

**KNOWING THE  
UNKNOWABLE**  
SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE  
MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 3:14-21  
Sixth Message  
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*Ephesians 3:14-21*

In our passage this morning, Paul prays that the Ephesians would know the unknowable love of Christ. But how do you know love?

When our children were little, my wife and I used to read them this board book called *Guess How Much I Love You*. Let me read a few excerpts.

*Little Nutbrown Hare,  
who was going to bed, held  
on tight to Big Nutbrown Hare's  
very long ears.*

*He wanted to be sure that  
Big Nutbrown Hare was listening.  
“Guess how much I love you,” he said.  
“Oh, I don't think I could guess that,”  
said Big Nutbrown Hare.<sup>1</sup>*

For the following several pages, Little Nutbrown Hare and Big Nutbrown Hare keep comparing how much they love each other, trying to outdo one another until the grand conclusion.

“I love you right up to the moon,”  
he said, and closed his eyes.  
“Oh, that's far,” said  
Big Nutbrown Hare.

“That is very, very far.”  
Big Nutbrown Hare settled  
Little Nutbrown Hare  
into his bed of leaves.

He leaned over  
and kissed him  
good night.

Then he lay down close by  
and whispered with a smile,  
“I love you right up to the moon—  
and back.”<sup>2</sup>

Right “up to the moon and back.” How do you measure love? How much love is there to the moon and back?

Christians are fond of saying, “Jesus loves me.” But how much does Jesus love us?

This morning we're going to find out. At PBC, our sermons tend to work their way through books of the Bible because we are convinced this book is the only completely reliable source of truth about God. We are currently working our way through the New Testament book of Ephesians. We've subtitled this series The Mystery of Christ because it's a phrase that shows up several times in the book.

We've seen that the mystery has to do with unity—in chapter 1, a cosmic unifying of all things in heaven and earth. Last week, the unification of ethnic groups who have a long history of hating each other.

We know this kind of unity is hard. We see new examples weekly in our culture of the lack of unity. So it makes sense that the apostle would follow his encouragement toward unity with a prayer. Unity is not something that happens apart from the supernatural work of God.

The content of the prayer isn't what we might expect. The main request is that the listeners would know the love of Christ. But in the same breath, the apostle admits that this love is outside of the bounds of human knowledge. Today we'll talk about “Knowing the Unknowable.”

On the one hand, it seems like it should be easy to know the love of Christ. I should be able just to tell you, “Jesus loves you.” Now you know it.

As we dive into Paul's words, we'll see there seems to be something standing in the way to us knowing the simple truth that "Jesus loves us." In the deepest places of our hearts, there is a part that feels unloved for many of us. Maybe even unlovable. In fact, it seems like something—or someone—doesn't want us to know that we are loved.

Earlier this morning, heard the passage read. At first glance, it all sounds a bit convoluted. It's actually a single sentence in Greek. As beautiful as the ideas are, it can be easy to lose them. It helps to map out the structure.

Paul begins with an introduction to the prayer. He addresses God as the father of all the families in heaven and on earth. You can see the unity theme echoes in these words.

The actual prayer has three main elements. First, Paul prays for strength so that Christ may dwell in the hearts of his readers. Next, he prays that they may comprehend the love of Christ. Then, he prays that they might be filled with the fullness of God. Finally, Paul concludes the prayer with what theologians call a doxology. That's simply an acknowledgement of God's glory.

You can see how the passage flows—opening with God as Father, praying that Christ would dwell, and knowing the love of Christ right at the center of everything. That results in people being filled with God. Then, concluding with the awe of God's glory.

As soon as I started studying this prayer, I was struck by its power. The apostle Paul tells the Ephesians of this powerful theology. But he knows that telling them isn't enough. So he prays for them that they would truly understand it.

Now, here we are—we're reading this book. Scott Grant and I have been trying to tell you what it says, but we know that this isn't enough. We need God's power to really get this. So I've been praying this prayer for us every day for the past several weeks. I've been praying that God would give us at PBC strength and comprehension and fullness. I've been praying the same for myself.

At the end of my sermon, I'll give us a simplified version of this prayer that we can use moving forward.

As we look at the apostle's prayer, I want to highlight three big themes which stood out to me: strength, love, and glory.

## Strength through the Spirit

The prayer repeatedly mentions strength and power. Listen to Ephesians 3:16, where Paul prays the following.

### **Ephesians 3:16:**

**That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.**

First, Paul points out that God has plenty of strength to share: "according to the riches of his glory." We're not asking God for something he doesn't have. The main request is "to be strengthened with power." We'll look at those words in a minute. We see that this kind of strength comes from the Spirit, and the place it lands is in our "inner being." This isn't strength you can see; it lives within us.

Webster defines strength as "the capacity for exertion or endurance."<sup>3</sup> Power is defined as "the ability to act or produce an effect."<sup>4</sup> This is what we need—we need the capacity to do something. We need to be stronger than we are if Christ is going to dwell in our hearts.

