

The Dimensions of Love

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[0 : 00] We now turn to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, and we may read again at verse 14.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, and at verse 14. For this reason, I bow my knee before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

And according to the riches of His glory, He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, 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 knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

I have been reflecting with you on this marvelous prayer.

The last two times that I was with you in the prayer meeting, and already we have seen how the Apostle Paul prayed, his attitude of prayer, what he prayed for, and especially for strengthening in the inner man.

[2 : 02] Then we saw how he was desirous of a permanent resident in the life of the believer. We noted the role of the Holy Spirit in this permanent resident, and then we noticed the purpose of his residency, that we be rooted and grounded in love.

Because God has called us to live among and to love sinners. And he knows that in order for us to love one another, we need to have a life that has been established and anchored in the love of God.

Jesus loved sinners who let him down. He calls us to love sinners who may let us down. Sinners that may betray us.

Sinners that may wound us. Sinners that may hurt us. Sinners that may disappoint us. Sinners that do commit real sins against us.

Sinners that may not be found. These are the ones. In other words, people like yourselves. If you know your own heart, these are the ones whom we are called to love in the world.

[3 : 34] Not necessarily the people that you like, but sinners like yourself. It's easy to get on with people that you like, and to choose out some.

But you are called to live and to love those who are fellow sinners like yourself. And only the power of God can vote and ground us in the love of God, so that we can love in this way.

Now this evening, I'd like to take a further step in this prayer as Paul expands on his prayerful aspiration for the Ephesians first and for the wider church.

And I suppose that you might say that Paul here is aiming at the goal of spiritual maturity. I think every true pastor would seek that for their flock.

If I put it like this, every shepherd, in the sheep sense of shepherd, looks forward with a sense of anticipation at this time of year, to lamb in time.

[4 : 57] No shepherd would want their lambs to remain as lambs. No matter how attractive the lambs might be, he or she, who is the shepherd, would wish them to grow into healthy sheep.

And so in the spiritual realm, although a pastor is very desirous of new additions to the flock through the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, the pastor The pastor does not wish them to remain as spiritual infants.

He wants them to become spiritual adults. And this is what I think that Paul is seeking, particularly in this prayer, as we come to this step in the prayer.

It seems to me that that is the goal that the apostle has in view, that you may be filled, he says, with all the fullness of God. And although that is more fully developed in the next chapter, because in chapter 4 he tells us he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Now, if I were, that's the goal that he has in view, and if I were to ask you to write down at this moment, what do you think would bring about maturity in the life of believers?

[7 : 05] I am sure that not everyone would have the same answer. I am sure there would be a variety of answers, from perhaps additional Bible study to the other extreme of seminary courses.

But what did Paul think was essential for spiritual maturity? And since Paul is writing as one born or carried by the Holy Spirit, you have to ultimately conclude that is God's way of maturing sinners or Christians.

and the answer that we receive in this passage is that we may know and comprehend the love of Christ. This is what matures the believer, the love of Christ.

We may have extensive Bible knowledge, but be a stranger to knowing the love of Christ. And you remember what Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians.

he says, Ah, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Knowledge puffs up.

[8 : 23] Knowledge without love may inflate egos, but it is not constructive to building in the spiritual realm.

To grow the knowledge of the love of Christ will surely promote growth and faith and have Christ's presence grow in your heart.

Paul believed in the power of love and so should we. The power of love, the power of Christ's love at work in our lives.

And so here he prays that they be empowered by God to grasp this love that surpasses knowledge. he prays that we would have a knowledge of Christ's love which is beyond knowledge.

And when you reflect on that it seems almost not to make sense. What in the world is Paul talking about? What is he trying to say that we be rooted and grounded in love would be able to comprehend with all the saints?

[9 : 35] what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge? Well it seems to me Paul is saying that he wants us to have the ability to grasp the love of Christ in our individual lives.

He wants you as a believer to have a real personal experience and comprehension of the incomparable love of Christ at work in your life.

And so we need to be asking ourselves the question why would God why would Paul say that we needed power in order to know the love of Christ?

And it seems to me that the answer to that is this that Paul knows that the love of Christ does not arise naturally in our lives.

The love of Christ is naturally as we are by nature it's beyond our understanding to experience. It is hard as it were for the love of Christ to get through.

