Ephesians 3:14-21
Paul's prayer

I recently visited the Cinque Terre along the coast of the Ligurian Sea. It is a place of breathtaking natural beauty, Sheer and jagged rock faces drop straight into deep clear blue waters. The contrast is stunningly beautiful. But this beauty is one that takes an incredible tenacity to inhabit. The people who live there have spent centuries carving a life out of these rocks to build homes and create terraces upon which to grow food. It is a magical place where natural beauty coexists alongside the human resolution to inhabit this beauty.

As we have been studying the book of Ephesians God has been revealing the extravagant beauty of his plan for his people. Today we begin to learn how we might inhabit this beauty! It is a passage full of promise.

Our context places Paul imprisoned by the Romans. His life faces uncertainty and suffering. It is under these circumstances Paul's heart is captured by the extraordinary vision of our God to provide unlimited access for all peoples to himself through Christ Jesus, unity among believers, both Jew and Gentile joined in a radical new society, and a church that evidences his multi-faceted wisdom even to the heavens!

So how does Paul go about pursuing this vision? Let's see...A long range plan is always a good starting point? Maybe a committee? Perhaps another missionary journey? No! Paul drops to his knees in prayer. He does not turn inward gathering his own resources but outward seeking to enter into this most intimate of relationships with his Father. Miroslav Wolf reminds us "God was not willing to sacrifice a relationship with you so He sacrificed Himself to make possible a relationship with you."

Paul knows to whom he bows. He is Paul's Heavenly Father with whom he has a relationship. Verse 15 says, He is the Father of all peoples. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Father who is able to do immeasurably more than he could ever ask, dream or imagine. The Father who is generous out of the rich treasury of His never ending glory. In verses 7&8 Paul recognizes the Father who has bestowed His saving grace and mercy on Paul. The Father who has revealed his heart, his purpose and his commitment to Paul and His apostles. Out of Paul's knowledge and experience he knows who he is addressing and he prays boldly. His confidence is found in who God is alone.

Great men of faith when in hard places often enter into prayer with praise, worship and even a recitation of the things God has done. They remind themselves who God is and in so doing understanding their new identity as His own. Beholding their God inspires and empowers them to pray “God sized” prayers! Remembering the great things God has done leads them to greater expectation of what God can and will do. Their prayers, their vision and their hearts are shaped by his presence.

2 Corinthians 3:18 says, “And we all, with unveiled face, Beholding the glory of the Lord, are progressively being transformed into His image from [one degree of] glory to [even more] glory. For this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

I have been reading a series on the great prayers of the Bible and everyday I think I should change this talk to include another one but today let’s look at Nehemiah an old favorite of mine. In Chapter 1, Nehemiah has just received tragic news of Jerusalem and the exiles who remain. Nehemiah is brokenhearted but he is limited as a cupbearer of the King. He has no freedoms apart from those the King might allow. In his helpless place he turns to his limitless God in prayer. He is honest with God as he weeps and mourns the losses inflicted on God’s people. His lament brings him to the Lord and provides him the intimacy found in a relationship where we share our deepest heartache. God is brokenhearted over His people and Nehemiah recognizes that and grieves in fellowship with the Lord. Nehemiah shares his heart and welcomes God into his fears and hurts. His understanding of the heart of God and His love for His people is enlarged in this lament. He fasts and prays saying, “O Lord God of Heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenanting steadfast love with those who love Him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.” Nehemiah continues his prayer with personal repentance and he returns to scripture and reminds God of his promises to his people. He then asks the Lord to give him success as he goes before the King. Here Nehemiah is risking everything. Appearing before the King with a heavy heart or less than a cheerful countenance is punishable by death. Nehemiah is depending on the God of heaven, who loves him and with whom Nehemiah shares the desire for restoration of his people, to prepare the heart of the King. The Lord does immeasurably more that Nehemiah could ask or think by giving him opportunity, courage, wisdom, resources to build, and time off to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall. In relationship with God

through prayer Nehemiah has moved from helplessness to empowerment. He has been strengthened in the Spirit to believe and experienced God's abiding and provisional love equipping him to lead the rebuilding of the walls even in adversity and the realization of God's vision to restore Jerusalem.

