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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Big Prayers, Bigger God

Ephesians 3:14–21

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series: Sit, Walk, Stand: A Journey Through Ephesians

Part of the ritual of graduating from high school or college is listening to graduation speeches. I never gave one but I've listened to a few. One of themes that often comes up in these speeches is the importance of dreaming big. The message is sent that you have limitless potential and the only thing holding you back is your own unwillingness to dream the impossible dream. And often times examples are given of people who did just that.

People like Larry Page and Sergey Brin. In 1998 they picked the number one followed by 100 zeroes while still grad students at Stanford. That number in math terms is called a googol, and that became the name of their new business—Google. Today, they operate the largest search engine on earth. Here were two men who dared to think on a huge scale and turned that into a great product.

Or we might hear about someone like David Burnham. He was an architect who developed the plans for cities like Chicago and Washington D.C. During his career Burnham said: "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans. Aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency."

That's the kind of thing we like to hear in a graduation speech. But I wonder if it's really true? Is it true you and I are limited by our inability to think and dream in limitless ways? As followers of Jesus, he has no limits. He turned water into wine. He healed a man born blind. He raised a 12-year-old girl from death. He showed us we serve a God who knows no limits.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, "*To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?*" Then he said, "*lift up your eyes and look to the heavens.*" When we look up into the sky we see just our own galaxy, with about 200 billion stars. Astronomers estimate the universe contains 50 to 60 billion other galaxies, many of which are much bigger than ours! But God says look into the heavens and then he asks, "*Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing*" (Is 40:25–26). God says, "You want to know how big I am? Take the 200 billion stars in your galaxy, throw in the stars from 50 billion other galaxies, and not only did I create them, but I know each of them by name." That's amazing! I can't even remember the names of my three kids!

God's power and knowledge are without limits. But the question remains: Can **we** tap into that power? If so, how does that happen? What does that look like? If we're honest, deep down we know we don't always experience that power. We feel very limited. We struggle with sin. Our families are sometimes in disarray. Life beats us up. Things don't go the way we want. We can get discouraged.

I think the Ephesians believers were experiencing that. I don't think they doubted God's limitless power, but they were having a hard time seeing that power at work in their own lives. That's why Paul says in 3:13, "*I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you...*" He said that because they **were** discouraged! "If God is so powerful, why are you in prison, Paul? If God is so powerful, why am I still struggling?" And so, in v. 14 he turns to prayer. It's not the first time he's prayed for them in this letter. He did so in chapter 1 as well. But he prays, and in doing so he reveals the secret. How can we experience the limitless possibilities of God? Not through positive thinking, but through prayer. Through prayer we learn God's capacity for giving far exceeds our capacity for asking.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 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. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, 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 all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14–19).

We Pray in Humble Submission to the Father of All.

In the first part of his prayer Paul shows an attitude of humble submission. It was customary for Jews and early Christians to stand when they prayed, but Paul says he **kneels**. You'd only kneel when you were desperate and passionate. The Bible doesn't lay down rules about what posture we should pray in. We can pray kneeling, sitting, standing, walking or even laying down. But sometimes it just fits for us to humble ourselves and kneel before him.

Notice how he describes the One he kneels before: he's "*the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives*

its name.” We know Jesus taught us to address God as our Father, but here Paul reminds us every family grouping in heaven and on earth gets its name from him. In that society, fathers passed their name on to their children. We do the same thing. I got the name “Mitchell” from my father and he got it from his father. It’s a way of showing not just our connection to them but our dependence on them. We owe our existence to our fathers; we came from them. In that sense every family in heaven and on earth bears his name. And just as Jesus taught us, he’s a Father who delights in giving *“good gifts to those who ask him”* (Mt 7:11). Paul reminds us in v. 16 he gives out of *“his glorious riches.”* His resources are unlimited. He’s not a Father who holds back.

I recall as a kid my father carried a billfold and in it there was always a wad of money. And my dad was very generous. I never recall a time when I asked and he didn’t pull his billfold out. I must admit I’m not that kind of father. First of all, I never carry cash. But, even if I did, I wouldn’t be quite so openhanded. But God is more like my dad than me! Aren’t you glad?

We Pray to Experience God’s Power, Love and Fullness.