[10 : 47] Now I am sure there are some in this room perhaps many in this room who have been walking with the Lord for many years and yet you have wrestled with knowing and with experiencing the love of Christ in your own life.

That has been a real issue in your own life and there are various reasons for this. For some it may be a pattern of sin that is replicated again and again in your own heart.

Or it may be something that you feel comes between you and God in the private place that prevents you from having that boldness that you are encouraged to have as a child of grace before the throne.

And so there may be all of these things and perhaps you are thinking that he couldn't possibly love you, he couldn't possibly keep you and save you and commune with you and a fellowship with you.

And there may be many other reasons but for the apostle Paul it is vital that we have a real and personal experience and comprehension of the incomprehensible love of Christ because that is essential to our spiritual maturity.

[12 : 16] And Paul knows that if we do not at least in some measure know the boundless love of Christ for us then we cannot grow up.

We will remain as spiritual children. We cannot mature. No, the apostle Paul is not saying he wants you to go out and read a book about the love of Christ.

It's often what we do when we're trying to get acquainted with something. We don't know what it is we go out, we google it or we go out and read about it. We do something so that we can familiarize ourselves with whatever it is that is troubling us.

But that's not what the apostle is saying here. He is saying that we need the power of God because we can't know and experience this love on our own.

If I can put it like this and use an example and every example falls very far short. You may have read or you may even know of children who have been who were emotionally scarred for one reason or another and that has frequently resulted in behavior problems in the life of the child and even the most skilled and the most knowledgeable in the area of behavior issues with children may conclude that such children are hopelessly damaged emotionally and intellectually.

[13 : 56] And yet, yet despite such conclusions, if some of these children happen to be placed in foster care where there is tender, careful love, the situation can be changed, what brings about the change, and I would suggest that this is what brings about the change, it is love.

Love works miracles. And whatever you might say about the example that I have used, and as I said every example falls short, this I do know, that every person who is crippled and twisted and scarred by sin, and who of us this evening is not crippled and twisted and scarred by sin, divine love works wonders in the lives of those who are adopted as infants in grace and brought up in the family of God.

Because that is what God does when he quickens to life. He not only justifies the sinner, but he also adopts such and he brings them into the warmth of the embrace of the love of the family of Christ, so that those who are crippled and twisted and scarred by sin grow up in an environment that is very different to the one in which they were growing up.

So, here he goes on to say, he sets before us the measurements or the dimensions of love, and he uses four measurements or dimensions, but they're not detailed as such.

you can't say the width of this love or the breadth of this love is this wide, or the length of the love is this long. It is so great that it surpasses knowledge.

[16 : 21] How can anyone set before us detailed measurements of this love? Remember, he has already called it in this letter, the great love with which he loved us.

And it reminds me of the little boy who was out fishing once with his dad, and they were using hand lines. He let down the hand line, and with the weight, it touched the bottom, pulled it up.

They moved out further in the boat, and eventually they came to a place where the little boy's hand line didn't reach the bottom, and he turned to his dad and he said, surely this is the center of the great ocean.

And his dad said to him, when you come to the middle of the great ocean, there is no bottom and no shore. And when you come face to face with the love of God in Christ, it is like a huge ocean with no bottom or no shore.

And these terms that are used here, I believe, are calculated to set before us the immensity and the inexhaustible nature of the love of God in Christ.

[17 : 37] And if we look a little more closely at these dimensions, we find that he first speaks of the breadth of love. And what I understand from this term is the embraces nature of this love.

In this very letter, Paul speaks of Jew and Gentile being brought together through the cross. He himself is our peace, he says in the second chapter, who has made both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

Irrespective of background or race or age, there is room in the extensive embrace of love.

There is a place in this love for Rahab the prostitute. There is a place in this love for backslidden, penitent, restored Samson.

There is a place for Naomi, who experienced who had been emptied and in order to be more filled. There is a place for Ruth the Moabite, who became heir of the promises.

[19 : 07] There is a place for the woman that was a sinner. There is a place for Zacchaeus the tax collector, and you could go on, and you could enumerate all those who are brought within the scope of this embrace, and there is a place for you and me.

And does that not humble you? For you do not possess knowledge of anyone like you do of yourself, self, and your knowledge of self is limited in the sense that it is clouded by the judgments of a heart that is deceitful and desperately wicked.

so you see, your judgment of self is not exhaustive. In fact, it is very limited, it's very biased, but even with impaired, biased knowledge of a person like yourself, yet, even with that impaired knowledge, biased knowledge, you know that you never deserved a place in this all-empressive, all-enveloping love of God in Christ.

