

Prayer That Changes: Part 2
Ephesians 3:17b-21

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think...”

Introduction: *“Birds aren’t Real”* This is the mantra of a pseudo cause/movement started by a young college student in 2017 in Arkansas named Peter McIndoe. Starting as a skit for a video of a made up, ridiculous phrase, it turned into something that was followed by hundreds of thousands of people who bought enough merchandise to allow Peter and a couple of friends to drop out of college and pursue it full time. What was it? A movement that claimed the government had spent the latter part of the 20th Century killing billions of birds and replacing them with drones that spied on the population, recharging on power lines throughout the nation. The culminating march was on the headquarters of Twitter, who have a bird as their company’s logo, and they spent days calling for the massive company to switch logos to something that didn’t scream of government control.

When asked in a more recent interview (*“The Truth Behind ‘Birds aren’t Real’/ My life Online”*) why he played this character of a conspiracy theorist/movement leader, Peter said, “This was a story worth telling...more and more a reflection of America and a reflection of a feeling when I go on Twitter or walk outside. That lunacy and embodying that in the real world.” It was a satirical look at the lunacy of movements, or causes, and of finding purpose in the absurd. Yet Peter, who grew up in a home school, church going family, but rejected that truth in search of something else, even something as unthinkable as robot birds flying over us. “We’re all telling ourselves a story about our lives. Everyone is doing that to some degree —- tweaking elements of themselves to find that **identity**. I thought about that about myself, too, with *“Birds aren’t Real”*. *Birds aren’t Real* has been my way to find **purpose, identity, and community**. Just like a conspiracy theorist....I love *“Birds aren’t Real.”* The irony is palpable and sad: looking for truth, meaning, love, and acceptance in something made up, fictional, and fake.

While this story is obvious and outlandish, it illustrates a much more subtle reality. Most people are looking for these fundamental and foundational principles in their life: *What are we here for? Who am I? Where do I belong? Will I be loved and accepted?* The true answer to each of these is sourced in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the love of God for sinful and broken humanity, in the fact that Jesus not only substituted Himself on the cross but brought us into His household. In this, we know our purpose: *to bring Him glory*, who we are: *children of the King, sons and daughters of God*, we know where we belong: *in His household, family, and part of His eternal kingdom*, and if we’ll be loved and accepted: *we are loved before the foundation of the world and so much that Jesus died in our place*. If a group of Gen Z activists could get people all around the country to give money, time, and passion to something made up, how much more would a group of believers in Jesus commit their lives to growing in the knowledge and understanding of our Savior.

We come again to a prayer of transition, moving us from positional realities (chapters 1-3) to practical actions (chapters 4-6), from knowing who we ARE in Christ to what we DO in Christ.

Prayer is an essential piece of this holistic view of life in Christ, and what Paul prays FOR is of utmost importance. Before we can DO all that God has commanded us, we must know and comprehend the vast love He has for us. This is the essence of Paul's prayer, and should inform our prayer for each other.

Before looking at the last two purposes or requests of this prayer, let's look at the flow once again, this time working *backwards* through the text. Starting in verse 19, we see that Paul prays that the church would be **filled with the fullness of God**. This is the height of our call to perfection and maturity. The only way this can happen is if we have the strength to comprehend and know the love of Christ (18-19), which is based on our rooting and grounding in love, which is a result of having Christ dwell in our hearts (17a), which can only happen when we are strengthened in our inner man through the Spirit (16). We note the work of the **Trinity** here in our lives, with the work of the Spirit in the inner man, Christ in our heart, and God filling us full. This is how we become **spiritually mature**, which is not an option, but rather an expectation for every child of God.

Coming to Grips with the Love of Christ (17b-19a)

"That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may behave strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge..."

Again, this is the second "hina" clause which gives us the second great request or purpose of this prayer. This second has to do with "LOVE", which is simply defined as seeking the highest good of the one loved, implying humility, sacrifice, and service. This request is made up of a 1) result and 2) a request for strength.

- **Result leading to love** – "being rooted and grounded in love" is a direct result of being strengthened by the Spirit in our inner being, which will allow Christ to dwell in our hearts by faith. In order to have understanding, our inner self must be **renewed or re-configured**, and Christ must become the master of our entire life, taking up residence in every part of our heart, including our desires, motives, and passions. This means that our hearts are NOT typically bent to understand the true definition of love, but are instead shaped toward ourselves, loving out of selfishness or passions rather than seeking the highest good of others. There are two metaphors Paul uses to how love affects us. *"Love is the soil in which believers are rooted and will grow, the foundation upon which they are built."*¹ The first is a picture of agriculture, the second from architecture. Both of these reiterate the same thing. Love is the means by which we grow, not just into maturity, but in our knowledge of love itself. Remember, we are planted to grow and built to last. God's love for us in Christ, which is the focus here, was not showered on us to simply sit on and bury. As my good friend Doug Bookman said, "I like teaching overseas, because teaching in the States is like feeding fat sheep who go home and take a nap." The Spirit dwells in us to continually shed light on the

