

Growing From and Into Love

Psalm 145: 10-11, 19 All your works praise you, O God, and your faithful servants bless you.

They make known the glory of your kingdom and speak of your power...Abba God is near to those who call upon him, to all who call upon him faithfully

Introduction

Through Ephesians we've talked about the need for heartfelt, mind-filled remembrance of Christ's work in the world thru the Cross and Resurrection event and how remembering this brings Christ close to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, here, we have hope. What God has done combined with God's presence with the community through remembrance makes us hopeful because we are not abandoned and have something to participate in: the divine mission of the revolution of love, life, and liberation in the world for the beloved. And at the intersection of hope and remembrance we find ourselves bending our knee to pray, not as a last-ditch effort but to find our ground and our language so we can move through God and toward our neighbor, bringing tangible hope that is faith working itself out in action for those who are in need, on death's door, frail and fatigued, on the verge of giving up.

Last week we dove into the peace that Christ brings us by destroying dividing walls, ridding us of hostility and enmity, and rendering inoperative laws that cause in groups and out groups. Within the Christian walk and life, the act of rebuilding walls keeping many out and few elite in, fomenting hostility and fear, and forcing the gospel to become a law in the church or the state is anathema. According to Ephesians, the followers of Christ cannot support any of these things or anything that supports these things. We have been liberated into radical equity with our neighbor through the work of Christ and the event of the Cross and Resurrection—(we are not, have never been, and will never be superior to our neighbor).

But all of this is moot if we don't grow—individually and corporately—bringing the outer person in line with the inner person. Ephesians 3 exhorts us to grow in such a way so we can be stronger and more able partners of God participating in God's mission in the world made known to us in Christ and inspiring our hearts, minds, and actions by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 3:14-21

...so that [God] might give to you according to the abundance of his glory the power to grow through [God's] Spirit to align with the inner person [and] establish Christ in your hearts through faith. Having been fixed firmly on and having laid the foundation of love, [stand on love] so that you might be perfectly able to comprehend with all the saints what the breadth and length and weight and depth, and to ascertain the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge... (Eph. 3: 16-19a)

This portion of Ephesians is a prayer to God the Father. The hint is *For this reason I bend my knees to the Father, from whom all families in heaven and on earth received [their] name...* I retained the use of “Father” in the translation to highlight that Paul isn’t praying to some distant deity,¹ but to a loving parent, who is involved in our lineage and our name.² But the point of the passage isn’t the emphasis on “Father” but rather the “bending of my knees,” the fact that Paul prays for the Ephesians.

So, Paul prays and prays these three petitions: for 1. Inner strength, 2. Profound understanding of God’s love, and 3. Being filled with God’s fullness.³ The request for “inner strength”—*so that [God] might give to you according to the abundance of his glory the power to grow through [God’s] Spirit to align with the inner person [and] establish Christ in your hearts through faith*—is a statement that nothing is taken from God⁴ as God inspires and woos the believer and the congregation as a whole⁵ to bring the outer person into alignment with the inner person. In other words, the wholeness of self—the receipt of the believer’s self—hinted at in chapter 2 (last week) is confirmed here in chapter 3 as Paul prays that God out of God’s abundance gives abundant strength to the believer to be a whole person by bringing the outer person in line with the inner person. According to our letter, to be loved by God is healing balm that then empowers the believer to love as they have been loved and this is done from the firm ground

¹ Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, eds. Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher (Louisville: WJK, 2011), 123-124. “The ‘every family’ would have God as ‘Father,’ and every tribe and nation would be counted among the children of God. Then the invocation could be translated, ‘Father of all families [or tribes or nations].’ It is clearly not a biological relationship that is affirmed, but the care a father takes to supply the needs of his family, as when God is praised in Psalm 68:5 as the ‘father of orphans,’ the father of the fatherless. The scope of God’s parental care is not limited to those who know to call God ‘Father.’ Its reach extends beyond those who are near, and even beyond those who have been brought near.”

² Verhey and Harvard, *Ephesians*, 124. “This is no tribal deity, no local god, not just the god of our ancestors. This God is not just committed to the flourishing of ap articular culture, country, or family. This God is the God of ‘all the families of the earth,’ the God of ‘all things.’ And to this God alone the Jews and Gentiles of the Lycus Valley—and we—owe ultimate loyalty.”

³ Barth, Markus, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1-3*, The Anchor Bible Series (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 368. “Three petitions may be discerned in what follows. (a) Intercession for the inner fortification of the saints; this is unfolded in the prayer that Christ reside in their hearts (vss. 16-17). (b) supplication for their strong perception of all the dimensions of God’s will; this supplication is interpreted by a request for knowledge of Christ’s love (vss. 18-19a). (c) Petition for perfection with God’s perfection (vs. 19b).”

⁴ Barth, *Ephesians*, 369. “In remembering the ‘riches’ and ‘glory’ of the Father, Paul is convinced that God need not change or lose anything by granting the requests made to him. God is expected to act according to his nature, his character, i.e. his radiating love and power.”

