

COMPREHENDING THE GREATNESS OF HIS LOVE

EPHESIANS 3:18-19

Introduction:

Why would Paul pray for Christians to know how much God loves them?

There seems to be a common assumption among us today that God's love is a given—He loves all men so He loves me.

But it is not quite that simple. Actually many people struggle with the reality of God's love. It is not easy to comprehend, or to lay hold of. So many of you have experienced the pain of rejection in your life at some point. It may have been a spouse that rejected you, and then sought a divorce. You wonder if person whom I can know and see rejects me, why should I believe that a God that I cannot see would love me.

It may have an abusive, unloving parent. Unfortunately some parents fail to give their children the love that they need. Shamefully some are even exposed to physical, verbal, and even sexual abuse. If someone who was supposed to love me abused me that I can actually see, why should I believe that a God I cannot see should love me?

And then there are some who have been hurt deeply in life, and think that God let them down. It may have been the untimely death of a loved one—why did God let such evil happen? The Enemy is always ready to support

such a view of God by his lies. He assures us that God does not really love, and cannot be trusted. He first whispered the accusation against God in the Garden of Eden, and he still uses the same line.

Yet the Apostle knew how important this is. The essence of the Christian the Christian life is responding to the love of God in love. It is our loving Him because He first loved us. It is expressing our love to Him in service in an attempt to express our gratitude. It is loving others like He loved us.

And furthermore, you will always be limited in your trust of God until you really do begin to comprehend how much He loves you. Until you realize the greatness of His love, you will always be attempting to prove something to Him, or to buy from Him what you need.

So this petition touches on a vital thing in the Christian life. It touches on a vital thing in the life of the unbeliever. There is a compelling power in a comprehension of God's love. God draws the sinner into life out of death by revealing His love to her.

However there are many things about the love of God through Christ toward us that defy our ability to understand. Since it is God's love, it is infinite like everything else related to God—which means that it defies human understanding. “Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made; were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade; to write the love

of God above, would drain the ocean dry; nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.”¹

Yet it is important that we know as much as we can of the love of Christ for us. The more fully we comprehend or lay hold of the love to God, the more fully we will be able to respond to God and to each other appropriately. It all begins with opening our hearts to the love of God in Christ.

We are in desperate need of knowledge of this divine love. This is the reason that Paul includes this particular petition in this inspired prayer. Let us consider what we do know about the unknowable.

I. THE BREADTH OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST—the wideness of His love.

The Apostle begins with the width of the divine love—it may be the most obvious thing about it. It covers the “who” of God’s love—who has He chosen to love?

1. A Love for All Saints.

The Apostle makes reference to “all the saints” in the text. The very fact that they are “saints” is evidence of God’s love. Everyone has been chosen by God in love and brought into a saving relationship with Him. Every one of

them enjoys the relationship and has been dedicated to the divine purposes in time and eternity.

We must not limit the saints to our own little circle, or limit it to some super Christians as our Catholic friends are inclined to do. Every time you meet someone who names the Name of Jesus, who gives evidence of trust in Him as Savior, and has a love for Him, you are meeting a saint. You are meeting someone that the Lord loves.

We sometimes make faulty judgments and exclude someone from our circle that God has included in His. Remember the width of His love!

2. A Love for all Sinners.

This is the part that stretches our understanding and comprehension. God loves all humans—regardless! All of every tribe and language. All of every color. All of every moral condition. When Jesus declared, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son---.” That is what He meant. There is no sinner for whom Christ did not die.

During the war a man died and his two friends desperately wanted to give him a decent burial. They found a cemetery in a nearby village. It happened to be a Roman Catholic Church and cemetery and the dead man had been a Protestant. When the two friends found the priest in charge of the burial grounds, they requested permission to bury their friend, but the priest

refused because the man had not been a Catholic. When the priest saw their disappointment, he explained that they could bury their friend outside the fence. This was done.

