

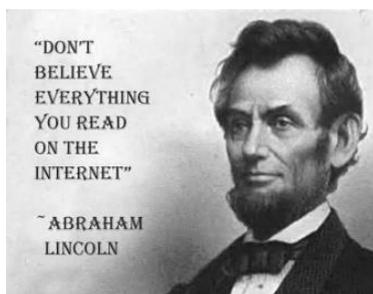
There is a word I want us to focus on this morning as we return to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. The word is **COMPREHEND**.

This word isn't very complicated. It is fairly easy to... well, comprehend. To comprehend something means to understand something, to really know it. To comprehend someone means to really know them and understand them.

Comprehending something is different than just knowing a little bit about something. You've heard the saying, "Jack of all trades, master of none." What does this mean? It means that someone KNOWS A LITTLE BIT about a lot of stuff, but they are not an expert in any one particular field. They have knowledge about many things, but they haven't really devoted the time and effort it takes to become an expert in any one particular field by devoting themselves to really comprehending the field fully.

There is a big difference between someone who knows a little bit about electrical work and someone who is an expert and really gets all the concepts about electricity. I've often heard people who work in construction say something like, "They know just enough to get themselves killed." If someone knows a little bit about electrical work I am happy to let them help me change a lightbulb or switch out an outlet in my house. But I probably wouldn't want that same person to hook up a hot tub for me where the wrong setup could result in me and anyone else sitting in the tub being electrocuted with 220v of electricity. I'm not really looking to die in my hot tub. I'm going to trust an expert – someone who really comprehends how electricity works – to hook up that hot tub for me.

It takes a lot of work to fully comprehend something. It may not take me long to know a little something about a subject, but it can take a long time for me to comprehend it so well that I become an expert on the subject. For example, it doesn't take very long to Google something, find an article that supports something I think, copy the article link, and send it to a friend. But any idiot can copy and paste an article. I mean, slow clap for finding being able to find an article on the internet where someone agrees with your position. Finding and sharing articles that agree with your position doesn't mean you are an expert, that you really comprehend a subject well, or that you are right. All finding articles on the internet really proves is that you know how to use a search engine. Just because I can find an article on the internet doesn't mean that I really know or comprehend something fully. I mean, listen to the great words of our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln.



I found that quote and image on the internet.

To become an expert in something, to really **comprehend** something well, requires a significant investment of time, energy, thinking, studying, and learning. Real, deep comprehension is not something that we come by easily.

We all have experience with this. It takes work to really comprehend something or someone, doesn't it?

- School – the hardest assignments I've faced are the ones that take weeks, even months, to study
- Vocation – developing a marketable skill requires a tremendous amount of work
- Finances – it takes a lot of work to change the way you think and to change what you believe about money, and even more work to adjust your behavior problems with money
- Spouse – 15 years of marriage has changed me, but I'm regularly surprised by what I still don't understand about the way Rachael thinks differently than me
- Discipleship – one of the hardest parts is spending enough time together, listening close enough, and thinking hard enough to comprehend how those I am discipling are thinking right now

Comprehending something or someone is not for the weak or the faint in heart.

It takes so much work to fully comprehend something; and, even then, there are some studies that we could devote our lives to and never really fully comprehend everything there is to know about the subject.

Albert Einstein was a GENIUS and an incredible thinker. His scientific theories are still used in the scientific world today. BUT, Consider how much more we know now and how much further technology has advanced since Einstein was living in just the late 1800s and first half of the 1900s! He was the expert of his time, but if Einstein were alive again today, he would have a lot to catch up on! There are some things we could devote our lives to and still never FULLY comprehend all there is to know.

Are you with me? To KNOW a little about something might not take much effort, but to really COMPREHEND something or someone well requires a significant commitment and investment.

Let's open our Bibles once again to this passage in Ephesians 3. As we read this prayer Paul prayed over the church of Ephesus, look carefully for the word COMPREHEND in this passage.

Ephesians 3:14-19

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 **dwelt 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*.