Lift up your arms and flex your muscles. This is what strength feels like in our bodies. We know that feeling. We're familiar with it. But what does strength feel like in our inner beings? How do we flex the muscles of our heart?

The fact that the apostle Paul prays for strength means that he must think the Ephesians on some level are weak. They need to be stronger than they are. So if this was true for the Ephesians, it's probably true for us as well.

Do you feel weak in your soul? Do you feel like something inside of you is exhausted and doesn't quite have the capacity to do something that needs to be done? Many of us are aware that our inner being needs to be made stronger. We need to be strengthened with power.

It's up to us to do the work to strengthen our bodies. But Paul prays here that God would do the strengthening of our souls. According to his riches, his Spirit gives us strength. What's left for us to do is to receive it.

Think for a moment about how we get stronger in our bodies. You probably have a basic sense of the process. We have muscles in our bodies. When we push the muscles and use them strenuously, they get

damaged—small tears in the muscle fibers. Then during the repair process, the damage is fixed, and the muscles grow larger and more resilient.

A recent study uncovered more about how this process works. Scientists discovered that cellular nuclei migrate to the damaged place in the muscle fiber and rebuild the fiber. That makes us stronger.<sup>5</sup>

The process for strengthening our souls isn't that different. We get stronger by feeling weak. Our souls are stretched farther than what's comfortable. We feel inadequate. We suffer because it hurts. Maybe even parts of our inner being are torn apart by the challenge of living in this world.

Paul prays that God would send his Spirit, like those nuclei, to the location of our damaged souls. And the repair process would begin. God works to strengthen our souls. He takes our suffering, and he heals us.

How does he do it? What does it take to heal a soul torn apart by suffering? That's what we'll look at next.

## Knowing the love of Christ

The passage continues with some of the most beautiful words in all Scripture. Ephesians 3:17b-19a contains the central part of this prayer.

### Ephesians 3:17b-19a:

**That you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.**

Notice that the prayer again focuses on strength. Not just that followers of Jesus would know the love of Christ, but that they would have the strength to know the love of Christ. This kind of knowledge starts somewhere—like a rooted seed or a grounded building. Then it grows from there.

The apostle references the boundless scope of God's love in two different ways. First, it's described in four dimensions: "breadth and length and height and depth." I love this description because it is impossible to make sense of. The last time I checked, space only had three dimensions. Why does Paul list four?

In the ancient world, these dimensions were sometimes used in reference to magic and the occult. For us, they signify that the love of God exceeds the bounds of our physical world. It extends into a dimension that we can't even understand. It's love that goes even farther than "to the moon and back."

This is why the apostle continues with this majestic paradox: "to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge."

When Rachel and I were first married, I'd sometimes ask why she loved me. She'd say, "I love you," and I'd ask, "why?" For those of you who've been married, have kids or parents or have any common sense—which I didn't—you know this never ends well.

The person on the other end of that question can give answers such as "Because you're kind" or "Because you're funny" or "Because you're smart" or "Because you're compassionate" or whatever. But those kinds of answers never fully address the question. Love grows out of more than just a list of attributes.

Real love is somehow indescribable. It transcends language, explanation, and understanding. Love can be demonstrated but not explained.

But there is more going on here. The word for "knowledge" here is not an intellectual exercise. It refers to something experiential. To know something is to encounter it deeply. The reason the love of Christ surpasses knowledge is that his love is unlike anything we experience on earth.

The love of Christ for us is given freely. There is no condition. You did not earn it. You cannot lose it. None of your effort or success makes God love you more. None of your failure or disappointment or broken promises, or outright evil acts could make God love you any less.

The love of Christ is unknowable because we have never known anything like it on this earth. This is the very simple idea that I've been praying we would know. Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you.

The prayer isn't simply that we'd know the love of Christ. The prayer is for the strength to know the love of Christ. This knowledge doesn't just happen. I can tell you a hundred times, but you need to overcome your weakness in order to know this. One of those weaknesses is that you are resistant to that truth.

Sometimes, what is required is simply to open ourselves up to it. Open up to the love of Christ.

We are sometimes resistant to the love of Christ because we think we don't need it. Love like this is for children. It's for the Little Nutbrown Hare and children in Sunday School and people whose lives are falling apart. Let me assure you that no matter who you are, your deepest need is to know that you are loved.

I've been praying through this idea a lot since I started this passage. I've noticed how difficult it is to simply be open to God's love. I find all these other voices that I hear on a daily basis. I should do more. I should have responded better to that person. I hear all the ways that I fall short. It's not even falling short of God's standard—I simply fall short of the kind of person I want to be.

I can give you a massive list of reasons why I shouldn't be loved. I have lots of answers to the question, "why don't you love me?" But the love of Jesus is a surprise. Honestly, it doesn't make sense to me. But I know that I need it—more than anything.

And I know that you need it. If we as a church simply had the strength to know the love of Christ, everything else would fall into place. Unity would come more naturally because we'd be secure in who we are and not be threatened by other people. Sacrifice would make sense because we'd understand that it isn't sacrifice at all. Loving others would become a simple overflow of God's love.

