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The Truth About Our Life in Christ
A Study in the Book of Ephesians
Steps to Spiritual Fulfillment
Ephesians 3:14-21
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Most of you are aware that in the last year Patti and I have been through the house-building project. We are still happily married, so we think that is pretty good. In the process of doing that, we have learned a lot. One of the things we have learned is that it is exactly that—it is a process. There are a number of steps in building a house, and it has been interesting to learn how each step has to be done in its proper order. You can't really get those steps out of order or it doesn't work. There are certain things that have to be done first, and other things are built upon that. Then something else happens and each step has to be completed before you move on to the next step. If one step isn't completed, the whole process basically grinds to a halt until that one step is finished, and the same is true all along the way.

But when you walk into a completed home, you don't tend to think that way. If you were to come into our home today, you wouldn't stop and think about all of these steps that were necessary to build a home. Instead, you would tend to notice the completing steps—the final steps. You would notice the color of the carpet, the type of flooring, the cabinets, the countertop and the furniture. Those types of things that you notice would be the final steps. Often we don't stop to realize that there were a whole number of necessary steps before these final steps—the ones people focus on.

There are a lot of things like that in life. Take, for example, music. When Janice comes up here and plays the piano, we appreciate her ability to play. You might even think it would be really wonderful if you could play the piano like that, but you don't stop to think about all the steps that were necessary in order to get to that point. The steps needed to be taken in their proper order. It isn't really possible to start with a piece of classical music and say, "Eventually I will need to go back and pick up the basics." It just doesn't work that way. You learn the basics and then you build on that, and there is a necessary progression of steps.

The same thing is certainly true spiritually, because there are spiritual steps in this journey. One step builds upon another step and it is a process of growth. We can't skip steps, even though there is something within us that causes us to want to skip ahead. In Ephesians 3, I think Paul outlines four steps to spiritual fulfillment. They are not four points—they are four steps—and there is a difference between those two terms.

When we use the term "steps" it means that the first step has to be taken, and that leads into the second, which leads into the third, which finally leads into the fourth. This is spiritual fulfillment. It would be my opinion that many people never really experience steps three and four, because they do not take steps one and two. I think our tendency is to want to skip the first couple of steps and we want steps three and four. But it just doesn't work that way.

Ephesians 3:14 is a transition—it's a closure from the first three chapters, preparing us to move into the last three chapters. This is a prayer that Paul offers for the Ephesian

believers, but certainly the prayer would be for us as well. The prayer is for all of those who are reading this letter—that they might understand and experience what God wants in this journey for spiritual fulfillment.

Paul opens in verse 14 by saying “for this reason.” I think he says, “for this reason,” because he is going both backward and forward. This passage summarizes the first three chapters of Ephesians. Paul is bringing it all together here, and that should remind us of the importance of studying the Scriptures within the context in which they are given. This passage is a good reminder that if we were to start in Ephesians 3:14 and just study this passage, without having studied the previous material (in other words, pulling that out of its context) we would not really understand the depths of this passage. Paul is assuming that we have studied what has preceded—that we have read chapters one, two and three. “For this reason”... he pulls it all together.

There is a difference between understanding the Scriptures within the context (understanding the flow of thought as the writer intended) and just pulling a verse or a section out of its context. The difference is like dropping a plate down a well and dropping a bucket down a well. The plate will bring up some water, but it is really going to be minimal. There is not nearly the depth in that plate that there is in a bucket because the bucket, of course, has much more volume. So as we go through this passage, I think it becomes fairly obvious that if we hadn’t studied the previous material, we wouldn’t really understand what Paul is talking about. It’s important that we understand and emphasize that as we go into this passage.

Paul says, “For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” There is quite a bit of discussion about what verse 15 means. I think it is just Paul’s reference to the ultimate sovereignty of God and how everything flows out of God. All of these riches that he has talked about and life itself flows out of the Father. Because of that, he is praying to God the Father who makes all things possible.

