

Theme Development

Theological Perspectives from Ephesians

Introduction

The Song of Quoodle

If dogs could speak, what might they say about our ability to see things as they really are? A dog named Quoodle is flabbergasted at the failure of humans to see beyond their noses. In fact, they have no noses!

They haven't got no noses,
The fallen sons of Eve;
Even the smell of roses
Is not what they supposes;
But more than mind discloses
And more than men believe.

Quoodle is appalled "at the poverty of human olfactory perception, and especially the great wonders of which humans are unaware"¹:

The brilliant smell of water,
The brave smell of a stone,
The smell of dew and thunder,
The old bones buried under,
Are things in which they blunder
And err, if left alone.

Actually, Quoodle is downright skeptical about the popular idea that what is real consists only in what we can perceive with our senses:

And Quoodle here discloses
All things that Quoodle can,
They haven't got no noses,
They haven't got no noses,
And goodness only knowses
The Noselessness of Man.²

¹ Thomas C. Peters, *The Christian Imagination: G. K. Chesterton on the Arts* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 15.

² For text of Chesterton's poem "The Song of Quoodle" see <http://www.dur.ac.uk/~dcs6mpw/gkc/books/quoodle.html>

We owe G. K. Chesterton, author of “The Song of Quoodle,” a debt of gratitude, to my way of thinking. Not only does he awaken us to the joy of looking for “the wonders of every day life.” He also reminds us as Christians of “the hidden reality of the spiritual realm and of the miracles that we have taught ourselves not to notice”: “The Song of Quoodle”...is a playful wake-up call to people who are missing what is most important in life because they apparently ‘haven’t got no noses’.”³

If you will pardon the play on words, Quoodle (and of course Chesterton) must have been nosing around in Ephesians to say “of the fallen sons of Eve”: “More than mind discloses/And more than men believe.” St. Paul says of human beings who are apart from Christ that the fall into sin has profoundly affected their thinking and perception: “[The Gentiles] *are darkened in their understanding*, alienated from the life of God *because of the ignorance that is in them*, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18⁴). At the fall “the lights went out” in and on the human mind. And this is no temporary power outage (as the Greek expression used here makes clear): human beings are in a permanent mental black-out, so that they are congenitally blind to spiritual truth—the truth that saves. Not only haven’t they “got no noses,” they ain’t got no “eyes” to see either! (Their minds are blindfolded, so to speak. See 2 Cor. 3:12-4:4). They are truly *beyond* imagination (as in “*beyond* redemption”).

And so Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians at the only place where it is possible to begin—with the prayer “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may *give* you a spirit of wisdom and of *revelation* in the knowledge of him, *having the eyes of your hearts enlightened*, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you,

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...” (Eph. 1:17-18). In the language of revelation (a motif present everywhere in Ephesians; see 1:9; 3:3, 5, 10; 6:19), Paul teaches through his prayer that God illuminates human hearts to understand His eternal purposes as He has revealed them in the person of His beloved Son: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Spiritual perception formerly “out of reach” (*beyond* imagination) has by the Spirit of God (Eph. 3:5)⁵ now introduced us to realities far exceeding (*BEYOND*) any thing we could ever think or imagine!

Beyond Imagination: An ‘Ephesian Perspective’

To explore the 2004 Youth Gathering theme from an “Ephesian perspective” and to help us “turn on some lights” as we develop the theme further, I have decided to follow a rather simple outline. First, let’s sketch out the context of the Gathering theme text, Ephesians 3:20-21, and do so in a way that will illuminate its nature and its role in the letter (Part I). Then we can turn to look more closely at the theme text, which can serve as a kind of “eye-peeper” like we insert in doors (I checked with Home Depot on this one! Wal Mart calls it a “Wide Angle Door Viewer”) allowing us a wide-angle view into the corridors of God’s heavenly blessings (Part II). There are really no adequate human analogies (or adjectives) to describe the grandeur! And finally, under “The Power of Imagination” (Part III) we can introduce ourselves to ways of applying the “Ephesian

⁴ The Scripture quotes in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are from English Standard Version [ESV].