¹ Peter T. O'Brien "The Letter to the Ephesians", p. 260.

truth, convict us of sin, and lead us in the light. Christ dwelling in our heart by faith means that He is shaping us everyday to be more like Him. There is no such thing as **spiritual neutrality in our life**. A seed is not planted to lay dormant in the dirt, nor is a foundation of a building significant if nothing is placed on top of it. Love is what created new life in us with Christ's loving death on the cross. Our responsibility is to operate with the strength He provides to grow from there.

- **Request of understanding love** – It is important to understand that the love talked about in this prayer is a comprehension of God's love for us, not our love for him or even others. However, the point of this request is that WHEN we grow in our understanding of His love for us, we will be able to fully love each other, which is the point in 4:2, 4:15, 5:2, etc. The main prayer is that we would have **strength or power** to come to grips with, comprehend, and know the love God has for us in Christ.
- 1) **Comprehending Love** – How do we comprehend God's love for us? In some ways, even a child can understand at some level what it means to love, but not fully. How many of us as parents have understood how much OUR parents loved us once WE became parents ourselves? Then we began to understand the lengths a parent will go to love their own and the true meaning of sacrifice. Is there much of anything that we would not do for our kids? But here comprehension is described **two ways**:
- **Comprehending love is a community project** – We comprehend "with all the saints". Growth in an individual believer CANNOT happen in isolation but must happen in the context of relationships, playing out the 'one-anothers'. We EXPERIENCE this when we walk with each other in love, bearing with, forgiving, unifying, helping, sacrificing for and serving. But to comprehend the love of God we need to be with others who are also seeking to comprehend God's love for us. Notice that we do this with ALL, not just those like us. When we are in close proximity with each other, we see how God's love plays out the same way in all of us in vastly different ways. This is why we cannot simply exist in a church family online or for 2 hours a week alone. We are with each other in study, in seeking to understand, in observing how God's love plays out in other lives. There is a front row seat we get each week in our Shepherding group as we share what's going on in life through the lens of God's love for us.
 - **Comprehending love is a lifetime venture** – Admittedly, this is a tough sentence to understand, because Paul uses words of measurement without definition or even tying it off. Many options exist to explain what Paul was pointing to, but the best option sits in the context, that he is describing the vast, fully orb'd definition of God's love for us. Let me give you a possibility embedded in the context of Ephesians as to the dimensions of God's love:

BREADTH – How *broad* is the love of Jesus Christ? It is broad enough to bring in both those near and far from Him, both Jews and Gentiles, into His family with no wall of division, bringing everyone in on the same terms so that we are made into one family, one temple, and one

nation. We live in a day and age that wants to separate people into classes, economics, and skin color, with each having different rules. God tears all of those down in the gospel, recognizes the fact that we are the SAME in sin and need of salvation, and saves us with the same blood. How broad is the love of Jesus? He can and will save anyone, from all nations, tongues, tribes, and languages.

LENGTH – How *long*, or *what is the length*, of Jesus' love? Look again at Eph. 1:4. He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before Him **in love!** His love transcended eternity past, but it did not stop there, because Eph. 2:7 says he wants to show us His grace and kindness toward us into eternity future, because of the great love with which He loved us. So, there is no end of the length of the love He has for us, but stretches out before time began and continues when time will not end.

HEIGHT – What is the height of His love? It goes as high as heaven, since that is where Christ is seated (1:20) and we are seated with him (2:6). That is the place where all blessings come to us (1:3). "For your steadfast love is great above the heavens; your faithfulness reaches the clouds" (Ps. 108:4). "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him" (Ps. 103:11). How high is the love of God in Christ? As high as the heavens where Christ is seated on His throne.

DEPTH – How *deep* is the Father's love for us? Deep enough that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). Deep enough to take dead sinners under wrath who were captive to the course of this world and make us alive through His love, mercy, grace, and kindness (Eph. 2:1-7). It's why we sing "How deep the Fathers love for us" by Stuart Townsend, "How deep the Fathers love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure. How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns His face away. As would do which mar the Chosen One, bring many sons to glory." That's deep love indeed.

God's love can save anyone, extends from eternity to eternity, reaches to the heavens, and plumbs the depth of salvation through His blood. This love cannot be comprehended on our own: we need each other. This love cannot be comprehended in our flesh: we need the Spirit to strengthen, Christ to dwell, and God to strengthen.

