

“Transforming Prayer: How Everything Changes When We Seek The Face of God – Part 4”

Ephesians 3:14-21

~ Delivered at DHBC on September 29, 2013 (Soli Deo Gloria)

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to Ephesians 3. **READ 3-12.**
- I have no story with which to begin my message today. No illustration. No thought-provoking question. In fact, all the ways in which I have been taught how to preach seem woefully inadequate before this prayer of the apostle Paul.
 - You see, this prayer describes the mountaintop of Christian experience. What Paul is praying for is not simply that we would know God or obey God but that we would experience God.
 - This prayer is like a trail that leads you higher and higher into the heights of communion with God.
- But how can I possibly explain such breathtaking views to you? For instance, half way up the trail Paul asks that we might grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ’s love in such a way that he says it, **“surpasses knowledge.”** How am I supposed to help you understand an experience of Christ’s love that transcends understanding?
 - As if this was not high enough, Paul then prays that we would reach the peak where we, **“may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”** Most times I feel decently competent to explain the Scriptures to you but how do I define that?
 - Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, preached 16 sermons on this prayer and still confessed that he felt totally inadequate before it.
- This scripture is the mountaintop of Christian experience. We are in rarefied atmosphere here. In fact, the communion with God that Paul is asking for is so awe inspiring that you will be tempted to think it is only for super Christian types.
 - But it is not. This letter was written to average Christians like you and I. Moreover, in verse 18 Paul says, **“And I pray that you...may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”**
- So there is an intimacy, a closeness, and a communion that every Christian may have with God Himself. This communion is so exhilarating that, like the view from a mountaintop, it takes one’s breath away.
 - But too many of us are content to stay in the lowlands, to stumble through the mist and fog, catching only rare glimpses of God. I am convinced that as soon as we step into eternity and first lay our eyes upon God we will not only be staggered by how glorious He is, but we will think, **“Why when He is so magnificent did I get so caught up in other earthly things that I neglected communion with Him?”**
 - You see brothers and sisters, coming to Christ to have your sins forgiven, to be justified, and adopted as his child is only the beginning. God wants you to experience Him.

- So I thought that best way to go about today's message would be to do a quick overview of what Paul is praying for and then spend some time giving examples of Christians who have ascended these heights. I want you to catch a glimpse of the heights that are possible for you. I want to whet your appetite.
 - So let's do this in three parts. First, I will define communion with God. Second, I will depict communion with God from the experience of other Christians. Finally, I will describe how we also can ascend into higher communion with God.

DEFINING COMMUNION WITH GOD

- So let's begin then by surveying this trail. Let's do a quick overview of the prayer. Let's begin by **(SHOW SLIDE)** defining communion with God. I see three things here.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, communion with God means experiencing His presence.
 - His first request is in verse 16. **READ 16 - "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."**
 - We cannot ascend to this first lookout on our own strength. We are too weak to climb and so we pray for the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit. Paul then describes the first experience of communion as Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith.
- But this sounds confusing. Doesn't Christ already dwell in the Ephesians? In Romans 8 Paul says the Holy Spirit lives in all Christians and then says, **"if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."** Christians often speak about **"accepting Jesus into your heart."** So if all Christians already have Christ dwelling in them, why ask for this?
 - The word "to dwell" means to take up a more permanent home. It means to experience more deeply the presence of the one who already dwells in you.
- To understand this I want to quote you one of the most misinterpreted and misapplied verses in the New Testament - Revelation 3:20. Jesus says, **"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."**
 - Christians often apply this to non-Christians saying that if you just receive Jesus he will come to dwell in you. That is true but it is not what this verse is saying. Who is this verse written to – Christians or non-Christians? Christians. It is written to the church in Laodicea. They know him but he has not moved into every part of the mansion of their hearts. Those Christians, like so many of us, do have Jesus but so often they leave him standing on the front step of their hearts.
 - But in his grace, Jesus keeps knocking and calling out to us. And what a promise he makes. He says when we open the door he will come in and eat with us. In oriental lands, even more than today, the sharing of a meal indicated a strong bond of affection and companionship.
- Think of the greatest meals that you have ever enjoyed with family or friends. Those meals where you sat at the table for hours talking of wonderful things,