Later they returned to visit the grave but couldn't find it. Their search led them back to the priest and, of course, they asked him what had happened to the grave. The priest told them that during the night he was unable to sleep because he had made them bury their friend outside the fence. So he got up and moved the fence to include the dead soldier. In Christ, God has "moved the fence" to include the undeserving.

--James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988)

The Christian faith represents a God who knows and loves you just as He knows and loves all other human beings on this planet--but with this addition: when you are sick or hurting or lost or confused or in pain or deprived--He loves you even more. So, we personalize the message that "God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love."

--James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) p. 251.

II. THE LENGTH OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST—the eternity of His love.

What is the significance of the length of His love? It brings into focus the eternity of His love. There is an immeasurable, everlasting aspect of His love.

1. Began before we began.

When did God first begin to love you? Did it begin on the day you were born? Never! It began in eternity past. As you study the Scriptures you become aware that God chose you to be one of His children because He loved you. But when did God make this choice? We know that He chose Christ to die for our sins before He created the world, “He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” (1 Peter 1:20) But when did He choose us in love? Listen to Paul’s answer in this same letter, “For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 1:4-5)

This obviously takes us out of the realm of time into the realm of eternity! It takes us out of the realm of things that we can know into the realm of the unknowable.

2. Reaches into eternity.

This means that the beginning of His love is in eternity past, but what about the end of His love? Can anyone discover when God will no longer love us? Listen to this word from the inspired Scriptures, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?—No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35-39)

Charles Spurgeon, the famous English pastor wrote: Once while riding in the country, I saw on a farmer's barn a weather vane on the arrow of which was inscribed these words: "God is Love." I turned in at the gate and asked the farmer, "What do you mean by that? Do you think God's love is changeable; that it veers about as that arrow turns in the winds?"

The farmer said, "Oh, no! I mean that whichever way the wind blows, God is still Love."

Charles H. Spurgeon

--James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 324.

I read somewhere, “There was nothing I could do to make God love me, and there is nothing that I can do that will make God not love me.” True! His love is longer than life—it is as long as eternity. Who can know it?

III. THE DEPTH OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST—the sacrifices of His love.

“Depth” points toward how far God will go in His love. Is there any sacrifice that He will not make? Is there any price that He will not pay?

1. The Person.

The love of Christ for us captured the heart of the beloved Apostle Paul. He wrote to the Romans, “God shows His love to us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” Christ! It is His love for us that sets Him apart from all of the other religious leaders of the past.

I recently read a book comparing the worldview of the major religions of the world. In contrast to the other religions Christianity alone tells about a God who sent His only begotten Son into the world to save the world from its sins. God sent His Son! Does anything else need to be said?

John put it so clearly in his first letter, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10, NKJV)

2. The Price.

But the glorious truth is that Christ was willing to do whatever it took to save us. When it became obvious that our redemption would cost Him His life, in love He freely gave it. Paul put the two together in his testimony verse in the Galatian letter, "The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Galatians 2:20

How deep is His love? Is it just words? Go to the Cross. Measure the distance between the throne of glory in heaven to the Roman cross on which He died. Then you will know the depth of His love. Feel the darkness surrounding that Cross, and listen to the agonizing cry from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?", and realize that it was all for you. Then you will begin to realize the depth of His love. It went all the way!

IV. THE HEIGHTH OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST—the goal of His love.

Exactly what did God expect in return for His love? What was His goal?

What did He hope to get out of bestowing such love upon sinners like us?

The answer is rather clear from the Scriptures.

1. A relationship.

Above everything else He wanted a relationship. He was seeking a family of human beings who would love and trust Him in response to His love. His sacrificial, forgiving love was seeking such a people.

We are blessed to have 14 grandchildren—10 girls and 4 boys. Four of our grandchildren are really special. Our son Tommy and his wife Nathalee were not able to have children, so they chose to adopt. Bethany is their oldest daughter. She was born to a fifteen year old girl in Beaumont, Texas.