Did you catch it? Paul prays that we would have the strength to **COMPREHEND** and to **KNOW** the love of Christ that **SURPASSES KNOWLEDGE**.

How ironic! A prayer that we would be able to comprehend the incomprehensible. That we would deeply know something that is beyond knowing! But this prayer is not a cruel joke. Rather, it contains the secret to living a life that is marked by growing in faith and love. It contains a secret that uncovers how to remove your own thoughts and emotions from the driver seat of your life so that you are not controlled by what you think or what you feel but rather controlled by the Spirit by faith. It gives the

answer to how a person can change their thinking so that better thinking leads to better beliefs which lead to behaviors that are rooted and grounded in love.

What's the secret? Let's unpack this spiritual truth together from God's Word this morning. Let's learn what it means to pursue comprehending that which surpasses knowledge.

To understand this ironic prayer, we need to start by making sure we have a good understanding of the nature of God. The Bible teaches that we can have a true and personal knowledge of God. At the same time, we must understand that this does not mean that we will ever understand him or know him exhaustively. The Bible is clear that God is ultimately incomprehensible to us; that we can never fully comprehend his whole being.

Psalm 145:3

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.

Job 26:14

Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?

Isaiah 55:89

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

1 Corinthians 2:11b

...no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

Romans 11:33-34

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

Referencing: Job 42:1-6, Psalm 139:6, 17-18, Isaiah 57:15

Not only do these verses teach us that God's whole being is beyond our comprehension, but that His attributes – His greatness, His power, His thoughts, His ways, His wisdom, and His judgements – are well beyond our ability to fathom fully. Not only can we never know everything there is to know about God, we can never really know everything there is to know about even one aspect of God's character or work! God's glory is beyond compare.

Ultimately, we must understand that the knowledge of God is infinite. It knows no bounds. We could keep learning and learning and learning and never reach the end of what there is to know about the greatness and glory of our God.

Yet, God has chosen, in His great wisdom, to reveal Himself to us in ever increasing ways.

This idea brings us back to the concept of **PROGRESSIVE REVELATION** that I introduced to you a few weeks ago. It is a theological label that means something very simple. Progressive Revelation is simply the understanding that God has chosen, in His infinite wisdom and insight, to reveal Himself in ever increasing ways over time. We know that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He does not change. Yet our understanding of God can change as God reveals Himself to us more and more.

Here's a quick revisit of the idea of Progressive Revelation:

- **Noah**
- Abraham
- Moses
- Judges
- Kings
- Prophets
- Apostles

Each had a greater understanding of God than the generations before them. God didn't change, but their understanding grew as God revealed Himself more and more.

The same things happens in our lives. We are not born with a complete and full understanding of God. In fact, it is quite the opposite. We are born without knowing anything about God. We must learn about Him as we grow. God **reveals** Himself to us in all kinds of ways so that our knowledge in Him can grow:

- His Word (the Bible)
- His Spirit
- His Church
- His Creation
- Our Consciences (which He made)

God is actively at work in our lives, revealing Himself to us more and more. The work of comprehending God is never-ending. We never "arrive" in our understanding of God. There is always more to study, more to know, more to learn, more to understand... more to COMPREHEND about God.

So, God has revealed Himself PROGRESSIVELY throughout history, and we are coming to an understanding of who God is PROGRESSIVELY. That simple means our understanding of God grows more and more over time.

Because of this reality of God, I believe that we will spend **the rest of our existence** in this age and in the age to come being constantly blown away by an ever-increasing understanding of God! Another way to say that is this: His glory will never cease to amaze us. Even in heaven, we will continue to grow deeper and deeper in our understanding of the greatness and glory of our God and in the breadth and length and height and depth of His great love for us – a love that surpasses knowledge. We will constantly be blown away by the glory and wonder of God. It will never get old.

