

Ephesians 3A

- We're nearing the end of the first half of Paul's letter, so I think it's a good time to revisit the structure of this letter
 - Remember I said this letter is half doctrine, half practice
 - The first three chapters of the letter teach fundamental principles of our salvation
 - Other than Romans, no other letter of the New Testament dives more deeply into the ramifications of salvation by faith in Christ
 - It's a deep exploration of grace
 - Then the final three chapters of the letter shift gears dramatically to explain how we live out our faith in specific ways
 - Paul explains using spiritual gifts
 - Putting aside sin in our actions and speech
 - Fulfilling our assigned roles in the church and in our families
 - Imitating Christ in resisting greed, showing forgiveness, living called out lives in the midst of an ungodly culture
- Today we start Chapter 3, but it's a short chapter which is why I say we're coming to the end of the first part of this letter
 - Chapter 3 was to be a prayer by Paul on behalf of the church in Ephesus
 - And he does give his prayer
 - But Paul interrupts his prayer to give a parenthetical explanation of an important mystery
 - Remember, I said mysteries are truths God hid from earlier generations but then revealed in the New Testament
 - They are mysteries in the sense that they were previously unknown
 - The mystery Paul discusses is the mystery of the Church, and we'll discuss that mystery in depth as Paul presents it in this chapter

- But because of the way Paul approaches this chapter, I'd like to do something a little different with our study
- Despite our name (Verse By Verse Ministry), I am going to jump around a little in Chapter 3
- First, we're going to study the prayer, since it follows directly from Paul's teaching in Chapters 1-2
- And then after we've studied the prayer, we'll go back and study the mystery, because the mystery serves as the foundation for Paul's teaching in Chapter 4
- The prayer begins in v.1, so let's start there...

Eph. 3:1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles –

- Before we study Paul's prayer, first take note how his prayer is interrupted at the end of that verse
 - In my English translation, the editors placed a em dash at the end of the verse to indicate a break in Paul's thought
 - Now scan down the page in your Bible and look for where Paul returns to his original thought
- At the start of v.14 you see Paul picking up again with his prayer using the same introductory phrase
 - The verse begins again with "for this reason"
 - So if we're to study his prayer, we need to jump from v.1 to v.14 as if vs.2-13 didn't exist
 - And that's what we're going to do this morning so we can study Paul's prayer intact
- So I'm going to read the prayer as a one passage

Eph. 3:1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles –

**Eph. 3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,
Eph. 3:15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,
Eph. 3:16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,
Eph. 3:17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love,**

[Eph. 3:18](#) may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
[Eph. 3:19](#) and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

- Since Paul repeated the phrase “for this reason,” let’s start by asking the obvious question, “What reason?”
 - The reason is the argument Paul made in Chapters 1 & 2
 - In those chapters, Paul explained how believers have received immeasurable blessings from God
 - From before the foundations of the Earth, we were selected to be God’s own possession in Christ
 - From the Godhead, we receive promises of righteousness, peace, spiritual gifts and eternal blessings
 - And for that reason, as a result of all that we’ve received, Paul prays that the church would come to appreciate all these things
 - Specifically, circle some key thoughts in Paul’s prayer
 - In v.16, the phrase strengthened with power
 - In v.17, the phrase rooted and grounded in love
 - In v.18, the word comprehend
 - And in v.19 the words to know and to be filled up
 - These words or phrases form the outline of Paul’s prayer and will guide our understanding this morning
- Back to the top for a moment, Paul begins by describing himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus
 - The word prisoner sounds negative of course, but in the context of v.1 it conveys a distinctly positive meaning
 - While we may not like the idea of being a prisoner, the truth is that all humanity is a prisoner of someone
 - We learned earlier in Chapter 2 that all humanity is born slaves to the enemy and to sin

- We are all born into bondage to the enemy because we come into the world sharing the enemy's fallen nature
- Therefore, we also share his condemnation, and it's impossible to escape that sentence on our own, thus we are a prisoner to our condition
- But by the grace of God, we may be born again in the nature of Christ, so that by faith in Christ we receive His spirit
 - Our new spirit is incapable of sin, because we are placed in bondage or slavery to Christ
 - As Paul says in Romans

