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The extent of God's mystery

God's counsels, and the knowledge of the love of Christ

"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from Whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen".

Ephesians 3:14-21

I was thinking of this prayer of the apostle Paul in connection with the refrain of a well-known song:

*O the height and depth of mercy!
O the length and breadth of love!
O the fullness of redemption -
Pledge of endless life above!*

The love of Christ stands in contrast with the world and all that is in the world. The Father's love is also diametrically opposed to the world (1 John 2:15-17). It is right to sing, "Take the world, but give me Jesus."

Actually, I want to think with you briefly about the dimensions mentioned in Ephesians 3:18, which we also sang about. It talks about the length and depth and height, and here it also talks about the width of God's counsels. You might think,

it's all about the riches of Christ's love there in Ephesians 3, as in the song mentioned above. But the question is whether those measures here refer to the dimensions of the rich love, the great extent of the love of Christ. The primary concern in these verses is the richness of God's counsels in Christ, the plans He has conceived in Christ before all ages. And the apostle prays that we might grasp these counsels, which he has set forth in the first three chapters of the letter, and fathom its magnitude – as far as is possible for our limited minds. He first prays that we would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ might dwell in our hearts by faith. While we are also rooted and grounded in love (v. 17).

Two prayers

The apostle prays in chapter 1 that we will understand God's counsels. In that first prayer in Ephesians 1, he talks about the hope of God's calling, and the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints; as well as the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He has worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places (vv. 18-20).

It's actually several topics, but one of them is that we would understand the plan that God has conceived in Christ by raising Him from the dead and giving Him that glorious, exalted place at His right hand in heaven. This is all part of God's plan concerning Christ and the church. So we must pay attention to what happened to Christ. He died, was buried, but has been raised from the dead. And now He has received that glorious, exalted position at God's right hand, so that He might be the center of all God's plans with the world to come, with Israel, and with the church.

But the second prayer in Ephesians 3 is about knowing and enjoying the mystery that God has conceived in Christ. And it is wonderful that not only does the Holy Spirit dwell in us, but that Christ – Who is thus the center of God's plans and thoughts, and has been exalted by God at His right hand in heaven – that this same Person has made His dwelling place in our hearts by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit in the inner man.

The point, then, is that the Lord Jesus, who is actually the center of everything, of all God's thoughts and all His plans and decrees, that the same Lord who has received such a place of honor at God's right hand is now dwelling and residing in our hearts through faith. The Lord desires that. And if that is so, that we may know and enjoy the presence of the Lord Himself in our lives, then with that knowledge

and with that experience we will also be able to understand what God's plans are regarding our Lord and Savior.

He Who dwells in our hearts is also the center of all things. He is the Lord, Who now fills our hearts with His love, but soon He will fill the universe with His glory and splendor. This is God's counsel, and the church – all true believers, all the redeemed of this dispensation – is the body of Christ, the body of this exalted Head. God has subjected everything at His feet and given Him as Head above all else to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23).

Now, if we know the Lord and belong to Him, if we love Him, He fills our hearts first of all with His great love, about which we have also sung. We cannot gauge this love, it is beyond knowledge. That is also what these verses say in Ephesians 3. We also read here that as believers we are "rooted and grounded in love" (v. 17). This is another special expression, for it contains the idea that the love of God and the love of Christ are the soil in which we are planted. We are rooted in it, and so can take root in that love; and we are grounded in it. It is the breeding ground that has been given to us, and when we take root in the love of Christ, we can grow up in it as well and flourish spiritually.

The width

Then we get to know the Lord Jesus better and we get to know God our Father better. Then we also begin to understand, together with all the saints – for it is not only individually, but with all our fellow believers – the extent of that plan of God, the great scope of it. This plan does not only include the people of Israel, God's chosen people under the old covenant, but it is much broader in scope. It also includes the Gentile nations, to which we originally belonged. It includes all people. The salvation of God has come to all in Christ and it is offered to all. So wide is the scope of God's plan of salvation.

The length

And the length of this plan, that is also a great theme to think about. When did God conceive of these plans? Is it from the foundation of the world, as is the case with Israel? No, says this letter: God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, before the beginning of creation. In Him He chose us, that we might be holy and without blame before Him in love (Eph. 1:4). You see, by the way, there you have His love back again. This is the breeding ground where we may find ourselves

as believers, where we may take root, where we may grow up through the knowledge of the love of God and of Christ.