Starting in verse 16, then, Paul is going to outline what I see as four steps, each one leading into the other and ultimately ending in spiritual fulfillment. To help you organize this passage, the four steps can be identified by the four “*that* clauses.” Verse 16, “*that He*”; verse 17, “*so that*”; halfway through verse 17, “*that you*”; and halfway through verse 19, “*that you*.” If you are inclined to mark your Bible, you can circle the four uses of “*that*” because those are the four clauses which identify these four steps. Having said that, let’s dig into verse 16.

In the first step, Paul says: “He {*God the Father*} would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.” I think this first step means to be strengthened or to be fortified by biblical doctrine—biblical truth. He is referring to what he has already talked about in the first three chapters. The very deep, meaningful doctrine that we have studied in Ephesians 1, 2 and 3 is what Paul is referring to here.

Let’s look at verse 16 a little closer. The word Paul uses when he talks about being *strengthened* is the Greek word that means to be fortified. It means to be invigorated—to stand strong. It would be the idea that a wind is blowing outside, and you know it is going

to come along and blow you over, so you strengthen and fortify yourself. You get a good strong stance to be ready to stand strong. This is the idea of strengthen that's used here.

He says, "to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man." We know that we have the Spirit of God. Paul told us that in chapter one. He said that as soon as we trust Jesus as Savior, we are given the Holy Spirit of God and He seals us. The Holy Spirit is a pledge of our inheritance, meaning He guarantees the fulfillment of this salvation. That Spirit of Christ is within us and strengthens us. When he talks about the inner man, he is talking about that immaterial part of us. In another passage Paul says that, while the outer man is groaning (meaning the physical part of us wears out), the inner man can be fortified, strengthened or renewed day by day. The inner man is our heart, our emotion, our will and our mind. It is that inner part of us that is strengthened by the Spirit of God.

What does the Spirit of God use to strengthen us? The answer is in the first part of that verse: "according to the riches of His glory." Another way to translate it could be: "according to His glorious riches." It is not "out of"; it is "according to." In other words, the glorious riches are what Paul has talked about in chapters one, two and three. He has often referred to this truth (this doctrine) as the riches of Christ. He is talking about in proportion to the degree in which we understand what is true about Jesus Christ, who He is, what He has done for us and our position in Christ. This degree to which we understand is the degree to which we will be fortified by the Spirit of God that dwells within us.

Let's go back to Ephesians 1 and 2 and remind ourselves of some of these riches as an overview. In 1:3 he talked about how God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. He talked about the fact that God has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that He adopted us as sons, as legal heirs to the family fortune to inherit these wonderful riches in Christ. Paul said that we have been redeemed; we have been set free from the slave market of sin and that through his blood we have the forgiveness of our trespasses. He talked about the fact that we are God's inheritance and what a glorious thing that is. We are given the Holy Spirit in order to seal the deal – signed, sealed and delivered—guaranteeing the fulfillment of this salvation when Christ brings all things together on that glorious day. Paul talked about the fact that because of this marvelous calling, it gives us hope. We are God's inheritance and what a glorious promise that is. He talked about the power that is at work within us in order to allow us to live at a whole new level of life.

Then Paul went into chapter two and reminded us that we were a corpse. We were dead and had no life. The world, the flesh, and the devil were propelling us down the mountainside, headed to eternal destruction. But God, in his grace and mercy, reached down and brought us to life. Not only through His power were we resurrected to life, but we ascended with Him and were seated with Christ in the heavenlies in this exalted position. He talked about the fact that God had done all of this that we might be His masterpiece. We are a trophy of His grace. He displays His grace for all eternity by taking sinners, redeeming them through His blood, and celebrating His grace.

He went on to talk about what an amazing thing it is that, at one time, we as Gentiles were outside the promise of God. We couldn't claim these riches in Christ, but through Christ's death on the cross, He has brought us all together—every tribe, every tongue and every nation. It is the very theological truth that makes it meaningful for those

in our church family to go to other countries where they can sit down with brothers and sisters in Christ, and know that we are all one family. We know that together we make up this dwelling place in Christ because of what Jesus did on the cross. The walls have come down. That has not always been true, and it is a marvelous truth that Paul celebrates.

