

THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

If I were to ask you to define the ultimate experience, what would it be? For New Zealand's Edmund Hillary, the ultimate experience occurred on May 29, 1953.

That was the day Edmund set foot on top of the 29,032 foot summit of Mount Everest - becoming the first human to reach the pinnacle of planet Earth.

For George Perry, an avid fisherman, the ultimate experience took place at Lake Montgomery, GA, on June 2, 1932. On that memorable day, George landed the record for the largest bass caught in America.

The record-setter weighed 22 pounds, 4 ounces, and was 32½ inches long. *Imagine the excitement for George trying to get that monster-catch into the boat.*

I said for years, the ultimate experience for me would be to drive on the German Autobahn. Picture 5000 miles of blacktop with no speed limit! What a rush!

My dream almost came true one year when I went to Germany to speak at a CC. I took my daughter and we rented a car. There we were on the Autobahn, cars flying past us doing 160 mph. *But we had a problem...*

Cheapskate Sandy had rented a little economy car that topped out at 95 mph. *There we were with **no speed limit**, but we were driving a car with **no speed**.*

Moral of the story... when you dream, be specific!

But here's my question for you this morning, **what would be your ultimate experience?...** A vacation with your sweetheart to an exotic destination?... To sail around the world?... To walk on the lunar surface?...

All these experiences would be thrilling, but none would rival - what is for all human beings **The Ultimate Adventure** - and that's an experience with God!

Think it through... *a frail, finite, fallible, fragile, foolish human being* rubbing shoulders with *the indestructible, indescribable, infinite, infallible, incredible God.*

That's an experience!

We're talking the God who hung the heavens, and parted the Red Sea, and sent fire down from heaven, and walked on water, and even rose from the dead!

To sense His presence...

To feel His forgiveness...

To behold His glory...

To be touched by His tenderness...

To savor His love...

To hear His calming voice...

To soar on a surge of His strength...

Without question, this is **the ultimate experience!**

Joseph Newton once wrote, "Only God is permanently interesting. Other things we may fathom, but He out-tops all our thoughts." After you've experienced God, everything else borders on boredom!

Sure there's always an attraction to the new and novel, but it never holds your attention for long! It's temporal and superficial. What's the big deal about walking on the moon after you've walked with the Son?

I love how King David put it in Psalm 84:10, "For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand (anywhere else). I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness."

I'd rather hold the door, so when it swings open and shuts, I can peek inside at God's glory... rather than have front row seats for the wickedness of this world.

As a child, I grew up in a Bible-believing church. I like to say, "I cut my teeth on the back of a pew."

When the kids at public school said "peeewww" and pinched their nose... I looked for a place to sit down.

In fact, the first word I ever uttered as a baby wasn't "mama" or "dada" - I think it was "Amen!"

I grew up in Bible-toting, Scripture-quoting churches!

I knew the hymns - could quote the verses - recall the stories - list the books of the Bible... I even memorized a timeline of the book of Revelation.

I could preach, teach, testify, collect an offering, pray in King James English - I could do it all... *except sing!*

I was the poster child for a good church-goer - a future deacon on the rise. Yet I had one major, gaping omission in my spiritual resume'... ***I didn't know God!***

I *thought* I knew Him... I knew a lot about Him... But I'd never experienced God in a personal, intimate way!

I was religious, but I lacked a relationship with God.

And I was not alone... Countless people I grew up around majored on being religious, *yet missed out on God.* Rather than live refreshed and empowered and comforted in God's presence, we live burned out, and worn out, and bummed out... *We had missed out.*

Religion is like playing house with your daughter.

When Natalie was young, she'd invite me to dinner. She used her best china - cooked up an imaginary meal - served her dad. I'd chew, and chew, and chew. I'd even send my

compliments to the chef. She and I would comment on what a delicious lunch we had...

