

The Exceedingly Abundant Love  
Ephesians 3:14-21

Romans 8:1-17

Romans 8:18-39

Responsive Psalm 105:1-6

This morning we are going to finish up chapter 3, looking specifically at verses 14-21. It is here in these verses that Paul spends some time in prayer for the saints in Ephesus, as he simply worshipping God for his grace and mercy in the revelation of the mystery of Christ to the Gentiles of which he had been imprisoned, which is a tribulation that Paul also sees is fulfilling the purpose of God. Back in verse 8 Paul marvels that of all the saints it is he who has been chosen by God for this ministry, and he says it was a grace to be given that ministry. From his perspective, the riches of the glory of God could not compare to the status and glory he left behind as a rising member of the Pharisees. Such afflictions and tribulations for the cause of Christ is of far more value than fame and fortune brought about by other various means, for gold and silver pass away, even time has a way of erasing the glory of fame, which means little to nothing after death. But God who is rich in his mercy, though we are an unworthy people, have been made worthy by his sacrifice that we may share in the riches of the everlasting glory of God our father.

It is for this reason that in verse 13 Paul asks the Ephesians not to lose heart because of his own tribulations. Paul being the sort of figurehead of the Gentile ministry it would seem a rather big blow to that ministry to have him arrested as we have talked about previously. Though Paul obviously had an understanding of these things, knowing that nothing will thwart God's purpose or plan, and indeed he was right where God wanted him at that moment, it may have likewise been difficult for these Gentile churches to know that this one who had brought them the gospel message, by which they have received the grace and mercy of God would not be himself suffering. Paul is seeking to encourage them in the reality that he is where God wants him, and they should take heart in that knowledge, not lose hope, nor their faith because of tribulations.

Trouble in this faith does not mean defeat, because we have the almighty sovereign creator on our side to see us through it. God will never abandon his children, and in fact as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, speaking of his own affliction, this thorn in the flesh of which he asked God to take away, but God's response was, "My grace is sufficient for you. For my strength is made perfect in your weakness." God did not abandon Paul, nor did he rejoice or revel in his suffering as some might want to paint God as a vindictive God who revels in the punishment of sinners, on he said my grace is sufficient, I will provide for you daily what you need, not more, not less, but exactly what you need each day so that in your weakness my strength may be revealed. So what was Paul's response? He said, "Most gladly I would rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ might rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in my infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ sake, for when I am weak I am strong."

Paul understanding that his strength is not his own but rather comes from God, says he rejoices in his weakness for by it God is given glory through his provision. As believers this reality should dictate how we walk through this life, this life is struggles, it is temptations, and tribulations, but we have a God who is greater than our struggles, more powerful than our temptations, and is high above our tribulations. And he is not an unknowing, nor is he an uncaring God who is hands off in our lives, but rather he is there with us through it all.

And indeed even in such times, he is working his purpose and plan for us, drawing us to him, providing for us the sufficient grace we need each and every day. There is nothing that befalls us outside of God's purpose, and in each and every thing, he is there to provide for us. I think of the Israelites in the wilderness, how he provided food and water for them, for 40 years while they were wandering in the wilderness, each and every day their physical needs were met, but they were given just what they needed so that each and every day they were reminded of God's provision, of his mercy toward them, and their need for him. That is why Paul said he rejoices in tribulations, it isn't that Paul is throwing a party and dancing because of affliction, but he isn't hanging his head moping around saying woe is me either. For he knows that such things work to the good to those who are called according to God's purpose. None of it is meaningless, all of it serves a purpose, even if that purpose is to teach us to trust and rely on God more.

