

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost
July 18, 2021
Proper 12

The Lessons: Genesis 9:8-17
 Psalm 136:1-9
 Ephesians 3:14-21
 Mark 6:45-56

The Hymns: # 906 *O Day of Rest and Gladness*
 # 535 *How Wide the Love of Christ*
 # 649 *Blest Be the Tie That Binds*

The Collect: Almighty and most merciful God, the protector of all who trust in You, strengthen our faith and give us courage to believe that in Your love You will rescue us from all adversities; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Ephesians 3:14-21
 Pentecost 10
 Word and Prayer

“For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father...”

I. The Prayer: 3 Bold Petitions

In today’s epistle, Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians; and while it isn’t as apparent in the English, he prays that the Lord would grant His people three things.

First of all, Paul prays that the Lord would grant them strength: the strength that comes by the work of the Holy Spirit, he writes, “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Paul is praying that the Lord would give them strong faith. How strong? The strength is to be determined not by the commitment of the Christians, but “according to the riches” of God’s glory. That is a strength of faith that will not fail, because it comes from God, not man. And because it is from God, we hear that faith is a gift—it is not the work of man. It’s worth noting that this is the triune God at work: the Father strengthens with power through the Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in them.

That’s the first petition of Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians: and if you think about it, it’s pretty bold to ask not just for enough strength to get by, but for strength according to the riches of God’s glory.

Second, Paul prays that they might have knowledge. The Ephesians are believers because they have been rooted and grounded in God’s love for the sake of Jesus: in other words, God loves them because Jesus died for them. Now, Paul prays that they might have knowledge of Christ and His love — and not just enough knowledge to get by. Rather, he prays that they might comprehend the “breadth and length and height and depth” of God’s love for them in Christ. This is a love that

surpasses knowledge—it's beyond our human abilities to comprehend. Yet that is the love of God, and Paul prays that the Ephesians might grow to know it more and more. It might seem a little presumptuous or illogical for Paul to pray that the Ephesians would comprehend a love that is so incomprehensibly big. But Paul prays that they might have that knowledge anyway.

Third, Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians might be filled with the fullness of God. If the first two petitions sounded bold, the third might strike you as clearly over the top. God is all-powerful, all knowing, eternal, present everywhere; and Paul prays that the Ephesians might be filled with His fullness. Again, it sounds like outlandish overstatement.

We pastors pray the same for you. We pray this as we pray generally for this congregation. Sometimes, we pray this as we pray individually for you, because of trouble and afflictions from which you specifically suffer. We pray that you might be strengthened in faith according to the riches of God's glory, that you might know His incomprehensible love and that you would be filled with the fullness of God. These are not just high hopes or nice sounding words. This is our sincere prayer for you.

II. Where the Prayer Is Answered

But where is all this to be found? Where does one go—where does God grant such enormous blessings? Compared to the mundane quality of regular life, it sounds so lofty and otherworldly, like something one might perhaps approach after a lifetime of achievement or in some great, life-changing experience. Where does one go for this glorious strength, this knowledge of the incomprehensible, and to be filled with the fullness of God?

Dear friends, the solution is not far away. And as I prepare to tell you what it is, I do so praying that the devil does not snatch away your joy and replace it with disappointment that the answer is so obvious, so near at hand. Here it is: all of these blessings of God are as near to you as...His Word.

Consider that first petition, that God would strengthen your faith according to the riches of His glory. It is no mystery how the Lord gives and strengthens faith: Romans 10 declares, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." The Lord gives and strengthens faith by His holy Word. His holy, powerful Word. Never forget that the Word of God is not just informative, but powerful. It doesn't just tell us things, but it does things. The Lord—who spoke to create all things and to heal the sick—still speaks His Word to you, to forgive your sins and strengthen your faith. He does not measure out just enough faith to keep you barely breathing: He gives you faith in abundance, according to the riches of His glory. And by the Word you hear, the Holy Spirit is at work so that Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—might dwell in your hearts. He is the Son of God, and He possesses the omnipotent power of God. Where you are weak, He is strong—so strong that He has conquered death and grave for you. Because He dwells in you, you are blessed with strength according to the riches of God's glory, because Jesus is your strength.

Consider that second petition, that God would grant you knowledge of His incomprehensible love for you. Where does God tell you of His love? In His Word. Circumstances and events in life will sometimes echo the news of God's love for you – as when things are going well; but sometimes not. You know God's love for you because He tells you about His love for you in His Word. But there is more to it than just hearing about His love in His Word: Romans 5:8 declares, "God shows His love for

us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” It is not just that God tells you of His love, but God demonstrates His love for you in Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh. You cannot comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth of the incomprehensible love of God for you. But Jesus can—for He is the Son of God, and His life, death and resurrection are God’s demonstration of His incomprehensible love for you. So while you cannot comprehend God’s love, by faith you know Jesus. He dwells in your heart, delivered by the Holy Spirit, by means of the Word. And because He dwells in you, so does God’s incomprehensible love for you.

Consider that third petition, that the fullness of God would dwell in you. Where might you find the fullness of God? Once again, in the Word. Colossians 1:19-20 declares, “For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross;” and again in 2:9, “For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” In the mystery of the Trinity, Jesus—the Son of God—is fully God, not just a third of God. In the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus is fully God and fully man—not just half and half. By means of His Word, by the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus dwells in you. In Jesus, the fullness of God dwells within you.