In the first half of chapter 3, Paul comes back and reminds us what a marvelous message this is and what a privilege we have to take this message to hopeless, despairing people so that they might know life. That is an overview of some of the riches in Christ that we have talked about so far in our study.

Now as we look at Ephesians 3:16 we see what Paul is talking about. The degree to which we understand these riches and enter into and believe this truth is the degree to which we will be fortified. We will be strengthened and invigorated. We will be prepared to take that first step and to really be grounded in what is true about our life in Christ.

Having taken that first step, it leads into the second step, which is outlined in verse 17. This is the second *that* clause: “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” When Paul talks about Christ he is not really distinguishing that there is a difference between Christ the Son and Christ the Spirit. Rather, he is talking about them as one and the same. When Jesus left and ascended, He said He was going to send His Spirit, and through His Spirit, He would be with us. He is talking about more of the same. When He talks about dwelling in our hearts, that is not to be distinguished from the inner man, but it is really a synonym. It is saying the same thing. Paul is just talking further about what he had talked about in step one. The question is: What does it mean for Christ to dwell in our hearts?

Paul is not talking about Christ just coming in through His Spirit and existing or locating in our lives. We know from chapter one that when we trust Jesus as Savior, the Spirit of Christ automatically becomes part of our lives. It seals that salvation and becomes that inheritance. We know from what the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:9 that you cannot be a Christian and not have the Holy Spirit within you. The moment you trust Christ you are given the Spirit of God. So that is really not what He is talking about here. There is an understanding that we all have the Spirit of God within us if we have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior. But when he talks about the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us, he is talking about something more than that.

In the Greek language there are two different ideas for this word *dwell*. Both of them have appeared in our study of Ephesians. If you turn back to chapter 2, one of the words meaning to dwell shows up in verse 19 and would be translated as *strangers* or *aliens*. It is the concept of pitching a tent. It’s the idea that we don’t live here; this isn’t our home, but this is where we are dwelling. Maybe in our culture we would understand this to be life in a motel. A motel is someplace where I can dwell. It’s a place where I can stay and sleep, but I understand that I don’t live there. A motel is not my home; it’s just a place that I occupy. That is the meaning of the word used in Ephesians 2:19.

But there is a second word used in Ephesians 2:22 for *dwell*. It says that we “are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” This is a different word which means to take up residence. It means to permanently dwell—to be at home. The word that Paul uses in chapter 3, when he says “so that Christ may dwell,” is the word which means to take up residence; that He might be at home there. We understand that there is a

dramatic difference between life in a motel room and life at home. When I stay in a motel, I understand I don't pick out the carpet. I don't choose the furniture, or the bed, or the color of the walls. I can't redecorate or remodel. I can go down the hall to the ice machine, get a pop, and come back to my room, and that's about as dramatic as it gets in a motel. When I am staying in a motel I am constantly reminded that I am not home, but I am merely dwelling there.

That is radically different from what we experience at home. At home I get to pick the carpet color (if my wife lets me). I get to decide what goes on the walls; I get to choose the furniture, the countertops and the appliances. We get to decide all of those things because it is ours. It is our home—it is where we dwell. I think there are far too many Christians who have given Jesus a motel room, but they have been unwilling to let Jesus establish His home. There is a big difference between those two. In a motel room we say, "Jesus, you stay there; that is your room. Don't remodel, don't redecorate, don't change the pictures on the walls. But you can stay there." That isn't what it means to dwell. It's much different when you invite Jesus to come in, saying, "Jesus, I want this to be Your home. I want You to remodel, and to redecorate. I want You to change the pictures on the wall. I want You to put furniture in here that is appropriate to You, so that You will feel at home here."