While we may never fully comprehend the Person or attributes of our infinite God, there is no question that Paul prays that we would have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

This word, COMPREHEND, has a meaning that surprised me. In English, this word means to obtain knowledge and increase understanding. But the Greek word Paul used in this passage, that we translate into the word COMPREHEND, has a different feel to it. This word is only translated as “comprehend” a few times in the New Testament. In other places where this same Greek word is used, translators use words that have strong ties to the concept of **warfare. So, to COMPREHEND** in the sense that Paul is using the word means:

- **To attain**
- To seize
- To perceive
- To find
- To catch
- To obtain
- To overcome
- To overtake

Do you see the connotation of this word and the way this word relates to warfare?

To comprehend, in this sense, is not just to seek to understand or to gain knowledge. In Ephesians 3, when Paul prays that we would comprehend, he is praying that we would lay hold of this knowledge of God. That we would seize it. That we would obtain it and overtake it.

Do you know that there is a battle raging for your mind? That bad thinking can create strongholds in your life that lead to bad beliefs and bad behaviors? Did you know that the weapon God has given us to combat these voices and these wrong ways of thinking is to take thoughts captive by challenging them with the truth and subjecting them to complete obedience to Jesus Christ?

2 Corinthians 10:3-6

3 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but **have divine power to destroy strongholds**. 5 We **destroy arguments** and **every lofty opinion** raised against the **knowledge of God**, and take **every thought captive to obey Christ**, 6 being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

Our thoughts are subject to all kinds of voices that can lead us to bad thinking:

- Voices in our world that raise themselves up against the knowledge of God (media, friends, articles, psychology, education system, self-help books, etc.)
- Voices of the hosts of Satan that want to destroy us by telling us lies (deception is Satan’s greatest weapon – he lies the most about who God is and who we are)
- Voices of our flesh that tell us that what we feel or what we desire is what is true and right (our flesh is corrupted by sin)

All of us used to be subject to these voices. We used to be dead in our trespasses and sins, unable to resist these voices that lead to bad thinking, bad beliefs, and bad behaviors...

Ephesians 2:1-3

And you were dead in the **trespasses and sins** 2 in which you **once walked**, following **the course of this world**, following the **prince of the power of the air**, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of

disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

BUT GOD! Ephesians 2:4! BUT GOD made you alive in Christ so that you are the new man! These voices no longer have power or dominion over you. You have the authority of Christ.

You are well equipped in the Spirit to take on the voices that speak lies and to exercise dominion over your own soul. God has given you that power in Christ. You are no longer a slave to sin. You have the weapons you need to rip down the strongholds of bad thinking in your life. Together, with all the saints, you can evaluate and annihilate the thoughts that are rooted in lies that seek to hold you captive to sin. You can take your thoughts captive and walk in obedience to Christ!

To COMPREHEND is a warfare term. It means that you lay hold of the truth. It means that you seize the knowledge of God and make it your own. It means that you overcome the lies with the truth.

Now, here's the good news... there is no end to this awesome pursuit of God and His truth! You will never run out of opportunities to increase your understanding of God so that you are fully equipped to win the fight for faith, take thoughts captive, and grow in the knowledge of God!

Paul's prayer is ironic. He prays that we would be able to comprehend something that surpasses knowledge. But His prayer unlocks the secret to growing in faith and growing in love. Here's the secret. You ready? **RUN HARD AFTER JESUS**. RUN HARD AFTER KNOWING JESUS AND KNOWING HIS GREAT LOVE FOR YOU.

The love of God will never cease to amaze you! You will never find the end of it. His love goes beyond the breadth, length, height, and depth of what you can know or understand. It's like the best relationship you ever had. You spend years, decades, or – in eternity – centuries and millennia searching out the unsearchable riches of God and His great love for you. You plunge deeper and deeper into the depths of His thoughts about you that are higher than any thought you have ever thought before. Then, you step back and look at what you discovered about God. You can see clearly that you know so much more about His love than when you first came to know Him. But, as you step back further, you see that, after all this time and learning, you are only beginning to scratch the surface of knowing His unthinkable love for you. **You discover that there is still so much more to enjoy and learn in this relationship. And, because you have fallen in love with Jesus and the process of knowing Him more and more, nothing could bring a greater thrill to your soul.**

That's the beauty of seeking to COMPREHEND the incomprehensible God and His unthinkable love for you.

