

Good Morning. Psalm 31 speaks of God being our place of refuge. V.21 reads, "**Praise be to the Lord, for he showed me the wonders of his love when I was in a city under siege.**" Sounds like us today – in a city under siege in total lockdown. "Praise be to the Lord, for he showed me the wonders of his love – in the Lord I have taken refuge."

Welcome to church online – let us take refuge in our Lord.

For those of you who may not have caught up with us last week, and may be wondering, yes we are in a stable financial position. So, thank you for your faithful giving.

I again, encourage you to begin meeting together – perhaps in one's or two's, up to ten, but do keep remembering your social distancing. Until the 1.5 metre rule is lifted we are still very limited in terms of getting larger groups back together.

Now, if you have your Bible with you, open up to the book of Ephesians – we're going to spend a little time in there this morning. And Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, some ten years after his last visit to their church. He had visited many times before during his three missionary journeys, and he now writes to the church as he is under house arrest in Rome – in total lockdown.

In his opening greeting in v.1, he says that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ "by the will of God." Not only was Paul sent by the will of God, but as he writes this letter, by the will of God he now finds himself under house arrest. By the will of God he was now a man who had lost his freedom, and in total lockdown. He was a man who had suffered persecution, beatings; he had been stoned and left for dead, he had been in shipwrecks, he had suffered personal attacks and so much more. And yes, it all happened "by the will of God."

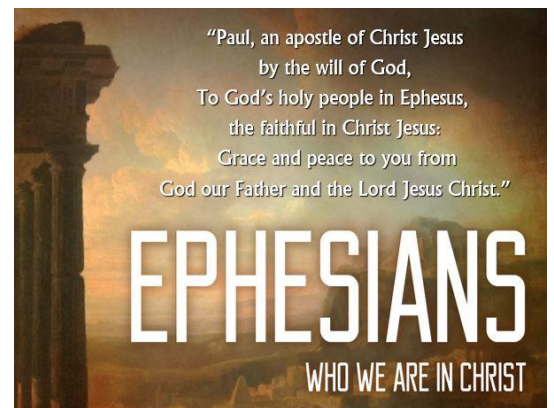
What an amazing testimony to us. God is sovereign and while we don't always understand the things that we go through, we can look at the example of Paul and know in our heart that it is all "by the will of God." God is in control, and what we are facing today is by the will of God. Some people struggle with this – the fact that hard times come for Christians who seek to live to their best ability to obey God.

Cheri Cowell wrote, "We all have those days when we feel like the stuffing has been beaten out of us. Without even realizing we'd entered a boxing ring, we've been punched, and beaten, and wounds have opened up. How can so many things be going sideways all at once when we have been diligently trying to obey God and follow His commandments? Rather than trying to formulate an answer, we remember that He who committed no sin had it even worse: He was betrayed, flogged, mocked, and crucified.

When we are feeling bruised and beaten, we need to remind ourselves that the Lord has been in the boxing ring with us. We don't fight on our own.

He knows the blows we've taken, some because of our obedience to His commands. He has taken His own blows, as His hands and side attest. Yet even now He — who defeated sin and death — is lifted up above all nations."

By the will of God, we're going through what we're going through. By the will of God, Jesus went through what He went through for our salvation. Isa 53:10 says that "**it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,**" but the verse goes on to say that the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand. And so we know victory, and as we take the bread this morning we remember His sacrifice, for by the will of God we have been saved.



COMMUNION

Can we join together in prayer...

Father, as we continue to look into your Word, may you be prompting us and empowering us by your Spirit, to Your honour and glory. Amen.

The church at Ephesus was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and understandably they struggled to get along; racism was rife in the wider community and it didn't all go away within the church. Jews still struggled to love Gentiles. And Gentiles thought of the Jews as dogs.

And so, the church now faced challenging times. It was a challenge to now see how this new community would function; people who once held such discrimination and hatred toward one another - should now deal with one another in love. And the challenge to leave behind Judaism and its elitism for a new community of unconditional love and acceptance. It's always a challenge to accept others we have previously had difficulty with, as our brothers and sisters. It's always a challenge to leave the old way that we've always done things and adopt change.

In 2:14 Paul says that the dividing wall of hostility has now been destroyed, and from the beginning of chapter three Paul speaks of a mystery that God had now brought to light and it challenged the Jews position in particular. This great mystery was that God's love was now clearly demonstrated for all people, no longer just for the Jews. V.6, **"This mystery is that through the gospel the gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."** How this must have challenged the Jewish held position – "we are God's chosen people!" A paradigm shift was required for them – the scales would need to be taken from their eyes.