The love that took you as a neglected, helpless, orphan, without resources, and brought you within the embrace of this marvelous love.

So, the breadth of love, it embraces a wide selection of people from all races and backgrounds and nations and peoples in the world.

[21 : 02] And then he speaks of the length of love. And from one point of view, you could understand this to set before us the eternal nature of love.

It is without beginning. It is without end. As the Father says, Jesus, speaking to the disciples initially, as the Father loved me, so have I loved you.

No, between the presence of the guarded, there is an infinitude of reciprocal love. Love not constrained by ignorance, not quenched by knowledge, but love that is drawn out by exclusive and exhaustive knowledge.

I think it is Augustine of My Memory Serves Me White, who said something like this, love slays what I was so that I become what I could not.

And in many ways, it seems to go beyond reason. I may have told already some time in the past, I am not sure, I quoted it often, I think, at one time when I read it, but it is a long time since then, a book with the title Love Beyond Reason.

[22 : 20] And in that book you find the story of a little girl with a rag doll. Every place she went, she took this rag doll.

Eventually the doll became the worst for wear, very ragged, one arm, one leg, but the little girl loved her ragged doll, just as much as when the opposite was true.

And there is a sense in which we too are made ragged by virtue of sin. We're flawed, we're wounded, we're broken and bent.

And if you've ever put a splash of ink in a bottle of water, and you see how the ink goes through the hole of the water, the ragged the raggedness permeates, that is brought about by sin, it permeates our whole being.

And you know in Christ, and I hope that I am not misunderstood here, in Christ it seems to me that we are God's rag doll.

[23 : 34] that's not how our first parents were created. God says about them they were very good. That's what he says about the work.

But you see, by the fall we became ragged. And even still we may be unlovely but you're not unloved.

unlovely but not unloved. And this love appears in different ways and is experienced in different ways.

You know the apostle here is not speaking of some kind of nice warm feeling. This love can be challenging and at times extremely painful because the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.

Notice the language there. Every son whom he receives. Not just some. Every son whom he receives. And the end result is that they too become lovely.

[24 : 52] And they are never I would suggest more like the lily than when they are perfectly conformed to the image of the son.

You know how in the song of Solomon Christ or the beloved of the church is spoken of as the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley. But then he speaks of the bride as being like the lily.

In other words there are qualities that are imbued to make her like the lily. the grace of humility. The work of sanctification in the purifying process that is going on.

But when this process is brought to its marvelous conclusion they are indeed never more like the lily.

So they are without spot or blemish. The breadth it is embrative. The length from eternity to eternity.

[26 : 02] The depth of this love. And it seems to me when you're looking at the depth and the height looking at the depth you begin at the top and measure down.

And when you're looking at the height you begin at the bottom and measure up. And if you think of the top as being the throne of God and then you try and understand this measure for depth.

How are we to express it? How far is it from the throne of the universe to the manger in Bethlehem?

That's a huge distance. How are we to compound that? How are we to work out the measurement there? If you think of it to the sepulcher in the garden to the cross first of all and then to the grave?

That's the depth of the love of Christ. And however far that distance might be from that elevated position for equal divinity in the bosom of the father or face to face with the father radiant with the glory that is his to the lowliness of the form of a servant and the sorrows the limitations the rejections the pains and the death that I believe in some ways touches on the depth of Christ's love.

[27 : 54] We can estimate the depth of his love by saying he came from above. He tabernacled with us and as one person puts it kind of graphically this heaven descended Christ I like the description has come down the long staircase of incarnation and has brought with him has brought him into contact with sinners and you know you have to remember he was holy perfect he hated sin how his holy soul must have recoiled from contact with sinners and yet he didn't allow it to interfere with the relationships that were formed or from bringing the light of truth to bear on sin scarred lives that is the measure of the love of Christ and perhaps there is another way to measure it you know as you go through life you experience much trial and tribulation but they are shallow in comparison with the love that goes down beneath you and beneath all he laid aside you remember how his love didn't allow him to shrink from a basement and perhaps that is best illustrated in the upper room where he laid aside his outer garments and he took a towel and he tied it round his waist and then he poured water and began to wash the disciples feet to wipe them with the towel swapped about him here he is showing them the practical side of love and how it ought to be practiced in the life of the church he is not afraid to get down into the lowliest position and to wash the feet of those who were far beneath him in many many ways even washing Judah's feet just think of that his love does not turn him away from a sinner he doesn't avert his face and you remember how that is shown and demonstrated to us in the way that he reached out to the unclean leper and everyone else was shrinking back there is an example of