I learned you can burn an hour or more playing house **and never eat a morsel. And that's religion!**

You can go to church each Sunday - chew on the pastor's message - comment about the nice dinner - even compliment the chef... **yet no one ever eats!**

We can say we're talking and listening to God - *but it's just pretend*. If you're starving for the real deal... if you're hungry for a genuine relationship with God; then pay attention to Ephesians 3. For here, Paul invites us to the ultimate experience - an encounter with God!

And he tells us what we can expect...

He begins his description, verse 14, **"For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named..."** Notice, Paul experiences God on his knees.

This is one of the things that's so beautiful about knowing God; *it's so simple*. **To experience God, all you have to do is drop to your knees in humility and ask!**

You don't have to coil your body into a mantra position and chant mindlessly... or walk barefoot over hot coals... or go door to door in the neighborhood distributing religious propaganda... or pay huge fees to order the definitive tape series from the latest guru...

If you want to experience the living God, you need *to step over your pride, and admit your sin, and humble yourself, and bow to your knees* - in your heart...

Come to God thinking He owes you or you deserve to be there - and *the heavens will seem like brass!* But bow and **repent**, and God will reveal Himself to you!

Jesus left His home in heaven and made the long journey to Earth, even to Calvary's cross - to **pay our admission into God's presence. Today, the tickets are at the will call window with your name on them.**

You can get in with a simple and sincere prayer.

At the close of Chapter 3, Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus and for us - and as he does, he reveals what this ultimate experience looks like...

First, God gives us **strength for our weakness.**

Second, He gives us His **presence for our loneliness.**

Third God swaps His **love for our bitterness.**

And fourth, He gives us **fullness for our emptiness.**

God's strength for our weakness, His presence for our loneliness, His love for our bitterness, His fullness for our emptiness... this is the ultimate experience!

In verse 16, Paul prays, **"that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man."** First, Paul prays for power - **strength for our weakness.**

We were taught a truth in Sunday School *but have we really learned it...* **"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me**

so... Little ones to Him belong, they are weak, but He is strong." *Me weak, God strong!*

We're like pine trees swaying in the wind - we're as stout as a wet noodle. But Jesus can make us strong!

I love what one man said about his relationship with God. "God had the strength, and I had the weakness, so we teamed up! It was an unbeatable combination."

Bring your weakness to God and He adds His power. **Paul prays for spiritual strength in the inner man.**

And that's a strategic point. The focus of Paul's prayer and God's strength is the inner person, not the outer person. Each of us is divided into two parts... We consist of body and spirit - a physical and spiritual side.

The inner man, the spiritual part of a person, is that which lives forever... Whereas, the outer material person is the part that dies and reverts back to dust...

2 Corinthians 4:16 tells us, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day."

It's amazing how much time we spend on the outer man - the deteriorating part of our person - while we ignore the inner person of the heart that lives forever!

Do you realize every day in our country, Americans spend \$300 million on new clothes for their body?

We spend an enormous amount of time and money on clothing the outer person, while we ignore the health and healing and prosperity of the inner person.

I talk to people all the time who are working hard to lower their cholesterol levels, monitor their blood pressure, and manage their weight gain - *who haven't given the health of their spiritual life a second thought!*

I hate breaking the news to you, but your body is going to die! Every one of us has an expiration date.

Thankfully, our drop-dead date isn't stamped on the package, but trust me, you have one. Why put all your effort into the part of you that'll end up shriveling away.

When the outer man grows weak, and anemic, and sick - we know how to treat it - we eat some chicken soup, or we visit the doctor and fill a prescription.

But what do you do when the inner man gets down and sick, and overwhelmed? Some people try to escape the problem... or numb the pain... or analyze and psychologize their way through the difficulty...

Paul would tell us **to pray!** Pray that God will send His Holy Spirit to strengthen you with His might...

It's interesting, the Greek word translated **"might"** is **"dunamis."** From this word comes the English words, **"dynamic, and dynamo, and dynamite."** The Holy Spirit is our dynamite! He generates a spiritual combustion inside us... *Ask God to strengthen you with His "might!"*

I remember when Reebok Pumps came out. They were hailed as a breakthrough in basketball shoes.