And so following on from the Lord's teaching on prayer from last week, where Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would be given to anyone who asks God for it, I thought we'd have a look at Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus in chapter three. (16-21)

You may recall that we looked at the book of Ephesians in 2018, and we noted that the letter is really in two parts; the first half is academic in nature, whilst the second half is very practical. Interestingly, the connection between the two is this section on prayer. Prayer is the key; prayer is the bridge, which links the doctrinal section of this book (chapters 1-3) to the practical section; prayer is which turns our beliefs into behaviour. Prayer is that which turns doctrine into doing. Prayer is what turns the principle of unity that Paul had been calling for in the first three chapters, into the practice of unity.

Is it any coincidence that Jesus too prays for unity as recorded in John 17 before going to the Cross? He has taught His disciples and shown them the way, and now prays that they (and us) may live out what we know in our heads; that our behaviour will change, and we will live in love. Prayer is the bridge between knowing something in our head and adopting it as part of our very being. Why? Because in prayer we invite the power of the Holy Spirit to be at work within us; we're asking God to reveal himself and transform us. And this is at the forefront of Paul's prayer.

From v.16 Paul says, **"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."** (16-17a)

Last week, in Luke 11 Jesus calls us to pray; and to pray asking for the Holy Spirit. Here too, Paul is asking on behalf of the church at Ephesus -for the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever said to someone, "Make yourself at home?" Now, if you really meant that, then that person could rearrange all the furniture, repaint all the walls, and eat all your food. When someone truly makes themselves at home, they live in that home like they own the place.

Well, that's what we want Christ to do in our hearts; to dwell in our heart; to make Himself at home – rearrange the furniture, paint the walls whatever colour He likes – to make all the changes that he desires. And how is that to happen – but by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

As believers, we know that He already lives in our hearts, but by inviting Him to go on filling us, we want Him to make Himself feel at home in our hearts. We want Him to live there like He owns the place. We want Him to take possession of our hearts and become the controlling influence of all our attitudes and actions.

As I mentioned last week, it is the Holy Spirit who comforts and encourages, guides and prompts. It is the Holy Spirit who strengthens and sustains so that we may cope with our daily circumstances. But it is the Holy Spirit working within us that produces such Godly fruit as peace, love, joy, patience, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. It is the Holy Spirit who helps us as interact with family, or work colleagues in a godly manner; as we face varying situations that may cause heightened levels of stress; as we enter into circumstances that we'd rather not have to face. It is the Holy Spirit that brings unity and allows us to truly love one another. We are empowered and transformed by the Holy Spirit. So, Paul asks for the power of the Holy Spirit to come and allow the church in Ephesus to learn to love one another.

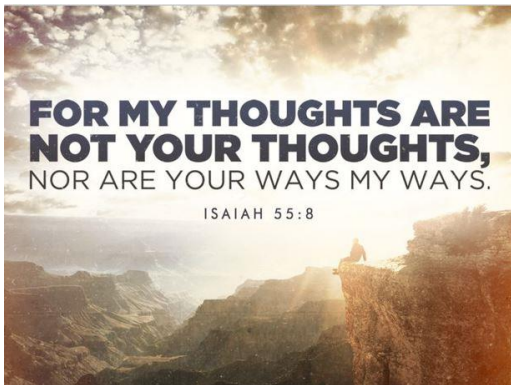


Paul then says, **“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”**

Now, remembering that Paul is writing to the church at Ephesus, and the Jewish Rabbi’s had set themselves up as being the ones with all knowledge about God, and how to please God. But Paul, having learnt through his own experience as a zealous Pharisee, describes the love of God as a love that surpasses knowledge. In other words, “I thought I knew what God was up to, but His is a love that is multi-dimensional in breadth, length, depth and height, and a love that reaches to the extremity of the earth and embraces every man, every woman - every child. It includes every colour, and race, without favouritism; for we are all one in Christ.” For Paul, he now understood that the love of God, surpassed any thing that he thought he knew about God. **“To know this love that surpasses knowledge.”**

I think that for us as Paul describes it, God’s love is immeasurable, because the more we understand it, the more we realise we’re just beginning to grasp it. And the more that we understand God’s love, the more we grow in grace, mature in our faith and are strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit, in our inner man.

