

Right In The Middle Of It

Ephesians 3:14-19

A small boy and his father were in a boat a few miles out from land. It was one of those times when a father and son could spend time together, just the two of them. Times like that prompt conversations that might normally never happen. Knowing that he had his dad's full attention, the boy began asking the kinds of questions that little boys ask.

They were the usual questions, such as "why is the sky blue?" and "why is the water wet?" And dad very patiently answered those questions the best he could. Finally, the little boy asked, "How big is God's love?" The father thought a moment then said, "Look straight up, son; how far can you see?" It seemed to the boy that he could see forever! So the dad told his son that God's love is like that.

He then took him to other parts of the boat and told him to look out to the distant horizons as far as he could see. All the boy could see was where the water met the sky. The dad said, "God's love is wider than that!" He then told the awestruck boy to look down into the depths of the water, and asked him, "Can you see the bottom?" The little boy could only shake his head. Then he told his son, "That's how deep God's love is."

With wonder in his eyes, the boy exclaimed, "Wow! And here we are right in the middle of it!"

How does one dare to preach a sermon on the love of God? It is a subject so vast and beyond our comprehension that no words in any human language could ever adequately describe it. It is a theme so deep that no human brain could ever completely understand it. Its truth is so overwhelming that none of us can fully embrace it. Even the Apostle Paul had difficulty in unfolding the concept that Almighty God could love us that much. He already had trouble describing the riches of Christ; in fact, in 3:8 he just called them "the unsearchable riches of Christ," meaning that while we can know them and experience them, we would never reach the end of them.

There are two prayers in the letter to the Ephesians. The first is in chapter one, beginning in verse 15; the second is in our passage for today, 3:14-19. There are several things that Paul wrote he was praying for them, each of them adding to the one before it like a snowball rolling downhill in wet snow. You can feel this prayer getting bigger and richer as it moves along.

First, in verse sixteen, Paul wrote, *“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”* Literally, Paul prayed that God would “empower them with power.” This power comes from “his glorious riches.”

Second, in verse seventeen, *“...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”* That word translated “dwell” in verse seventeen literally means to settle down and be at home. It refers to a permanent dwelling. Is Christ at home in your heart and life? Once that happens, once it becomes a reality in your life, we can begin to move into the realm of knowing something of God’s love.

Sure, we know those precious words in John 3:16—*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* We are familiar with Romans 5:8, which reads, *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* The words of 1 John 3:1 resonate with something deep inside me everything I read them: *“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”*

But just reading those words would do nothing to bring us into a full and right relationship with God. This is the kind of love that, even though we can’t fully explain it, is something that can be experienced. We’re going to follow Paul’s thought process here so hopefully we can understand all this a little better.

So, third, Paul continued his prayer in verse 17 that they would be *“... rooted and established in love.”* Take a brief look at two words in this verse. The first word is “rooted,” which was an agricultural term, referring to the roots of a tree that has gone down deeply into the soil. The idea here is that the roots of our faith, our life in Christ, should go down deeply into the soil of His love—that our living for Him and our experience of His love should be more than shallow, meaningless words.

The second word is “established,” or in some versions, “grounded.” That is an architectural term; it refers to the foundation of a building. Our lives should be built firmly and securely on the foundation of Christ. Put those two together: *“rooted and established in love.”* Go down deep in your relationship to Christ; establish a firm foundation, because there’s much more here to experience and know. What does the foundation of your life look like? Is it built on things that won’t even be here in a few years, or is it built on the Rock, which is Christ?

Paul's prayer in verse 18 was that we might "grasp," a word meaning "to seize," the immensity of Christ's love. In verse 19, he prayed that we might come "*to know this love that surpasses knowledge.*" Pay attention to that: he prayed that we could know something that is *beyond knowledge*. How can that be possible?