In prayer, we are given the opportunity to be known and loved by God. To enlarge our understanding of God's sovereignty over all things in our lives, His presence in all the places we have been, the place we are presently, and anywhere we will go in the future and lastly His infinite knowledge of all things. Here we find rest, It is from this secure place that we are given the confidence to entrust our hearts to Him even unto repentance.
II Timothy 1:12 says, "I know whom I have believed and know that He is able to keep that which I have entrusted unto Him."

Paul is secure in his relationship with God. He continues to makes his request! Paul's prayer is one for inhabitation, transformation and fullness. He prays that God the Father, out of the rich treasury of his glory, might strengthen their inner man by the Spirit. "The treasury of his glory" is not some Amazon warehouse or even some kind of Fort Knox. It is God himself! It is the inexhaustible abundance of who God is- His character, His power, His love, His grace, His holiness, His wisdom, and His goodness. It is from this bounty that His generosity is lavished upon His people.

For what purpose do they need to be strengthened by the Spirit? So that they might be able to plumb the depths of God's love together. This is not a task taken up in a day, a year or even a season. It is a lifetime pursuit that will require the surrender of oneself that Christ might be able to fully settle down and inhabit their hearts, even all the intimate places, transforming them into his likeness. It is a prayer for the hearts of God's people. This is where the inhabitation of this beautiful vision begins-their hearts.

John Bunyan in his book <u>All Love's Excelling</u> reminds us the understanding of God's love begins in that,"He that sees himself but little, will hardly know much of the love of Christ: he that sees of himself nothing at all, will hardly ever see anything of the love of Christ. But he that sees most of what an abominable wretch he is, he is likely to see most of what is the love of Christ."

Jack Miller reminded us to “preach the gospel to ourselves everyday”. Tim Keller helps us to understand what this looks like:

> “Believing my sin is real, but Christ’s payment is sufficient.
> My acceptance before God rests wholly on Christ, not my own performance.
> God’s love for me is grounded in Christ’s finished work, not in how well I have done today.
> Because I am accepted by grace. I can run to Him to confess my sin and not away from Him.”

The lavish love of God is demonstrated in our relationship with Him because of Jesus. “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.” I John 3:1.

Paul prays further that by faith Christ will actually settle in and make himself at home in us. Let me just clarify here, if you belong to Jesus you already have the Holy Spirit and in Him dwells the fullness of the Godhead. Paul is seeking a deepening of these gospel truths so that God’s people are reshaped, and restoried by their experience with His love. Life is changed as you live out of these truths. Our primary relationship is now with God and His promises are the foundation for our security rather than life’s circumstances.
This faith is a gift of the Spirit and it is He who enables us to trust God.

There have been times when life has imposed circumstances that I never anticipated. I have been asked in recent years to trust God with people I love dearly and circumstances I could never imagine. I have found myself forbidden to enter in and helpless to do so. It is in these places I can honestly say His Spirit has strengthen me to trust Him. In the middle of the night He has reminded me of His faithfulness in the past. He has given me scriptures and delivered them to me at the most needed times. He has enabled me to dismantle some of my idols to make more room for Himself and intimacy grows. He has taught me to delight in this brief season where I have the opportunity to walk by faith and not by sight. As I bring my tottering and feeble trust to him I see him enlarge it and even receive it as my worship to him. In each instance I have the opportunity to transfer the title of Lord and Master from myself to Him. My desire is to no longer treat him as a guest in my heart but to give him full reign that he might inhabit and restore me with His fullness.

