

Ephesians 3:14-20

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[0 : 0 0] Yes, we can, is the mantra that seems to capture the spirit of the age. Yes, we can. Now, you'll remember that as the slogan of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, and indeed, in his victory speech, this was the slogan that punctuated that speech in a very stirring manner.

Yes, we can. And let me be clear that there is a place for inspiring women and men to reach higher and further. That is a good thing. There is a place for that. There is a place for us to reflect on all that we are able to do with the strength that God has given us, and the resources, and the intellect that we have been blessed with. And so, there is a place for us to echo those words, yes, we can.

But sadly, the cry of, yes, we can, is often more reflective of a vain and proud declaration of autonomy. Yes, we can. Think as we please. Yes, we can. Do as we please. Yes, we can. Live as we please.

We answer to no one. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. But the reality is somewhat different. The proud cry of, yes, we can, is often met with the sobering reality of, no, you can't. You see, we are limited. We are weak. We are largely powerless.

Now, in contrast to our reality, we read the stirring and true words of Paul's duxology in Ephesians chapter 3 and verse 20, now to him who is able. And if we just pause there, even without continuing to read the totality of the duxology, simply that truth, to him who is able. He is able. He is able. He can. But able to do what? Well, the duxology continues, immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. He who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Now, these are words that we often quote or hear quoted. But what do we ask or imagine? If we are to have some idea of the more that God can do, then we need to relate it to that which we ask or imagine, because what the duxology declares is that he is able to do more than that. But rather than think about the kind of things that we ask for or the kind of things that we imagine, what we can do this morning is focus on what Paul asks and imagines in the immediately preceding verses where he is praying on behalf of the Ephesians. And as we see what he asks for, when we see what he imagines in favor of God's people, then we have a point of comparison to consider the wonder and the marvel of the duxology that God is able to do more than we ask or imagine. I want us to consider part of the prayer. The prayer really is found in verses 14 to 19, but we're not going to consider the whole of that section, but rather perhaps what we might call the second half of that prayer as we have it from verse 17 or the second half of verse 17 through to verse 19, where the prayer focuses on the grand theme of the love of Christ. Notice there in verse 17, halfway through the verse,

[4 : 3 0] And these are the words that I want us to spend a little time thinking.

about this morning. Let's explore this prayer or part of Paul's prayer, the part that we've just read under three headings. First of all, I want us to consider what we could call our present reality, something that Paul takes as being a given or takes as being already true of those for whom he is praying. Notice there in verse 17, and I pray that you being rooted and established in love. So, he acknowledges that this is something that is already true of them. It's almost like given that this is true, he can then go on to pray what he prays or make the petition that he makes. So, that's the first thing I want us to spend a little time thinking about, what I'm calling our present reality, that we are, as believers, rooted and grounded in God's love. But then I want to go on and think about what I'm calling our continuing task, which is really the object of Paul's petition to God. Namely, that we would grasp and know the love of God, that we would grasp and know the width and the length, the height and the depth of the love of Christ. And that's something that we need to do. We need to continue doing. We need to continue grasping. We need to grow in our knowledge. It's a continuing task. It's not something that we can say, well, okay, I've done that and now I can move on. No, this is something that we must be ever doing. And so, I describe it in that way, our continuing task. But then thirdly, I want to also notice just briefly a third aspect of this and what I'm calling our future hope. And really what I'm identifying is what Paul sees as the outcome for those who grasp evermore and who know evermore the length and breadth, the height and the depth of the love of Christ. Namely, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Our future hope is that we would be filled with the God of love. So, rooted and grounded in God's love, the challenge to grasp and to know the love of God, and with this outcome that we might be filled with the God of love. So, let's think about these words along those lines. First of all, then, our present reality. Paul is praying for the believers in Ephesus and indeed for all believers everywhere. Notice how he begins his prayer in verse 14, for this reason I kneel before the Father from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. Indeed, Paul, as he prays, has in mind the church triumphant and the church militant, the church across the centuries and indeed across the world. They all are in mind as he prays.

And it's very clear that his stress is not so much to challenge individual believers in their own little worlds, but believers together. He speaks about how he prays that we might have power together with all the saints. And so, Paul is praying for the believers in Ephesus, to whom he is writing certainly, but his prayer extends beyond them. And as he does, he is confident of this present reality that they are rooted and grounded in love. And the two verbs that he uses there in the second half of verse 17, rooted and established is the manner in which it's translated there in the church Bible, rooted and established or rooted and founded in God's love. These two verbs that he employs serve to paint pictures that illustrate what he's saying. First of all, the picture of a tree and its roots, and secondly, of a building and its foundations. So, rooted is the language of a tree rooted in solid ground, and the language of established or grounded or founded is the picture of a building with a solid foundation. Now, we could work with both pictures, but I'm going to limit myself to the picture of a tree and its roots. Both pictures really illustrate the same truths, but in different ways. And I want us to identify what the tree and its roots represent. First of all, we'll think about the tree that is rooted.