I would not let a stranger come in and take over my home. That is why I need step one. Step one is learning who Jesus is and what He has done. As I understand these glorious truths about who He is and what He has done, based upon that, I throw open the doors of my life. I say, "Jesus, based on what I know to be true about You, I want You to take over. I want You to be at home here. I want You to redecorate, to remodel, to refurbish, to do whatever You need to do in order for this to be a place where You are at home—a place where You belong." That is what it means to allow Jesus to dwell in our heart. First you have to take step one and understand who Jesus is, and then you take step two and you allow Him to come in and take over.

That leads into step three. Halfway into verse 17 we see, again, a *that* clause: "that you being rooted and grounded in love." What does Paul mean when he says that you have been "rooted and grounded in love"? Being rooted is an agricultural term, so we understand that. It means to have those roots down in the ground so that you have nourishment and are stable. To be grounded is an architectural term, and it means to have a strong foundation. Both words are saying the same thing: be strong, be stable, be well-grounded or well-rooted. I think he is referring here to steps one and two. We are firmly grounded and rooted in the love of God if we have taken step one and step two. In fact, in chapter two, Paul even described the riches of Christ in verse 4: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us." He is talking about how these riches in Christ are evidence of this great love of God. If we have taken step one we have been grounded and rooted in the love of God.

He goes on to complete his thought: "Being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge." He says that, based on being rooted and grounded in love (in other words, based on steps one and two), we are then able to comprehend. The Greek word used here means to reach out and grasp or take hold of this love of God that is so wide, so high, so deep, and so immeasurable. We reach out and take hold of it.

Imagine that the love of God is up on a top shelf, and we are trying to get to it in order to grab hold of it. We are standing on this crate, but the crate is wobbling and we can hardly even keep our balance. Because the crate is so wobbly, the best we can do is just reach up there and maybe get a little handful. That is all we experience of the love of Christ because our feet are not firmly planted on anything solid. Then contrast that with the image of having your feet firmly planted on the ground so that you are stable and have this fortified stance (step one). Now you can reach up to that top shelf and grab an armload of the love of Christ, and you can now grasp or comprehend this immeasurable love of Christ. He says it is not just so that you get a hold of that love, but also that you might experience it.

Verse 18: “may be able to comprehend or grasp with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ.” Remember the word *know* is a word which means to know intimately. It is the word used to describe sexual relations between a husband and a wife. It means to know the love of Christ, not intellectually, but to know it experientially. It means to know it intimately, not only to be able to reach up and grab hold of it, but to then experience the love of Christ. He says to know that “which surpasses knowledge.” He is saying that we can experience what we can’t fully understand—what we can’t explain. This happens all the time. I experience the power of prayer, but I can’t explain it. It surpasses my understanding but that doesn’t mean I cannot experience it. I experience the joy of my salvation but I can’t fully explain how it works. It does surpass knowledge but that doesn’t mean I can’t experience it. After 20 years of marriage, I can tell you that my love for Patti is far deeper than it was 20 years ago. I know that is true. I experience it; I feel it; but I cannot necessarily describe it or explain it. That is what Paul is talking about here. He is talking about the fact that we can actually grab hold of and experience, in this meaningful way, this immeasurable love of Christ which goes beyond our ability to even understand and explain.

I think what most Christians want in their Christian life is step three. They want to experience this intimacy with Christ—to know the love of God and have this wonderful experience that Paul is talking about. That is a wonderful thing, but the problem is that far too many Christians don’t experience it because they are unwilling to take steps one and two. They want to go right to step three, but it doesn’t work that way. You can’t have that kind of a love relationship with Jesus Christ if you don’t know who He is. First you have to know what He has done for you and know what is true about your life in Christ. Based upon that, you have to then let Him dwell in you and let Him take over. Those are the two necessary first steps. Then we can reach out and experience this love of Christ that we want to have in our Christian walk.

