

YOU CAN BE FILLED WITH GOD'S LOVE**EPHESIANS 3:14-21**

Do you know what a sinkhole is? I used to hear about them a lot when I was growing up in Florida, but sinkholes can happen just about anywhere. Did you hear about this sinkhole that opened up in western Kentucky about a week ago? It opened up right beneath the floor of the National Corvette Museum in Kentucky at 5:45 in the morning. It swallowed eight extremely rare Corvettes two of which were valued at over \$1 million each. Car lovers across the country groaned with dismay! What causes a sinkhole? For a variety of reasons, the soil and rock underneath the ground at the surface just erodes away so that everything collapses or sinks into the resulting hole that's been created.

Yes, there are physical, literal sinkholes. But there are emotional and spiritual sinkholes as well. It's when you feel as if your life has caved in somewhere or is about to give way. Another word for it might be stress. We know stress comes in all shapes and sizes. We know some people can handle more stress than others. We even know that some kinds of stress can actually be positive. We know that harmful stress affects all kinds of people – rich, poor, educated, uneducated, young, old – and let's be honest – Christian and non-Christian. Sometimes the mounting concerns, pressures and struggles of life leave you exhausted, angry, strung out and feeling like you're falling into a bottomless pit.

Here's a question I want you to think with me about today. Does being a child of the one, true King – that's the title of this messages series in Ephesians - make any difference to how you experience and deal with sinkholes? I'm convinced that relief from and renewal in the midst of stress comes through a fresh encounter with God's love. That truth is explained in the section of Ephesians we consider today. We have the privilege of encountering a marvelous passage in God's Word today. When I visit people in the hospital or at a rehab facility, this is one of my "go to" passages when I read some scripture and pray with them. It's sort of a wonderful parenthesis in Paul's letter. The passage right before this one and right after it are all about how we get the privilege of helping to build the church of Jesus. But these verses are just different and wonderful. I invite you to let these incredible words just wash over you. Just take them in and let the Holy Spirit refresh your spirit by and through them.

The great Christian leader, Paul, wrote those words to Christians living in and around the city of Ephesus in the middle of the first century. They were going through some very stressful times. Paul himself was no stranger to sinkholes. He'd been shipwrecked three times, whipped mercilessly on several occasions, stoned and left for dead on another occasion. Oh, and don't forget, he was writing this letter from a prison cell in the city of Rome! In addition, Paul got many of the first Christian churches started. He carried around with him at all times the spiritual and emotional burden of their welfare and development. Paul was a tough man who had learned that God is alive and well in a tough world. Did you notice that this is a prayer? Because it's a prayer, you get a window into

what Paul wanted for his brothers and sisters in Ephesus. And because we believe Paul's words were inspired by the Holy Spirit, we get, then, a window or an insight into what God wants for His people in the twenty-first century as well as the first century. Three wonderful truths about God's love leap out at me from these verses. Here's the first one:

GOD'S LOVE EMPOWERS YOU.

How do you feel when you're under stress? You feel weak – drained, exhausted, weary. You feel like you're walking through deep snow or in wet cement. Every step is an effort; every decision is a crisis. Can God help you when you feel weak? Look again at v. 16-18, "I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is." (Eph 3:16-18 NLT) Did you notice the relationship there between God's power and God's love? When you get a hold of God's love – or, better yet, when it gets a hold of you – it will empower you even in times when you feel like you're collapsing into some kind of emotional or spiritual sinkhole. I must admit that I can be a "whiner": "God, take away this problem. Please remove this stress. I feel weak." But God doesn't always remove the stress, does He? Instead, He puts His power into us to deal with the stress and climb out of the sinkhole.

Notice what else this passage reveals about God's power. It comes as an aspect or a result of His "glorious, unlimited resources." God has a kind of wealth that's beyond your imagination. Sure, He ultimately owns everything in the material, physical world. But He also possesses everything of spiritual value. He's willing to share with you and me out of that endless supply. True, that kind of wealth can sound foolish to people with no use for God. That's why they prefer to trust in money, possessions, themselves – anything and everything but God. But because you're a child of the one, true King, you're invited to come to Him and draw from a treasure chest of riches to find the power to live this life with joy.