In verses 16–19 we have the substance of Paul’s prayer. He’s told us who he prays to, but now he tells us what he prays for. There are really just three things here. I like to think of these three things as a staircase where he climbs higher and higher in his aspirations for us. It’s not that when you go up a step you leave the other one behind, but rather each builds on the other and brings us to a higher place. We can summarize each step with a word. First he prays for power. Next he prays for love. Finally he prays for fullness. Let’s take these one at a time.

We pray to experience God’s power

He starts out and he prays for power. This is God’s power. He says several things about it. It’s a power that *“strengthens”* us. Do you need strength? Strength to endure a trial? Strength to overcome temptation? Strength to accomplish a task? He gives strength.

It’s also power that comes *“through his Spirit.”* The Spirit of God; the One who is God comes to reside in us when we believe. That’s why he says this power is actually experienced in our *“inner being.”* That’s where the Spirit lives and that’s where we need strength the most. It’s out of our “inner being” that everything flows—our choices, our attitudes, our values.

And he prays this *“so that Christ will dwell in your hearts through faith.”* This phrase goes with what he just said. Both refer to our inner life—our inner being on the one hand and our heart on the other. Both refer to the living God dwelling in us—the Spirit of God on the one hand and Christ on the other.

You might wonder, if the Spirit already indwells everyone who puts their faith in him, why does he pray this? We know these were believers. Why pray for what they already had? The key to

this is the word he uses for *“dwell.”* That word actually means to settle down somewhere; not a temporary stay, but a permanent residence. When we moved last August, we stayed in a Residence Inn. It was awesome—breakfast bar in the morning, gym, pool, even a maid! But it wasn’t home. We couldn’t really settle in. Paul prays Christ would settle into our hearts, strengthening each area of our lives.

Years ago, Bob Munger wrote a booklet called, *My Heart—Christ’s Home*, based on this very verse. He said, “Without question one of the most remarkable Christian doctrines is Jesus Christ himself through the Holy Spirit will actually enter a heart, settle down and be at home there. Christ will live in any human heart that welcomes him.” He uses the imagery of a home with many rooms to bring out the full meaning of having Jesus actually residing in our lives. He describes all the different “rooms” in our lives: the Study, the Living Room, the Play Room, even the Hall Closet where we hide stuff. He asks the question, if Jesus moved in and made his home there, what would have to change? What would it look like for you to experience his power and strength in every room of your life?

By the way, notice how this power is activated—*“through faith.”* That’s what he says. You have to trust him. You have to believe he’s there, living in you, and that he’s able to meet any challenge in your life. Do you have that faith?

We pray to experience God’s love

Let’s go to the second step—love. When Christ dwells in our hearts, we will be *“rooted and established in love.”* He mixes metaphors here: deep roots and firm foundations. Like a deeply rooted plant he prays our roots will sink deep in the soil of his love. Like a well established house, he wants us to build on the foundation of that love. Both of these images are a picture of stability and security. A deeply rooted tree and a house with a firm foundation can stand against a storm because they’re stable and secure. What will allow you to stand in the middle of one of life’s storms? It’s his love! His love never changes. His love endures forever. People often fail us, but he never does.

It’s interesting both roots and foundations are normally beneath the surface and thus not readily visible. You and I have an unseen source of love that allows us to endure rejection, failure and loneliness. We don’t have to try to impress people because deep down at the very core of our being we know we’re loved.

But Paul isn’t content to have us simply rooted and established in love. He also wants us to *“have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”* Again, God gives us this power through his Spirit in our hearts. But here it’s a power to comprehend the vast dimensions of his love. His love is wide enough to encompass all mankind, long enough to last for eternity, deep enough to reach

the most vile sinner, and high enough to lift him up to heaven. Some have seen in this an allusion to the cross with its width and length. That may or may not be what Paul has in mind, but we know what Jesus said: *“Greater love has no man than this, than he should lay his life down for his friends.”* This is a love that *“surpasses knowledge.”* It’s not an intellectual thing. It’s not something you can study and investigate and have nailed down. It’s too big for that.

There’s something else to see here: we’ll only have this power to grasp his love *“together with all the Lord’s holy people.”* Not only is this love for all his people, but it can only be learned and experienced in fellowship with God’s people. You don’t learn about God’s love in isolation. You learn about it in community.

In a book called *Leadership Jazz*, Max DePree writes about his granddaughter, Zoe. She was born prematurely and weighed one pound, seven ounces, so small that his wedding ring could slide up her arm to her shoulder. The neonatologist who first examined her said she had a 5 to 10 % chance of living three days. When he saw Zoe in the neonatal intensive care unit, she had two IVs in her navel, one in her foot, a monitor on each side of her chest, and a respirator tube and a feeding tube in her mouth.