Well, the tree is a picture of the believer, or perhaps more accurately of the church as a body of believers. I think we can apply the illustration in both senses to each of us as believers, but particularly to all of us together as God's people. And we're familiar with the way in which the Bible often uses the picture of a tree to represent the believer. Think of the righteous man in Psalm 1.

What does the psalmist say of the man who is trusting in God? He says this, He prospers ever like a tree that's planted by a stream, and in due season yields its fruit, its leaves are always green. You are the tree rooted in love. We as God's people are that tree rooted in love. And the roots of the tree are a picture of God's love. Or in any case, the roots are fed and nurtured in the soil of God's love in Christ. We are rooted in the love of God.

[10 : 58] We are rooted in God's love for us in Christ. God's love for us in Christ is life-giving. In the absence of God's love, we are weak and powerless. God's love for us in Christ is fruit-producing.

In the absence of God's love, we are fruitless. But rooted in the love of God, the tree will grow, the tree must grow, and will produce fruit. Again, we could turn to the Old Testament to see how this picture is used, really in a very similar way to the way it's used by the psalmist in Psalm 1. In fact, we've already read from Jeremiah chapter 17. But let me just read again two of the verses that we read, not the whole passage that we read earlier, but verses 7 and 8 of Jeremiah 17.

But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes, its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Before we move on, let's just pause and ask the question, have we become part of this tree rooted, grounded in the love of God? Well, we become part of this tree by the indwelling of Christ in our hearts through faith, that which Paul has spoken of in the first half of the verse, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And so that is a question for each of us to reflect on and to pose to ourselves. Is that true of me? Does Christ dwell in my heart through faith? Have I put my trust in Jesus as my Savior and become part of this living church, of this gospel tree, of this holy building that is God's people? So, our present reality is God's people, rooted and grounded in the love of God.

But we move on and think maybe just a little bit more carefully, or spend a little bit more time thinking about what I'm calling our continuing task, what Paul is praying for on behalf of the believers, that they would grasp and know. We thought a moment ago of these two verbs, or we thought of one of them really more carefully being rooted and established. Well, now we have another two verbs that speaks of our continuing task, to grasp and to know the love of Christ. I don't think we are intended to draw any distinction between the two verbs. They are two ways of saying the same thing, to grasp the love of Christ, or to know the love of Christ, just using language that emphasizes the same reality or the same task. Now, with respect to this continuing task or mission, let's notice three aspects of it. First of all, just spend a little time thinking about the object of our grasping.

[14 : 29] What is it that we are to grasp? What is it that we are to know? But then also notice the privilege and responsibility laid upon us to grasp. This is something we need to do. But then finally, notice also the power required to do so that Paul makes a reference to. So, we're thinking about our continuing task, and we're thinking about it in these three ways. First of all, the object of our grasping. What is it? Well, we're told it is the love of Christ. To grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. This is your continuing and never-ending task or mission as a believer, to grasp and to know ever more deeply and ever more sweetly the love of Christ.

How does Paul describe this love? How does he attempt to describe the magnitude of this love? Well, he speaks of its width and of its length and of its height and of its depth.

And the language that Paul uses has been understood or interpreted over the centuries in different ways. Some like Augustine have, I think, rather fancifully seen in the language a picture of the cross as it extends in four directions, upward into heaven, down into the soil, and in both directions.

I don't think that is what Paul has in mind, but I certainly do acknowledge that there is no better place to fix our gaze if we are to grasp and know the knowledge of the love of Christ than the cross. Others, like John Stott, while conscious of the danger of trying to overanalyze the language, have also suggested how we might understand Paul's description of the love of Christ or the language, the vocabulary that he uses. And let me just read what Stott suggests is one way of understanding these different dimensions. The love of Christ is broad enough to encompass all mankind. It is long enough to last for eternity. It is deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner and high enough to exalt him to heaven. Now, again, while each of these statements is true, I doubt Paul is intending us to interpret each dimension individually as has just been done or as the quote that I've just read does. Really, what I think is happening is that Paul is also grasping, but in his case, he's grasping for language that can, in a measure, convey something of the magnitude of the love of Christ. I think at the heart of this language is the desire to impress upon his reader something of the magnitude of the love of Christ. And we could attempt to say something of its magnitude in identifying some of its characteristics. The love of Christ is ubiquitous. Now, I was well into my adulthood before I knew what that word meant. I used to hear people using it. I think, I wonder what that means? And then eventually