Let's dig a little deeper. The word translated "know" in verse 19 means "to know on an intimate basis." A similar word is used in the Old Testament to refer to the relationship of a husband and wife. It means to know something because you've experienced it. We've talked about this before, when we used the metaphor of experiencing the Grand Canyon. I can read about it, watch documentaries about it and see photographs that have been taken of it, but unless I've been there and actually been down inside it, I've really haven't experienced the Grand Canyon. We can read the Bible, hear other people sing or talk about God's love, and even preach or sing about it ourselves. But until we've experienced it, until we have really known the love of God on an intimate level, we don't really know anything about it.

Look again. The word "knowledge" very likely refers to human knowledge. So Paul is saying, "I'm praying that God will give you the power to experience the love of Christ on a deeply intimate level that goes so far beyond the bounds of human knowledge that it can't even be described."

So exactly how does Paul describe it? Let's go back to verse 18, where Paul wrote that he was praying that they "*may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.*" Stop there for a moment. It seems that Paul is just not completely able to describe the immensity of the love of Christ. Human words are not good enough; the love of Christ cannot be measured. When he uses words such as "*wide and long and high and deep*" he's not talking about dimensions. When we read in the book of Genesis about the ark that Noah built, we can read the exact dimensions. When we read about the Tabernacle in which the people were to worship God while they were in the wilderness, we can read the exact dimensions.

But whenever the Bible talks about the love of God, or the love of Christ, there are no such measurements. Just think about the words the Bible uses when it talks about God's love. In Jeremiah 31:3 God says, "*I have loved you with an everlasting love.*" Outside of the Bible, can we even comprehend an *everlasting* love? No. There are plenty of human love stories that inspire us and move us, but even those are not everlasting. There was a beginning to them, and there is an end.

But even the word “everlasting” does not completely describe what God’s love is like. It’s almost as if God had to restrain Himself, as if He knew that our little brains couldn’t be wrapped around the vastness of His love, so He had to scale it back to the word “everlasting.” Theologians even struggle with this. Some of them read Ephesians 3:18 and they talk about the “dimensions” or the “proportions” of God’s love. But that’s not right.

The word “dimensions” implies that there are exact measurements that can be made, that we can actually say how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is. Paul wasn’t talking about the dimensions of the love of Christ so much as he was talking about the immensity of it, the enormity of it, and he was saying that it’s bigger and vaster than anything any of us could ever imagine. It’s like trying to describe the entirety of the U.S. tax code to a five-year-old.

So how enormous is the love of Christ?

It’s wider than all of mankind. It’s wide enough to include not only the Jews but also the Gentiles, which is what Paul has been writing about so far in this letter, remember? That means that no matter who you are, where you’ve been or what you’ve done, God’s love is wide enough to include you.

It’s longer than the longest night. It’s longer than the span of your lifetime. It’s longer than the season of depression you find yourself in. It’s longer than the trial you’re in.

It’s higher than the highest star. It’s so high that it reaches all the way to the throne of God Himself, and if we are in His love, that means that at every second, every moment, we have instant access to Him.

It’s deeper than the lowest, most despicable, filthiest sin that you and I could dream of. That means that there is no sin so foul that the love of Christ cannot cover. There is no sinner so evil that he or she cannot be included in the love of Christ.

There’s one more word we should look at today, one that we often overlook whenever we read this verse: “*how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.*” Notice that it doesn’t say that’s the way it used to be, nor will it become that way at some distant point in the future. It *is*. So no matter at which point we find ourselves in our lives, the love of Christ *is*. No matter which day it is, the love of Christ *is*. No matter what the doctor says; no matter the dire predictions of the

economists; no matter the increasing changes we see in the mirror; the love of Christ *is*.

So if the love of Christ *is* wide and long and high and deep, where does that put us? Remember the little boy on the boat with his dad? “Wow! Here we are right in the middle of it!”