- eating the most delicious of foods, and laughing until your stomach hurt. In those moments you enjoyed sweet communion with each other.
- Your God, your Maker, your Saviour, Jesus Christ wants this type of communion with you. He wants to sit and eat with you. He wants you to know the enjoyment of his presence.
 - So you see there are differing degrees of communion with God. You can be a Christian and yet not truly experience his presence. That is why we ask that God would strengthen us that we might climb higher and experience more intimately his indwelling presence in our hearts.
 - But this is only the first lookout. There are even higher experiences of Christ that Paul wants for us. In the second place (**SHOW SLIDE**) communion with God means experiencing his love.
 - Look at the second half of verse 17. **READ 17b-18** – *“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, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”*
 - Note carefully that we are not asking that we would love Christ. We are asking that we would know Christ’s love for us. And this is not just an intellectual knowledge. It is an experiential knowledge. The word for “grasp” usually means to be ambushed in the sense that you are dumbfounded in surprise. It means to be thunderstruck. When Peter suddenly understood that God was including Gentiles in His plan of salvation Peter said to Cornelius, *“I now realize [grasp, comprehend] how true it is that God does not show favoritism.”* This truth ambushed him. He was thunderstruck. He would never be the same. He would never forget it.
 - Paul is asking that as Christians we would be thunderstruck by the limitless dimensions of Christ love for us. That we would look into the depths of it, the heights of it, the length of it, and the breadth of it.
 - Again, this is written to Christians. Notice in verse 17 that they are already rooted and grounded in love. They are mature believers. But Paul says there are higher experiences of Christ’s love for us to know. Paul wants us to be like a hiker who breaks out of the forest to see the world in all its beauty stretched out before her. As we grasp the love of Christ we would say in awestruck wonder, *“Wow, look at that.”* Such an experience surpasses knowledge. How can one describe the view as you take the gondola up Grouse Mountain? Words fail us. You just have to experience it.
 - But this is still not the top of the mountain. I told you this was astonishing. The communion with God that Paul is praying for goes beyond knowing Christ’s presence and love. In the third place we are asking for a communion that means (**SHOW SLIDE**) experiencing the glory of God.
 - **READ 19** - *“that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”* How do I even define that for you? What does it mean for a human soul to be filled with the fullness of God? It is an experience where the Christian so beholds God in all his glory that we say with the

old chorus, ***“Turn your eyes upon Jesus and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.”***

- I confess that I have rarely felt so incompetent on expounding a passage of Scripture to you. We are in rarified atmosphere here. I confess that I have caught glimpses of this view but I want more. How about you? Do you know something of this communion with God?
 - In order to help us catch a glimpse of this I thought it might serve us best to hear of the experiences of other Christians. Before I relate these to you I would remind again that there are degrees of communion with God.
 - You may not know the communion of some of these people but I still think it is worthwhile to hear their descriptions so that we will yearn for higher communion with God. I give you these examples to whet your appetite and to try to capture in words what surpasses knowledge.

