

Grace & Peace (March 4 - 8)

Lenten Devotions 2024

By Janice Brauer

Peace Lutheran Church—Lombard, IL

Note: Scripture quotations, unless indicated, are taken from the English Standard Version.

Third Week of Lent—Monday, March 4

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. The mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Ephesians 3:4-6

Another Facet

Two weeks ago, we considered the mystery of God's will as a multi-faceted gem. In today's reading, Paul reveals another facet of this jewel—that Gentiles are included in God's covenant blessings through the Messiah. It is natural that Paul, who had a special calling to take the gospel to the Gentiles, considers this such an important part of the mystery.

That doesn't mean Paul was the first or the only person to recognize this. Remember what Simeon said as he held the 8-day-old Christ child in his arms: *"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"* (Luke 2:29-32).

It was, indeed, God's original intent that the Messiah would come for all people of all nations. When God called Abram to leave his homeland and travel to a place God would show him, He spoke this promise: *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:2-3).

It humbles me to consider that I am included among them all. Could it be that when God looks at me, when God looks at any of His redeemed children from any race or nation or tribe or peoples, He sees a treasure? Yes, it must be so, for the mystery of salvation includes God's personal love for you, for me, for all!

Dear Savior, Words cannot adequately express my thanks to be among those You have redeemed. May my grateful heart overflow with praise to You each day. Amen.

Tuesday, March 5

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Ephesians 3:7-8

Worth It

The least of these. It is an interesting phrase. Usually, we use it when speaking of someone marginalized or powerless or unremarkable or unworthy. Paul would likely have put himself in the unworthy category; he considered himself the least of the saints because he had been a persecutor of the early Christians.

With that in mind, can you hear the gratitude in Paul's voice as he reflects on his life's mission? He is deeply aware that all he has experienced is a gift of grace. From the Lord's dramatic appearance to him on the Damascus Road, to the revelations of truth God gave him as a new believer, to his call as an apostle to the Gentiles—it was all grace!

Some of what followed may not have felt much like grace. Read through the book of Acts, and you'll discover that Paul experienced opposition, arrests, imprisonment, beatings, stoning, danger, shipwrecks, and more. And yet he considered it all worth it so that he could preach "*the unsearchable riches of Christ.*"

Jesus was also whole-heartedly committed to His God-given mission. He endured the cross to set free all those bound by sin and death. And why did He do it? Hebrews 12:2 tell us it was for "*the joy set before Him.*" Indeed, there are unsearchable riches in Christ, and our Savior was pleased to bring them to us—even at the cost of His own life.

**Gracious Savior, How amazing to think that it brought You joy to redeem Your lost children!
We praise and bless Your holy name! Amen.**

Wednesday, March 6

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...

Ephesians 3:14-17a

The Inner Being

Paul is praying again. And once again, his prayer focuses on the spiritual welfare of the believers, those in Ephesus and down through the ages to you and me. His prayer is jam-packed, so we're going to explore it in today's devotion and tomorrow's as well. Today let's consider that Paul asks the Father to strengthen us in our inner beings so that Christ can dwell in our hearts.

We know where our heart is (at least the blood-pumping organ in our chest), but where is our inner being? Where is the heart where Christ can dwell? It is obviously a figure of speech, a reference to the place inside each of us where we relate to God. Theologians say that in Scripture the "heart" represents the whole person—who we really are, the center of our true selves. This inner being is the place nobody sees or fully knows but God. Yet what is in that place can be observed by others when it is revealed in our words, our attitudes, our behavior.

You may have heard the sponge analogy: just as a saturated sponge will release water when it is squeezed, what's inside of us comes out when we are squeezed. No wonder, then, that Paul prayed for believers to be strengthened deep within by the Holy Spirit! Paul desired that when believers are squeezed by life's circumstances, what comes out will reflect the character of God. Certainly, that was true of our Lord, for when He was squeezed by betrayal and mockery and suffering and death, what flowed out was mercy and grace and forgiveness.

Do you feel squeezed in some way today, perhaps by difficult situations or difficult people? Your loving Lord understands. Ask Him to help you, and He will!

Dear Jesus, Strengthen me by Your Spirit deep within me so that I reflect Your character and always stand strong in You. Amen.

Thursday, March 7

...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have 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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:17b-19

Wide and Long and High and Deep

Paul continues by praying that the believers would be rooted and grounded in love. Paul had been dramatically transformed by God's love, and he just can't seem to say enough about the love of God! He can't think of just one word to describe it, so he comes up with four. God's love is wide and long and high and deep.

Wide love. God's love is so wide it spans time and eternity. We might picture this as a cord of love that stretches from eternity past (when God chose you by grace and planned your redemption) to eternity future (when you will receive your inheritance with all the redeemed). And all along the way, God's children are enfolded in His wide, wide love.

Long love. I often reflect on this as the long-suffering nature of God's love. His love is so patient! God doesn't get tired of loving you. He doesn't weary of forgiving you. He doesn't get fed up as you take baby steps facing your weaknesses and growing in grace. Such long, patient love is just what we need day by day.

High love. King David declared God's high love in the psalms. *"Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds"* (Psalm 36:5). *"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him"* (Psalm 103:11). God's love is high. It reaches beyond what we can fathom, yet it is right here in our hearts.

Deep love. God's love is deep and enduring. It is deeper than any disappointment you may face, deeper than despair or depression. And even when you feel yourself free-falling into utter darkness, His love is deeper still. Yes, deeper even than death. Perhaps that's why the Holy Spirit inspired Moses to reassure God's children long ago: *"The eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms"* (Deuteronomy 33:27a). That is deep, deep love!

Lord Jesus, I thank and praise You for such amazing love! Amen.

Friday, March 8

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.

Ephesians 3:20-21

Where The Power Comes From, Where The Glory Comes From

Strengthened within, grounded in love, living by faith—these are big prayers. Where does the power come from to answer these requests, to make them a reality? The power comes from God. It is the same power God used when He raised Christ from the dead. Now, that's a lot of power! That's resurrection power.

This ultimate, undefeatable power of the Holy Spirit, however, isn't like a genie in a lamp or a switch we push once and—presto! —all Paul's prayers for us are answered. Rather, it is a power we experience daily as we cast aside self-reliance and humbly rely on Christ.

When the Spirit convicts you of a specific sin and you quickly repent, that power is at work. When you seek God's will rather than your own, that power is guiding you. When you are loyal to friends, helpful to strangers, and kind to your enemies, that power is manifested.

God's purpose for the Spirit's power within us is that we become the people He created and redeemed us to be. He wants it to be evident that He has poured out the riches of His grace on us, that we are forever changed because He has made us His own. And for that, all the glory goes to Him forever.

Holy Spirit, Please keep working with Your power in me, so that my life may be to the praise of God's glory. Amen.