

Know the Love too Big to Know

1. Soaring Up into God's Big Heart!
2. Unlocking the Mystery of History
3. Knowing God's Broader Purpose
4. Saying A Big 'Amen'

Introduction: We Lack Perspective

"Won't be one," the theme of our conference. We are turning our attention to the study of Ephesians. I've been assigned chapters one and three. Let me say right off: this book is too big for me. I am not up to it. Ephesians is filled with such big ideas. You feel like you're standing at the foot of Niagara, with all these cascading waterfalls of words pounding around you. It's just too much to take in. I am not up to his exalted language. This book is too big for me.

And really, it's too big for anybody! Paul talks about "the *boundless* riches of Christ," (2:8); about knowing the "love that *surpasses* knowledge" (3:19). He even prays that we be filled to the measure of *all the fullness* of God" (3:19). God is infinite! God is beyond measure! How anyone be filled up with all his fullness? These words are stupefying! How can we get our arms around them?

But there's another reason why this book's too big for us, if we're honest. The world is too much with us. Our noses are pressed too closely to the ground. We see the blade of grass, but not the lawn. We see the bark, but not the tree. We still see through tears, dimly; we see through clouds of sin, darkly. We lack perspective.

Not only this, what we do see is so discouraging. The world is too much with us. We watch the daily horror show on the nightly news. Riots, pandemics, gun violence. Broken people, broken families, broken lives, broken laws. Corrupt politicians, greedy business owners, faithless clergy. "Things fall apart," the poet once said. And he's right. "The best lack all conviction while the worst are filled with passionate intensity."

The basic fabric of society seems to be unravelling. And we are tempted to hunker down. To get lost inside our houses, hiding in our cocoons. We may have internet connectivity, but we lack human connection. We cut ourselves off in our own electronic echo chambers. We communicate within our self-chosen tribes. We only hear our own voices bouncing back at us endlessly. Isolation, fragmentation, polarization -- the order of the day!

Enough doom and gloom? Not yet! There's one more thing to say. This world is too much with us for one more reason.

Even if you are not a Christian, you still have this sense that this is not the way things should be or could be. That the world could be brighter. Why does our heart leap up when we hear a

bird sing on a clear blue morning? Why do we feel such awe at a majestic sunrise? Or such joy at the birth of a baby?

Because we know we could be better, should be better, were made for better habitations than these. That this world was not originally built for dust and rust and ruin. “God has also set a sense of beauty and eternity in the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Here’s the thing, though. When we have these glimpses of Eden, it can just make things worse. These glimpses always come with a sense of grief. Because when we experience these little Edens, it’s always as paradise lost. A joy that can’t last. A hope we can’t prolong. A garden we can’t replant. A home we can’t go back to.

The worst thing is, of course, that—even as Christians—we still experience the power of sin and death in our own lives and hearts. We are not what we ought to be. We do not do what we want to do. We have this sense of what we could be in Christ, and then we look at our faces in the mirror with regret and unspeakable sadness.

So let’s admit from the start that the reason why this book with these big thoughts is too much for us is that we lack perspective. Even as Christians, this sad old world is too much with us. We struggle with sin. We don’t know fully know ourselves or why we’re here. The fact is my God is too small. My world is too small. My heart is too small.

Paul’s purpose in this letter, then, is to give us that perspective—to give us a big God so that we can enjoy a God’s eye point of view. More: he means to unlock the big mystery of history, what lies underneath all that was and is and is to come. He wants to enlarge our hearts to know a love too big to know. He wants us to grasp God’s wider purpose for us in the universe. Finally he means to give us the power to say a big “Amen” with our mouths and with our hearts and with our lives.

1. Soaring Up Into the Heart of God

I am old enough to remember when the astronauts of Apollo 8 first shared with the world the picture that became known as “Earthrise.” A picture that seemed to pull you into the frame. It showed a beautiful world of blues and whites made all the more compelling by the contrast with the lifeless grey moon. The earth hung there like an azure ball against the inky darkness of space. Suddenly, all our squabbles and wars, our rivalries and quarrels, seemed so petty.

Nothing compared with the singular beauty of that one planet that was our common home.



Now imagine you could see this same picture from God's point of view. The frame would be much wider and much deeper. Your majestic vision would not only encompass the entire universe in an instant, but also this third planet from the sun. And you could see it not just as a whole, but in every one of its parts: every current in every ocean. Every river, every mountain, every jungle, every desert, every city, every field. Every man woman and child. Every thought of every heart. The past, the present, the future--all rolled up into one. And God doesn't have to expend any effort of thinking. He just knows it because he made it. No wonder the Psalmist says, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (Psalm 139:6).