And so, what is the measure of God’s love for us – it is in the gift of His Son in Jesus Christ. What is the measure of Jesus love for us – it is in His death on the Cross. And so, if we are to know the measure of the fullness of God’s love for us, then we will acknowledge that we are saved by Jesus death on the Cross. But that is just the starting point.



Again, the Jews and Gentiles were just starting to come to terms with a new paradigm - a new way of thinking – a new way of understanding what God was up to.

It was in the book of Isaiah that God wrote, **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, for my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”** (55:8-9)

And Paul in 1 Cor 1 wrote, **“the world through its wisdom did not know God, but the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.”**

In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God came upon selected individuals as God directed, but now in the New Testament we see that the Holy Spirit is available, just for the asking. This was a radical shift away from the days of old, and needed a new way of understanding God. How blessed are we to live in these times! How wonderful is God our father to make Himself available to us in this way!

Thus, Paul prays for the Jews and Gentiles in the church in Ephesus, that they **“may know the love of Christ, that surpasses knowledge, and be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”** To be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And to pray that prayer for ourselves we are asking that through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work within us, we might know an ever deepening understanding of Jesus love; an understanding that continues to grow deeper and deeper; that’s not just a head knowledge but heart impacting and behaviour changing – resulting in an ever growing maturity – filled to the measure of the fullness of God that enables us to live and love, like God.

Without Him we are selfish and self-centred. We only love, because he first loved us. We can only live and love others, as He does, as He lives within us by His Spirit. Thus Paul prays that these Jews and Gentiles in the church at Ephesus will be filled to the measure of the fullness of God – for God is love.

In his book, When God Doesn't Make Sense, James Dobson included a letter that he had received, and it was from a father describing the love that he had for one of his daughters – and in it we see a glimpse of the love that God has for us, and a glimpse of the love we can have for one another – through the power of the Holy Spirit. His daughters name was Bristol, and he wrote...

“Before you were born, I prayed for you. In my heart I knew you would be a little angel, and so you were. When you were born on my birthday, April 7, it was evident that you were a special gift from the Lord. But how profound a gift you turned out to be! More than the gurgles and rosy cheeks, more than the firstborn of my flesh—a joy unspeakable. You showed me God's love more than anything else in all creation. Bristol, you taught me how to love. I certainly loved you when you were cuddly and cute, when you jabbered your first words.

“I loved you when the searing pain of realization took hold that something was wrong—that maybe you weren't developing as quickly as your peers, and even when we understood it was more serious than that. I loved you when we went from hospital to clinic to doctor, looking for a medical diagnosis that would bring us some hope. And of course, we always prayed for you. We prayed and prayed.

“I loved you when you moaned and cried; your mom and I and your sisters would drive for hours late at night to help you fall asleep. I loved you when you were confused—when, with tears in your eyes, you would bite your fingers or your lip by accident. I loved you when your eyes crossed, and then when you went blind. I most certainly loved you when you could no longer speak, but how profoundly I missed your voice!

“I loved you when scoliosis began to wrench your body like a pretzel, and when we put a tube in your stomach so you could eat. We fed you one spoonful at a time—even up to two hours per meal. I managed to love you when your contorted limbs made changing ten years of diapers difficult. Bristol, I even loved you when you could not say the one thing in life that I longed to hear back: ‘Daddy, I love you.’

“Bristol, I loved you when I was close to God and when he seemed far away—when I was full of faith and also when I was angry at him. And the reason I loved you, my Bristol, in spite of these difficulties, is that God put this love in my heart. This is the wondrous nature of God's love: He loves us when we are blind, or deaf, or twisted in body or in spirit. God loves us even when we can't tell him that we love him back.

The letter went on, but that's the way God loves us! He certainly loves us when we are “cuddly and cute,” but He also loves us when we are blind, or deaf, or twisted in body or in spirit. He loves us even when we can't tell him that we love him back.

Paul prayed for the church at Ephesus; for it's as we come to appreciate God's love for us more and more, it's then that we are more able to love others with the same kind of love. He said,

“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

I trust that we are asking God to do His work within us; that we are cooperating with Him; that we love one another and are prepared to love those that we find difficult to love. I trust that we too, are praying for one another for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Let us join together in song as we commit to bowing before our wonderful God in prayer, and allowing Him to reign over our lives.

Song: Eagles Wings

Let us then close our time in prayer together, using these beautiful words of Paul directly following on from our reading this morning in v20-21. Let us pray...

**Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen.**

