

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

TRANSFORMING THE ORDINARY

If someone asked you this question – how would you answer it: “What is wrong with the church today?” You have two minutes to discuss that with the person sitting next to you. My answer is that the church needs an extraordinary transformation, and that the church – this church – most churches, possibly all churches, have not grasped what Paul prays in Ephesians 3 v 14-20. So far in his letter Paul has told us who we are in Christ. We began with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for all that God has done for us in Christ: we are chosen, special, loved, redeemed, forgiven, adopted – part of God’s family. He has reminded us of the extraordinary power that is at work within us through Christ. He has made it clear that this is wonderfully true for everyone the moment they come to faith in Christ, that all people are welcome into God’s family, and that we are never too far away for God’s grace to reach us. Paul has told us of our true colours in Christ reminding us how valuable we are to God, and reminding us that God is working to keep the dream alive - God’s desire to know and to be known. He has reminded us again how this is God’s desire for everyone – to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Paul has spent these three chapters reminding us of God’s greatest desire and of our place in it. God’s great love for his church of which we are so privileged to be a part. In chapters 4 to 6 Paul is going to talk about how we should live in the real world in the light of all that he’s said in chapter 1 to 3, and he will urge us to live lives worthy of the gospel. And he will do so recognising that there is, for us, a real battle raging that will make it hard for us to live like that. But before he does that – he prays one last time. Now Paul knows what he’s going to say about how we should live in the light of the gospel in Christ and he knows what he’s already told us about who we are in Christ and how God sees us and his church. And he also knows what he sees – the gap between chapter 1 to 3 and 4 to 6. He is acutely aware of what will enable us to live lives worthy of the gospel, and in this prayer (3 v 14-21) he prays for what will enable us to live worthy lives.

Ephesians 3 v 14 – 21

“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 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. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the saints, 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 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.”

In chapters 4 to 6 Paul is going to spell out what it means to live worthy lives. He’s going to get down to the nitty gritty of it too. He’s going to talk about living in community; humility, gentleness, unity, peace.

He's going to talk about how we shouldn't get dragged into living how the world lives. He's going to talk about relationships – marriage, families, work. Now it seems to me, that in this prayer, Paul understands how important chapter 1 to 3 are in being able to live chapter 4 to 6. So Paul prays in essence that believers would, in their heart, know how vast is Christ's love and what it means for them, that they would experience the greatness of the power of God at work within their lives and that they would catch a vision of who God really is.

What's wrong with the church? My answer – we haven't grasped what Paul prays. We are not rooted and grounded in all that Christ has done for us. We don't really own it for ourselves. We are not overwhelmed with a sense of the width, length, height and depth of God's great love for us. We don't live daily with the assurance in our hearts that he loves us because he loves us because he loves us. We cannot give love because we have not experienced love. We have not experienced the incomparably great power at work within us, because still we try and try and try to work it out on our own. We refuse to open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. This is a passionate prayer from the heart of Paul that gets to the heart of the issue for God's people and the church. Paul kneels to pray this prayer. Normally he would stand to pray, but here he kneels – recognizing the greatness of God and his love for his people. Paul is so burdened for the people of God – and this passionate prayer spills out of him. Friends – if we are going to live worthy lives we must live in the truth of this prayer. Friends, I struggle with this. I struggle to live in the power of the living, almighty God and I know that I struggle to live in his incomparably great power, because I struggle to live in the truth of his great love for me. I know intellectually that God loves me because he loves but I struggle to get it from my head to my heart. I struggle to live in the truth of the fact that I am loved, chosen, special, precious, alive, accepted. Every day I struggle to live in the truth of that and to know it in my inner being. My best guess – we all struggle with it in one way or another.

I've been thinking about some of the people in the Bible and the thought occurred to me that none of them found the end of God's love. I was thinking about Moses. Moses grew up estranged from his people – brought up in the Egyptian court. But he became so angry when he saw the treatment of his people that he killed a man and then tried to cover it up. When he realised he'd been found out he ran away and spent 40 years hiding in Midian. But he never reached the end of God's love

David never found the end of God's love either. David, the most powerful king, commits adultery after a moment of lust because he's not doing what he ought to be doing. When he found out Bathsheba was pregnant, he had her husband killed because he refused to sleep with her because his men were out fighting. So not only has he committed adultery, he's also responsible for murder. Yet David is the only person in the bible to be described as a man after God's heart. David never found the end of God's love.

Rahab, the woman who anoints Jesus' feet with oil – probably a prostitute, Zacchaeus the tax collector, none of them were outside God's love. Peter, who so confidently asserted that he would never deny Jesus - and then did exactly that. Even Paul, writing this extraordinary letter. Paul who went around persecuting Christians, Paul who stood and watched as they stoned Stephen to death because he boldly proclaimed the risen Jesus. They never found the end of God's love.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.” (John 3v 16) Are you in the world? Then you are included in God’s love. Whoever believes.... There is no favouritism in God’s love. He does not love some more than others – he cannot. God can love you no more today than he loved you yesterday. God will not be able to love you more tomorrow than he does right now. There is nothing you can do to make him love you more, and there is nothing you can do to make him love you less. You will never find the end of God’s great love for you. The truth is, the church will become more what God desires it to be, the more it experiences God’s love in Christ. Friends – what is your challenge? The truth of this prayer is that we will be better able to live a life worthy of the gospel when we live more fully in the love of God, and then in the power that God gives us. And this comes from knowing God. What’s wrong with the church is what’s wrong with you and me. So .. what’s wrong with you? The answer is nothing that will take you outside the love of God in Christ for you. You will never find the end of God’s love, you cannot go far enough to be outside his love. So .. the invitation is to come more into his love.

“Here I am, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.” Come through the door of God’s love and if we have the courage to walk through the door of God’s love he can transform our ordinary lives into ones worthy of all that he has done in Christ.

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