When the going got rough and you needed a lift, you could pump it up. To jump a little higher - or to run a little faster -

you could reach down and start pushing the orange button on the tongue of the shoe.

As you pumped the button, it inflated the shoe's inner-lining. I thought, "This is so cool! At last, white guys can jump!" In fact, they still make Reebok Pumps.

Wearing a pair of Pumps meant that though your foot receives the same jolt as it did before - there was now a cushion between the sole of your foot and the floor.

And this is how the Holy Spirit works in our lives.

When life gets jarring and pounding, you can pray and pump up your spirit! The Holy Spirit will fill the inner-lining of your life. He'll provide you some spiritual cushion between your soul and this hardcore world.

You'll still get jolted. Difficulties won't vanish - but now when you take the hit, you'll bounce rather than bruise! An inner strength will absorb the shock!

Paul asks God to give the Ephesians strength for their weakness, but he also asks God to give them a presence for their loneliness. He prays in verse 17, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith..."

God's presence can put an end to our loneliness.

Once we had a young man give his life to Jesus and get involved in our church. A little later, he enlisted in the Marine Corp. He was nervous about boot camp.

The thought that comforted him most was when I told him, "John, from the moment you give your life to Jesus, you're assured that you'll never again be alone."

And it's true! A follower of Jesus can never be alone.

If you're in Christ, Jesus lives in you. You have a permanent roommate. Paul prays *"that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith..."* Jesus has made your heart His home. You're His permanent residence.

But He's after more than just an address...

Jesus wants a place where He can feel comfortable. The word translated *"dwell"* means *"to settle down and make oneself at home."* It carries the idea of unpacking your stuff and arranging the space to your own liking...

Jesus wants to move into your life with all His blessings - stretch out His influence - feel at home.

If I were to walk into your house one afternoon and you casually said to me, *"Sandy, just make yourself at home!"* *You wouldn't really mean it - No way!*

For if I made myself at home, I'd take off my shoes and socks and sling them into the corner of the room.

I'd raid the icebox - move your furniture around - find a football game on TV - I'd flop on the couch and start picking my nose - or cleaning the lint out from between my toes... *Don't believe me? Just ask my wife!*

It wouldn't take long before I made you so hopping mad you'd shout at me at the top of your lungs, and in angry tones, tell me to make like a banana and split!

Well, Jesus really does want to make Himself at home in your heart! He wants to move in with all His stuff - unpack - take over - settle in - get comfortable...

And at first, it's great to have Jesus move in!

Wherever He goes, He brings His love, joy, peace, power. Jesus has some really cool stuff, and He shares it with His roomies! Jesus makes for a great roommate.

He's always up to something new and exciting. Believe me, Jesus knows how to have a good time!

But the conflict comes when Jesus starts to make changes uncomfortable for us. He wants to rearrange the furniture - or clean out some smelly closets - or reprogram the TV - or get rid of some links on our computer - or eliminate some songs on our playlist.

At first, our tendency is to resist these changes, until we're reminded *who He is* and *what He's done for us*.

Jesus is Lord - that means Head Honcho, Boss, Master and Commander - *and He's been so good to me I want Him to be comfortable!* Yet initially, His adjustments produce some hesitancy and some fear.

I'm not quite sure where it's all headed...

Let's say you had a new roommate and one day you came home to discover the old rug in your living room was gone. You're shocked! **That rug was in the family for years. Your mom changed your diapers on that rug.**

You knew that rug stunk - and you suspected your roommate was allergic to it - but you loved that old rug, and you've kept it around for sentimental reasons.

You can't wait to get your hands on your roommate and demand that he retrieve your favorite rug!

That is until the next day.

You open the door, walk inside, and to your amazement, the whole house has new carpet - we're talking plush. It's beautiful, and you're so blown away - you'll never think another second about that old rug.

Now you can't wait to get your hands on your roommate so you can hug him, and thank him for his generosity, and the wonderful changes he's made.

Hopefully, you see where I'm going with my parable.

There's a lot of dirty habits we maintain in our lives just for sentimental reasons... Yet they stink, and Jesus is allergic to them. And they really got to go!