- 2) Knowing Love** – But Paul did not stop his prayer there, but gives another vast superlative concerning love. We are to "**know Christ's love that SURPASSES knowledge!**" The key word here is the word "know", which does not simply mean an intellectual capture but an EXPERIENTIAL understanding. God's love for us in Christ is something we get to have in our life, daily, as we taste of His goodness, forgiveness, and grace. The fact that His love surpasses knowledge not only signals its vastness, but also the necessity of divine intervention for us to actually come to grips with it. Jesus loved us selflessly, leaving the glory of the Father and taking on humanity, veiling Himself as a lowly servant, allowing men to spit on Him, nail Him to a cross, and becoming a curse for us. The One who created and sustains this world, which was made by, through, and for Him, willingly placed Himself under the wrath of God, being judiciously condemned by

the Father who treated Christ as if He had committed every sin of every believer for all time. The One who forgave those who sinned continually, called those who didn't even want Him, and selflessly laid down His life for those who were seeking to save theirs. This is the love we are to KNOW, understand, and by which we respond to others.

Why is comprehending and knowing this love so important? We are loved with such a vast love that we can be filled with **confidence rather than insecurity** that we have value and meaning. It means that no matter the situation you find yourself, whether its financial strain or cancer, or whether you're struggling in your marriage or with your kids, or whether you are discouraged by circumstances or prospects of the future, God is using all of these to deepen our understanding of His love for us. He acts always according to His love, and we cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

When God Grips us Fully (19b) –

“That you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

What is the culmination of comprehending and knowing God's love for us? That we'd be “filled with all the fullness of God!” To be honest, I'm not even sure how to articulate or explain this one. The goal of this is to be filled up to the fullness of God in terms of His moral excellence and perfection. This is the end of a prayer that paves the way for all the calls to walk in Christ in chapters 4-6. The goal of our life is to submit ourselves to God, to yield ourselves so completely, to be crucified to our former life, that God is in complete control of us from the inside out. The marks of this kind of life is a settled contentment, a hatred of sin, a love for others, a love and growth in God's Word, an active growth in obedience, faithfulness in making disciples, and glorifying God in His church.

Now we stop here and simply ask this: is this how we pray for each other? We spent time as elders on Thursday night reading through 4 prayers of Paul (Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-11) and then we prayed for you. Instead of merely praying for situations to improve or pain to be relieved, we prayed that these truths would be true and growing in you. Is this how you pray for your spouse? For your kids? For your elders? What we pray for reveals what we hope God does in our midst. If we are going to be a healthy church, these are the things we need to seek from the Lord on each other's behalf.

God's Grip on Glorifying Himself in all Things (20-21)

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

The end of this chapter and entire first 3 chapters ends with a DOXOLOGY, which is appropriate, since the letter began with one. A doxology is an expression of praise to God, one that would be repeated often in worship. This is one of the boldest declarations of God's greatness and ability in all of Scripture, so this is a worthy one to remember. This is also a declaration of what we truly desire, or more succinctly, what we know God desires.

First, it is a declaration of trust in the greatness of God – What a thought! God can do what we ask and BEYOND what we even ask, or even THINK! He can do more than we can dream up or imagine. God can make dead men live, blind people to see, give captives freedom, can change a heart of stone to a heart of flesh, and bring people from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son. He can certainly answer your request. But far too often we dabble in small prayers alone without raising our expectations and requests, settling for a better grade on a test or having enough money rather than pleading with God to bring more of whom He's called to salvation. Our God has trillions to give away and we keep asking for a cup of coffee.

Second, it is a recognition of what is at work in us. – What is the work that He'll do? He will work in and through us, both to transform our hearts and minds and conform our lives to obedience, and do this impossible task through the power at work in us. *“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in your absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.**”* (Phil. 2:12-13).

Lastly, it is an understanding of what God is working out – What are the rails by which God answers prayer? He does all things for His glory, in Christ and the church, extending from generations to eternity itself! God will receive all the glory both now and forever. If He chooses to answer our prayer, it's for His glory. If He chooses to do what we DON'T pray for, it's for His glory. He glorified Himself through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and continues to glorify Himself by saving humanity in the gospel through the church. We can absolutely know with certainty that everything that God does will bring Him glory, and we'll be with Him in glory forever.

In a world that is searching for meaning, for identity, for purpose, we have clarity about all of these in the glory of God, in His church, and in Jesus Christ. So, we simply pray that God would change us to be more like Christ, to be transformed in our inner being, that Christ would dwell in our hearts, that we would comprehend and know the love of God in Christ so we will be filled with the fullness of God, all to God's glory, knowing He can do all of this and more through the power at work within us!