⁵ Gordon Fee, in his insightful book *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001 reprint), rightly notes: “Without the Spirit, who alone knows the mind of God, human beings do not stand a chance to penetrate this ‘hidden mystery [1 Cor. 2:7],’ which ‘eye has not seen nor has it entered the heart of human beings’ [1 Cor. 2:9]” (80).

perspective” out of which our theme has grown (under the Lord’s guidance, I am confident).

Singing Hymns in Prison

“...I am an ambassador in chains,” Paul wrote to the Ephesians (6:20; see 3:1; 4:1) while in prison. A fun place to be? Not exactly.

Despite various efforts to promote reforms, conditions in ancient prisons were often harsh. Most prisoners wore chains; their feet might be shackled, their hands manacled or even attached to their neck by another chain, and their movements further restricted by a chain fastened to a post....The very word “chains” became a synonym for imprisonment. Some prisoners were also kept in wooden stocks, devices to restrain the feet, hands, or even the neck of an individual (see Acts 16:24)....Prisons often had poor air circulation, a lack of hygienic facilities, rats and vermin, and food of poor quality. Unscrupulous guards might at times use the withholding of food or even outright torture to extort money from prisoners or their relatives.⁶

Who knows for sure, but when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians Paul could well have been in Mamertine, a prison in Rome.⁷ In any case, it seems as if it was customary for him and his friends to sing hymns in prison (cf. Acts 16:25). As commentators have often observed, Ephesians itself reads like a hymn, rich in content and singing of the “manifold wisdom of God” and the “unsearchable riches of Christ.” This is especially evident in the first three chapters, where sentences and phrases cascade in almost untranslatable fashion. The opening overture at 1:3-14 is such a long sentence Paul never really stops to catch his breath!

⁶ *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 883.

⁷ Of the Mamertine Prison, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Third Edition, 1998) says: “A building in the centre of Rome consisting of two cells, one above the other, in which, acc. to tradition St. Peter was imprisoned and converted his two gaolers, Processus and

A Letter Set to Music

An old book I love speaks of Ephesians as “doctrine set to music”:

This Letter is pure music. More than one scholar has noted its musical structure and quality. What we read here is truth that sings, doctrine set to music.⁸

Yes, in Ephesians we see Paul “soar aloft into realms of truth never before reached by mortal mind...”⁹

But why did Paul write this magnificent epistle? The letter is general in nature (not addressed to specific persons and problems) and many think it could have been a kind of “circular letter” for churches in the region of Ephesus. Paul doesn’t say much about his specific intention. But overall he seems to have had two purposes in mind. First, Paul tells us that he sent Tychicus, the bearer of the letter, to the Ephesians “that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts” (6:22). Perhaps the Ephesians had become depressed at the news of his imprisonment, so that they needed encouragement. But second, and more generally, surely he intended by this letter, as was his custom, to do some follow-up strengthening of the church. He does this through what some have recently (and quite fittingly, it seems to me) called “identity formation”:

[Paul] writes Ephesians to his mainly Gentile readers, for whom he has apostolic responsibilities, with the intention of informing, strengthening, and encouraging them by assuring them of their place within the gracious, saving purpose of God, and urging them to bring their lives into conformity with this divine plan of summing up all things in Christ (1:10). Paul wants to ‘ground, shape and challenge’ his readers in their faith. In other words, the main purpose of his leader is ‘*identity formation*’.¹⁰

Martinianus. It was certainly in use as a prison from Republican times. The small church of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami now stands above the site” (1026).

⁸ John A. Mackay, *God’s Order* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁰ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 57.

That is to say, Paul wants to shape minds and lives with things beyond imagination that were revealed to him (Eph. 3:5).

The Unveiled Secret

Have you ever heard of Mechthild of Magdeburg? If you have, you should get a prize “beyond imagination”!

