

July 26

More Than We Can Imagine

Eph. 3:14-21

An agnostic scientist once said to me that *if God exists or is involved in our world, he certainly isn't interested in making it known*. His phrase was **God doesn't leave any DNA**; markers that can be traced to the divine. *The world of science is filled with anomalies and mysteries to be sure*, he said, *but there is no way to determine if they have some divine cause*. He wasn't able to imagine anything outside the scope of the natural order.

I don't recall having any imaginary friends when I was young, but I did have an imaginary deacon at one church. He was kind, creative and eager to serve. As a boy, I could imagine a war with only a pile of dirt and some plastic army men. I could imagine being one of the Musketeers with only a wooden dowel that I had sharpened to a point. Once I tried to imagine rescuing a damsel from a tower, but I knew she would want to kiss, yuk! So I stuck with dragons, which I figured were not as dangerous. Turns out I was right.

But life shuts down the imagination for most of us. We become mired in a myriad of obligations that are all too real. I heard a psychologist say that the despair of depression is the defeat of imagination; our ability to imagine a better life. While adults don't need to play imaginary games, we do need the hope and energy that lives in the power of our God-given imagination.

Paul wasn't imagining like a child when he wrote to the Ephesians, but he was intrigued by a power that exceeded our ability to imagine a better life and a better world.

Writing to these young Christians, Paul explained the new spiritual reality that had dawned in Jesus. God was not distant or disconnected as some said. God was not waiting for some future event to be at work. Because of Jesus, God was already at work in us *through the Spirit*. For one thing, in **v. 16**, God is at work in our inner being **by the power of his Spirit**.

The Greek in Ephesians is sometimes awkward. **V. 18** is a case in point. Paul wants us to comprehend the *breadth, length, height and depth*. The problem, of course, is that he doesn't say of what.

Most assume he means the breadth, length, height and depth of **Christ's love** because that's what comes next in his thought process, but the syntax is unclear. Paul wants us to comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth of something, he just assumes we're going to get it.

Haven't you done that? Someone walks up to a conversation you're having and you assume they know what the subject is and you say, "pretty awesome, huh?" And they go, yeah...what are you talking about?

Paul is writing along and he knows exactly what he's thinking of when he says he wants us to know the breadth, length, height and depth of it. But we can't ask for clarification so we have to give it our best guess.

If he's speaking about comprehending love, why does he then say that love surpasses knowledge, which would imply that it is beyond comprehension?

As one scribe footnoted in one ancient manuscript of this passage, and I quote: *it is easier to comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth of God than to understand a woman*. I'm guessing he had just been dumped.

Others assume that Paul is speaking not about Christ's love specifically but about the breadth, length, height and depth of the **fullness of God** that concludes his phrase in **v. 19**. But how can we possibly comprehend the fullness of God?

There's an article in today's paper about **artificial intelligence**. There is apparently some risk that artificial intelligence could actually get out of control and take over human life. I was almost all the way through the article before I figured out they weren't talking about Congress.

Paul uses a term for *comprehend* that is closer to the concept of AI than the typical human variety. If you want to comprehend biology, go to school and study hard. If you want to comprehend Spanish, try one of those language programs or move to Mexico. If you want to comprehend the gospels, focus your mind on the commentaries of scholars. If you want to comprehend the financial system or healthcare, forget it. In all these disciplines, we pursue knowledge through educational processes. But that isn't the meaning of Paul's term.

Because the word is in the **middle voice**, it is not describing something that we mentally capture and master by virtue of our prowess; by force or power of our minds. The middle voice suggests that this comprehension is something we seize with our minds because we have already been seized by it. That's the middle voice. We participate in the action of another. Our comprehension, like AI, comes from the particular design of our Creator.

Paul has already spoken of the power of the Spirit in **v. 16**. Only when our minds have been engaged by the power of the Spirit will they be empowered in this unique form of comprehension; a comprehension that surpasses knowledge. This is the power that grasps and renews our minds, allowing us to take hold of the *breadth, length, height and depth of the fullness of God*.