Bethany is in our family because Tommy and Nathalie went looking for her.

They asked the birth mother for the privilege of being a father and mother to her baby. Since she had no way to care for the baby, she entrusted the baby to them. Her mother had abandoned the family because of drugs, and she was living with some siblings, and a step-father. Life was difficult and the baby would have not had a chance with her.

I am not sure about each of our grandchildren—sometimes babies come along at inconvenient times. Not so with Bethany! They went looking for her.

Did you know that you are spiritually adopted into the family of God? God wanted you in the family. He wanted this special personal relationship with you. He wanted you to be joint-heir with His beloved Son the Lord Jesus. He wanted to bestow the fullness of His eternal love on you. This is the height of His love.

2. A throne—a shared rule with Him.

There is another reference to the divine love in this same letter, “But because of His great love us (You should read about “us” when He bestowed His love upon us in the first verses of this passage.), God, who is rich in mercy, 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.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

What a revelation of the height of His love! It is His goal to seat us with His exalted Son in the heavens, and to allow us to share His rule of the universe for eternity. It is His goal to use us an example for the whole of eternity of the greatness of His love as He lavishes upon us the fullness of His grace.

Does anyone want to know more about his love? It will take an eternity to understand it fully, if we ever can. In the meantime we should be asking the Father for a greater comprehension of this unknowable love.

I read a wonderful testimony just yesterday. During an American Bible Society distribution campaign in Zimbabwe years ago, one of the recipients gave a rather antagonistic answer,

“If you give me the New Testament, I will roll the pages and use them make cigarettes!” the man told Gaylord Zambarani, the General Secretary of the Bible Society of Zimbabwe.

“I understand that,” Gaylord replied, “But at least promise to read the page of the New Testament before you smoke it.” When the man agreed, Gaylord gave him the New Testament, and that was the last he saw of him. That is until last year.

While Gaylord was attending a Methodist convention in Zimbabwe, the speaker on the platform suddenly spotted him, and pointed him out to the audience. He said to the audience, “This man does not remember me, but fifteen years ago he tried to sell me a N. T. When I refused to buy it, he gave it to me, even though I told him I would use the pages to roll cigarettes. I smoked Matthew, and I smoked Mark, and I smoked Luke. But when I came

to John 3:16, I could not smoke anymore. My life was changed from that moment.”

The antagonist is now a full-time church evangelist, devoting his whole life to telling others of the immeasurable love of God.

ALTERNATE CONCLUSION

Philip Yancey has an interesting story out of South Africa. Under Nelson Mandela a serious attempt was made toward reconciliation in the nation. The years of racial oppression had left the nation with a lot of bitterness and anger. They put in place a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For two and a half years South Africans listened to reports of atrocities coming out of the meetings of the commission. The rule was simple: if a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for the crime. At one hearing a policeman named van de Brock recounted an incident when he and other officers arrested an eighteen year old boy and burned his body, turning it on a fire like a piece of barbecue meat, thus destroying the evidence. Eight years later van de Brock returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife was forced to watch as the policemen bound the man's body to a woodpile, set it afire, pouring gasoline on it.

Van de Brock faced the elderly wife and mother of the family. When asked what she wanted from the policeman, she requested that he go to the place where they burned the body of her son, and bring the ashes so she could give him a decent burial—he nodded his head that he would do this.

Then she added another request, “Mr. Van de Brock took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. Van de Brock to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.”

Spontaneously, some of the courtroom began to sing, “Amazing Grace” as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand, but van de Brock did not hear the hymn. He fainted, overwhelmed.

I have told you of an even greater love this morning. What will you do? If this height of His love is about a relationship—you know that there are two sides to a relationship. If you are to ever enjoy this relationship, you must respond to His love in repentance and faith. You must confess to Him that you have been wrong in your actions and attitudes, and that you want His love. You must open your heart to Him in faith, and receive His love. I am going to ask you to do this tonight.