She was a 13th century poet (1210-1280) who claimed that she received some visions. She once wrote: “Of the heavenly things God has shown me, I can speak but a little word, not more than a honeybee can carry away on its foot from an overflowing jar.”¹¹ If she had said this of God’s Word, and not of her own mystical thoughts, chances are that she may not have had to flee to hide in a monastery.¹² What a perfect way, though, to picture central theme of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians! Paul could have written these words himself.

In his opening hymn of praise St. Paul writes, “In him [Jesus, “The Beloved”] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, *which he lavished upon us*, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:7). The overflowing honey jar: “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (1:18); “God...rich in mercy” (2:4); “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness

¹¹ Quoted in R. Wayne Willis, *P.S. God, Can You Fly?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 11.

¹² See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*: “Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207-1282 or somewhat later), author of a book of mystical Revelations. Descended from a noble family in Saxony, she experienced visions from the age of 12 and left her family home c. 1230 to become a *Begaine at Magdeburg under the spiritual guidance of the *Dominicans”(1064).

toward us in Christ Jesus (2:7); “the riches of his glory” (3:16). So little on a honeybee’s foot: “the unsearchable [Gk: *anexichniastos*- impossible to understand, unfathomable] riches of Christ” (3:8). As Paul sings in Romans: “‘Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’” (Rom. 11:33). In the words of our Gathering theme, “Beyond Imagination.”

The riches of God’s grace (the full honey jar) may be impossible to comprehend with our limited capacity to think, yet they have been revealed to us in the great “Unveiled Secret.” A key term in the letter to the Ephesians, and in fact a one-word summary of the entire letter, is the word “mystery.” It occurs 6 times. “The Mystery” is the deep secret existing in God’s mind before creation, hidden for eons (Eph. 3:9), but now revealed (3:3). The “mystery” is this: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). That means us! The mystery is, simply, the Gospel. Paul prays, “...that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim *the mystery of the gospel*, for which I am an ambassador in chains....” (6:19-20). If you want to put it in one word, then do it like Paul does in Colossians: “[To the saints] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, *which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Col. 1:27).

Two “Sub-Texts”

In modern literary studies a “subtext” is the “implicit meaning or theme of a literary text.” If we hyphenate the word, though, perhaps we can alter the word to mean a text that lies “beneath” another to give it meaning. In this sense, there are two passages in

Ephesians that form the “building blocks” on top of which sits the capstone, the Gathering Text, Ephesians 3:20-21. These two passages are: Eph. 1:18-23 and 3:14-19.

Paul’s “Hyper-Gospel”: Eph. 1:18-23

I pray also 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 the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (NIV)

This passage is so rich that it is impossible to plumb its depths in this study. But in line with our goal of getting an “Ephesian perspective” on our theme “Beyond Imagination,” let’s point to some “motifs” important for our use of the Gathering Text.

1. Ephesians contains several “*hyper*”¹³ compounds, the first two of which occur in Eph. 1:18-23! a) Eph. 1:19 “...his *incomparably* great power” [ESV: “immeasurably great”]. The Greek word here is *hyperballon*, a participial form, and the verb means “**to attain a degree that extraordinarily exceeds a point on a scale of extent, go beyond, surpass, outdo.**”¹⁴ b) Eph. 1:21: “...*far above* all rule and authority.” The Greek word here is *hyperano*, an adverb meaning “**(high) above.**”

The *hyper* compounds (of which Paul was so very fond) here describe the immense power which God exerted in behalf of His people when He raised Jesus Christ from the

¹³ *Hyper* is a Greek preposition (meaning originally “above”) which when attached to a verb often has the effect of intensifying the verb. When Paul says, for example, in Rom. 8:37 “we are *more than* conquerors” he uses a verb with *hyper* prefixed to it.

