

Building a Stairway to Heaven

Ephesians 3:14-21

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith — that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I do not consider myself a master carpenter, more an apprentice. Over the years I have completed a number of projects, some successful and some less so. Ironically, some of the things I have made using the simplest tools have been some of the best. Just a few years after our marriage I made a bookshelf/phone stand from plans my grandfather Hermann had given me. We had that bookshelf/phone stand for years. It moved all around the country with us, if not the world. We finally disposed of it when we moved to St. Augustine; there was just no place for it. When our first daughter was about 21 months old I made a rocking horse for her second Christmas. We were living in an apartment during my vicarage year. Working in the bathroom, using a simple Black and Decker jig saw and an inexpensive drill, I made a rocking horse from particle board, screws, and white glue. (I still have the plans.) That wooden horse lasted for years until someone much bigger than it was designed for, sat on it and broke it.

I have made many other things since and I have better tools, but I don't know if I would want to tackle a set of stairs. I know the basic parts: the stringers to either side, the treads, and the header to which the stairs are attached. However, there is a serious safety issue involved with stairs; make them incorrectly and someone could get seriously hurt.

A decade ago I saw a television program about a beautiful, spiral staircase constructed for the Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe. The chapel was constructed in the nineteenth century. When the chapel was complete the nuns discovered there was no staircase to take them to the top level. They spent nine days praying to St. Joseph, Jesus' foster father and carpenter. On the last day, a stranger knocked at the sisters' door and said that he was a carpenter who would build a staircase. He constructed the staircase all by himself, which was considered to be the pride of

carpentry. Then the carpenter, who did not use a single nail or glue to construct the staircase, disappeared without even waiting for payment.

There was a rumor in the city of Santa Fe that the carpenter was St. Joseph himself, sent by Jesus to attend to the nun's problem. Since then, the staircase has been called "miraculous" and become a site for pilgrimages. There are three mysteries connected to the staircase:

- To this day the identity of the builder remains unknown.
- The architects, engineers and scientists say that they cannot understand how this staircase can balance without any central support.
- The wood used to build the staircase does not exist in the region.

Over 250,000 people a year visit the chapel to see the staircase.

When I study this morning's text, I detect another master carpenter. In stair-like fashion Paul crafts a prayer for the beloved Christians in Ephesus. He prays for their blessing and complete comprehension of the riches they have received and will continue to receive through God's grace in Jesus.

A set of stairs must rest on some platform or foundation. Stairs take people from one level to the next; stairs that end in a void are not too useful. The foundation upon which Paul's prayer rests starts a few verses previously. Paul, who is in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus, does not want the Ephesians to mourn his imprisonment. Paul cannot think of anything better than to suffer hardship for the sake of the Savior who rescued him from a wasted life and eternal death. Paul writes, "This [his imprisonment] was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus, our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is to your glory" (3:11-13). Paul is willing to undergo anything in working for God's glory. And if God permitted Paul to endure so much as a consequence of his work this showed God's own estimation of the work.

Have you noticed how thin newspapers have become? Ad revenues are down; therefore newspapers have been forced to make cuts. Companies who advertise their products or services must decide how much they can afford to spend to get the word out about their products and services. Evidently many companies decided it wasn't worth the return, so they cut advertising. In a way, that seems self-defeating. I would think you would want to spend even more to differentiate your product or service from everyone else's. God had a message, and it is so important that He doesn't care what it costs – His Son's life or Paul's imprisonment. Paul quite agrees.

When I was a child in Ohio, all our homes had basements. We gained access from the ground floor to the basement and vice versa by means of wooden stairs. The stringers to either

side, upon which the treads were fastened and upon which they rested were sawn from 2 x 6s or 2 x 8s, depending on the length of the stairs from top to bottom. The longer the length, the stronger the stringers had to be. In the case of our text I believe the stringers are found in verses 14 and 15, and they are built of 2 x 10s. Paul kicks off his prayer by writing: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named...”

Can you visualize the picture? Paul, imprisoned, falls on his knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. The work of Christ has unified Jews and Christians under one God. The Fatherhood referred to is soteriological, in other words, it springs from God’s sacrifice of His Son to redeem us from our sin and its consequences. The one great family is the una sancta, the one true, universal church – a part of which is already in heaven while the other part remains on earth.

Now Paul starts adding the steps, each one rising higher on the stringers, rising toward the doxology at the end of our text. The first step starts at verse 16: “...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being...” The gifts for which Paul asks go along with and match all the attributes of God: His love and grace, His power and wisdom, His majesty and infinitude. As the giver, so is the gift. These gifts are put into our hearts by the Spirit of Christ who works through Word and Sacrament. This is why Paul falls on his knees; he comprehends, although in a limited way himself, what he is asking. The “inner being” is our essential personhood, which when yielded to the powerful working of God’s Spirit can become thoroughly new.