Paul has knelt before the Father to implore the strength of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ for what purpose? “That you may be rooted deep in love and grounded securely on love, That you may have the power and strength to apprehend and grasp with all the saints the experience of love; what is the breadth, and length and depth and height of it” Ephesians 3:17-18.
He has understood that the place to start to inhabit the beauty God has intended is to know His love for them! He prays that they will know in an experiential way the extraordinary love of God.

Miroslav Wolf says it simply, “God has turned towards us in a radical embrace.”

Let’s just pause for a minute in his embrace that we might have a glimpse of his love for us.

Dane C. Ortland in his book Deeper says, “Love defines who God is most deeply. A love so great and so free that it could not be contained within the uproarious joy of the Father, Son and Spirit but spilled out to create and embrace finite and fallen humans into it. Divine love is inherently spreading, engulfing, embracing, overflowing. If you are a christian, God made you so he could love you.”

C.S. Lewis reminds us in The Four Loves that God’s love is unlike any other love. “Divine love is Gift-love. The Son gives himself back to the Father, and gives Himself to the world...”

J. I. Packer in Knowing God says, “God’s love is an exercise of His goodness towards individual sinners whereby, having identified Himself with their welfare, He has given His Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy Him in a covenant relationship.”

Jesus tells us more about His love:

God’s love is giving. John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes on him will not perish but have everlasting life.”

God’s love is sacrificial and good. John 15:13. “Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

God’s love is inclusive, divine, eternal because it’s source is in the relationship of the Father and Son. In John 17:23 Jesus prays “Thou hast loved them, as thou

has loved me."and in John 15:9, Jesus says, "As the Father loved me, so I have loved you: continue ye in my love."

Paul Miller in his book Love Walked Among Us says this "The person of Jesus is a plumb line to which we may align our lives." Jesus life on earth demonstrates what love looks like as He touches lepers, welcomes the little children, eats with sinners, weeps with those who mourn, he forgives, he washes His disciples' feet and he lays down his life for us.
I John tells us "This is love that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."

This is the soil of love into which we must be rooted and grounded. This is the place from which we are fed and strengthened to experience His love and to echo his love in this world. It is a secure place from which we as his body can navigate the challenges of life and the brokenness of this world; rooted and grounded in His love.

Paul has been given with all the apostles the vision of God's church united in Christ for His glory. It is a radically beautiful vision. The hope of his people inhabiting this beauty is found in experiencing and exploring his love together.

I want to inhabit this beauty with you sisters. And verse 18 reminds me, I need you for without you I cannot even begin to grasp the breadth of His love for all peoples, the length of His love for us throughout all of life's seasons and even through eternity, the height of His love lifting us toward himself and the depth of his love for us even in our brokenness. I have experienced God's love for me in Christ and His abiding love throughout my life.The Spirit testifies to this truth encouraging me and it is so good. But when I see you open your hearts in repentance and forgiveness to one another, when I witness transformation in your lives as you grow in the security of his love, when I witness your sacrifice of resources, to serve one another, when I hear you testify of His compassion, His comfort, His presence, strengthening you in various seasons of life, loss, injustice, hurt and failure my God is enlarged for me in new exquisite detail. As you and I inhabit his love together we are strengthened to expand our collective vision of his love and we are filled up to overflowing even flooded with God himself! Romans 5:5 says, "God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Paul is reminding us that it is not dependent on us but on Him who's power is at work in us to be able to carry out his purpose and do super abundantly, far over anything we could imagine.

So Paul begins and now returns to recognize who God is and His purposes for us. He will fully inhabit us that we might be transformed. We are to dwell with Him in the church where we are encouraged to explore the hight, length, depth and breadth of God's love together. It is here we will be filled to overflowing with his fullness. To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout the generations forever and ever.

Let's pray.
Lord we are blown away by the beauty of your plan for us as your children. The provision of your indwelling glory and the grounding in your unshakeable and unchanging love. Lord teach us to love as you have loved us that you might be glorified. In Jesus Name, Amen.

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