



“Rooted and Grounded”

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Ephesians 3:14-21

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Biblical scholars and experts in ancient linguistic tell us that it is highly unlikely that Paul wrote all the letters attributed to him, including the Letter to the Ephesians. They note that the grammar, sentence structure, and particularly the use of definite articles (like *a*, *an*, and *the* in English) are different here from the letters we're much more confident are authentically Pauline. So who wrote Ephesians, if not Paul? Someone writing in his name, at least. That's not to say it was written by an impostor or that someone was attempting to mislead us. Ancient writing conventions are different than our modern standards. It could have been someone writing on Paul's behalf, at his direction, to convey the substance of what he had to say. Or it could have been someone from the faith communities Paul planted recording from memory the teachings handed down to them. We simply don't know. Much of the content at least is consistent with what we find in Paul's other letters. The early church considered Ephesians to be authoritative and worthy of inclusion in the canon. It is part of our Holy Scriptures, and as such, carries the weight of authority and contains the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. I say this because I want to be clear what I mean when I refer to the "writer of the letter to the Ephesians" or "the author" in generic terms. I consider it my responsibility to *share* scholarship with you, not to shield you from it, so we may all be fully aware. So I do not refer to Ephesians and a handful of other letters as being written by Paul when the weight of evidence indicates they were not. But do not mistake that qualification for a lack of reverence or an assignment of lesser status. This is, as we have just attested, the Word of God for the people of God.

The passage upon which we reflect today is the content of a prayer, a description of what the writer prays for the church at Ephesus. As prayer lists go, this is among the most beautiful and moving we will ever find. But before we get to the substance of that prayer, note the opening words of our passage: "For this reason..." The epistles, the letters in the Christian New Testament, are peppered with referents to the material that comes before, words like "Because of this" or "Therefore" or "For this reason." Whenever we encounter that, we should look back to find the reference point so we can have context for what comes next.

As we look at the preceding verses in chapter three, lo and behold, the very first verse of the chapter begins, "This is the reason ..." So, we need to look back even further. In fact, the beauty of Ephesians is that it is a letter that builds upon itself, each chapter elaborating and going deeper in the message that preceded it. That's why we're preaching it in a series of sermons over a five-week period. Rev. Moseng shared two weeks ago from the opening chapter in which the writer describes what it means to be "in Christ," to be adopted into God's family through the forgiveness of our sin and the grace that makes us holy and blameless. Being in Christ is central to our identity. Last week Rev. Streiff illuminated a passage from chapter two that instructs us that Christ is our peace. In the midst of whatever we face, we have the peace of Christ by the grace of God that reconciles us to one another.

All of that is the groundwork for an audacious claim: that the Gospel is for *all people*, Jews and Gentiles alike. To our modern ears, that probably doesn't sound terribly earth-shattering to us. We're by now so familiar with the inclusion of Gentiles in the faith that it doesn't seem like a bold proclamation to say so – certainly not a mystery. But the audacity of this claim for the first century church cannot be understated. Chapter three begins by recounting Paul's commission by God, through divine revelation, to carry the message of salvation to the Gentiles. This is the same person who had once been known as Saul, the leading persecutor of Christians in Jerusalem. He was devoutly Jewish, trained in the pharisaic tradition, and his core convictions were for a pure faith, one free of both Christian heresy and unclean Gentiles. But Saul had a divine encounter on the Road to Damascus, which he described as an appearance by the risen Christ himself. He got a new name, a new faith, and a new job, as an evangelist and church planter. Up to this point, the followers of Jesus were all Jewish, by birth or by conversion. They understood Jesus as a reformer, God's Son calling God's people to a higher righteousness – within Judaism. Along came Paul, a latecomer to the party, a former arch-enemy, attesting to a divine revelation and proclaiming that God's plan of salvation was not just for Jewish converts, but

for Gentiles, too. This was scandalous. And it was so disruptive for the early church that they had to call a special General Conference to figure out what to do about it. The conference ended not in schism, but in a compromise, with one faction for Jewish Christians and another for Gentiles. True story (Acts 15).

Here in the third chapter of Ephesians, the writer states in Paul's name that this had been God's plan all along, hidden through the ages but revealed through apostles and prophets by the Spirit. The letter goes on to make the even bolder claim that the Gentiles are "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Not second-class, Johnny-come-lately, also-rans, but equal in standing and status within the kingdom of God. This is a message of reconciliation, of flattening power dynamics. Christ is the great equalizer, calling all people, everywhere, to join together as members of the household of God, equal in the eyes of God and of fellow Christians. Unfortunately, the people in the first century...and in every century since...haven't really lived into that.