But to know only this about our God's perspective is not enough. It's not necessarily a comforting thought. To know that your Maker and Creator sees right through to the inner core of your being, your thoughts before you conceive them, well: that's pretty daunting to say the least. Which is why a more important question than 'What does God see' is to ask, "How does he see it?"

That's why Paul, himself sitting in chains in Rome, wants to take us away from our tiny, cramped earthbound rooms and teach us to soar, to fly high up into the heart of God itself. With these words he wants us to grasp the great heart behind everything that happens in the universe, all that was and is and is to come. Listen to his song:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Eph 1:3)

Here's a man who knows how to praise God. Because Paul knows who God is. I mean he knows God's heart. For Paul—and I pray for you and me—God is not some inscrutable Deity lost behind a thousand stars, hidden behind the fabric of the universe. For Paul, God is the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and that makes him our Father too because he gave his Son up for us. “He has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”

Think this through with me as you answer the question, “How big is your God”?

First and most important, “He has blessed us”—that means God is by nature a Giver. A big word for this God as a Giver is grace—a word that appears over 15 times in this letter in one form or another. “Grace,” as you know, speaks of God's love as something unforced, unasked, unearned. Grace means God's love doesn't depend on us, who we are or what we have done. It depends on him and him alone. God has made us his children “to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given (graced us with) in the one he loves” (Eph 1:6)

Meditate on this. If God—who rules over all in all--gave you his Son, what good thing will he withhold from you? He's your Father! That means, as Jesus says in another place (Matthew 7:11), he only knows how to give you good gifts. He doesn't know how to give you bad gifts. When he gave you Jesus, he gave you his heart, and along with him “every spiritual blessing.” God is not stingy, and he doesn't hold back. In Christ, God's greatest Gift all is Gift or must serve the Gift.

How big is your God? Let's review: at the heart of the universe, there is God. At the heart of God, there is nothing but sheer love for you. At the heart of all God's plans and purposes for you is Christ, his Beloved, whom he gave to you as a gift. We'll talk more about this shortly.

This doesn't mean our struggles and troubles and trials on earth suddenly go away. In fact, they may increase as we follow Jesus, bearing our cross through pain and sorrow. But [it gives us a] we have a new perspective, gained from a God whose heart is brimming with love for us. It's a faith perspective that teaches us to sing with Paul a new song. Luther puts it this way:

Note the great art and wisdom of faith....Faith does not despair [even though] God sends trouble... Faith rises above all this and sees God's fatherly heart behind His unfriendly exterior. Faith sees the sun shining through these thick, dark clouds and this gloomy weather. Faith has the courage to call with confidence to Him in the middle of trouble.

Whoever can learn, let him learn. Let everyone become a falcon and soar above distress. Let everyone know most assuredly and not doubt that God does not send him this distress to destroy him.... He wants to drive him to pray, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn to know God better, to get used to doing battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious.

“Let everyone become a falcon and soar above the distress.” Even in the middle of our struggles we I like that. Soaring with the Spirit into God's great loving heart.

2. Unlocking the Mystery of History.

The love too big to know has another facet we want to look at too. Scripture clearly teaches that the history of Christ is the key to unlocking the mystery of history. Paul says,

God has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ (*and that purpose is*) to bring all things in the universe together in Christ (Ephesians 1:8-9) (the purpose behind and the goal toward which everything moves)

Again, note carefully: all God's plans, all God's will, all God's motives, all God's purposes center in Christ. If you want to look into the heart of God, if you want to draw back the curtain and peer into what's at the center of all things past, present, and future, you don't have to fly up into the third heaven. You don't have to plumb the depths of the sea and soar beyond the farthest galaxies. Simply look at the Man of Nazareth.

Note, too that Paul doesn't call this a mystery because God wants to keep it hidden. No, "God has made known to us the mystery of his will," something which he later calls "the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (Ephesians 1:13). The good news of Jesus is the mystery of history revealed for all to see and believe.

That's not to say that we understand everything perfectly. God's workings—all the details of the plans and the reasons behind this or that—are beyond our ability to figure out. More often than not, on the surface, history looks like it's going from zero to nowhere. To unbelievers especially it often seems random, purposeless, meaningless. One wretched thing after another.

But even for us, who have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, sometimes our comfortable little worlds fall apart. A sudden death. A terrible accident. A cancer diagnosis. A marriage destroyed. A job lost. A besetting sin. A fall from grace.

We struggle to keep sin and death at bay, but they are relentless, and relentlessly trying to invade our lives. Sometimes it even seems they're winning. "What then can it mean," our hearts cry out, "to say that Jesus is the key to unlock the mystery of history?"