¹⁴ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition, 1032.

dead and exalted him far above every other opposing force existing in the universe. Paul combines two passages from two messianic Psalms (8:7; 110:1) to proclaim the exaltation and reign of the risen and ascended Christ. The resurrection rocketed Christ to God's right hand and has demonstrated him to be both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:24; 1 Cor. 15:25; Rom. 8:34; 1 Pet. 3:22) forever.

2. The *power* of God and His “hyper-activity” in behalf of the church is a second key motif in Ephesians. In fact, Clinton Arnold (New Testament scholar at Talbot School of Theology [Biola University]) has written an entire book on the subject: *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*.¹⁵ On the very first page of his book he says this: “When occurrences of power terminology in a given book are considered in proportion to the size of that book, Ephesians is found to contain a greater percentage of power terminology than any other NT book.” And, “Each word group denoting power in Ephesians contains a higher percentage of power terms than is contained in all other epistles attributed to Paul.”¹⁶ Clinton thinks that this tips us off to a major theme of Ephesians, especially in light of the fact that “the devil and various categories of ‘powers’ are mentioned sixteen times in the epistle.”¹⁷ Paul's theme is sounded right here in this first “sub-text”: “In the prayer in Eph. 1:15-23, the writer wants to impress indelibly upon his readers that no conceivable being can even come close to matching Christ in power or authority.”¹⁸

3. A third central theme in Ephesians is God's action in behalf of, and in, the

¹⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

church—which Paul calls Christ’s “body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” What is truly remarkable is this: “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything *for* the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” God’s power is not merely the explosive force of the kind that , for example, blew the top of Mount St. Helens off; it is the power of loving kindness or grace mightily exerted *in behalf of* those whom He chose from eternity to be His own possession.

American editor and author of 50 books, Christopher Morley (1890–1957), said (in pre-cell phone days, but almost prophetically in view of 9-11) that if we suddenly discovered we had only five minutes to live, every phone booth in the country would be filled with people blurting out, ‘I love you.’”¹⁹ Paul says of God, “In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ” and this “*before the foundation of the world*” (Eph. 1:4).

Four Dimensions: Eph. 3:14-19

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom [his²⁰] whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, 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 with all the fullness of God. (NIV)

Heads up everyone! These words immediately precede our Gathering Text, and enrich our understanding “beyond imagination”! In these verses Paul prays that God’s people may be strengthened (here is another “power” term) in their inner being, so that

¹⁹ Quoted by Willis, 15.

²⁰ The Greek reads “every family.”

Christ may take up residence²¹ in their hearts by faith. "...God's ways are made known only to those who are given enlightenment by God's Spirit."²²

1. But are God's ways really able to be known? Are they truly **beyond** imagination? Here we come up against one of the great paradoxes of the Bible: we are able to know the unknowable. As Paul put it, "...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 (a *hyper* word) knowledge...." (Eph. 3:18). Listen to what one New Testament commentator says about this:

It is simply that the supreme object of Christian knowledge, Christ's love, is so profound that its depth will never be encompassed by the human mind. That which is absolutely necessary to know, in fact, surpasses knowledge.²³

You might say that Christ's love is at the level of a "fourth dimension," but by the power of His Spirit Christians have been given special insight into this love because God has graciously revealed this to them!

2. According to Eph. 1:23 the church, which is Christ's body, *already* shares in His fullness. Now in the final words before our Gathering Text Paul prays that the readers may be filled "with all the fullness of God" (3:19). Here we see once again the tension between the "already" and "not yet." In our study of Colossians for the 2001 Gathering we learned from Col. 1:19; 2:9 that the fullness of God dwells in Christ, and

²¹ The verb Paul uses here ("to dwell in") is the source of the noun "dwelling place" (*katoiketerion*) in Eph. 2:20 where he teaches that the church is the permanent residence of God in the Spirit.

²² Martin H. Scharlemann, *The Secret of God's Plan: Studies in Ephesians*, Reprint in part from four issues of *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1960-70) Vols. 40 & 41 (Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 17.

²³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 213

that from Him believers have already come to the fullness of life (2:10). And yet at the same time they need to *attain to* this fullness (Eph. 4:13; cf. 5:18).