Paul gave his life for the gospel in his reaching out to the Gentiles. Paul is imprisoned because of his interactions with the Gentiles. As we mentioned a few weeks ago, he was arrested for bringing a Gentile into an area of the temple that was forbidden for Gentiles. But as Paul has been saying, there is no tiered acceptance in God, we have all been invited into his inner chamber to have communion with him, to be able to approach him directly, not through sacrifices, rituals, priests, or saints, but directly, because Christ has opened the way by covering our sins with his blood so that we have been made holy and righteous and can approach God. Those purification rituals, the sacrifices necessary for temple access, the mediation required by the priests of old, have passed for we now have the great high priest Jesus Christ who is greater than all, who sits at the right hand of the throne making intercession for us. Our sins which would condemn us, Jesus sits besides the throne and says, no, this one is mine and I have washed away his sins, therefore we may approach the almighty and make our petitions known.

This is a love, and a mercy in which we can not fully understand in this life, but will be revealed to us one day when we meet our Lord and Savior face to face. Paul here pleads in a prayer to God that those he writes to may all know the width, and length, and height of this love, and God in his infinite mercy and grace, intended those words for us today as we read them. Paul's letter is just as relevant to us today, as it was the Ephesian churches he was writing to. So let us go ahead and read our passage this morning, but let us start back at verse 8, and read to the end of the chapter. ( read 8-21)

So as we can see in verse 14, these following verses is a prayer, it is Paul's prayer for the people to whom he is writing. He had just finished explaining that in Christ we may have boldness and confidence in our access to God because of Christ, so he prays to God, not to some saint, not through some priest or elder, but directly to God, in whom we who are his children have all been called, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named. Though Paul is imprisoned and suffering his own afflictions, his heart and mind is drawn toward the Ephesians and his concern and care for them, he does not pray here for escape, or relief, but instead that those to whom he is writing will understand God's great love, a love that Paul is willing to sacrifice everything for, a love more precious than life itself, for Paul had given his life in ministering this love to the gentiles in bringing them the gospel message of hope. He doesn't even ask them for prayer in his own plight, but instead prays for them that they may know and understand what a great gift they have been given.

Strength in trials, strength in temptation comes from God. We can not endure or fight without his strength. That is what sets the believer apart from the unbeliever. The strength of God working in us is the basis for our salvation. We did not come to God on our own strength or merit, but he came to us, he pardoned us, he took our sin and made us righteous.

And we need that strength daily, for each day gives its own challenges, its own temptations, but God who is rich in mercy gives us the strength we need to endure, he promises us that he will, he promises that he will never leave us, nor will he turn his back on us, he will never forget us, or abandon us. Paul is talking here about a spiritual strength, a strength which does not doubt God, a strength which rests in God, and strength that is given by God. So much of this life can weigh us down, it doesn't even necessarily have to be some big sin, or temptation, but sometimes simply the monotony of life can bring us down, the slog of daily living, working, cleaning, cooking, we can become frustrated in or lot. But just like Paul, the reality is God has you exactly where he wants you. Hate your job? Frustrated with the constant never ending chore of keeping a house, maybe you feel where you are isn't where you think should be, but the reality couldn't be further from the truth. God has given you what you have, your job, your household, your family, and just like the Israelites in the wilderness we become weary, and complain sometimes.

But even in this, God can give strength, God can give encouragement, and I think we should take a lesson from Paul who saw himself as God's prisoner, God used Paul's situation for his glory and I believe he uses ours as well. Often times I don't think we give God enough credit for what he does in our lives, we take things for granted, but life can change quick, and what we once had can be gone, I know I am guilty of this myself and sometimes God gives us a wake up call, we become ill, we lose a loved one, we lose our jobs, as Job said, should we accept good from God and not trouble? We live in a sin sick world, and much even our own struggles is brought about because of our own sinfulness. But some is just the reality of living in this world, life and death is a reality in this world since the fall of mankind through Adam, loss is a reality in this world, but loss is not a reality in God's economy, for he says he will not lose any who are his, and a loss of life here for the believer is gaining eternal life in the presence of God. I always find it interesting how God works in the lives of his children, using hardship, loss, and calamity to move us around, to drive us to where he would have us to be. God has done some pretty interesting thing in all of our lives to bring us all here this morning. My family is from California, I was born there, but God used sickness to drive us to Holland, Michigan, God used a church split to drive us out of the church my family was attending to bring us to a church where I would meet Diana.

