Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“In Christ: In Over Our Heads”
Ephesians 3:14-21

This passage may sound familiar. If you’ve been with us throughout this series “In Christ,” as we’ve been walking through Ephesians chapters 1-3, you may remember that this was in fact where we started seven weeks ago. Next week, we’ll wrap up this series with a look ahead in a few verses in chapter four, and the week after that, two weeks from today, we’ll begin a new series called “Thirst.” What is it about us that has this longing for God? Where does it come from? What do we do about it? We’ll start that in two weeks. But for today, obviously, with us reading a passage twice, I suppose I might be tempted just to trot out the same sermon as seven weeks ago just to see if anybody noticed, but that’s a game for a bolder preacher than I. For now, even for a second time around, my hope is that we can again come to a heartfelt, beautiful prayer of an imprisoned Apostle, concerned for the well-being of the church. Will you pray with me?

Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

One of the most influential theologians in the twentieth century was a Swiss pastor named Karl Barth. Some of you may have heard of him, some of you may not have. He’s credited with rescuing European theology from this pseudo-spiritual humanist blob in the 19th century, refocusing on the Trinity, on orthodoxy, on Scripture, and most of all, on Jesus.

But if you ever have the fortune of reading him, or depending on how you look at it, the misfortune of reading him, you will quickly realize that the man didn’t come to a point quickly. He is notoriously wordy. He’ll spiral around a topic, and right when you think he’s going to land something, he’ll introduce something else. A very biblical writer, but the guy is long-winded. So long-winded in fact that the work he’s best known for, his magnum opus called Church Dogmatics, is over six million words long and he never actually finished it.

As a result, he was at times susceptible to some light jabs, but he was quick on his feet. In one story about him, he just gave a Sunday sermon, and I shudder to think what he was like as a preacher, but someone says to him, “Pastor, I’m just a simple astronomer. I don’t understand all this complicated theology, but to me all of the Christian faith could just be summed up in the words, ‘Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.’” To which Barth replied, “Well, I’m just a simple theologian, and to me all of astronomy could be summed up in the words, ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.’”

In another story, toward the end of his life he was on a lecture tour in the early 60s. At one stop, he gave his lecture and then took questions. One student asks him, “Professor, could you summarize in one sentence your whole life’s work in theology?” This is being asked of one the most long-winded theologians ever. But Barth says, “Yes I can. It’s the words of a song I learned long ago on my mother’s knee. Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

The first half of Ephesians, Ephesians 1-3 is really dense. Paul’s teaching really important, foundational stuff for the Christian faith and a life in Jesus Christ, but it’s been pretty challenging. You don’t just pick it up, read it once, and think, oh well this makes perfect sense.
And I’m grateful to all of you who have shared with me how meaningful it has been for you to dive in deep, to sit here in this letter and stay a while, because honestly, I was kind of curious how folks would respond to it. To me, it’s important that as a congregation we not shy away from challenging texts, but nor would I ever want it to feel inaccessible, because that’s not the gospel. That’s not good news. I can only hope that, if Ephesians is something you’ve never considered or read closely, it’s a bit less of a mystery now than it used to be, but even more than that, I hope that you may grasp a little more the depth of God’s love for you and how in Christ he is at work within the world in some unbelievable ways.

But no matter how deep or how complicated or how comprehensive these chapters in Ephesians might be, we should never let ourselves stray too far from what the point is behind it all. It’s the same point that long-winded theologian gave back in the 60s to sum up all of his work of theology: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

In this passage, it seems, Paul prays for something similar. When he says, “For this reason,” it’s as if he’s pointing back, saying, “This, everything I just said, is why I bow my knees in prayer.” That means that all that we’ve talked about the past seven weeks, all that complicated stuff about the glory of God in Christ and his plan for the fullness of time and being brought from death into life and being saved by grace through faith and being gathered as the church making known the wisdom of God, all of it, is why he prays, why he bows his knees before the Father.

But I think in another way, Paul’s giving a nod to those who are reading or hearing this letter that he knows isn’t easy to understand. He knows it’s a handful. He knows it’s challenging. So before he goes any further, he wants them to know that he’s not just talking at them, not just unloading a bunch of theological jargon. He cares for them. He’s praying for them.

He prays in vv. 16-17 that they would be strengthened in the Spirit, that Christ might dwell in their hearts, that they would be rooted and grounded in love.

And he prays also that they would be able to fully grasp the glory and sheer scale of all God is doing, all that Paul has been writing about up to this point. In v. 18, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth.” He’s saying I pray you grapple with this stuff. I hope it challenges you. But I pray you’ll have the power to grasp something so glorious, so magnificent, so far over our heads that even the faintest glimpse of it would put you in awe of the majesty of the Lord. He prays for this.

