

“Inexhaustible”
Ephesians 3:14-21
07.18.21

Introduction

In his book, *Practice Resurrection*, Pastor Eugene Peterson tells a story about his friends, Fred and Cheryl, and how they adopted a five-year-old girl named Addie. The couple had already been married for several years and had two biological sons, Thatcher and Graham. The boys were 13 and 15 at the time.

The first night Addie ate with her new family, she could not believe all of the food that was spread out before her on the dining room table. She sat there quietly as her new older brothers scarfed down pork chops, along with mashed potatoes and other sides, refilling their plates multiple times.

Having lived all of her life under difficult circumstances, Addie was used to scarcity. Noticing her insecurity, Cheryl took Addie by the hand and led her into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator door and showed her all the food that was inside: milk, juice, fresh vegetables, eggs, a package of bacon.

Then she opened the pantry and showed Addie the peanut butter, bread, jam, the bins of potatoes, onions, squash, and canned goods. In essence, Cheryl did not simply tell Addie that she would not go hungry again, she showed her the kitchen and let her know it all belonged to her as much as the rest of the family.

This is the way that Paul describes the riches of God’s glory. Did you notice all of the adjectives describing what God has already done for us? The height, breadth, length and depth of God’s love. More specifically, Paul prays an oxymoronic prayer; he prays that the people of God will know a love that is unknowable.

In Ephesians chapter one, Paul tells us that God has adopted us into the family, which gives us the picture of God moving us from a place of scarcity to a life of abundance. We now belong to the family and everything that we need to grow in our faith belongs to us—we just need to claim it and start living like we are sons and daughters.

Digging Deeper

Our Scripture lesson today is a prayer report. Paul is sharing with a group of Gentile Christians how he has been praying on their behalf.

The two parts of Paul’s teaching comprise two long sentences in Greek. The first is eighty-six words, and the doxology (vv. 20-21) is made up of thirty-seven words. In English, both sentences would probably be considered what we call “run-ons.”

If you've ever written a paper and had someone proofread it and they said, "Well, it's pretty good but you write the same way you speak," I think that is what is happening here. Paul is literally unloading the prayer that he has been praying for the Ephesians and he's more concerned about conveying content than careful structure.

I urge you to spend some time with this passage and allow it to become a template for prayer in the same way that we use the Lord's prayer. A careful read will reveal that Paul does not pray for anyone's health and he does not pray for anyone's problems to be resolved. In fact, Paul does not really even pray for God to do anything new. Instead, he simply prays for the Ephesians to be receptive to everything that God has already done.

Paul prays that:

- God will strengthen their inner being.
- Christ will dwell in their hearts through faith.
- The Church will be rooted and grounded in love.
- The Church will know the incomprehensible, inexhaustible love of God (i.e., height, depth, length, and breadth).
- The Church will be filled with the fulness of God.

The common feature of each of these requests is that Paul is concerned about the Ephesians maturing in their faith. And as we saw in chapter two, according to Paul, spiritual maturity is does not look like an individual spiritual path, but it is when we grow together into a Christian community that embodies the presence of Jesus in the world (2:21-22). The metaphor that Paul uses for this in chapter four is "The Body of Christ."

Paul's vision of the Church is of a diverse group of people coming together in the name of Jesus to collectively become the Temple that houses the presence of Christ in the world. So that through our life together, others will witness the crucified and risen Savior.

In some ways that sounds a bit overwhelming and intimidating. But it is not something we have to generate or discover on our own. All of the riches of God's glorious grace are accessible to us as soon as we join the family.

Theological Reflection #1

The recipients of Paul's letter lived in a world of limited good. It didn't matter how much wealth or power one had, there was a limitation on resources. In other words, a store owner could not go "check in the back to see if there is more in the stockroom." They could not place an order. It was first come, first serve.

The idea of inexhaustible resources was unheard of; but Paul tells the Church that God has an endless supply of everything they need to become a mature community of faith. And his focal point is God's love.

It's important to remember that Paul is not praying for people outside the Church—he's praying for people sitting in the pews every week. Paul knows that if the people of God can just latch onto this immeasurable, inexhaustible love, it will not only change their lives and their faith communities, but it will ultimately change the world.

Theological Reflection #2

There's a familiar story in the New Testament that we call *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. We are most familiar with the younger son who takes his inheritance and squanders it in unspeakable ways. But as Jesus is telling the story he is most concerned about the elder sons in the room.

When the elder son learns that his younger brother has come home he is furious. In fact, he throws a fit. The father has killed the fatted calf and thrown an elaborate party, and the elder brother says, "you have not even given me a goat so that I might celebrate with my friends."

The father replies, "Son, you are always with me; and everything I have is yours."

The story about the prodigal is a bit more dramatic. After all, the father runs to him, kisses him, and throws him a party. But we must remember that the father is also willing to leave the celebration to invite his elder son to come back home.

Ironically, the story ends with a cliffhanger with the prodigal feasting at the father's table, but we're never told whether the elder brother comes back inside to join the celebration. Instead, we are given the impression that as one son comes back home, the other begins wandering from the father's house into the world.

Invitation

The words that the father speaks are so powerful: "Son, you are always with me; and everything I have is yours." Some of us have been professing Christians for a long time. It's not that we're bad people. We go to church, we're involved, and we serve on committees. But that does not necessarily mean that we are feasting at the father's table. It doesn't mean that we are living like we are sons and daughters.

The words that Paul prays comes from a pastor's heart. I, too, pray for you each day that you might live in the abundance of God's transformative loves so that we can grow together into the fullness of Christ. As Paul indicates in the doxology, when we are willing to surrender to this love and allow the love of God to live in us fully, God is "able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine..."

Reference Tools

Martin, Ralph. *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. 1991. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Peterson, Eugene. *Practice Resurrection*. 2010. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Thielman, Frank. *Ephesians*. 2010. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Snodgrass, Klyne. *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*. 1996. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Describe mealtime in your home growing up. Did everyone eat together? If you are comfortable sharing, what were the family dynamics?
2. How does Paul's example inspire you to grow in the ways that you pray for yourself and for others?
3. What do you think it means when Paul prays for the Church to be "rooted and grounded in love"?
4. As you reflect on the story of the elder brother, why do you think we go through seasons where we choose not to live in the abundance of the father? What are some ways that we can allow God to "strengthen our inner being" and grow in our knowledge of God's incomprehensible love?
5. How have you experience God's grace recently?

6. How can we pray for you?