It's hard to turn loose of patterns and attitudes, but it's worth it - for whatever Jesus takes from me, He promises to replace it with something infinitely better!

His blessings are lavish and plush. You could never afford them on your own, but Jesus is generous. He desires to supply your life with the richest and the best.

The only thing that holds our Lord back from making even more changes for the better is our reluctance.

We need to stop being scared and holding Him back.

We need to rise up in faith and turn it all over to Jesus. Remember Psalm 84:11, "no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly." Let Jesus make **your heart, His home** - and you'll begin to experience the grace, and glory, and goodness of God.

Well, Paul prays next, “that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge...” When we come to Jesus, He first grounds us in His love, but then we grow up in love!

We root down - then we shoot upwards. Here, Paul asks God to give us **love in place of our bitterness.**

Romans 5:8 tells us, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us..." How do you know God loves you?

Look to the cross... He sacrificed His only Son.

Most of you have been in a delivery room and you've experienced the thrill of cradling a newborn baby in your arms. You're so proud of that little infant.

It's wrinkled and shriveled.

Its head is lopsided from sliding down the birth canal.

It's covered with blood and goo.

In the first few moments of life, a baby is one ugly critter. If you were crawling under your house and saw a newborn staring back, you'd call an exterminator.

Yet in the eyes of love, there's nothing more beautiful, and gorgeous, and precious than *your* baby!

Now, what if you were in the delivery room cuddling and cooing over your newborn and suddenly a man with an assault rifle - burst into the room and tried to snatch that baby from your arms? *What would you do?*

I know what you would do - you'd die holding onto your baby. There's no way you would give up your newborn. You'd fight and scrap to hold on to your child.

Yet God said goodbye to His only Son and allowed Jesus to be mistreated - His body to be tortured - His hands and feet nailed to a board. Jesus was God's kid! God loved Him - and yet Jesus was sacrificed for you!

If God never did anything else for us, the cross alone is reason enough for us to be confident of His love for us. We'd still have an overwhelming motivation to give our lives to Him, since He gave His life for us.

In Romans 5, we are told God's love was **set out**, or displayed on the cross, but there's more to the story...

In 5:5, we're told, "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." God's love is **set out** on the cross, but it gets **poured out** into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

An experience with God is like a skyscraper. Its peak reaches high into the heavens - but only after its foundation is poured deep below the surface.

You begin the Christian life looking to Calvary's cross, but then the Spirit brings God's love down from that cross and pours it into every crevasse of your life.

Faith in the love Jesus *has shown* comes first. Then an experience of the love Jesus *will show* comes next.

I love an OT analogy. After the priest made the sacrifice, he took the carcass outside the gate and had it burned. The

ashes were collected and mixed with water; then a leafy branch sprinkled the mixture onto whatever needed to be dedicated. The effects and merits of the sacrifice were transferred by the water.

And this is why the Holy Spirit is referred to as water.

The Holy Spirit conveys the merits of what Jesus did on the cross 2000 years ago - to our hearts today.

Again, **God's love is set out on the cross of Calvary, but His love is poured out by the Spirit into our hearts.**

It's vital to be grounded in the knowledge of God's love, but a foundation is not an end in itself. **If all you are is rooted and grounded... you're just a stump.**

Yes, you need to sink your roots down into the love of God, but then your shoots should soar upward.

God wants us to experience the full volume of His love. The *width, length, depth,* and *height* of His love...

How **wide** His love has reached to **get us...**

How **long** His love will go to **keep us...**

How **deep** His love is meant to **save us...**

And how **high** His love has gone to **bless us...**

God wants us to "*comprehend*" His love.

The word "*comprehend*" in Latin is "*prehendere*" which means "*to grasp.*" We say that a monkey has a "*prehensile tail*" because its tail was designed to clutch on, and grasp, and pick up, and hold onto to stuff.

And likewise, when we ask, God will give to us a *grasping ability*. The capacity to latch on to His love.