[Rom. 6:22](#) But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

- Frequently, the epistle writers refer to themselves as bondslaves to Christ
- So if you're going to be a slave, far better to serve the Living God Who loves us and grants us eternal life than to serve His enemy
- Paul then adds that his service to Christ was dedicated to the needs of the Gentiles
 - Paul, an eminent Jew, was commanded by the Lord to begin the recruitment of a Gentile church
 - Paul says in 1 Timothy he was commanded by God to serve
 - Do you remember Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, as the Lord literally arrested him and enlisted him?
 - Paul is simply emphasizing his life is dedicated to the needs of his readers, therefore his prayer is sincere and heartfelt
- And then we move to v.14 where Paul begins to pray to the Father
 - Notice that Paul directs his prayer to the Father specifically
 - We always pray to our Heavenly Father
 - We know the Son is interceding for us in our prayers at the right hand of the Father
 - But the destination for prayer is always the Father

- As Jesus Himself taught us when He told us to pray “Our Father in Heaven...”
- Secondly, notice Paul says his prayer is offered as he bows his knees
 - It’s curious that Paul thinks to mentions his prayer posture
 - Paul must have included the detail of bowing to his knees to communicate something to us about prayer
 - And what it communicates is that Paul approaches the Creator with reverence and submission to His sovereign power
 - Notice in v.15 that Paul acknowledges the Father’s authority to determine everyone’s place in Heaven and on earth
 - It’s like the history of Creation is a giant chess board, and the Father has arranged every piece just as He pleases
- So Paul bows to his knees as he begins to offer a prayer on behalf of the saints in Ephesus
 - Your posture is more than a matter of convenience or preference
 - It’s not simply ritual
 - Your physical posture is as important as your heart attitude when you approach the Lord in prayer
 - Because one reflects the other
 - Our posture reflects how seriously we take the opportunity to speak to the Father
 - In scripture when we read of men praying – whether prophet or king, shepherd or farmer – you often see them bowing, face down, prostrate
 - They were driven to the ground in recognition of their own unworthiness
 - They were acknowledging the Father’s supreme holiness
 - Their minds and hearts were fully engaged and submitted to God in prayer, and so their posture followed suit
- So here’s Paul, fully engaged in heartfelt prayer, compelled to drop to his knees by his appreciation for all the Father is and all He has done
 - And this brings us to the first of our key thoughts in v.16

- Paul prays the Father would grant His church in Ephesus to be strengthened spiritually by God's power
- Spiritual strength in the inner man is spiritual fortitude, spiritual maturity
- He's describing a Christian gaining power over his or her flesh, becoming less susceptible to the enemy's schemes
- It's power from the Spirit of God to lead us into a closer walk, one dependent on the Spirit of God and less dependent on our own desires
- For Ephesus, spiritual strength was the first order of business, since this community was prone to leaving their first love
 - They were surrounded by a rich ungodly culture so their flesh was a strong adversary
 - They needed strengthening from the power of the Holy Spirit
- If a Christian is not interested in seeking spiritual strength at the expense of the flesh, then not much more is possible for them
 - Trying to teach, guide or encourage a believer who isn't seeking spiritual strength is like trying to train a runner who won't tie his shoes
 - God is the One Who grants spiritual strength, but He grants it to those Who seek for it
 - And we should be making appeals to the Lord for increasing spiritual strength to prepare us for the rest of our journey with Him
- That brings us to the second mile marker in Paul's prayer in v.17: being rooted and grounded in love
 - The verse begins with the phrase "so that" indicating that should the Father grant Paul's request in v.16, then it may lead to the next step
 - The next step is that Christ would then dwell in their hearts
 - Paul was writing to believers, so these Christians already had the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them by faith
 - Therefore we know Paul was speaking of something else