All three of these outlandish blessings are far beyond our ability to earn, attain or grasp. But the Lord brings them all to us—not in some out-of-body experience, not in a once-in-a-lifetime journey, but always available, right there, in His Word. It’s right here on Sunday morning, in the hymns, liturgy, sermon and more. It’s right there in your Bible at home.

And therein lies the “problem” for us sinners: the Word is so readily available to us that you’ll be tempted to take it for granted. You’ll have your list of reasons why you didn’t get around to reading it. There’s always more to do—either the list at work or the list of stuff that needs to be fixed around the house. There are always entertainments—Television, music, phone calls with friends, You-Tube videos.

There are the good intentions that you were going to get around to it, but your schedule just got out of whack. In reality, please understand that this isn’t just a problem of the world and your sinful flesh: the devil doesn’t want you to hear the Word. He wants you to keep the Bible next to your insurance policies—there if you really need it, but hoping that you’ll never have to use it.

We do well to remember the story of Naaman’s healing from leprosy in 2 Kings 5. Elisha sent a servant to tell him to wash in the Jordan River seven times. When he heard that the cure was so ordinary, he was angry. But a servant said to him, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" (2 Kings 5:13 NKJ). Naaman almost spurned the cure because it was so common, so easily at hand—but only by washing in the Jordan was he cured. The rivers of his homeland were more appealing, more beautiful, but the Jordan held healing by God’s command. Likewise, you’ll be tempted to ignore the Word because it is so easily at hand, and because other things are alternately more appealing or seem more necessary; but only by means of God’s Word is your faith strengthened, your sins forgiven.

That’s why we urge you to a life in the Word on a daily basis. We encourage you to make weekly worship a priority, because here the Lord is at work to feed your faith and forgive your sins. To deprive yourself of the Divine Service is to deprive yourself of God’s grace. And because we are the

body of Christ, it deprives others as well: for as you sing and speak here, you put God's Word into the ears of those around you. When you are not here, your fellow Christians are deprived of your voice added to the faith we confess.

We encourage you to daily reading and meditation. There are resources out there—reading the scripture appointed in the daily Portals of Prayer, for example. But it may be as simple as opening your Bible and reading a psalm and a couple other chapters. If your concentration is frazzled as mine often is, you can read it out loud so that the words come out of your mouth and back into your ears. Pick out a verse or two to memorize, to meditate upon. Close the day with a passage, as your thoughts while asleep often dwell on your last thoughts while awake. And if you have children, include them, too. Read Bible stories. Memorize the Small Catechism bit by bit around the dinner table. The Lord works through His Word to strengthen their faith, too.

For this is true. God answers this threefold prayer—He strengthens your faith, imparts knowledge of His love and dwells in you—by means of His Word. If you are not hearing His Word, your faith is weakening. It's just that simple.

So we encourage you to be in the Word at home and at church. It is not because we obsess on attendance numbers, or because you earn forgiveness for one sin every time you crack open a Bible. It's because the Word feeds your faith, like food feeds your body. It's a gift of God to keep you alive. I mentioned before that we pray this for you because of the troubles you will encounter. You know your pains far more than I do, and I need not enumerate them here. But let us think, for a moment, what happens when it is given you to suffer.

When trouble strikes, you think about it. You worry and dwell on it. It occupies your thoughts. This means that you're already meditating, because you're always meditating on something. And when trouble strikes, you meditate on the trouble. The problem with this meditation is often that we just fret about how troubling the trouble is. We sinners often don't think to pray or to hear the Word for help.

But the Lord has much to say to you in time of trouble in His Word. Remember: by that Word, He forgives your sins, strengthens your faith and makes known His will. As you read His Word—before trouble comes or even as you endure the suffering, the Spirit is at work to give you all of God's blessings. The Word becomes part of your meditation. Along with the whispered fears in your mind, you also hear, "God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1) You hear, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability" (1 Corinthians 10:13). You hear that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). You hear Christ Jesus your Lord promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). These are not pep-rally words to get you back into the fight; these are the promises of God to grant you strength in times of trial, for you are one of His beloved children for Jesus' sake.

Strengthened and informed by His Word during trouble, you pray. You know better what to pray, because you've heard the help that God promises. Having heard Him speak to you, you now speak back to Him. But wait: you have help here, too. Romans 8:26 says that the Spirit intercedes for you with groanings too deep for words, crafting your prayer into one worthy for God's ears. By the work of the Spirit, you do not know all that you ask for—only that your prayer is even better than when it

began. And you know that God hears your prayers, because Jesus intercedes for you at the Father's right hand. He declares that you are one for whom He has shed His blood, and the Father delights to hear your prayer.

He also delights to answer, and this brings us back to one more bit of good news in our text: verse 20 declares that God "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us." When God answers your prayers, for Jesus' sake He does far more than all you ask or think. He does far more than you can comprehend: so though you may not see Him at work with your eyes, you have His Word that He is doing far more.

It is quite a lot to keep in mind when you have cause to worry. When trouble strikes, you really have no idea how much trouble you're really in—for you fight against principalities and powers of darkness. But when you pray, you don't know how good your prayer is—for the Holy Spirit makes it far better than you can imagine. And when God answers, you can't comprehend how great His answer is — because He does far more abundantly than all you ask or think.

That is why His Word is such a blessing in a time of trouble; and, dear friends, as long as this world lasts, you are in trouble every day of your lives. By means of His Word, you have all of these blessings. Apart from it, you have none.

Be in the Word. For there the Lord strengthens your faith through His Spirit in your inner being. By means of that Word, Christ dwells in you. By that Word, God grants that you might know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. By means of that Word, you are filled with the fullness of God. For by means of His Holy Word, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.