The second step begins at verse 17: “...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith...” The Spirit’s strengthening us in the inner-man produces the result that Christ dwells in our hearts.

We talk about faith a lot. It is one of the three affirmations of the Lutheran Church, but how often have we analyzed and discussed the nature of faith? It is a gracious work that God creates in our hearts, the inmost depths of our human nature. He does this by means of the Holy Spirit who comes to us through the Word – the good news of Christ – and through the Sacraments – the same Word attached to visible signs that we can see and touch. Therefore Paul prays that this blessing would come to all of us and that we would believe, because our faith is the hand that clenches God’s promises and appropriates them for us.

One day following a very busy weekend when we lived in Gulf Breeze I read in the newspaper that during the previous weekend Pensacola Beach lifeguards rescued over a dozen people. Maybe it would help us to think of God’s offer of forgiveness and salvation as the red, foam rescue device carried in hand by the lifeguard, or as the good news carried to us through the seas of life by the Holy Spirit. He not only brings the message to us, but He places it in our hands. Then He takes His big hands, matches them to ours, and folds our fingers around the

message. He keeps our hands on the buoy so we will not let go. Then power flows from Him to us so that we hold tighter and tighter until we are possessed by an unbreakable desire to be God's child forever.

Verses 18 and 19, together, comprise the third step: "...that you, being rooted and grounded in love may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with the fullness of God." The purpose of Christ's indwelling is to make us strong to grasp God's great and glorious plans and to know His all surpassing, vast love. "The fullness of God" is all the riches of His grace in Christ Jesus.

A science teacher placed a large jar on the lab table in front of his students. He asked them how much they thought it would hold. He took a bag of garden stones and poured them in until they reached the top of the jar. "Is the jar full?" he asked the students. "Yes," they replied. Next he poured in some aquarium gravel and shook the jar. "Is the jar full?" Then he poured in some white sand from Pensacola Beach and shook the jar again. "Is the jar full?" Finally, he poured in water.

God wants us to know the fullness of His grace and love. Just about the time we think we are full, He has more, and then more, and then more to pour in. Paul says that we are not filled with God's fullness until our capacity is reached. But then God shakes us, settles us and pours in even more. We cannot comprehend what God has for us – the length, breadth, height, and depth – but He has more than we could ever imagine or think. Nonetheless, Paul wants us to try!

Permit me, please, to put it all together for you so that you can sense the stair like essence of Paul's writing:

 "...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,
 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
 that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

Finally, Paul arrives at the next level. He completes the stairs by taking us to heaven in a sense. He concludes with a doxology of praise to God. "That's a short set of stairs," you may think to yourselves, "hardly enough to get us to heaven." Yet, God obliterates the gap; God reaches down from heaven and builds a stairway in just three steps.

God can do this for us not only more than we ask in our petitions and intercessions but even more than we are able to think or conceive in our minds. This is the strongest kind of

encouragement to ask Him. Paul does not leave God's power as an abstract – His power is working in us at present. It quickens the spiritually dead and builds up the spiritually quickened. We normally ask God for such simple things, such foolish things, such trivial things. He has so much more to give, blessing piled on blessing.

Having reached the top of the stairs Paul finds God waiting, the wonderful gracious God who gave His Son for us and sent people like Paul and others to bring us the good news. Paul concludes, "... to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." We cannot add to God's glory, but as believers, we should recognize and honor it. "In Jesus" means all the glory that is due God the Father connected solely and alone with Christ Jesus – His office and person – and that to all eternity.

So, we must pray like Paul, in faith, believing that Christ will do what He promises. We must ask for inner strength – poured down, shaken, settled and filled to overflowing. More than that: we must invite Christ Himself to take possession of the inner sanctums of our souls. Our invitation becomes one of asking that He displace all lesser gods, forcing them to flee. Beyond our fondest imagining we shall emerge as victors over the things of this world that would drag us down. And we shall gain strength in weakness, and light in darkness.

I want to close with a poem. It was written many years ago by Joshua Loth Liebman. It speaks of God's unsurpassable love, more love than we can contain.

In this vast universe
There is but one supreme truth –
That God is our friend!
By that truth meaning is given
To the remotest stars, the numberless centuries,
The long and heroic struggle of mankind...
O my Soul, dare to trust this truth!
Dare to rest in God's kindly arms,
Dare to look confidently into His face,
Then launch thyself into life unafraid!
Knowing that thou art within the Father's house,
That thou art surrounded by His love,
Thou wilt become master of fear,
Lord of life, conqueror even of death! Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. *Sola Dei Gloria!*