

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the **breadth and length and height**

and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

When the Apostle Paul falls to his knees before God it is for two reasons, just as it should be with each of us: To kneel in humble praise for the salvation that Christ brought to the world, and that you and I have received; and to kneel humbly and beseech the Lord for the strength needed to continue walking by faith, to persevere through whatever comes our way between now and the end of our course. This is very much the twofold theme of Ephesians: How God has revealed to mankind the great Mystery of our existence in the person of his Son; and how he has called each one of us to take an active part in this Mystery as it unfolds.

In the background of Ephesians lies the heresy of the early Christian Gnostics. These Gnostics taught that the deep secrets of God lay in a remote heavenly realm, that the Redeemer comes to reveal these heavenly secrets, and that we are called spiritually and mystically to ascend beyond our physical existence to experience these mysteries.

But in Ephesians Paul shows us that the truth is exactly the opposite: It is the angels of heaven must come to earth to learn how God works his secret wisdom. Salvation for mankind does not mean enabling us to escape this world, but discovering how God redeemed us by becoming one of us on earth, by suffering as a Brother who shares our flesh and blood.

Jesus, in other words, is no Gnostic redeemer. And God does not hate or despise what he has

made. So great is his love for human beings made of clay that Christ comes among us, not merely to undergo death, but to endure the insult of unjust violence and the brutal pain of crucifixion. This story is the great Mystery.

So it was that at Bethlehem heavenly angels praised God for the birth of a most human infant named Jesus. This is why angels stood beside a vacant tomb to declare to the world the bodily resurrection of God's Son. God revealed the fulness of his glory when he became man on earth, suffered the worst that sinners can do, and triumphed over it as the Author of Forgiveness.

But though we can fit this Gospel into something as brief as the Nicene Creed, do not imagine that true and full knowledge of this salvation comes to a person all at once. We are called to grow in our Christian understanding and conviction. Paul wrote this epistle especially for new Christians, and in it he explains how, once you have been baptized and catechized, you must never be complacent, but must seek to mature.

And so he pictures the Gospel for us in three dimensions. The Gospel has height & depth, it has length, and it has breadth. The height of the Gospel, of course, is the infinite splendors of heaven. For just as Christ once came to us from realms of glory, he did so to earn for us the right one day to live there ourselves in God's presence forever. To meditate on this promise, the height of the Gospel, therefore, is to have HOPE.

Now for the depth of the Gospel: Just how far did Jesus descend? As I just said, to a death that took the form of humiliation and shame. What is the most revered symbol of the Christian religion, the most sacred figure of our confession? How ironic – It is a Roman cross, one thing from which people in Jesus' day stayed as far away as they could.

But that final hour of self-lowering was only the culminating event in a three year ministry of serving us. For three years the Son of Man had no place to lay his head. For three years he trekked and labored, beat down Satan and refuted the hypocrites. Every day He went to war for us – and won, not for his own benefit, but to rescue us.

The LENGTH of the Gospel tells how all this was planned by God before time began, of how God created man free, knowing that we would use this freedom to become slaves of sins and thus to forfeit eternal life. But on the day Eve ate from the tree, God already had the virgin Mary in mind; and the

entire Old Testament is a bridge between these two women, a bridge that you can walk across and receive so many lessons in the faith that would take me an hour just to name them.

Then, when the promised son of David appears, he becomes the mid-point of time, the axis on which all history turns. Now you and I live in the final part of this story, what liturgically we call “The Time of the Church.” It began when Christ ascended and the Spirit came down; it shall end at the end of time itself, when Christ comes in glory and the universe that we know shall pass away. Such is the length of the Gospel.

To meditate on the mighty acts of God, to realize that the story of Cain and Abraham and Moses and Isaiah is the great human story, and that its moment of highest glory was when the Son of God seemed to have gone down in death and shame – to love hearing again and again the DEPTH of Christ’s sufferings, to meditate on LENGTH of how this Gospel unfolds from Genesis to Calvary – this is to grow in FAITH.

Finally, the Good News of God in Christ is BROAD, in that the Lamb we worship shed his *blood to ransom people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation*. This has been, in fact, a major theme of Ephesians 1 and 2, namely, that all human differences, which often provoke in sinful hearts mutual suspicion and hostility, which incite unhealthy rivalry to the point of hatred and war, fall away when people walk through the doors of God’s Kingdom.

This is the glory that God reveals, not in his Son, but in the Church that Christ goes on to build. Just previous to this morning’s epistle, Paul makes the most amazing statement. He declares that

...through the church the manifold wisdom of God [is] ... made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

It is in the Body of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, that we learn to serve and forgive one another. It is in the Church, the flock whose *Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*, that we the self-centered can acquire the willingness *to lay down our lives for the brothers*. What do we call it, when our realizing that there was no one for whom Christ did not die, that in the Body of Christ

...there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but [that] Christ is all, and in all;

and that we are disciples of him who knelt down to wash his disciple’ feet? This, declares Paul, is

nothing less than *the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*; and in today's reading he also asserts that to reach this point is to be *filled with all the fullness of God*.

How beautiful a church is has nothing to do with its architecture or its music, but with how faithfully its members seek against their own sinfulness to grow in God's grace. God never measures the strength of a congregation by its membership stats or its financial report; but by how its people grow and deepen in their HOPE of salvation, in their FAITH in his mighty acts, and in unselfish LOVE for others.

God knows where our path shall lead. He calls on you, therefore, not to make predictions but to make commitments, not to go about measuring others but to examine yourself, and humbly seek to grow into the man or woman he had in mind when he first called you by the Gospel. He calls on you to understand that if the whole universe is in his hands, so is the life and well-being of every church. Our task is always to fall on our knees to thank him for his goodness, and to seek his strength. ✠