- You could translate v.17 to read “that Christ be at home in your hearts”
 - By gaining spiritual strength in our inner man, we become a place where Christ may feel at home
 - Christ indwells every believer by His Spirit but He dwells in us when our thoughts and behaviors mirror His
 - It’s the difference between Christ being in the backseat of your car or behind the wheel
- Paul prayed that the thoughts of Christ would become the thoughts of the church, and as a result the church would be rooted and grounded in love
 - To be rooted in something means to find our supply in that thing
 - The roots supply the rest of the plant with everything
 - If you place a color dye in a houseplant’s water, you can change the color of the entire plant
 - So what are you rooted in? Where do you go for your supply?
 - When a Christian is rooted in love, we’re saying the person has tapped into the mind of Christ
 - By study of His word, by a growing spiritual strength made possible by appeals to the riches of God’s mercy, by crucifying our flesh, we sink roots in Christ
 - Then as we face life’s decisions, we draw from Christ’s love
 - So we say the loving words, we think the loving thoughts, we do the loving things instead of what our flesh desires
 - And to be grounded refers to the foundation of a building
 - A building is grounded in the sense that it rests on something unmovable, something steady
 - So Paul prays the church in Ephesus would be grounded in love
 - That they would not be distracted, tempted, or otherwise drawn away from Christ and from His love
- The chain of Paul’s prayer is starting to make sense...can you see it?
 - He prayed for spiritual strength by the power of the Spirit, because the church relied too much on personal strength

- Strength of finance, position, reputation, power, influence, etc.
- And therefore, they were prone to leave their first love, to overlook the spiritual blessings they have in Christ
- To overlook how blessed they are already
- And by that spiritual strength they begin to make their home a place Christ may dwell
 - They will tap into the love of Christ
 - They will be grounded on Christ's love
 - And then as a church, they become resistant to chasing after the world's pleasures and rewards over those found in Christ's love
- And from this place of strength and steadiness, rooted in God's love, real spiritual understanding becomes possible
 - In particular, Paul prayed that from a position of spiritual maturity, believers in Ephesus might comprehend of the love of Christ
 - The term comprehend also means to lay hold of or to seize something
 - So Paul desires the church would take hold of something they already possess, though they are overlooking because of spiritual immaturity
 - And the thing he wants them to comprehend or seize is God's love, which Paul describes by four terms
 - Breadth, length, height and depth
 - The terms are intentionally vague because Paul is describing the limitless of God's love
 - Yet the four terms each have unique meaning in describing our experiencing God's love
- First, the breadth of God's love describes its all-encompassing nature
 - God's love is not reserved for just some kinds of people, like Jews or the pious
 - God's love, His mercy, His forgiveness, His riches are available to Jew and Gentile, kings and paupers, priests and pagans

- God's love is broad enough for everyone
- If the church in Ephesus could take hold of the breadth of God's love in Christ, they would see the world differently
 - And they would cease worrying about individual status or personal standing apart from their standing in Christ
 - Jewish believers would embrace Gentile believers and vice versa
 - The church would have united as a single family, and from their unity they could show the love of Christ to the entire city
- Secondly, the length of God's love refers to His limitless reach
 - Is someone too far for God to reach? Is someone too evil, too hardened, too unworthy?
 - No, because the length of God's love reaches as far as the ends of the earth and into the hardest of hearts
 - Remember the people of Nineveh
 - Remember Saul on the road to Damascus
 - Paul himself says in 1 Timothy that he was called as an apostle specifically to demonstrate the length God was willing to go to extend forgiveness
 - If god could reach them, He could reach anyone
 - And for the Christian, the love of God can reach us no matter how far we stray
 - No matter how completely our sin may consume us
 - Or how discouraged we may become in our walk
 - God's love reaches further, His forgiveness never runs out
 - His grace is sufficient
 - If the church in Ephesus could comprehend the length of God's love, they would have seen the unsaved in Ephesus with more compassion
 - They might have taken their commission as ambassadors for Christ more seriously