Then again, this power comes to you as a result of being rooted in the life-giving soil of God's love. "...Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong." (Eph 3:17 NLT) That invites me to imagine myself has some great, massive tree over at Highbanks Metro Parks where Cheryl and I love to hike that has this incredibly deep root system way down into the ground. Yes, the wind can blow and knock a few branches off here and there, but the tree is fine. Why? The root system. When you put your roots down deep into God and His love, your life takes on a stability that it could not have otherwise. Oh, you might lose a branch here and there, but the real you, the most important part of you, will be fine. You're rooted in God's loving control of your life. You're rooted in the knowledge that God loves you even in the midst of life's strong winds and heavy

rain. You're rooted in the fact that as you keep on holding onto God, He will bring you through every stress life presents.

God's love is immense and powerful beyond description. All that God does, has done and will ever do is summed up in that one word: love. That love can fill you with a mighty inner strength every day of your life. So when you feel weak from life's stresses – when you feel a sinkhole coming on – what should you do? Consciously, prayerfully, and worshipfully reflect on the vastness and bigness of God's love. Call it to mind. Rest in it. Remind yourself of it. Thank God for it. God may or may not take you out of the sinkhole you're in, but He does promise to give you the power to face it and overcome it ultimately. The Bible says, "Have you never heard? Have you never understood? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary.... He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint." (Is 40:28-31 NLT) God's love empowers you. Here's a second truth from Ephesians 3:

GOD'S LOVE ENLARGES YOU.

Stress can make you feel weak. It can also make you feel withered. If you look up the word "stress" it will say something like this: "strain, pressure, especially force exerted upon the body, that ends to strain or deform its shape." Stress can rearrange your emotional insides and leave you feeling withered and limited. Does the one, true King have an answer for that when His children experience it? "And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is." (Eph 3:18 NLT) Stress has a way of getting you to focus on yourself. Your viewpoint and perspective becomes as limited and narrow as you yourself. Your view of reality gets warped. It's kind of like the little boy growing up in the inner city who made his first trip out to the country. He enjoyed lying on the grass under the tree and seeing all the wildflowers everywhere. Suddenly, a flock of sparrows flew across the sky. His mother said, "Look there, Jimmy! See the pretty birds flying through the air." He looked at them and then said in a sad voice, "Poor little birds. They don't have any cages, do they?" His very narrow experience of life in the inner city led him to believe that birds were meant to live in cages instead of being free to fly wherever and whenever they desired. In the same ways, stress can have this withering effect on your vision and perspective.

A fresh encounter with God's love can enlarge you. How so? By getting your eyes – your focus – off of the sinkhole and onto God Himself and the bigness of His love. A country pastor went out to visit one of his members who happened to be a farmer. On a windmill at this man's farm were written the words, "God is love." The pastor was intrigued. He asked his friend, "Does that mean your faith in the Lord depends on which way the wind is blowing?" "No," said the farmer, "it

means that regardless of which way the wind blows, God is love.” For just a moment, think with me about the vastness - the infinite largeness – of God’s love! How wide is God’s love? It’s wide enough to include every person of every age from every country of every race and every culture. How long is God’s love? God’s love is longer than life itself and longer than eternity itself. God knew about and loved you even before He created the world. It’s long enough to put up with our sinfulness, our foolishness and welcome us back to God with open arms. How deep is God’s love? God’s love is deep enough have Jesus, His Son, die upon a cross for your sins and mine. It’s much deeper than any sinkhole you might find yourself in today or tomorrow. How high is God’s love? It’s higher than any mountain of trouble – any obstacle in life - you have to cross over or get around. It’s higher than Heaven itself. All too often – and I am as guilty of this anyone here – we bring our stress before God trying to convince Him that it’s just too big and would He please remove it from our lives. Well, sometimes He does and sometimes He doesn’t. But what we need more anything else is to get our eyes off the stress and onto the bigness of God’s love.

Anybody been dreaming about lying on a beach or swimming in the waters of a warm ocean? A few of you have already had the joy of making that dream a reality! Wow, it’s seemed like a very long winter this year, hasn’t it? Use your imagination with me today. Can you feel yourself splashing around in a warm ocean on a hot summer day? You relax in the warmth of it. You thrill to the power of it all around you. You float in the buoyancy of it. You realize you can never measure it. God’s love is like that and more. It’s like the words of that old hymn, “O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free! Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me. Underneath me, all around me, is the current of his love....” God’s love enlarges you. A third and final truth:

GOD’S LOVE ESTEEMS YOU.