Here the Apostle John comes to our aid through the Holy Spirit. God gives him a majestic vision of his rainbow encircled throne in heaven. Around the throne are four living creatures. Surrounding them are twenty-four elders with golden crowns—representing the full number of God's people. Thousands upon thousands of angels complete the scene. Suddenly, the scene shifts, and we see in God's hand a scroll with writing on it. Sealed with seven seals. The mystery of history itself! A mighty angel asks, "Who is worthy to open that scroll?"



But there's no one. In all that bright assembly, no one can tell us why or unlock for us God's ultimate purpose for this world and for us. John weeps. And no wonder! He weeps with grief and horror for all the sorrow and all the woe of mankind. There seems to be no explanation that can bring us consolation. No answer to our question, "Why?"

But, the elder says to John—and to us— "Do not weep!" Open your eyes! See what's at the center of God's throne! Open your eyes, he says, and know that the Lion of Judah, the Royal Son of royal David, the Messiah promised, and the Messiah who came to his people as promised—he and he alone has the power to make sense of history. .

And so we look to where he's pointing, and we see: a Lamb. A Lamb?! In all that great assembly, the ranks of shining angels, the elders with their golden crowns, the mighty beasts, none is worthy, none. But a Lamb. And a slain one at that.

Think of it! Who would ever have believed that history is not about lions, but a Lamb? And then, not so much about what that Lamb did, but what was done to him. Not so much about his doing, but his dying.

This is exactly the same thing Paul is saying when he declares:

In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:9)

Truly, history is written in blood. The blood of the Lamb. Only he is worthy to unseal the scroll, to unlock the hidden mystery of God's will. That's because he loved us with a woundable love, a love willing to be wounded, willing to become like us in this murky world of sin, toil, and death, willing to bear the name of a sinner—the Sinner—in place of all sinners to suffer. In

place of all sinners to die. So that he could set us free. So that he could give us the full rights as sons and daughters of the King (Ephesians 1:5).

This was always God's plan. This was always God's purpose. Not just in some general way. No, Paul wants you to make it personal, to take it personally. He says:

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship (Ephesians 1:4-5)

Before space and time existed, before the world came to be, God set his heart on you! From the high tower of eternity, God looked out over the sweeping succession of ages to come and he saw you. He wanted you. He chose you in Christ to be his own forever with an unbreakable, unshakeable love. He chose you not because you were holy, but to be holy. Not because you were blameless, but to be blameless in Christ's pardoning grace. And, in time, he made known to you that purpose. He pointed you to Christ.

This fact, this certainty, this faith lifts us up from our earth-bound perspective. It converts history from a horror show into a song of praise. It teaches us to sing with Paul:

If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?...
³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:31-37).

And so as we walk along our personal journeys in time, we know we follow a Lamb. The Lamb that was slain. We "set the Lord always before us. Because he is at our right hand, we shall not be moved" (Psalm 16:8) by trouble or sorrow. We order our days and live each moment of every hour by faith in the "Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

This is the sentence that embraces my before and after and my every moment in between. My past and what is yet to come. I am not haunted by sins past, because the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. I am not fearful of the future, because the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. I humbly walk with him in the present, submitting to sorrow and pain and heartache because I follow the Lamb that was slain. Why should servants be better than their master? All the same, the Son of God loves me and gave himself for me. And I know, I know: there's no such thing for a Christian as a crucifixion that does not resolve into the Resurrection.

3. Knowing God's Broader Purpose¹

It seems to me as I survey the world in which we live that there's one great affliction troubling our souls. You can see it in peoples' endless striving, as they stagger from one thing to the next. You can hear it in the longing of their spirits for something more, something better, something

¹ Title and idea from August Pieper's, "[The One Great Thought of God](#)," *Theologischer Quartalschrift*, October 1915.

lasting. They all have hungry hearts, but they don't know where to find the bread that satisfies. They're all in love, but they constantly seize upon loves that cannot last.

In short, as Paul says, they are without God and without hope (Eph 2:12). They have a God-shaped blank in their hearts (as one of my professors used to say), but nothing they stuff in their hearts apart from God can satisfy. They eat and eat and still are famished. They run and run and never reach their goal.

And since they don't know the good God who made them, they don't know themselves. They don't know who they are or why they're here. Is it just to gasp out three score years and ten and then to end it all in a hole in the ground? Is that it? With no solid purpose, life seems random, aimless. Nothing to hang on to. Living for nothing, loving for less, the truths of this world are only a guess.