This journey isn't reserved for heaven. Today, God has already made you alive by the power of His Spirit. He has resurrected your spirit from death to life. In the inner man, you are a new creation. You are the new man! As the new man, you have great capacity to search out and comprehend the love of God for you that surpasses knowledge.

Paul's prayer that you would lay hold of an understanding of God that surpasses knowledge is not cruel. In fact, it is beautiful. **It is a call into the endless pursuit of the most loving relationship you could ever know.** Listen to Paul's hope in this prayer...

Ephesians 3:19

19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that **you may be filled with all the fullness of God.**

Paul's hope isn't that you would know the fullness of God. That's impossible. Paul's hope is that you would be FILLED with the FULLNESS of GOD! That is completely possible. When you are living by faith, taking thoughts captive, and seeking to lay hold of the unsearchable knowledge of God, there is no question that you can experience -RIGHT NOW- the fullness of God by faith.

Do you follow? You are finite. That means you have limits. Paul's prayer is that the infinite God would fill you up to the brim. That in every way – in all your thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors – that you would be filled up with the knowledge of God. Since God is infinite, He has the capacity to fill us ALL to the brim at the same time! And the nature of being infinite means that He will have no less of Himself after filling us up than when He started. His love, His glory, His greatness will never run dry.

Can you feel the endless love of God for you this morning? If you do, do you realize that what you are seeing is being revealed to you by God through His Word and the preaching of His Word?

You cannot separate the love of God from the love of God's Word. He has linked Himself to His Word in such a way that they are inseparable. To love God means to love His Word. To know God means to know His Word.

Do you know God like this? Is there a relentless desire in you to run hard after the INCOMPREHENSIBLE God who loves you in a way that surpasses knowledge? Who's love for you runs deeper than thought or reason? Look at your life. Does the fruit of your life in the way you seek hard after God reveal that you are relentless about giving up everything else to know Him more?

- The treasure in the field
- The great pearl
- Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also

Anyone you will ever meet who loves God and is relentlessly running hard after Him like this has something in common: they have all died to loving themselves. They have decided to love God more than anything else. Do you want that in your life?

If that is you, let's conclude our time together in the Word this morning by asking and answering the question, "How do I press into this journey of COMPREHENDING the INCOMPREHENSIBLE God?"

1. Paul prays that we would comprehend WITH ALL THE SAINTS – discipleship is a team sport
2. Paul prays that we would know the LOVE of Christ that surpasses knowledge – it is all about relationship
3. Paul prays that we would COMPREHEND (a warfare term) – this is a fight for faith (preach)

A good strategy is essential in war. How do you build into your life the habits you need to stay the course in this relentless pursuit of COMPREHENDING the incomprehensible God?

Where should you start? A Time, A Place, and A Plan

1. A time, a place, and a plan to be with Jesus every day (quiet time, devotional life)
2. A time, a place, and a plan to seek to comprehend with the saints (preaching, small group)
3. A time, a place, and a plan for sharing what you are facing with others (small group, fellowship)

Are you ready for God to do a great work in your life?

Ephesians 3:20-21

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.

Will you commit yourself to the **relentless pursuit** of knowing His great love that surpasses knowledge? To knowing the limitless God? It starts with repenting of loving yourself and choosing to study, learn, invest, and give effort to knowing God more and more all the time. You will never reach the end of this pursuit.

How will you respond to this message today? I hope it is more than a commitment to read your Bible. I hope it is a confession and change in your heart that leads to repentance. To repent of loving yourself and to make a relentless commitment to know the limitless love of God more and more. I hope this change in your heart leads to a change in the way you read your Bible, in the way you listen to the preaching of His Word, in the way you participate in small group, and in the way you talk to others about Jesus and His Word.

How do you need to respond to this message? This is your opportunity to respond.