Shortly after I became a follower of Christ, I was introduced to that beautiful hymn *The Love of God*. Those long years ago I was touched most by the words of the third stanza:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

That’s poetry; allow me to interpret it. If we could replace all the water in all the oceans with ink; if the entire sky was made of parchment on which we could write; if every stalk of wheat or grass on the entire planet was a pen; and if every person on the planet spent all their time writing—we would drain the oceans dry, and even if we stretched that scroll from one horizon to the other, it could still not contain the entire truth or description of Christ’s love for us. He proved it when He went to the cross for us. If you’ve allowed Christ to move into your life, settle in and make Himself at home in your heart, if you’ve chosen Christ to be the Foundation for your life, if you’ve planted yourself deeply into Him, then you can know this love that surpasses human knowledge.

Be encouraged by that! You’re going through a difficult, heart-wrenching time right now—you’re in the middle of Christ’s love. Loneliness creeps in when you least expect it—Christ’s love surrounds you in inexhaustible, immeasurable expanses. Regrets and sorrows come flooding in, and your emotions well up—still the fact remains that you are in the very middle of the love of Christ. Disappointments come crashing in—and still, *still*, the love of Christ completely surrounds you in boundless measure. Regardless of the darkness or trial you find yourself in, regardless of the duration of the difficulty, the love of Christ will always be there. There is nothing you can do that would ever make God withdraw

that love from you. You cannot hide from it, outrun it, outgrow it, or exhaust it. No matter where life takes you or what it throws at you, you are right in the middle of the love of Christ.

Dean Register has written about his five-year-old grandson, Judson, who asked him one day, “Papa, does God still love you?” Dean smiled and replied, “Yes, Jud, I believe He does.” Little Judson came back with, “Well, Papa, why has He stopped letting the hair grow on the back of your head?”

Aren’t you glad that we have much more than our physical appearance to assure us of God’s continued love for us? Aren’t you glad that Christ’s love is more than that? It is so much more than that! And though it is so vast that it cannot be described with human words or definitions, it is available to us today.

If you saw the film *The Hiding Place* you saw the actress Jeanette Clift George playing the role of Corrie ten Boom. Ms. George was once on a short flight from Tucson to Phoenix, seated near a young mother with her baby girl. Both of them were dressed in white pinafores; the baby had a little pink bow in her hair. Mom was smiling, and the baby kept saying “Dada, Dada,” every time someone walked down the aisle. The mother explained to those seated nearby that Daddy was waiting for them after they had been gone for a few days.

There was a lot of turbulence, which was hard on the baby. Mom was prepared, though, with some fruit and a small Thermos bottle with orange juice. Every time the baby cried, the mother would give her a little more orange juice and a little more fruit. And that’s right: the inevitable happened. Eventually, all that fruit and orange juice that had gone down came right back up.

But now there seemed to be a lot more of it! Not only were the mother and the baby covered in it, but so were several of their neighbors, including Jeanette George. Fortunately, all of the passengers were gracious and tried to help the mother and reassure her that everything was okay. Here’s the scene: the baby was crying, and she looked awful. The fellow passengers looked—and smelled—pretty awful.

As soon as they landed, the baby was fine and once again began calling: “Dada, Dada.” Waiting for the plane was a young man who had to be “Dada.” He was wearing white slacks, a white shirt, and he carried white flowers. Guess what that clean Daddy, all dressed in white, did when he saw his baby who had that sticky, smelly stuff all over her clothes and her face and her hair?

He ran to the young mother, who handed the baby over so she could go get cleaned up. Then Daddy held that little girl, and he hugged her and he kissed her and he stroked her hair. As he held her close, he said, “Daddy’s baby’s come home. Daddy’s baby’s come home.” All the way to the luggage claim area, he never stopped kissing that baby and welcoming her back home.

Ms. George thought, “Where did I ever get the idea that my Father God is less loving than a young daddy in white slacks and white shirt with white flowers in his hand?”

Do you realize just how much God loves you? He loves you so much that He is willing to pick you up and hug and kiss you—you *and* me with all the messes of our lives. *That’s* how big the love of God is—and we’re right in the middle of it.