God's counsels thus takes us back before all ages. His plans for the church date from before the foundation of the world and they also reach into the distant future, yes, into all eternity. So long, so vast is this plan of God (cf. Rev. 20-22). For in the ages to come, God's thoughts will be fulfilled and His plans will be realized through Christ and the church, which is His body and is united to Him. Christ will be the center of all things and we will be united with Him, even in His government over creation in the millennial kingdom.

The height

The height of that plan of God, and the depth. How high is this plan of God, so that people who did not deserve it – born sinners, human beings who are limited to the earth anyway, because it has been prepared for the children of men – that they would be elevated to become the children of God and even receive a high and exalted place in His glory? That is actually beyond all our thinking. So high are the thoughts of God that He wanted to unite lost sinners with His Son. And just as high as Christ is exalted, so high shall we also be united with Him, and be glorified with Him. Seek therefore the things that are above, says the same apostle in the letter to the Colossians. Set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth (Col. 3:1-2). The height, that is the theme with which the refrain of our song begins: "O the height and depth of mercy! O the length en breadth of love!"

The depth

But then the depth. How deep is this divine plan? And how deep did the Lord Jesus descend? This morning we had the opportunity to think about how deeply He humbled Himself. Yes, it was to the point of death, the death of the cross! That is how far He went down. He died and was buried. He was laid in the grave, that is how deeply He humbled Himself. He descended – according to Ephesians 4:9 – into the lower parts of the earth. That is the grave, where He was laid to rest. But He did not remain there.

He is also the One who rose, who ascended far above all the heavens (Eph. 4:10). He first descended, but the same One who so humbled Himself and was laid in the tomb is the One who also ascended above all heavens, that He might fill all things. Amazing contrasts. In contrast to the depth of the suffering of our Lord and Savior

is the amazing height, the exalted place He now occupies. It is above all the heavens, that He might fill all things, truly the very highest place in the universe (Eph. 4:8-10). The highest honor is given to Him, and it is part of this great plan of God with the world, His plan with sinners, His plan with the church, which we know by grace; and then Ephesians 3:19 adds, "and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge. "

The love of Christ

This is, so to speak, the secret of this whole counsel, of all these divine dimensions: the width and length and depth and height of God's plan of salvation. This plan has a central point, and that is Christ and His love, which we know and enjoy. It is a love that passes knowledge. We know Him, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the center of God's plan; and if we know Him and if He dwells in our hearts by faith and we are rooted and grounded in love as our breeding ground, then we are, so to speak, at the center of that whole plan of God, because we are united with Christ and know and enjoy His love. And it is a love that passes knowledge, and this is of course in accordance with the song that we sang: this love cannot be measured.

Love that passes knowledge

But it is primarily about God's plans, God's counsels in this letter; and also the dimensions that we are now allowed to think about, they are primarily related to that. And if we may occupy ourselves in this way with the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge, then we will grow and will be filled with all the fullness of God.

This is also a special expression; for of course we are not made gods by this plan of salvation, we remain human beings. But God puts into our hearts that which is divine in origin. We are filled to the whole fullness of God. We are brought into conformity with God because this divine love dwells and works in us and because we are now light in the Lord and respond to the purity, the holiness of God Himself.

You could compare it to a vessel, an object thrown into the water, or thrown into the ocean. The water from the ocean is then in that vessel, in that object. It is full of it, full of water, but of course this little vessel cannot contain that whole ocean. And so it is with the love of God, with this fullness of God: it can dwell in our hearts and we can enjoy it. God's love fills our hearts, but it remains a sea of love which we cannot gauge and which surpasses all our thoughts, all our knowledge. And this

is the will of God for us as believers. Isn't that wonderful that God wants us to enjoy the love of Christ, and the love of God the Father?

When we pray, it is usually in connection with our needs and wants, our desires; and we are free to present those desires to the Lord. But here prayer is primarily about the knowledge of the love of God and of Christ. "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (vv. 20-21).

You see, this is an eternal song of praise to all generations for all ages. He will be given honor forever. He is now given honor and glory in the church, among the whole of the redeemed who are part of this great plan of salvation of our God. The church is destined to glorify Him. And this will not cease when we have left the earth. This hymn is an eternal hymn, which will resound in heaven and on earth for all generations in all eternity.