Christ reaching out to the unclean and that's what the love of Christ does you know perhaps sometimes when we get involved and there is maybe an element of disgust mingling with pity but Christ love comes down to those who are sunken in deep abasement and delivered far in the abasement any human soul has descended yet Christ comes in the marvel of his love and he rescues them and he lifts them up where did he find you my friend did he not find you in the dust did he not find you on the ash heap what does the love of Christ do he raises the poor from the dust and to the needy lifts the needy from the ash heap and in days of when this country had a lot of coal mining sometimes the pits they experienced explosion and they wouldn't go down to rescue their fellow miners until they were sure that there was some kind of ventilation despite how desperate they were to get to them but you see

Christ in his love goes down down down into the into the thickest most dangerous atmosphere reeking with sin and corruption and he stretches out a rescuing hand to the most abject and lowest of sinners in this world how deep is the love of Christ it reached you and it reached me in our abasement and lastly the measurement is the height of the love and if we begin at the throne to look at the depth of his love then we have to work back upwards to look at the height of the love beginning at the cross and the darkness of the forces of evil and this love rises up rises up and it raises sinners to dwell with him in heavenly places he has come to lift sinners to himself that's the height of his love so that you are placed in heavenly places well I think the measure of love ultimately is how much it gives and when you look at the love that is spoken of here you can see how much is given it's the gift of

God of his only son who has made man to die for sins and that's you know love is something that's it's not tangible you know you can't put love in your hands and say well this is love or that is love you have to see the proof of it and the proof and the demonstration of love is that he died for sinners greater love has no one than this that someone lays down his life for his friends and sometimes you read about that you read about it where our forces are engaged and you read about how some lay down their life in order that others might be released and delivered from the dangers that surround them but you have to remember it wasn't just for friends that Christ was laying down his life it was for those who were sinners those who were at enmity with God he laid down his life and saw the cross which Christ is a pulpit

I think it was I can't remember now was it Augustine but it was one of these worthies who made the quote that the cross is the pulpit in which Christ preached or from which Christ preached his love to the world and you might be saying well how do I know that I have experienced this love and it reminds me of a theologian and his name escapes me at the moment but he was asked the question how can you know that Jesus loves you and everyone sat back expecting a huge profound involved answer do you know the answer he gave this is the answer that he gave my memory serves me right Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so how do you know that Jesus loves you it is through believing study of the word of

[36 : 27] God you're not going to find it coming out of the earth you're not going to hear it in a voice proclaimed to you it is through the word of God that you will receive assurance of the love of Christ and you have to learn of this love and you will learn of it as you live in obedience to him obedience is necessary to a life of blessing it's the disciples who follow Christ and take up their cross daily who know and experience this love and we can learn it too in the trials and sufferings of life you know perhaps in sharing our experiences with one another sometimes difficult providence and trying providence is used as it were to cast us onto the promises of God and you are brought then to a place where the only person you can relate to in your pain is

Jesus alone why because he understands what you are going through he was despised he was hated he was reviled he was betrayed he sorrowed in the loss of those he loved he faced the agony of suffering and death did all this out of love so that the believer would face similar trials as more than conquerors through him who loved us and note what he says here that you may have strength to comprehend with all the saints it's as if Paul is putting an emphasis here on learning of this love through the experience of fellow believers in the church and this suggests to me an exchanging of one another's experiences of grace in your life come says the psalmist and hear all you who fear

God I will tell you what he has done for my soul again in the prophecy of Malachi those who feared the Lord spoke with one another and as you live together as the flock of the Lord you learn about the greatness of Christ's love love because where there is a reliance on the love of Christ there is a confidence in drawing near to God to receive the blessings that are necessary to the life of faith and it seems to me that the Christians who become spiritually fruitful and strong are those who can say with the apostle John we have come to know and to believe the love that Christ has for us or that

God has for us and how the time has flown past I think I have to leave the rest of the verse for another time all to know more of it let us pray