God's power and strength is necessary now precisely for the reason that Christians stand in the midst of this tension between what already is and what is to come. Since the final consummation of God's great redemptive plan has not yet come, we still struggle against the enemies of Christ—a situation requiring God's full armor in the battle against spiritual forces at work in our world (Eph. 6:10-20).

Beyond Imagination: The Gathering Text—Ephesians 3:20-21

The general outline of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is quite simple to follow. The first three chapters deal with doctrine ("set to music"), and the last three chapters describe the Christian's response to the redeeming love of God in Christ Jesus. But the beauty of the way Paul structures the first three chapters is shown by the special role the Gathering Text plays.

Paul opens the first half of Ephesians with a doxology (1:2-14) and, you guessed it, he closes with one (3:20-21)! Following his opening thanksgiving he prays for the enlightenment of his readers (1:15-2:10). He expounds the mystery of God's plan for the unity of humankind as mirrored in the life of the church (2:11-22), and then moves on to describe his mission as an apostle to the Gentiles (3:1-13). This is followed by the prayer of 3:14-19 that the Ephesians may know and grow in the full dimensions of Christ's love. The Gathering Text is an ascription of praise, punctuated with a loud "Amen!" It concludes the first three chapters and prepares us for a description of the new life in Christ

in the final three. So, the Gathering Text is Paul's way of saying, structurally, "As I think about all of this again, it is 'beyond imagination'; to God be the praise!"

This is truly what you call creative writing! The literary structure (for those who like to dabble in such things) is: a, b, c; c, b, a.²⁴

"In the Church..." we praise

Before we look more closely at the two verses of the Gathering Text, we need to notice that this is the only doxology in the New Testament (and there are many) where the expression "in the church" occurs together with the phrase "in Christ Jesus." What do we make of this? I think this: In Ephesians Paul reveals to us that it is *in the church* that the God of glory is present (1:17; 2:21) and it is *in the church* where the triune God is worshipped "to the praise of His glory"(1:6, 12, 14; 5:18-21). Paul's own worship reflects this truth. Only as a Christian could He sing in the opening "blessing" of Ephesians 1:3 "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" and pray to "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory" (1:17).

The God of "Superlative" Power

Doxologies in the New Testament have three parts: the *One to whom* glory is given, *giving glory*, which properly belongs to God, and the *temporal* "for ever and ever," meaning praise belongs to God not only in this age but also in the age to come.²⁵

Mega-kudos belong to God for his extraordinary achievements! The exceptional accomplishments of God are emphasized in verse 20 in two ways that are not made immediately obvious by most English versions. First, Paul piles up in this one little verse **three** "power" words, two of which are related to our English world "dynamite." "Now to

²⁴ I owe this insight to my former teacher, M. Scharlemann, *The Secret of God's Plan*, 17.

Him *who is able (to de dunameno)* to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, *according to his power (kata ten dunamin) that is at work (ten energoumenon)* in us.” God is “the Powerful One” and it is impossible for our little human minds to wrap themselves around God’s ability to act. All we can do is praise Him.

Second, in this one little verse two *hyper* words occur! “Now to Him who is able to do *immeasurably more (hyperekperissou) than all (hyper panta)* we ask or imagine...be glory....” The first of these two superlative expressions is the highest form of comparison imaginable. It means “quite beyond all measure.” We have here a “super-superlative.”

It’s like there is a crescendo in verse 20, a rhetorical build-up:

God is said to be able to do what believers ask in prayer; he is able to do what they might fail to ask but what they can think; he is able to do all (*panta*) they ask or think; he is able to do above all (*hyper panta*) they ask or think; he able to do abundantly above all (*perissou hyper panta*) they ask or think; he is able to do infinitely more abundantly above all (*hyperekperissou hyper panta*) they ask or think. And what is more, says the writer, this inexpressible power is at work within us!²⁶

And now comes the most remarkable thing of all, from our perspective as Christians!