⁵ Barth, *Ephesians*, 385. “The gospel proclaimed in Ephesians is distinct from many variants of secular and religious collectivism by the vital concern shown for the enrichment, strength, stability, love, knowledge, grown, and perfection of each member of the community and, virtually, of every man.”

and fixed foundation of Christ's love and the believer's faith that this God (as parent) really does love them.⁶

And because Paul sees the Ephesians as grounded and substantiated in God by love, Paul can write, *Having been fixed firmly on and having laid the foundation of love, [stand on love] so that you might be perfectly able to comprehend with all the saints what the breadth and length and weight and depth, and to ascertain the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...* In this prayer, the author of the letter bases everything on the love of Christ—on which the Ephesians have been firmly fixed and which is the foundation under the ground where they stand in the spiritual realm. The love of Christ is the starting point for the believers in Ephesus, from here they not only understand just how massive and astounding is God's love (which is truly beyond human understanding),⁷ but from where they move, have their being, and participate in God's mission of divine revolution of love, life, and liberation for the beloved. The great mystery that the Ephesians are let in on is the divine mystery that is Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension and the impact of this divine event for the cosmos. But even then, understanding those points does not now make the Ephesians perfect or filled, or the arbiters of all that is of God⁸ as if there is nothing more to learn or understand; this mystery surpasses all human knowledge.⁹ For Paul these two things—the alignment of the outer with the inner person and the understanding the depth of God's love—are woven together to create the situation where the believer *might be filled into all fullness of God*.¹⁰ Embedded in the prayerful entreaty is Paul's awareness that the Ephesians can never fully be filled with God's fullness as if it is one and done. Rather, it is to be worked out; it's on going—happening in the future and happening right now. This is what it means to grow: to grow in strength, to grow in act, to grow in prayer

⁶ Barth, *Ephesians*, 369. "If this command is a parallel to the prayer contained in 3:16, then 'the Lord' is the aim, focus, and source of gathering strength—he, and not some innate self that resides in the nature of man and constitutes his individual quality."

⁷ Barth, *Ephesians*, 369. "In Eph 3 these nouns are so arranged as to make it clear that man must be invigorated by God's Spirit before he is able to grasp God's manifold wisdom and hold onto it in knowledge. Paul would hardly affirm in general terms, that knowledge is power. Rather he avers that through his Spirit God empowers man to know things that are beyond the human mind, eye, ear..."

⁸ Verhey and Harvard, *Ephesians*, 127-128. "Paul pleads that the church will grow strong enough to hold onto the mystery of God without claiming to be able to understand that mystery fully. That is, after all, what 'all the saints' (Eph. 3:18), including Job, did."

⁹ Barth, *Ephesians*, 373. "God laid his heart bare when he showed that from eternity the Gentiles are included in his love and in the Messiah's realm, but the saints' knowledge and understanding of the secret is still 'imperfect'..."

¹⁰ Verhey and Harvard, *Ephesians*, 128. "Here Paul prays that the church will in fact be 'filled with all the fullness of God'...that is, with Christ..., in whom the secret was made known and who will bring the plan of God to complete fruition. That grace, that glory, that loves is not created by human beings, but it exalts human beings. It creates and restores humanity, and it strengthens the church to respond to God's grace and glory and love, to be responsible agents in service to God's plan."

and dependence on God, to grow into fullness of the relationship with God, with the neighbor, and with the self.¹¹

Paul then ends with *And to the one who is able to do abundantly more than all things of which we ask or we can perceive according to the one who strengthens us, to [that one] be glory in the assembly and in Christ Jesus from all the families of the ages of ages, amen.* As the three petitions work themselves out in the lives of the believers by the power of God, the Spirit,¹² glory is brought to God because where this community remembers, hopes, and prays, there is God in Christ. It is this that is the firm foundation and starting point for the one community that is the temple of God who worships together and then proceeds to move through God to serve the beloved, the neighbor. And as the neighbor is served, their God's name is blessed (hallowed,¹³ honored¹⁴) and glory is brought to God in the community and in Christ Jesus.¹⁵

Conclusion

Beloved, we remember, we hope, and we pray. We have wholeness with God, with our neighbor, and with ourselves by faith in Christ as divisions, hostilities, and laws cease to matter in Christ. From here we grow, constantly being brought to the edge of our understanding of God's love for us and not just for us but for our neighbor. Because, for Paul here in Ephesians, the community who is open to and able to go outside of itself is the community that is growing—individually and corporately—in the knowledge of God's love.

Paul prays for the believers—in Ephesus, and here today—that we would completely and fully—as limited as we are—understand just how much God loves us. Paul reminds us of the work of Christ on our behalf—the great mystery of the divinely inspired cosmos—and that we—who were once far off—are now counted among the children and families of God—spanning all time and space. And all of this never for ourselves in some privatized fashion so promoted by current American evangelical theology, but in a deprivatized way: for we are so loved by God that we can bring our outer person (personal and corporate) in line with the inner person (personal and corporate) and live in the world in love as we have been loved—no dividing walls and fences, no

¹¹ Barth, *Ephesians*, 373. “While Col 1:19 and 2:9 speak of the ‘indwelling’ of ‘the whole fullness of God’ in Christ and the church, and described it as an accomplished fact, it is (despite all elements of ‘realized eschatology’) characteristic of Ephesians to speak of ‘filling’ as a process still going on.”

¹² Verhey and Harvard, *Ephesians*, 125. “The petition is that the church will be empowered by the Spirit to grow into Christ.”

¹³ *Let your name be hallowed* (Lord's Prayer)

¹⁴ *Honor your Father and Mother* (Ten Commandments)

¹⁵ Barth, *Ephesians*, 376. “In Eph 4:4-6 Paul mentions the church first because he starts from the actual locus of God's praise. Then he adds a reference to the Messiah Jesus to designate the basis of the that praise. The existence and manifestation of God's glory *in the church* is and remains dependent upon glorification of God through the Son. The secret of God is indeed now known only to the church, but it was revealed in Christ of the benefit of the whole world.”

enmity and hostility, no laws keeping some in and some out. As we remember Christ, hope, pray, embrace radical divine equity, and grow, we can work to bring love to those who suffer under the oppression of indifference, life to those who are dying and liberation to those who are captive.