DEPICITING COMMUNION WITH GOD

- So having defined communion with God let’s turn in the second place to **(SHOW SLIDE)** depict communion with God.
 - D.L. Moody was the Billy Graham of the 19th century. I give you his experience because he was a very uneducated man. He shows us that we do not have to be great Bible scholars to experience communion with God.
 - ***“Well, one day, in the city of New York -- oh, what a day! -- I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name. Paul had an experience of which he never spoke for fourteen years. I can only say that God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand.”***
 - So Moody experienced the love of Christ in such an overwhelming way that he could hardly take it. It was an experience that surpassed knowledge.
 - Or let’s take the example of someone who was not famous at all. Daniel Steele was a teacher in Britain. He wrote a letter to a friend because he’d been experiencing sweet communion with God. He says in his letter:
 - ***“Almost every week, and sometimes every day, the pressure of His great love comes down upon my heart in such measure as to make my brain throb and my whole being, soul and body, groan beneath the strain of the almost insupportable plethora of joy. He has unlocked every apartment of my being, and filled and flooded them all with the light of His radiant presence.”***
 - Again, it is the same type of thing. Notice that although he prays everyday, it is not a permanent thing. But he experiences the presence, the love and the glory of God in a way that fills his whole being.
 - Here is one from the great evangelist and preacher George Whitfield. He writes in his journal,
 - ***“... the freeness and riches of God’s everlasting love broke in with such light and power upon my soul, that I was often awed into silence and***

could not speak!” He said, “Stop it, God. I have to get my rest. The love. It’s too much love. My being feels like it’s groaning under something insupportable. I had to ask him to stay his hand.”

- David Brainerd was a missionary to the Native Americans in the 18th century. He wrote this in his journal on April 27, 1742:
 - *“I retired pretty early for secret devotion; and in prayer God was pleased to pour such indescribable comfort into my soul that I could do nothing for some time but say over and over, ‘O my sweet Savior! O my sweet Savior! Who have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth, that I desire besides Thee...My soul never enjoyed so much of heaven before. It was the most refined and the most spiritual season of communion with God I have ever yet felt.”*
- An Indian woman who had just become a Christian was speaking with Brainerd. At one point he interrupted her, asking her the question whether, *“Christ was now sweet to her soul?”* With tears in her eyes she said:
 - She said, *“I have many times heard you speak of the goodness and sweetness of Christ, that He was better than all the world. But oh! I knew nothing what you meant, I never believed you! I never believed you! But now I know it is true!”*¹
- Lest you think that this is just for emotional type people, let me give you the experience of two men who were extremely rational, analytic, and intelligent. Here is Jonathan Edwards, widely considered to be one of the top minds in Christian history.
 - He says, *“Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension...The person of Christ appeared inexpressibly excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception ... which continued as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud... I have, several other times, had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.”*
- Or finally now listen to Blaise Pascal, who was of course the great French Mathematician. His intellectual understanding of Christ changed around 1654 when he experienced Christ dwelling in him. In his journal he wrote,
 - *“In the year of grace, 1654, on Monday, 23rd of November...From about half past ten in the evening until about half past twelve. Fire!”* He tried to describe the fire in his soul. Here is what he wrote:
 - *God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
Not of the philosophers and scholars.
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.
God of Jesus Christ.*

¹ David Brainerd, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* ed Jonathan Edwards 8th edition, pg 83, 280.

“Thy God and my God.”
Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God.
He is to be found only in the ways taught in the Gospel.
Greatness of the Human Soul.
“Righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee,
But I have known Thee.”
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.”

- Let's be careful how we interpret these experiences.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, do not make another person's experience normative. Notice that all of these experiences are different from each other. Don't look for the exact same thing in your life.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, do not make the mistake of just seeking an experience. These people were not seeking an experience. They were seeking Christ. It is not feelings we want. It is Christ we want. We don't base our lives on feelings or experiences but on Christ.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, notice that these people did not live forever on the mountaintop. One of my favourite memories of this past summer was riding the Screamer Roller Coaster at Disneyland with Emily. The highs of a roller coaster are an amazing experience. But you cannot live on a roller coaster. God takes his people to the mountaintop but he also makes them walk through dark valleys. And sometimes it is the valley's where God gives us the greatest experiences of his presence, love, and glory.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Fourth, their experiences arise out of Scripture and do not contradict it. These are not people claiming to have spent 90 minutes in heaven. These are not bizarre mystical experiences. They are all about Christ and his love for us in his death, his resurrection, and exaltation. It does not contradict Scripture.
 - Fifth, they all shared in **(SHOW SLIDE)** something that includes the intellect but it is an experience that surpasses knowledge. It is an experience of God. Do you know this? If God is merely facts to you then you are likely a religious person but not really a Christian.
 - Sixth, what all these stories share in common is that **(SHOW SLIDE)** they all speak of knowing the sweetness of Christ and His love. Oh yes there are degrees of this. But do you know even a little what it means to commune with him? To taste him? To be thrilled by him? To have him capture your heart? To know that He is sweeter than anything else?
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Finally, I say again that this is not just for certain super spiritual Christians. Notice that these were all different types of Christians. Educated. Uneducated. Men. Women. Teachers. Mathematicians. Preachers.
 - Christ wants all of his people to experience his presence, his love, and his glory.