Most people want to jump right to step three. There are probably many ways to illustrate the fact that we want to skip steps one and two. Let me illustrate it this way. Before we started this study in the book of Ephesians, were you more familiar with Ephesians 1, 2 and 3 or Ephesians 4, 5 and 6? Ephesians 4, 5 and 6 talk about the gifts of the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit. Those chapters also talk about relationships between a husband and wife and between parents and children. They talk about spiritual warfare. We are very familiar with all of those topics. But could you have told me what was in Ephesians 1, 2 and 3? You see, chapters 1, 2 and 3 are doctrine (step one). Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are really steps two, three and four. We are far more familiar with the application part of it and we are much less familiar with step one. Often we struggle with experiencing the love of Christ because we want to skip steps. It just doesn’t work that

way. Paul is bringing together chapters 1, 2 and 3 (step one) and reminding us how important this is in order to enter into chapters 4, 5 and 6, which are really steps two, three and four.

All of this, then, leads to step four, which is outlined in the latter part of verse 19: “that you may be filled up to the fullness of God.” He is not saying here that we can contain all of the fullness of God in ourselves. In Colossians 1:19 the statement is made that Jesus contained all of the fullness of God. It is a way of saying that Jesus was God. You would have to have a God-sized capacity in order to contain all of the fullness of God—only Jesus could do that. Paul is saying here that, to the limit of our capacity, we are filled with the fullness of God.

Think of it this way: when you go to the ocean, the ocean is vast as far as the eye can see. When you enter into that ocean and you have a glass in your hand, you can fill that glass to its capacity with the fullness of the ocean. You cannot put all of the ocean in that glass, but you can fill it to its capacity. If you were to go to the ocean and watch, you would notice an interesting thing. Some people come into the ocean and they have a Dixie cup. That little Dixie cup gets filled to capacity. But somebody down the way has a larger glass. And somebody else has a 5-gallon bucket, and then somebody clear down the way has a 50-gallon drum. It’s like filling their containers to capacity with the fullness of Christ. You say, “Why is it that one person gets a 50-gallon drum and another person just gets a little Dixie cup?” The answer is that step one, step two and step three determine capacity.

That is really what Paul is saying. If you want a 50-gallon drum to really drink in the fullness of God, then you have to know who He is. You have to understand what He has done for you, and you have to understand what we call Bible doctrine. You have to understand the truth about our life in Christ. You can’t skip that step. If you do skip that step, you get a Dixie cup. So the extent that you want to experience the fullness of God is the extent to which you are willing to learn who God is, to know God and to enter into this intimate relationship where you say, “God, I would like You to take over. I would like You to dwell here and make Your home here. Do whatever You have to do in order to make this Your home.” Based on that, you then experience the love of Christ. It is accomplished in steps, and you form this capacity in order to experience the fullness of God.

As we finish studying chapters 1, 2 and 3 of Ephesians, I would like to ask you a question. Would you say honestly that you are really experiencing the love of Jesus? Are you reaching out and grabbing hold of the love of Christ, and you know that it is real? Are you experiencing the fullness of God to the greatest? Are you experiencing that as a way of life as a Christian? What Paul has been telling us in chapters 1, 2 and 3 is really step one. This is who Jesus is. This is what He has done for us. This is the marvelous truth about who we are in Christ, all done to the praise of His glory.

Before we go on to chapters 4, 5 and 6, I would encourage you to go back and immerse yourself once again in the truth of these first three chapters. If you missed a week, go back through the transcripts of the sermons and immerse yourself in step one. Study the truth—Bible doctrine—of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Based on that, the only acceptable response would be to say, “Jesus, I want You to dwell here. I want You to take over. I want You to refurbish and do whatever You have to do to take

over my life.” If you are willing to do that, then you are right where you need to be to enter into chapters 4, 5 and 6, where it goes on to talk about the practical application of what we have learned.

The last two verses of the chapter are a marvelous response to chapters 1, 2 and 3. It is a doxology—a statement of praise. I remember being so impacted by these verses when I was in Bible school that I determined in the late 1970s to make these my life verses, the track upon which my life would run. To this day, these are the verses I claim to be my life verses.

I would like to close this message by offering Paul’s prayer as our prayer, summarizing chapters 1, 2 and 3 and the marvelous truth that we have learned about our lives in Christ:

Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.