To complicate matters, Zoe’s biological father had jumped ship the month before Zoe was born. Realizing this, a wise nurse gave Max his instructions. “For the next several months, at least, you’re the surrogate father. I want you to come to the hospital every day to visit Zoe, and when you come, I want you to rub her body and legs and arms with the tip of your finger. While you’re caressing her, you should tell her over and over how much you love her, because she has to be able to connect your voice to your touch.

You see, God knew we also need both his voice and his touch. We need to hear his word, but he also gave us also his body, the church, through which we feel God’s touch and hear him say, “I love you.”

We pray to experience God’s fullness

Right when we think Paul can’t go any higher, he adds one more thing: *“...that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”* Having grasped the love of God, we can be filled with the fullness of God. Now we’ve reached the top. This is what God made humanity for. He made us to be vessels filled and flooded with God himself, manifesting his character in all we think and do and say.

It’s like when you look on the label of a bottle and it says, “Blueberry, 100 percent juice, all natural.” There’s a picture of mounds of ripe blueberries. But then you read the ingredient list. Where’s the blueberry? Finally you find them, at the bottom of the list, after filtered water and “natural flavors.” The enticing pictures and clever labeling are decoys to sell a diluted, blueberry-flavored product, disguised to look like something it’s not.

Have you ever wondered, What if I had an ingredients list on me? Would God be the main ingredient? If not, how far down the list would he be? Would my “label” accurately represent my contents? Or would I falsely project a misleading outward appearance that cleverly masks diluted ingredients? My packaging may be convincing. I may look and sound like the real thing. But what if someone came to me looking for Jesus beneath my “Christian” label and found something else? Something Jesus-flavored, but not Jesus-filled?

To be filled up with God is the condition in which God is in possession and control of our lives, enriching us, strengthening us and using us. Later in 5:18 Paul says, *“Do not get drunk on wine. Instead be filled with the Spirit.”* When we’re filled with him we show the fruits of his Spirit: love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self control. In short, we’re like Christ. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine God filling your life to the extent that you’re filled up with the fullness of God?

Honestly, this seems like an audacious request! He prays we’d have his power to strengthen us and his love to establish us. I can get a hold of that. But to be filled up to the fullness of God? That’s a bold request! You climb this staircase and you’re going to be short of breath.

We Pray to the One Whose Capacity for Giving Exceeds Our Capacity for Asking.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (verses 20–21).

But then he ends with these words. Do you see what he’s saying? He’s saying God’s capacity for giving far exceeds our capacity for asking. Through the limitless power that works within us, he’s able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. And since this power comes from him, the glory must forever go to him in the church and in Christ Jesus.

In his book *The Divine Commodity*, Skye Jethani shares a story from a trip he took to India with his father. While walking the streets of New Delhi, a little boy approached them. He was “skinny as a rail, and naked but for tattered blue shorts.” His legs were stiff and contorted. He couldn’t walk and had to waddle along on his calloused knees. He made his way toward them and cried out, “One rupee, please! One rupee!” Skye’s father finally responded:

“What do you want?” the father asked.

“One rupee, sir,” the boy said while motioning his hand to his mouth and bowing his head in deference. The father laughed.

"How about I give you five rupees?" he said. The boy's countenance suddenly became defiant. He retracted his hand and sneered. He thought Skye's father was joking, having a laugh at his expense. I mean, who would willingly give up five rupees? The boy started shuffling away, mumbling curses under his breath.

But Skye's father reached into his pocket. Hearing the coins jingle, the boy stopped and looked back. Skye's father was holding out a five-rupee coin. He approached the stunned boy and placed the coin in his hand. The boy didn't move or say a word. He just stared at the coin. They passed him and proceeded to cross the street.

A moment later the shouting resumed, except this time the boy was yelling, "Thank you! Thank you, sir! Bless you!" He raced after them, not for more money but to touch the father's feet.

This, I imagine, is how it is with God. His capacity for giving far exceeds our capacity for asking. So rather than asking for what we truly desire, rather than asking for what he's able and willing to give, we settle for lesser things. Let's not settle for lesser things. Let's ask for more of his power to strengthen us and more of his love to anchor us. And let's even have the audacity to pray we could be filled up to the fullness of God!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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