I want us to know the love of Christ. I want you to know that Jesus loves you. When we do, amazing things happen. The nuclei of God's Spirit rushes to the tears in our broken souls and heals them. And something incredible results. That's what we'll see next.

## God's glory in the church

Paul concludes his prayer by praising the glory of God. But the way he does it involves a shout-out to the unified people of God who know the love of Christ.

### Ephesians 3:20-21:

**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, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.**

Paul can't stress enough how capable God is. To him who can do what we ask. To him who can do what we ask or think. To him who can do more than we ask or think. To him who can do abundantly more than we ask or think. To him who can do far more abundantly than all we ask or think.

This prayer is for something huge—for us to know, deep in our inner beings, the love of Christ as he ministers to us in our weakness and brokenness. If you've been kicked around by life at all, you've probably felt at times that this is impossible.

The apostle wants to make it clear: God can do this—this and more. This and far more. This and far more abundantly and bigger and grander and huger. God can do this.

And when God does this, the result is astonishing: "To God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus." The "Christ Jesus" part makes sense. But this is the only place in the New Testament that speaks of God's glory being "in the church."

Look around. What is there here that God would find his glory in our midst? Is this glorious? In this community, do we really see the glory of the creator of the universe?

What do people in our culture see when they look at the church? I went online to the Palo Alto Daily Post and searched for the word "church." The article headlines included:

- "Menlo Church pastor on leave"
- "Churches unite for Christmas event"
- "Embattled pastor quits"
- "Churches fight in court over building"
- "Mortgage scam targets AME church"
- "Dispute over car camping plan"

These are the headlines for the "church" in Palo Alto. It's a bit of a mix. There's some good and some bad. I'm not sure I'd label it glory.

Keep in mind that when the Scriptures speak of the church, they aren't talking about an organization. None of that existed yet. They spoke of what the reformers referred to as the "invisible church." The unseen group



of people who follow Jesus. It's in this invisible church that God glorifies. Let me make two observations.

First, there is glory in the church. Spend time with followers of Jesus long enough, and you will see the riches of God's glory. You will see lives transformed. Addictions broken. Marriages healed. People healed from trauma. They receive a calling to contribute to the world. We find a family where we experience the love of Christ.

Secondly, we can do so much better. Hang out with followers of Jesus long enough, and you will see that we are a broken people. We are not known by our love. We can be petty, power-hungry, selfish, defensive, and intolerant. We can allow ourselves to get carried away by the culture and pursue cultural values instead of biblical values. We can forget that, first and foremost, this is a place where Christ is to be worshipped.

If you are unsatisfied with the state of the church, that's a good thing. Bring that desire to see us be better to the Lord. Allow him to use it as a way of inviting you into making things better. Keep in mind there are no quick fixes. And contribute the long, hard work of faithful service toward making the church a place where God's glory is undeniable.

In short, believe in the church. Believe that there is glory here among us. And believe in us enough to help make things better.

Can you imagine the kind of community that Ephesians describes? A place where Jews and Gentiles, enemies for a thousand years, worship side by side. A place where all the things that divide us in the world are cast aside, and we see each other as equals. A place where we bring our brokenness and our shattered souls, and day by day, we come to know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge. A place where we trust that God can do what he promises to do in our lives.

This is the vision of the church that the apostle Paul gives us in the first three chapters of Ephesians. Next week we'll move into chapter 4, and we'll see him apply these grand themes of theology to the daily and specific ways that we interact in the world: leadership, marriage, family, jobs, and more.

This is the goal before us. To be strengthened in love so that the glory of God is found in this place.

## Conclusion

Let's go back to our book, *Guess How Much I Love You*. How do you measure love? How do I convince you that I love you? What can I do to show you how much I love you? Jesus answers that question this way in John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

That's very hard to argue with—the ultimate sacrifice demonstrates love as nothing else can. The death of Christ on the cross demonstrates love like no explanation or argument, or sermon could.

We've seen a prayer this morning that we could deepen our experiential knowledge of that love. There are a lot of ways that God does that in our lives. It happens when we read the Scriptures. It happens when we get involved in a community of believers. It happens as we suffer, and God comforts us.

But what if we followed the model that the apostle gave us here and prayed for it? I'd like to provide us with a prayer that we can use to ask God to do what the apostle asked God to do for the Ephesians. It's a simplified version of this passage.

"Father, give me strength by your Spirit to know the love of Christ."

This is a powerful prayer. Pray this throughout the week. I'd love to hear stories of how God might be answering this prayer in our midst.

## Endnotes

1. Sam McBratney, *Guess How Much I Love You* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 1995).
2. Ibid.
3. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *merriam-webster.com*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strength>.
4. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *merriam-webster.com*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/power>.
5. Nicoletta Lanese, "Stunning images show how muscles heal themselves after a workout," Life Science.com, Published October 16, 2021, <https://www.livescience.com/muscle-repair-by-roaming-nuclei>.