At work within us...

“The resurrection of Jesus Christ was God’s greatest act of redemptive power.”²⁷

This is what Paul is saying in Eph. 1:19-20, where he prays that the Ephesians may know God’s “incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ *when he* raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms....” “What the apostle asserts here is

²⁵ “Benediction, Blessing, Doxology, Thanksgiving,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 69. See Rom. 16:25, a close parallel to Eph. 3:20-21.

²⁶ Lincoln, 216.

²⁷ Scharlemann, 18.

that Jesus Christ has been entrusted with the running of the universe, no matter what part of it any one may name. Throughout all the countless galaxies of our world, with its billions of suns and planets, Christ is Lord. As this vast *kosmos* moves forward into the future, He has been given the power and authority to have things go His way.”²⁸

The apostle then goes on to say, “[God] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God *raised us up with Christ* and *seated us with him* in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus....” (Eph. 2:6-7).

Now we know the immense significance of the two little words at the end Ephesians 3:20: “*within us.*” We praise God because His redemptive power has found its way by the Spirit into our very hearts and lives!

Beyond our wildest imagination...

In 1990, children’s poet Jack Prelutsky published another of his delightful books and titled it “Something Big Has Been Here,” with the lead poem going like this:

Something big has been here,
 what it was I do not know,
 for I did not see it coming,
 and I did not see it go,
 but I hope I never meet it,
 if I do, I’m in a fix,
 for it left behind its footprints,
 they are size nine-fifty-six.²⁹

One of Paul’s purposes throughout his writings when telling us of God’s wisdom is to leave us with the impression (mostly in the language of praise) that “something veeeeery

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ Jack Prelutsky, *Something Big Has Been Here* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1990), 7.

big has been here.” He writes to the Philippians, “And the peace of God which transcends (another *hyper* word!) all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). As we can see from Ephesians “peace” in Paul’s mind is not merely a psychological peace of mind, but it is the grand, cosmic plan of God through Christ (who is our peace; 2:14) sent “to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus *making peace*, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, but which he put to death their hostility....” This Jesus did by destroying that dreadful barrier, “the dividing wall of hostility”³⁰ (Eph. 2:14ff.). Who would have every thought of such an incredible plan but God?!

St. Paul said this of God’s wisdom revealed through the foolishness of the cross of Jesus, the instrument of peace: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:9-10). What shall we say, then, when confronted with God’s phenomenal wisdom? Just this: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?’” (Rom. 11:33-34).

Verse 20 of our Gathering Text says it all: “... immeasurably more than we ask or imagine....”

³⁰ “The dividing wall of hostility” may be a reference to the wall in the temple in Jerusalem preventing Gentiles from entering. A stone inscription discovered in 1871, and on which the eyes of Jesus and Paul may often have rested, reads: “Let no foreigner enter within the screen and enclosure surrounding the sanctuary. Whosoever is taken so doing will be the cause that death overtaketh him” (in other words, will only have himself to blame for the penalty of death that will follow as a consequence). G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 80-81.

In fulfillment of a cosmic plan to bring everything together in Christ

We read verse 21 of the Gathering Text in wonderment as we think about what God has in mind in the future: “...to him be glory in the church and **in Christ Jesus** through all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

The program for the future is raised before our eyes in Ephesians 1:10. God’s plan, literally, “of the fullness of the times” is “*to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*” The Greek word used by Paul here combines two elements: everything will be brought together in Christ and He will be the head of everything (as, of course, He is now but the final revelation and consummation is to come). This is, of course, for us—with our limited capacity to understand—the bold outline. We await with eager and joyful anticipation for God to fill in the details before our very eyes (cf. 1 Pet.1:8-9).

The Power of Imagination

To stimulate some thinking about how we might expand the Gathering theme “Beyond Imagination” in light of the above “Ephesian Perspectives” let me offer three thoughts for reflection.

“Large petitions with you bring...”