Stress can make you feel weak and withered. It can also make you feel like you’re falling into a sinkhole of worthlessness. We live in a world that’s always measuring us and evaluating us in different ways. More often than not, all of us come up short. According to someone’s scale, survey, expert opinion or whatever, you’re not good looking enough; you’re not intelligent enough, you’re not old enough, you’re not young enough; you’re not educated enough; you’re not wealthy enough; you’re not healthy enough. Constantly facing the barrage of that kind of information can create stress. If you’re not careful, you can begin to feel insignificant, less than valuable and less than worthy.

This might be a kind of new concept for you, but God’s love actually esteems you. How so? It says right here that God wants you to be the very dwelling place of the Lord Jesus Christ. Did you see that? “Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him....” (Eph 3:17 NLT) This old world loves to put people into categories: very important... important... sort of important...

unimportant. God never does that. In fact, the Bible is full of stories of God working through people who everyone else writes off as worthless.

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest, scholar and author who died some years ago now. He had a prestigious teaching career at Harvard University when God called him to give it all up and work fulltime at a care center for the critically ill. He, along with several others, was assigned the 24 hours a day, 7 days a week care of a little boy named Adam who suffered from a debilitating form of epilepsy. One day, while calming Adam after an epileptic seizure, the Holy Spirit spoke into Nouwen's spirit with this message, "God loves Adam as much as He loves Henri Nouwen, and there's nothing Adam can do to be loved by God. God loves Adam just as he is."

That was a liberating experience for Henri Nouwen that brought him a profound sense of peace. But doesn't God want you to become more and more like His Son, Jesus, every day? Of course He does! But never lose touch without that fundamental, magnificent truth: God loves you just as you are. God doesn't love you more or less today depending on your performance yesterday. God cannot love you more or less than He does right now at this very moment.

Isn't that a wonderful phrase – "Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him..."? (Eph 3:17 NLT) This is more than an occasional visit. It means to move in permanently. The incredible intimacy suggested there comes from the original Greek words which literally combine the phrase "to live in a home" with the word "down." As a result, an accurate translation might sound like this: "that Christ may finally settle down and feel completely at home in your hearts." When stress begins to make you feel like you're about to fall into a sinkhole of worthlessness, remember that you are a dwelling place, a home, for the King of kings and the Lord of lords. God loves has a way of esteeming you.

Have you had the experience of being in someone's home, but you weren't quite sure you were completely welcome? Very awkward. It's one thing to be in a home; it's quite another to feel at home. Jesus wants to feel at home in your life. Jesus wants to have a personal relationship with you – daily, hourly, moment by moment. Maybe that's what Paul meant in v. 19 when he says, "May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God." (Eph 3:19 NLT) You can indeed be filled with God's love! Jesus not only wants to make your life – your inner spirit – His home; He wants to feel at home in your life. That should make you feel very special... very valuable... very esteemed. God's love esteems you. Let me ask you, "Does Jesus feel at home in your life?"

One day, only two workers remained at the worksite – a big, high rise apartment building nearing completion. These two were putting the finishing touches on the inside of a large incinerator chimney. One of them went outside the chimney to

get some materials. The other remained inside working at a considerable height from ground level. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, his safety line broke and began to fall down through the chimney shaft. As he did, he managed to reach out and grab a rope which extended through the chimney from top to bottom. It was pitch black and he was there all alone hanging onto that rope for dear life. He had no idea how far he'd fallen. He began to lose strength. His grip on the rope began to weaken and he started to slip downwards. His aching muscles told him that at any moment he would lose his grip on that safety rope entirely and fall to his death. That's stress, yes?

At that moment, his co-worker returned and discovered that his partner had disappeared down the chimney shaft. Horrified, he hurried down to the base of the chimney not knowing what to expect. When he got to the bottom, he could hear a voice from the other side of the door saying, "Help me. Save me. Lord, save me!" When he opened the door onto the chimney's floor or base, he saw something totally unexpected. There, in the darkness, was his friend, frantically clutching that rope with his feet dangling... just six inches from the ground! Flooded with a sense of relief, the only sensible thing he could think of to say at that moment was simply, "It's OK. Just let go and you'll be fine."

I wonder if you need to hear the Holy Spirit say, "It's OK. Just let go and you'll be fine. Relax. You're safe in God's love." The sinkholes that open up underneath you in life can make you feel weak, withered and worthless. When that happens, what you and I so often need is a fresh encounter with God's love. God's love is deeper than any sinkhole – any stress. God's love empowers you. God's love enlarges you. God's love esteems you. That's part of your identity as a child of the one, true King.