The Holy Spirit is able to line our hearts with spiritual Velcro, so the love of God sticks - we begin to sense it, and feel it, and experience it, and enjoy His love. God wants us to **comprehend** the full extent of His love!

When you read the Bible, **don't just study it like a textbook. Read it like it was a menu. Read it with the intention of ordering from it - and tasting all its treats.**

God wants His love to be more than an abstract concept. God's love is a love that **"passes knowledge!"**

What a line, by the way - the love **"which passes knowledge."** At first glance, this is an odd statement.

Yet think it through, there really are only two means of human discovery - by **study** or by **experience**.

Take **a bowl of ice cream for example. How do I know it tastes good? Well, I can put a drop on a slide and place it under a microscope.** I can run chemical tests on the ice cream comparing it to my taste buds.

I can feed the data into a computer, and it'll tell me what kind of a sensory reaction I can expect when the ice cream hits my tongue... *Or, I can just take a bite!*

That's why David tells us in **Psalm 34:8 "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good."** God cuts to the chase.

Rather than spend years studying and researching God's love - *as fulfilling as that would be - God makes it easier.* You can taste His love right now! See for yourself that His love is good. Ask God to pour out His love into your heart. God swaps **love for bitterness.**

And finally, Paul prays, “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Paul prays and asks God to give the Ephesians, and us, a fullness for our emptiness.

Realize our physical bodies are quite porous. It's not evident to the naked eye, but our flesh is like a sponge.

Your body consists of 92% water - only 8% solids.

I suppose if you ever sprung a leak, you'd pop like a water balloon. But God has constructed our spirit much the same way. The inner man is also very porous.

Spiritually, we're permeable and absorbent. Our lives are easily influenced by external influences - good and bad. We can get absorbed into something of interest.

We're like Bounty paper towels, “we're the quicker picker upper...” The problem though is we get wrapped up in things that really don't matter in the long run.

We're a quicker picker upper all right, but we're quick to *pick up* stuff that eventually *lets us down*. This is why life is frustrating... emptiness can overwhelm us.

Yet God made us porous so He could pour into our lives His fullness. He wants to saturate us with Himself and fill our empty spaces with His love and purpose.

God wants to flood our lives with His presence, His peace, and His power. He wants to pump new life into our family, marriage, work, and friendships...

God wants to fill *your emptiness* with *His fullness*.

He desires my life to be spiritually saturated. Totally absorbed with Him - so full of Him I can't help but drip His

goodness onto others. God wants us to be so soaked in His Son - so saturated in His Spirit - that when the world squeezes us - out flows His love.

Right now when you get squeezed what comes out?

Perhaps anger - maybe hatred - often envy, or worry, or impatience? If that's what flows out - apparently that's the stuff in which you've been soaking.

How many of us have been marinating in negativity? Absorbing the wrong attitudes? It's time to pray and ask God to replace **our emptiness with His fullness.**

It's interesting, Paul closes His *prayer* with *praise*.

Verse 21, **“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”**

Note, Paul prays **“according to the power that works in us”** - *he prays to the scale of God's ability.* His prayers are based on God's immense capabilities.

He doesn't call on God to give us a portion of His power, rather He prays in proportion to God's power.

Whatever He asks of God, He realizes that God has an endless supply and He has infallible capabilities.

This caused Paul to pray big prayers!

Let me close with a final look at verse 21...

We have a God who'll do what we **“ask,”** but more...

He'll do **“all that we ask,”** but more...

He'll do **“all that we ask or think,”** but more...

He'll do "*above all that we ask or think,*" but more...

He'll do "*abundantly above all that we ask or think,*" but our Lord will do still more... He'll do "*exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.*"

Paul stacks superlatives on top of superlatives to help us realize that our God wants to do in us far, far more than we could ever imagine!... *If we'll just ask...*

If you're looking for the ultimate experience to know God - His strength for your weakness... His presence for your loneliness... His love for your bitterness... and His fullness for your emptiness - then be like Paul, bow your knee, and your heart, and your life, *and pray...*

Tonight we want to give you an opportunity to pray.