- They would come to recognize there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who belong to Christ and those who don't (yet)
- And even after they forgot their first love and drifted away, they might have been drawn back by God's love
- Thirdly, the height of God's love refers to its inexhaustible and triumphant supply
 - God's love just keeps piling up, and it's always sufficient to address our deepest emotional needs, satisfying us in ways the world can't
 - In its immaturity, the church in Ephesus had turned to looking for love in all the wrong places
 - They valued good teaching but they also seemed to value the world's attention, rewards and pleasures
 - But the things the world offers just don't satisfy in the end, and they certainly can't meet our longing for contentment
 - If you've ever squandered a season of your life chasing after the world's rewards, then you already know how unsatisfying the pursuit can be
 - The thrill of the shiny toy, the challenge of the new job, the excitement of the new relationship...none of them satisfy
 - Once we get past the obsession and realize it was a waste of time, we look back on that pursuit and wonder why we were so foolish
 - But unless we ground ourselves in the love of Christ, we're likely to repeat that mistake over again
 - But after you've tapped into the love of Christ so that you are walking in spiritual strength, having become an imitator of Christ, then your life begins to change
 - You come to know the height of God's love
 - You can't exhaust God's love
 - You experience a joy in serving Him that surpasses anything you could find in the world
 - You find the reward of contentment

- Certainly, life won't become perfect, and we still experience disappointments and tragedies
 - But the height of God's love leaves us satisfied in Christ all the more when the world lets us down
 - When you have anchored your satisfaction in life in the love of Christ for you and His riches reserved in eternity, then you aren't rocked by life's disappointments
 - You see those afflictions as momentary and light, because the love of God given to you in Christ towers above them all
- Finally, Paul prays we would know the depth of God's love, which refers to His unlimited mercy and supply
 - God's power to bring us joy far surpasses the degree of sorrow the world can inflict
 - Believers walking in spiritual strength rooted in God's love still face difficulties in life
 - But by God's love we can face them with a resilience the world can't understand
 - We still have feelings...we still feel pain, or anger or resentment, at least for a moment
 - But the depths of Christ's love brings a new, mature perspective to those circumstances
 - The church in Ephesus dearly needed to appreciate the depths of God's love, because the things they were chasing were going to lead to ruin
 - Historically, we know this city entered into a decades-long economic decline
 - The port harbor they depended upon for trade began to silt up and as it did, commercial trade disappeared
 - This city of wealth became a city of ruin, but what of the Christians in the city who chased for the wealth the city offered?
 - Where would they be once the city crumbled?
 - If they could set a foundation of Christ's love, then nothing could shake them

- Their joy wouldn't depend on economic trends or commercial success
- They might know the fullness of God
- Notice Paul ends v.19 praying for that outcome
 - He prays the church could be filled with the fullness of God
 - He asks that the church might find its complete satisfaction in the full mercy, grace and peace that comes from an abiding walk with the Lord
 - Does the thought of such contentment seem out of reach to you?
 - Does it sound like religious speak? Like fairytale?
 - Perhaps you're listening to the Bible's teaching this morning, yet you're doubting that such a life of contentment is possible for you
 - If so, then you haven't been listening
 - You're thinking that God's love has limits
 - You've forgotten that it has no limit in breadth, length, height and depth
 - You're assuming that you have to work hard to obtain what God freely gives to those who rest in Him
- And Paul seemed to know you and I might have such doubts, because he ends his letter with a strong encouragement for us to pray this same prayer ourselves

[Eph. 3:20](#) 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,
[Eph. 3:21](#) to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

- The Lord is able to do things you can't even imagine
 - And even more impressively, God is ready to do things you have already assumed He isn't willing to do
 - You want to step away from an addiction, but you assume God isn't willing to help

- You're feeling led to change your job or your career plans, but you fear God won't be there to provide
- You're burdened with guilt for some terrible mistake or you're afraid to reach out to someone in need
- Whatever it is you can't see past, you've been assuming the love of God didn't reach that far
- But the word of God says the Lord can do far more in us and for us and through us than we could ever know
 - And if you pray to be strengthened in the Spirit
 - And as you direct your life according to Christ's desires, the love of God will manifest itself in your life in ways big and small
 - You will come to see the riches of God's love for you in Christ
- I'm not saying everything in your life will become perfect
 - But in time, you will because of the power of God working in you
 - And you will know contentment and peace
 - To Him be the glory in this church, and in Christ Jesus to all our generations forever and ever, Amen.