friend, or colleague. There are three ingredients in knowing another person: information, impact, and time. We amass an amazing amount of information about the person: appearance, background, quirks, hobbies, tendencies, favorite foods, and on and on. Gradually, that information has an impact on us. We are shocked to learn that the other person likes the same music as we do or was once a bank robber. As a result of the impact, you may begin to trust the person not to hurt you and to keep a promise. You can let down your guard, be yourself. Or you may decide to stay as far away from the person as possible. But the impact of information on us requires a lot of time for shared experiences with the person.

Knowing God works the same way. We amass information about God. What we know has an impact on us, but the full impact requires a lot of time for shared experiences with God: worship, scripture, obedience, serving, and suffering. Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 invites us again to know God better. Let's start at the very beginning of the passage, a very good place to start – verse 14.

### Prayer for Strength

**For this reason I kneel before the Father.** Do you remember how chapter 3 began? **For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles . . .** and he stopped in mid-sentence, because he suddenly remembered something else he wanted to tell the Ephesian believers. He got back on track in verse 14, and we learn that all along he was going to pray for the Ephesians.

Both verse 1 and verse 14 begin the same way: **For this reason.** What reason prompted Paul to pray for them? Well, this reason: Paul saw little bands of Jewish and Gentiles believers in Jesus worshipping Him in synagogues and house churches of the Roman Empire. He saw in that phenomenon the wisdom of God working itself out in the affairs of mankind. Christ was creating something new on earth. How could he make the Ephesians see what it all meant? Actually, he could not. Only God could do that. That's why Paul prayed for them, and what a prayer!

It begins in verse 16, and we find out right away that it is a prayer for inner strength. **I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.** What kind of inner strength are we talking about? The kind the Spirit gives. What does that mean?

Jesus compared the Holy Spirit to the wind. He said: **The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.**" (John 3:8) No one has ever seen the wind. We see only evidence of the wind's presence: the movement of leaves, or a piece of paper moving mysteriously across the yard, or the cool you feel on a hot day as the wind blows across your sweaty face.

Romans 5:5 presents the supreme evidence of the Spirit's presence: **God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.** The prayer of Ephesians 3 is a prayer for inner strength to experience the love God has for you. Hold on to that thought like a Titanic survivor to a lifeboat, and this prayer will stay with you for a lifetime.

### Rooted and Grounded

But the Holy Spirit is not a magician. He doesn't wave His wand, and poof! you experience the love God has for you. The Spirit is more like the Maître-d' of the human soul. He makes sure things function well. He helps people make necessary connections, none more necessary than the one in verse 17. **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.**

Do not underestimate the power of the word **dwell.** What's the difference between houseguests you like and those you don't like? The ones you like go home at the end of the party. But suppose they don't go home. Suppose they move in – indefinitely. Suppose they

think they have the run of the house, your house – indefinitely. That is what **dwell** means, and it makes enormous demands on your inner strength – your patience, your good humor, your hospitality, your time, and your plans.

Don't miss the essential point Paul was making here. If you want to experience the love God has for you, Christ has to move in, make Himself comfortable in your life, have the run of the house, and start to make changes in the house and in the habits of the house. He doesn't barge in and take over. And, I say it respectfully, you can always put Him out. He enters and stays only at your invitation. It's the best decision you will ever make. You need strength to do that, inner strength. That is what the Apostle prayed for, and that is what the Spirit gives year after year.

And that's where the words at the end of verse 17 come in: **rooted and established in love**. Remember the three ingredients in knowing God: information, impact, and time for shared experiences. Being **rooted and established in love** takes lots of time for shared experiences with God: worship, scripture, obedience, serving, and suffering. And lots of time is what we think we do not have.

It's time for a sidebar, a relevant sidebar I hope, but a sidebar nonetheless. I want to quote five lines of poetry for you. I know, I know, people stay away from poetry as they stay away from scorpions; but I think this is poetry you might sit still for. T. S. Eliot wrote it 80 years ago, and these lines are so up to date I think he must have had a crystal ball. It is from a work called "Choruses from the Rock."

The cycle of idea and action,  
Endless invention, endless experiment  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness,  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence,  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word. (T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"*)

Our knowledge of God shrivels, if we cannot be still enough and silent enough long enough for shared experiences with God. BVBC offers a matrix of shared experiences with God that can take place over time. In this matrix you can become rooted and grounded in the love of Christ.

The shared experiences are worship, class study, small groups, and ministry teams. Worship centers on the three Sunday services. They are the spiritual center of our life together. Classes study the Bible and its relevance to life. Small groups provide a setting where you can bring your life and share it with people you trust. Ministry teams serve inside and outside the church. You can find a wealth of detail about all these in the Ministry News. Participation in this matrix is how Christ makes His home in your heart, and how you can be rooted and grounded in love. The prayer of Ephesians 3 is for you to have the inner strength to participate in this matrix.

### **The Heart of Paul's Prayer**

That brings us to the heart of Paul's prayer. Let's pick up the prayer at the end of verse 17: **And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints (with the whole Church throughout the world) to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses**

**knowledge.**

That's the heart of the apostle's prayer, and I think he got excited when he wrote it. Knowing love that surpasses knowledge doesn't make sense at first. It's like jumping a fence that is too high to jump or swimming a river that's too wide to swim. The apostle just means: "Hey, if you want to know the love God has for you, knock yourself out. When you've gotten all you can handle, I guarantee you there is more where that came from. Just keep going further and further into the love of Christ.

I want you to notice the curious thing about this prayer. It is not a prayer for us to love Christ more than we do. It is a prayer for something that precedes our love for Christ. What we need more than our next breath is to know that Christ loves us. I hope it doesn't disappoint you for me to say that. Perhaps you expect to hear so much more. Perhaps you think there is so much more. But there is no more. If we ever know in our bones what it means that Christ loves us, we shall know there is no more.

Look at one more thing in this prayer. I can't believe Paul added it. Maybe he should have quit while he was ahead. But he didn't, and we will read it, and we will wish he had explained it (he did not), and we will gawk and walk away from the end of this prayer as if we had seen a ghost or a gaggle of ghosts, who moved past us in stately silence without saying a word.

**And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints** (with the whole Church throughout the world) **to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of the fullness of God.** Maybe verses 20-21 will shed light on that. We will look at them next Sunday.

**Take-aways**

As we move through the remaining weeks of summer, make it your determined effort to do the following:

1. Reread or listen again to Ephesians 1-3 several times, recalling some of what you have heard, as we have made our way through these chapters.
2. Pray the two prayers of Ephesians. Put them into your own words, or just use the words of scripture. Pray for yourself, for those you love best in this world, for BVBC, and for the whole, beautiful, maddening Church that is spread out over the whole wide world.
3. Commit yourself, when summer ends, that you will rearrange your busy schedule to become involved in the BVBC matrix where you can become rooted and grounded in the love of Christ.