I looked it up. And really, all it means is that it is everywhere. The love of Christ is everywhere. Wherever you go, wherever you are, you will find the love of Christ. I was seeing a cartoon, and at the risk of trivializing what we're considering such a grand matter for our thought and reflection, but it was a cartoon that had God's map of the universe. And the idea being that this was the map that God used. And it had all these little points, little dots all over it. And at each dot, it said, you are here, you are here, you are here, you are here. You see, God is everywhere. And the love of God, the love of Christ is everywhere. But it's also inexhaustible. It is all sufficient for every circumstance. There is no height, no depth, no place where it proves insufficient for us. But Paul also goes on when he uses the language in a way that seems rather counterintuitive or contradictory, when he uses the language of knowing and yet also describing this love as surpassing knowledge. He recognizes that the love of Christ is also inscrutable. It's beyond our capacity to fully grasp. We can and we do, and we're encouraged and challenged to grasp and to know more of the love of Christ. But it is beyond our capacity to know and to experience this love fully. Our finite minds simply cannot take it in. We can maybe compare this with our attempts to get our heads around the vastness of the universe. I don't know if you, you know, sometimes watch those documentaries that try and communicate something of the vastness of the universe in as much as we know its vastness. You know, and the numbers are such that you're trying to get your head around it and it's just too much. We just can't get our heads around it. And yet the love of Christ in its magnitude dwarfs even the universe. It's that big. If we could just maybe use the very simple words of a children's chorus. We've already sang one, but this is another one that dwells in the same theme. Jesus' love is very wonderful. It's so high you can't get over it, so low you can't get under it, so wide you can't get around it. Oh, wonderful love. And so we have what we're describing as we're thinking about our continuing task, the object of our grasping being the love of Christ. But then also notice the privilege and responsibility laid upon us to grasp and to know the love of Christ.

[21 : 00] Now the love of Christ, the love of God is a constant. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And His love is the same yesterday, today, and forever. There can be no growth in the love of Christ, certainly no diminution in the love of Christ. But there can and must be growth in our knowledge and experience of the love of Christ. And it is our privilege and our responsibility to grasp and to know evermore of this love. How do we do that? How do we grasp? You know, Paul is praying that we might grasp, that we might know. But how do we do that?

Well, I think this knowledge of the love of Christ is grasped in two very connected ways. We are to fix our eyes upon Christ as He has revealed to us in the Scriptures, and we are to follow Christ in our daily lives. So we fix our eyes upon Him as He's revealed to us in the Bible. But along with that, in parallel with that, we follow Him in our daily lives. And in our lives of following, in our lives of obedience, in our lives of service, we experience and discover out there in the real world at the coal face and all the things that we do, we experience and discover something of His love for us.

This knowledge that we are to grow in, what we are to grasp, this knowledge is discovered in a relationship that is growingly intimate. I wouldn't say, to use the old Scottish expression, I wouldn't say that it's better felt than telt, but it must be both telt and felt, this knowledge of the love of Christ. This is something that you have to do. This is something that we have to do. We need to grasp it.

We need to know it more and more. And I guess the question I could pose you is, are you rising to that challenge? Are you seeking to evermore grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ for you? Or are you thrittering away your life, grasping that which is passing and ultimately unsatisfying? Are you, in the language of Solomon, grasping the wind rather than grasping the Savior?

This is our privilege and responsibility. But then also, as we continue to think about this continuing task, the third thing I want us to notice is the power required to do so.

[23 : 57] If this is something that we are to do, and that's the point I've just made, it's our responsibility to grasp. It's our responsibility to grow in our knowledge of the love of Christ. Well, if this is something that we have to do, why does Paul pray that we might do it rather than just tell us to get on with it?

Well, he doesn't actually pray that we might do it. Strictly speaking, he doesn't pray that we would grasp and know the love of Christ. He prays that we would have the power to do so. Notice the manner in which he expresses his prayer there in verse 18. We need to read really from the middle of verse 17.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Strictly speaking, what he is praying in favor of the believers, what he's asking God to grant the believers is the power to grasp, the power to know. Now, you might say that's a bit of a kind of an unnecessary distinction, but that is what Paul, strictly speaking, is asking for on behalf of the believers, that they would have the power to do this. And what that makes clear is that we need power to grasp. We need capacity to know ever more deeply. Paul is aware that to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ is not something that we can do in our own strength. We need the God-given spiritual power or capacity to do so. We need God by His Spirit to open our eyes to see and grasp and know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Thinking back to the inadequate illustration we used a moment ago of the universe, it's a bit like an astronomer telling you to grasp and know the outer regions of the universe with the naked eye. Well, it's impossible for us to do that. We need to be given the power, the capacity, the most powerful telescope invented, and even then we will fall short in our discovery.