But then he prays for something that surpasses all of that, all of that understanding, all of that comprehension. He doesn’t pray that they would have some mystic experience, or an ethical life, or peace and contentment. He prays that they would know the love of Christ, and here’s the kicker, that surpasses knowledge, that they would know a love that is greater than anything they could possibly comprehend or study or memorize. It’s the same point that long-winded theologian gave back in the 60s: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

A few weeks back Andrew shot me a line about an anthem that he was considering and wanted to run it past me. And when I saw what piece it was, I got chills because I realized that it was a piece that years ago, the Lord had used for something of a breakthrough for me. It was in a time when I was trying to figure out just what the heck I was supposed to do with my life. For the longest time, I thought I was supposed to be a doctor, but ultimately, I had to say, this isn’t what I’m supposed to do.

Around that same time, though, I started feeling this tug toward seminary, toward ministry, which let me tell you I was as surprised as anyone at that. But throughout that period, it was like I had this imaginary skeptic next to me all the time, call it a voice of reason, or the
devil’s advocate, but as I was considering what it would mean to dedicate my life to this, it was all the time looking over my shoulder as if to ask, “You really believe this stuff? Seriously? You?”

I remember one particular hold up I had, for a long time, had to do with what motivation I would have to devote one’s life to love and follow Jesus. And the uncertainty was something like this, “You say you love this Jesus, but the biggest reason you do is because you’re either trying to avoid punishment in hell or get goodies in heaven. You call that love? That’s not love. That’s no different than only obeying your parents just so you don’t get grounded or only doing chores so you get an allowance. That’s Santa Claus. That’s not love. That’s not worth giving your life to.” And I had a really hard time responding to that one.

But then one Sunday, I was sitting in worship. A traditional Presbyterian church with a choir and organ, and honestly that was a time when I thought this style of worship was pretty boring, stodgy, relic of a past era. Why I kept sitting through it, I don’t know.

But the choir that day offered music with such passion and such skill, and they sang words that confronted and dissolved this lingering place of doubt for me. The anthem they offered was the same one Andrew suggested to me a few weeks back. The one that the choir offers today. [(8:30) And I guess y’all will just have to come back for the 11:00 service.] Among its words are these, and they’re in your bulletin: “Why, then why, O blessed Jesus Christ, should I not love Thee well? Not for hope of winning heav’n or of escaping hell; not with the hope of gaining aught; not seeking a reward; But as Thyself hast loved me, O ever-loving Lord!”

The message, the one that meant so much to me then and means just as much to me now, is simple. Why love the Lord, why give your life to him, why dedicate yourself to him? To gain heaven? To avoid hell? No. Because he loves you, because he has given himself for you. And more than anything else we might concern ourselves with, more than any theological truth, more than any challenging teaching, of first importance is to know, as Paul tells us, “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” The fullness of God doesn’t come from reading thick books or speaking in fancy language, it’s knowing that Jesus loves you. It’s the same point that long-winded theologian made years ago to sum up everything he had ever written: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

It’s been said that the gospel is like a river, shallow enough here for a lamb to walk, but deep enough there for an elephant to swim. In that same manner, friends, I hope with Paul that you would truly have the power to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth, that you would swim with the elephants into the deep currents of the river, that you would jump in over your heads, that the depths of Scripture and the truth of God would be something you never stop seeking. But more than that, I hope and I say again as I said seven weeks ago that you would know this first: that there is one who loves you, and that love might come to define you if you let it.

The final two verses, vv. 20-21—and you probably didn’t remember or notice—but we didn’t read them seven weeks ago. They form what some call the “doxology” of Ephesians. That word “doxology” comes from the Greek word for “glory,” and v. 21 says “to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

But notice what Paul says in v. 20: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory.” It’s so powerful to me that Paul follows up this towering summary of all he had written, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, by saying this, that to him be all glory, to him who is able to do far more than we can possibly imagine, but he adds this little wrinkle. He says, “to him
who *by the power at work within us.*” *Within us.* That means that this God that we worship, this God who loves you, this God who from the foundations of the world has chosen you, this God who has saved you by grace, this God who has made you alive, this God who has broken down barriers, this God who can do more than we can imagine, is the same God who says, “And I will do this through you.” “*By the power at work within us.*” It’s not our power. It’s not because we’re so mighty. It’s because God has chosen to do this amazing work of grace and redemption and renewal in and through us.

Now that makes me feel at the same time terrific and terrified. Because just as it doesn’t take very long when you dive into Scripture or swim into the deep end with the elephants before you feel in over your heads, it also doesn’t take long when you seek to love and follow and serve the Lord before you feel woefully unqualified to do so. How do I share this gospel? How do I represent Christ? How do I hold together all the different callings to service, to worship, to fellowship, to forgiveness, to generosity, to testimony? It all feels so far beyond me.

But all glory and thanks be to God, for the love of Christ does not just find you and leave you, and knowing the love of Christ doesn’t leave you the same person as you were before. It is that very power, that very love, that comes to you, that changes you, that empowers you, that through you God is able to accomplish abundantly more than all you can ask or imagine.

So, in the name of Christ who loves you, let’s get to work.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.