These were both hardships, and challenges that God used to bring about glorious and interesting things in my own life, and I am sure each and every one of us has some similar stories. God in his infinite knowledge worked through things that would seemingly be bad, to bring about his purpose in my life, even in hardships and suffering we are recipients of the love of God, for he works through those things to bring about his purpose for his glory. I think that is likely what is on Paul's mind in this prayer here, that they may know the height and depth and width of God's love. It is far deeper, then we can comprehend, far wider then we can see, and much more glorious then we believe it is. And what we see and experience is a mere inkling of God's true love toward us, Paul says this is a love that passes knowledge, it is beyond our human concept of love, but we don't need to full understand it to be recipients of it, for God's love is unconditional, we don't have to meet a standard, or understand it for him to love us, he already has, he already does, and the sign of that love is his Son, who was sent so that we may know him, so that we may be reconciled to him, so that we who were once far off, with no knowledge, or hope, have been brought near so that we may know, and we may believe.

Understanding what we can of God's love toward us goes a long way in understanding and enduring the hardships of this life. Knowing and believing that all things are temporary in this life, all things pass, and tomorrow is a new day, and one day we will have that ultimate new day when we pass from this life to the next, and we will see, and we will know what great love in which God loved us. It is a shift of perspective, to see our lives through the lens of God's working through trials, tribulations and hardships instead of seeing ourselves as the victim. To know we are loved by God, and not only does he provide the grace that is sufficient for the day, he is working exactly what we need in our lives. This can be a hard thing to believe when we are in the thick of it, but thankfully it doesn't need our belief to be true. Our God is not a vindictive God against his people, our God is not a cruel God, or a mischievous God, our God is a loving God who cares for and provides for his children in ways far deeper than we can understand.

So often our response in hardship is why me, woe is me, why must I suffer so. When the reality of our thinking should be, what is God doing, how may this all be working for his purpose in my life, is there a lesson here that God is teaching me? And how does all of this glorify God, as we seek to find our rest and hope in him through all things. That is why we pray is it not? To make our petitions known before God, to cry out to him in our dark times, ever seeking him, as we learn to trust in him more, as we learn to rest in him more. Prayer is meaningless without believing that God has your best interest, for why would you pray to a vindictive God, why would you seek wisdom, forgiveness, and mercy from a mischievous God, no, we have a loving God who says, all you who are burdened, all you who are suffering, come to me and I will give you rest.

There can be a deep rest of the soul that is beyond understanding, and this again I think is what Paul is alluding to, in the context of his own situation he says, think of the height and depth of God's love, so that whatever befalls me in this life I know that the God of the Universe loves me, cares for me, provides for me, therefore I can endure all things..and it is my prayer that you come to understand the love of God in such a way, that whatever befalls you, to know that you have a loving father who never leaves you nor forsakes you. And this God, is more powerful than we can know, who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think. And I think that is the point of the message this morning, to know, to understand, and to believe that God loves you with an everlasting love, and he does not forsake us or leave us, but instead works in us through the tough times to shape us and mold us into how he would have us to be. And this is not a cruel abusive thing, but a loving thing for the end is greater than the beginning, and God knows exactly what it takes to get us there, because we are a stubborn and dull people, and sometimes we have to go down the hard road to fully receive the glorious prize at the end of the journey.

So we as believers, as the redeemed children of an infinitely loving God should have the perspective of seeing this life through the lens of God's purpose. It doesn't always make sense to us, but we know and trust in a sovereign God who is working through it all. And it is in that reality that we can find peace and rest through all things, it is in that reality that Paul said that he can be content in all things, because he knows he has a loving father who is merciful, and gracious, who provides and delivers, and who works all things for his good pleasure and will. May this ever be forefront in our hearts and minds, so that whether we are in a time of suffering, or a time of blessing that God is working his purpose and will, and through whatever it may be we can look to him in hope, come directly to him in prayer and he will not ever turn us away. To the God who is exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think. May he be glorified in our lives and may we learn ever more the height, and depth, and width of his love for us as he works all things to draw us nearer to him.