Now let's unpack **v. 20**, which tells us what happens when we are filled with the fullness of God. Paul says that God's power is at work **within us**. *Within US*. In this passage, the words **you** and **your** are plural. Paul is not speaking about individual power; individual comprehension; individual accomplishments. He's talking about the power of the Spirit at work among those who are called together in Christ.

We don't get this because our culture is so radically individualistic. Paul doesn't say that the Spirit's power is at work within EACH of us. Of course the power of God can be at work in each of us, but that's not what Paul is speaking about here. It's at work within US. This power is not what individuals bring to God or what God does in individuals. It is a power God puts to work in a unity of believers because they are grounded in love and filled with the fullness of God.

And what happens when this power is at work in us? Paul says it **accomplishes far more than all we can ask or imagine**. I want you to think about that promise for a moment. The Bible does not promise that the power at work in **me** can accomplish far more than all **I** can ask or imagine. This kind of self-help, positive thinking promise may sell millions of books, but it's not true to this book.

Paul says that the power at work in us is able to accomplish FAR MORE than all WE can ask or imagine. He does not say that WE can accomplish anything. This teaching isn't about what we can do. It is God who is able to accomplish the work to which we are called.

Brothers and sisters, **this promise of great accomplishment does not seem to coincide with the religious reality on the ground in American Christianity**. Most churches in this country are somewhere between assisted living and ICU. Most have only enough power to gather on Sunday or Wednesday night. *Far more than we can ask or imagine* is far removed from what we see.

If God's power were at work in us, would 3000 churches be closing their doors each year? Would our community have fewer and fewer believers? Would the general public think we were boring and irrelevant; cloistered and hypocritical? I'm not speaking about physical

strength, except as a metaphor for spiritual power. God's power can accomplish holy purposes through the very young and the very old.

**Mother Teresa** stood up at the National Prayer Breakfast back in the mid-90's, in front of some very powerful people who think of unwanted pregnancies as statistics. *Do you have unwanted babies, she asked? Give them to me, I want them.* More than one non-profit adoption organization was birthed by people in that room who heard one old fragile woman speak a powerful truth. It came from God through a frail servant, not a rich and powerful one.

Do we lack mental, physical, emotional or financial power? We're just the kind of people God uses to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine.

**Yet this text is about what God can do but is not doing in very many places.** God is not coming close to all I can ask or imagine. How about you? If God did FAR MORE than ALL WE could ask or imagine, would our church, our community and our world look like it does now?

I have a pretty good imagination. I can imagine transformed lives. People freed from addictions to drugs, sex, foods and every other passion that keeps them in bondage. I can imagine a community of truth where people build each other up instead of complaining, bickering, gossiping and lying. I can imagine a community of forgiveness where bitterness and anger have no power over us. I can imagine a community of celebration where laughter and joy are abundant. I can imagine a community of abundance where no one has too little to live.

I can imagine every underperforming or at-risk child having a Christian mentor. I can imagine us running our own school for those who can't learn in public schools. I can imagine the church leading the way in preventative healthcare. We might leave medicine to hospitals and physicians, but exercise, diet, support, training and screening could be our bailiwick.

Sometimes I imagine what kind of resources we would have if everyone in our church tithed. Our budget would likely double and that would be an act of God. I imagine how our church might grow if each of us actively invited friends and neighbors.

But as Christian adults, we seem to stop being children of God. We stop imagining what God could accomplish through us. And we stop asking for anything extraordinary. So Paul, I have a question. **Will God accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine if we don't ask or imagine?** I say his answer would be *why in the world would you not ask or imagine?*

In our visioning process, we heard from some people who had stories of God doing more than anyone thought possible. Always, this came about after a season of prayer (asking) and imagination (dreaming). Outside of this country, God is accomplishing the most among people who have the least; among people who depend on the power of God.

Some churches do what they can and others pray that God will accomplish in them far more than all they can ask or imagine. We can all imagine the difference. We can and we must imagine the difference. And we must ask God to make it happen!