Is it any wonder that Paul prays for his Christians:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the *hope to which he has called you*, the riches of *his glorious inheritance in his holy people* (Ephesians 1:18).

And again:

God's intent was that now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known ...according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:10-11).



Paul wants you to know why you're here and where you're going. He wants you to know "the hope of your calling," the reason why God summoned you to faith in Christ. He wants you to understand God's big purpose. It's this: through Christ and his Church God means to display his glory to the universe (Ephesians 1:22).

That means we know what it's all about: it's all about Christ and how God intends to gather to himself a people of his very own (Ephesians 3:6). The Church, the gathering of saints. We are God's heritage, his inheritance, his prize possession (Ephesians 1:18). We are the temple in which God now dwells by his Spirit (Ephesians 3:16-19). We are the family who calls God "Abba, Father!" (Ephesians 3:12, 14). We are the beginning of the new universe (Ephesians 2:13-18). This is God's big thought: it's all about Christ and his Church. History is the process of putting all things under Christ's feet for the sake of the church (Ephesians 1:22). A new people based upon grace, not race; a new creation formed of every tribe, nation, language, and tongue (Ephesians 2:15).

Once we know who Jesus is and why he came, we know who we are and why we're here. God never intended to call us one by one to faith, and then send us each off to walk in lonely isolation to heaven. He called us to walk in joyful company, joining the throng on its way to the new Jerusalem. We walk together in heart and spirit, loving one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another, picking up someone if he stumbles and falls, carrying the weak and weary on our shoulders.

Certainly the church is still hidden under the cross. It doesn't always look so wonderful—not to others and not to us. This side of glory we look more like a band of ragged refugees than a church choir marching along in all their Sunday best. But this is what gives all the glory to God's grace. We are what we are because he is what he is. His grace takes the unlovely and makes it beautiful. In our weakness, God shows the power of his pardoning love. In fact I don't want to

belong to Church that sees itself as an assembly of the oh-so-perfect. Give me a Church that sees itself as a hospital for the sick, a ragged band of the walking wounded.

Similarly, we need to answer the question: what does God's great purpose mean for our personal lives here and now? What does it tell us about why we're here? You might think such a glorious future means a life now of miracle and wonder. You might suppose that we are going to breeze through this world floating ten feet off the ground. As if we were magic Christians daily and effortlessly moving mountains by faith. Let me remind you here about something else that the Apostle John once saw:

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.... Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;....

so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel.



Jesus knew who he was and why he came. He knew where he was going. So he gets up from the meal and does something that slaves do. He washes his disciples' feet. This is the kind of master we follow. The one who wants to be great in the Kingdom must make it his or her highest ambition to be a slave.

Which is why Paul answers the question, "Why are we here" in the rest of the letter, not by pointing to grand and glorious works, but to simple acts of love and kindness. He points us to our everyday callings in the world. Wives and husbands. Children and parents. Slaves and masters. "You don't have to leave the world to serve God! In fact, you don't have to go anywhere at all! Show the love of Christ in whatever calling or situation you were in when the love of Christ found you.

"Love one another, as I have loved you. By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, when you love one another." Sounds so simple. No big deal. The steady love of our lives. But it's the most glorious thing in all the world. Giving a cup of cold water in Jesus' name causes angels to pause in their flight with awe and wonder. Born of Christ, love abides. Love abides forever.

4. Say a Big 'Amen'!

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 to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine....to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen.

To know the love too big to know. To have a big God who fills the universe with his loving grace in Christ. To unlock the mystery of history. To know our glorious purpose as God's new creation. It's all still too much to take in. It's all still too much to grasp. We're like little children at a beach trying to empty the ocean with our toy buckets.

We feel like Mary when she was told that she would be the Mother of our Lord. He whose name is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. In awe and wonder, we exclaim, "How can these things be?" Yet she knew it didn't depend on her, but on the strong Word of God. So she spoke her glad 'Amen'! "May it be to me even as you have spoken!"

So say we all! God's love will always exceed our power to grasp it. But that doesn't mean we cannot seek to know it more and more. And remember, when we ask God to do these things for us, he is able to do far more than we could ever ask or think to ask. Just how wide, how long, how high, how deep is the love of God? How can we possess such knowledge? Remember his promise! Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and he will show you, day by day.

Amen! God will give us a new song to sing. A song too big for this old world. It will require a new heaven and a new earth in which to express it. God will give us a broader vision, a keener eye. God will give us one heart, one mind, one love, that together sees one thing: the glory of Christ and his body, the Church.

May it be to us as he has spoken. To that, again, let's say a big, "Amen!"

Paul O. Wendland

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