And as I say, that's a poor illustration of our need for power to see and grasp and know how wide and long and long and long and deep is the love of Christ. So, our present reality, rooted and grounded in the love of God, are continuing a task to grasp and to know the love of Christ. But then finally, let's just notice what I'm calling our future hope. Paul foresees a future outcome for us as we increasingly grasp and know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. And that outcome is in the language of Paul, fullness. Notice how he expresses it. To know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. So, it's the language of God. But what does that mean? The language that he employs, it almost seems too much. The fullness of

God, how can the fullness of God begin to fit in this vessel? Of course, there's a very real and wonderful sense in which that is already true in the reality difficult for us to grasp that we are indwelt by God in the person of the Holy Spirit. But if we focus on the language here that Paul is using, to understand something of what Paul is saying, we need to explore or compare how Paul uses the language of fullness in his letters. For example, let me just give one example. In his letter to the Colossians in chapter 1 and in verse 19, he uses very similar language that he's employing of the believers of what they will experience. He uses very similar language of Christ. What does Paul say there of Christ? He says this, for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. Now, bear that in mind as being something that is true of Christ. And when we bear that in mind and have that, just we're conscious of that. When we consider that alongside what Paul says concerning God's purpose for us as believers, as that's expressed in Romans chapter 8 and verse 29, that we as believers be conformed to the likeness of his Son. So, what is said of Christ? Well, that he is one in whom God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell. And then Paul tells us that God's purpose for us is that we be conformed to the likeness of his Son. Maybe we can begin tentatively to appreciate what Paul is saying or something of what Paul is saying in our text. To be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God is to become ever more like Jesus. To be conformed to his likeness.

[29 : 36] Now, this involves us becoming ever more like Jesus in our knowledge of God's love, in our enjoyment of God's love, and in our likeness to God's love. It's transformational. It's not just something that we enjoy and benefit from, but it is something that transforms us that we might in a measure show something, reflect something, demonstrate something of that love in our own lives. And in Jesus, we see that the model that we can, if you wish, aspire to as we are conformed ever more to his likeness. Well, when will this happen?

However, we understand what is going to happen. When will this happen? Now, I'm calling it a future hope, but it is a hope that begins to be realized in the here and now, as we grasp and know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. So, it's not some distant expectation. This is something that we can experience in a measure now. But of course, it is also something that we will experience in greater measure in the future. It is a hope that continues to be realized in heaven or in the new heavens and the new earth when we grasp and know ever more clearly how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. But even then, even in heaven, it will be in a measure. You see, this is knowledge that is, well, to use Paul's language, this is truth that surpasses knowledge. And so, there will never be an occasion, not even in eternity itself, where we will be able to sit back and say, well, now I know it all.

Now I have experienced it all. Now I am fully conscious of the magnitude of the love of Christ. That day will never come. This grasping, this growing in our knowledge of the love of Christ will be a task that will wonderfully occupy our attention eternally.

And so, in this prayer that Paul prays, we're confronted with what we're calling a present reality. We are, thank God, rooted and grounded in God's love. But there is in what he prays in favor of the Ephesians, a recognition of this continuing task or mission that we would grasp and know the love of Christ. And there is this future hope, realized in a measure even in the present, to be filled with the fullness of God as we are conformed to the likeness of Jesus.

But as we end, let's go back to where we began in Paul's doxology, praising the God who is able to do more than we ask or imagine. Now when we think of that doxology, in the light of what we've just been thinking about concerning what Paul asks for the believers, what Paul imagines as he contemplates the outcome of his prayer on their behalf. And then we see Paul saying to the one who is able to do more, well it's mind-blowing really.

[33 : 07] Paul has asked of God to give his people the power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and so to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

What could be more than that? Well I simply don't know what that could be, but I am excited at the prospect of finding out because this is the God of whom Paul speaks. This is the God to whom Paul extends his praise, to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. To him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen. Well let's pray. Heavenly Father we do thank you for your word and we thank you for your love. We thank you for your love as it finds such eloquent and powerful expression in the giving of your son and in the life of your son and in the giving of himself for sinners such as we are. And we do pray that you would help us as those who by grace are rooted and grounded in the love of God to know what it is to be ever grasping and ever taking hold of and ever growing in our knowledge and experience of the love of Christ and we pray in his name. Amen.