You are coming to your King,
Large Petitions with you bring;
For his grace and power are such
None can ever ask too much.
(Lutheran Worship, 433,2)

The Gathering Text proclaims that God is able to do for us “more than all we ask.” In one of the finest commentaries ever written on Ephesians, J. Armitage Robinson begins

his discussion of Eph. 2:20-21 by saying, “No prayer that has ever been framed has uttered a bolder request. . . . Unabashed by the greatness of his petition, [Paul] triumphantly invokes a power which can do far more than he asks, far more than even his lofty imagination conceives.”³¹

Is it possible that our prayer life, which is often so pathetically feeble, is so because we have a feeble God (though He really isn’t!)? If God is able to do far more than we can ask or think, why not “go over the top” in the petitions that we bring?

The Thrills of Boredom

If you will forgive another G. K. Chesterton reference, G. K. in an essay titled “On the Thrills of Boredom” argues that we can learn something from kids. “Youth is much more capable of amusing itself than is now supposed, and in much less mortal need of being amused.” As he reflects on his own youth, he is inclined to think “that youth never shows its glorious vividness and vitality so much as when transfiguring what might be called monotony.”

Chesterton once wrote: “What was wonderful about childhood is that anything in it was a wonder. It was not merely a world full of miracles; it was a miraculous world. . . . like a hundred windows opened on all sides of the head.”³² Actually, children reflect (so says Chesterton) the “divine imagination.” God loves fun (consider, for example, the hippopotamus, the sea-horse, and the platypus), so that “Play, laughter, joy, and mirth are necessary not only for good art but for human well-being in all its dimensions.”³³

³¹ J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: James Clarke & Co., LTD, n.d.), 89.

³² G. K. Chesterton, *autobiography, The Collected Words of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 16 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 45.

³³ Peters, 35-36.

G. K. contends that people miss out on joy in life because they don't turn their imagination loose. This is especially true in the midst of the ordinary: "I still feel a very strong and positive pleasure in being stranded in queer quiet places, in neglected corners where nothing happens and anything may happen..." "Imagination can not only enjoy darkness; it can even enjoy dullness."³⁴

When God is at work in our lives, anything can happen—maybe even the transfiguration "of what may be called monotony"! Perhaps we need to become more "Quoodle-like," more actively perceptive of the things that God is doing among us. Is it not possible (and surely we believe it is!) that even in the midst of what we may think seems relatively mundane God is at work doing something quite exciting?

"P.S. God, Can You Fly?"

R. Wayne Willis, Director of Pastoral Care for Norton Healthcare in Louisville, Kentucky, just recently published a book titled, *P.S. God, Can You Fly: Heartfelt and Hope—Filled Prayers of Children*. In this little volume Willis has collected prayers left in the chapel of the children's' hospital where he works. He writes this about the prayers that he has found:

Unbound by conventional notions of how prayers should be structured and worded, these children freely pray what they mean and mean what they pray. The result: prayer unflowery, unedited, unrefined, unvarnished—the kind of prayer not to be heard in a formal Sunday morning church service! Most of the prayers are starkly urgent. Children composed them, not in a classroom, not to satisfy a Sunday school teacher, but in the fiery furnace of a tertiary care hospital, where stakes—the life and health of a loved one—couldn't be higher.³⁵

³⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *All Is Grist* (1932), passim, 109-115.

³⁵ Willis, x-xi,

Here are two of the terse little prayers Willis records. “My mom is die. Why. Do God love me. I call lord for help but she die.” And then this one: “Dear God. Thank You for letting me live and keeping me alive. PS Can You Fly?”³⁶

Those who share an “Ephesian perspective” quickly know the answer to this question: “Yes, my dear one, Easter proclaims that God can fly and much more!” And the mind-blowing truth is that we shall fly too, when we “meet the Lord in the air” on the day of our resurrection at His coming, “and so will always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17).

O God, because you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding, pour into our hearts such love towards you that we, loving you above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Collect for Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
Lutheran Worship, 67,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36, 16.