Here's what it says in Ephesians 3:7-10:

⁷Of this gospel I (Paul) have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Did you catch that? "*Through the church the wisdom of God...might now be made known...*" This isn't just Paul's commission, *it's ours!* What is that commission? To make sure that the Good News about Jesus Christ is made known, that everyone – Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders – who come to faith in him share in the promise of Christ. It goes on to say that in Christ we have *access to God* in boldness and confidence through faith in him. Access to God! That's the Gospel, isn't it? God came to us in Christ, *to draw near to us*, and through his reconciling love in Christ and the forgiveness of our sins, enables us *to draw near to God*. That beats the heck out of any self-help book I've ever seen. We're not called to do some good things, to be just a little bit better, to find inner wisdom, to "brighten the corner where you are," but to inherit the promises of Christ and carry the message to all people – *all people* – that God's love is so boundless that God gives *everything* to be in relationship with us.

Buckle your seatbelts, because that's a big job, and it's going to take a lot of prayer support. That's exactly what we get. I paraphrase to simplify and emphasize the key elements:

I get down on my knees in prayer before God, who gives life and a good name to all people and tribes of the earth. I pray that you will have an *inner strength* that comes from God's rich blessings through the Spirit. I pray that *Christ will live in your hearts* through faith, and that you will be *rooted and grounded in love*. I pray that you'll be given the *power to comprehend* how broad and long and high and deep *God's love is for you* with all believers. And I pray that you will somehow *know the love of Christ that is too great for us to know*, so that you will be *completely filled* with the fullness of God.

Isn't that an amazing list of things to pray for? If we believe, as we do, that the Epistles were not just written for one group of people in one time and place but for all of us, then we can trust that Paul was praying those things *for us*, too. And I want to be so bold as to suggest that we should pray those things for one another, as well. Keep this passage with you for a reference and use it in your prayer life in the coming days.

I pray that we'll draw inspiration from this passage and take away a few key points. **First** is that Ephesians offers us a clear definition of the church: God's divine instrument for sharing the Gospel. That's a high and noble calling. We too often sell the church short. With the self-inflicted wounds of the institutional church and its leaders and a growing skepticism about organized religion, we sometimes find ourselves embarrassed by the church or apologizing for it, perhaps even hiding that we have an affiliation with a church in polite company. Or we may make feeble attempts to defend it by listing some of the good things we do or reducing it to a place we can go to experience "community." And it is certainly true the church is a place of people who work together to do good things, hopefully for others, while experiencing fellowship and connection. But so is the Rotary Club. At least they serve lunch.

A faith community may do all of those things and more. Church of the Saviour is invested in transformational ministries in many ways, from discipleship to mission; for all ages from children and youth to seniors; for all people, fitting every demographic we can think of; and we do so with Christ at our center and even in our name. But let us never

forget that the *purpose* of the Church is to serve as *God's divine instrument to carry the Gospel to the world*, to proclaim that God has come near in Christ to draw us near to God. We dare to make that claim because God's Word makes that claim of us and for us.

Secondly, we would do well to remember that we share much in common with the audience for whom the Letter to the Ephesians was written. The Christian Church in the West, particularly in United States, has been in a position of privilege for so long that we forget that, in the early days of the church, we were the outsiders. The Christian faith was a faith of those on the margins. But even so, Gentiles like us weren't even included. And for a time, it seemed we never would be. But God's grace broke in, the mystery of God's plan of salvation enacted through the unlikelyst of evangelists, the former police-dog enforcer turned apostle, who went to bat for us before the original disciples and before governors and kings. Christ revealed to him the gospel made plain and universal, attested in letters canonized in holy scripture. Never forget that God's love is real and came near to us in Christ. There is no length God will not go to be in intimate relationship with you, no matter what it takes.

And when we're tempted to draw lines around who's inside and outside God's grace, we should reflect on where we started. We ought to have the humility to recognize that maybe, just maybe, we may not be as right as we think we are. Some pretty big hitters in the faith never wanted us to be here in the first place.

And **finally**, I pray that we give Christ his rightful place at the center of our lives, scattering and sweeping out of the way all that would take that place instead. There are a lot of candidates for the role – political persuasion, family dynamics, circles of friends, old grudges or recent slights, financial or work success, notions of status or privilege, individualism and self-determination, to name a few. Remember that we find our *true* identity in Christ. That's going to be with us long after all those other things fade away and even if they fall apart. Above all, let us be rooted and grounded in love – not a sentimental notion of good thoughts and feelings, but the transforming love of Christ who redeems us and draws us into fullness of relationship with the one God and parent of us all.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.