DESCRIBING COMMUNION WITH GOD

- Are you yearning for more? Do you want to know how to ascend into higher communion with God? We have defined communion with God and we have depicted communion with God.

- We are ready in the third place now to **(SHOW SLIDE)** describe how we can ascend to higher communion with God.
 - So how do we do this? The short answer is that there is no formula. But I do think we see many principles in Scripture. Let me mention a few from this passage.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, if you want higher communion with God ask Him for it.
 - This is a prayer. Paul is asking that the Ephesians would experience to a higher degree what they already know. So come earnestly in prayer saying, ***“Father, I want to know you.”*** Pray as Paul did in chapter 1 that God would give you the Holy Spirit who is revealer of God in order that you may know him better.
 - Ask for the Holy Spirit to strengthen you because your hearts must be prepared for this ascent. The Spirit needs to rid our hearts of sin and get us in shape for the ascent.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, if you want higher communion with God commit yourself to Christian community. Look at verse 17. ***READ 17 - And I pray that you...may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.***
 - The isolated Christian can know something of Christ’s love but your grasp is limited by your own personal experience. It is together with other believers that we learn of Christ. It is in corporate worship that God often communes the highest with his people. It is in prayer together at small group. It is in studying the love of God in your GROW pod. It is in reading the teachings of the great teachers in history that we learn of Christ.
 - So be a member of a church. Commit yourself to Christ’s church.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, if you want higher communion with God fill your mind with God’s truth.
 - Notice that the experience follows the mind. Paul is praying that we “grasp” his love. That means we have to first learn about it. Paul begins the prayer by saying ***“For this reason.”*** He has been thinking all about what God has done for us in Christ – redeeming, forgiving, adopting, making us alive, and saving us by grace.
 - It is as you grow in your knowledge of Christ that the truth begins to shine, that the truth catches fire, and you grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ’s love. So don’t go looking for some mystical experience of the Holy Spirit. Live in this book. Learn more of what Christ has done for you. And you will find that the Spirit uses it to lead you into higher communion with God.
- There is no formula to higher communion with God but we can be like Blind Bartimaeus. From the story in Mark 10 we know that Blind Bart, as I like to call him, had heard about Jesus and the blessings that he could bring. So Blind Bart sat by the road and waited for Jesus to come. He did not know if or when Jesus would come but he waited. In the same way, if you want higher communion with God you must put yourself on the road where Jesus will meet you. That road is his word and his people. This is where God meets us.

- And then when blind Bart heard Jesus coming he yelled out, ***“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”*** Many people told him to shut up but he kept yelling. Jesus stopped, called him over and restored his vision.
 - As so as we put ourselves in the path of potential blessing we cry out, ***“Father, we want to know you. Father, take us higher. Give us your Spirit to strengthen us. Come take over every part of our hearts. Let us be thunderstruck by Christ’s love. Let us see your glory.”***
- More often than not God will graciously allow you to catch glimpses of himself. And sometimes, he pulls back the clouds and overwhelms you with a view of his love and glory. There are higher degrees of communion with God for you.
 - Seek Him for as He says, ***“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”***