

Love that surpasses knowledge

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[0 : 00] Do keep your Bibles open then to Ephesians 3, page 1175, and there's a hand up as well to help you follow along. Well, as I suggested on top of that outline, if ever there's a topic which everyone feels like they're an expert in, it would have to be the subject of love.

Because whether you care to admit or not, I bet you think you know something about it. And more often than that, there's more than that. We have strong opinions, don't we? As to whether something that's done is love or not love.

And we fight over whether we're right or wrong. Now of course, we're also very quick to form a view about whether someone loves us or not. Now those of you who've done marriage prep with me, who have done that little session around love languages, where we think people love us when they show love based on our preferred language.

Is it quality time? Physical touch? Acts of service? Words of affirmation? Gifts? Or as I found with some people, all of the above?

Such that when people don't show us love in our preferred language, but yes, we quickly conclude that they don't love us. And it actually takes conscious effort to tell ourselves that no, they do.

[1 : 33] It's just that they're showing it in a different way. And so, while we may not use the term experts, we still have strong views, don't we, about love? And particularly about whether we're loved or not.

And with so many differing views on what love is, you know, particularly when you turn on the TV and you have three, you know, experts sitting on the maths panel, how do you objectively define love and then measure it?

Well, the Bible tells us that love is defined by God. Whatever His nature and character is, that is what love is. However, He expresses it, whether it's to us or as between the Father and the Son, that's what demonstrates what love is.

And so Moses would say in the Old Testament from Exodus 34, verse 6, on the next slide, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, and maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving for wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet, He does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of their parents to the third and fourth generation. Likewise, the Apostle John, in his first letter, would say, God is love.

[2 : 51] Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them. And likewise, as we saw in Psalm 118, there is a constant refrain as we look through the Psalms that says, give thanks to the Lord for He is good, His love endures forever.

So whatever God does is good. And however He shows it is His love. What is the focus of our passage today is love as well, the love of God.

And it's the focus of Paul's prayer. Paul wants us and prays for us that we not only experience God's love, that we also know about His love.

We know it because we've experienced it in our lives, but more than that, know it so that it helps us to understand what's love and what's not. And how to differentiate that from the messages of the world.

So, as we begin our passage, Paul resumes his train of thought from verse 1 of last week. Remember, I said that Paul actually broke his sentence off and went off on a digression for 13 verses.

[4 : 05] Well, he returns to it now in verse 14 with the very same opening words for this reason. And it turns out actually that Paul wanted to do all along what he wanted to do was pray.

So, verse 14, For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives his name. I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you in power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

So, if you actually try and put verse 14 and verse 1 together, that is, had Paul not digressed, he might have said this, For this reason, I call the prisoner of Christ for the sake of you Gentiles, and then go straight into his prayer, Kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives his name.

Which I think helps us to understand why that phrase, from whom every family derives his name, is there. Because Paul, who is Jewish, is saying that he cannot pray for all the Gentiles on their behalf, for their sake, because they have a common Father.

God is the Father of all nations, and as their apostle, Paul prays on their behalf, even though he is not a Gentile, he is a Jew. Now, what is the first petition of Paul's prayer?

[5 : 32] What is the first request? Verse 16, That the Gentiles and all who are in Christ, will be strengthened through God's Spirit. And for emphasis, he actually says, strengthened with power.

Now, I don't know how you phrase your prayers, But often when we pray, we ask God to do things for us, to change things outside of us, as in an outcome.

You know, help me fix this problem, or make it go away. Help me to do this, to speak bolder, to act like that.

But as we read, Paul doesn't begin there. Instead, he prays for God's Spirit to work firstly, in us. The important thing is actually not change circumstances or outcomes, but actually, for Paul, a changed life within.

Paul prays that God will change us first. Of course, this is a result of the glorious riches that God has already promised, and given us in Christ.

[6 : 42] So Paul is really praying what God already wants to do anyway. But what Paul is now asking, he wants to ask in accordance with God's purpose.

And notice that Paul asks for strengthening in our inner being, the changed life within. Because the power of the Spirit is not firstly focused on doing or saying amazing things, but shaping us inwardly.

Our convictions, our desires, our motivations. That is what inner being refers to. So this is really a prayer for spiritual transformation, and a powerful one at that.

But we need to pray because transformation of this nature in our lives only occurs through God's Spirit working in us. It's actually a supernatural work, which we can't humanly do ourselves.

Now of course, humanly speaking, when we see someone, for example, convert to Christ, from a human standpoint we see, yeah look, he or she has changed his mind about Jesus, and it's turning to follow Jesus.

[7 : 57] But in reality, no genuine conversion occurs without God first, or unless God is first at work in us.

Repentance, genuine sorrow is something that God alone, by His Spirit, has to bring about. Yes, in a way we don't fully understand, God does not override our individual wills, but none of us would come to Christ unless God's Spirit moved us too.

And that is the same with godliness. So you know, patience, loving kindness, self-control, all these attributes are part of us when we grow spiritually.

But you know, Paul says in Galatians that these are the fruit of the Spirit, isn't it? That means they arise only as a result of the Spirit.

And these qualities only remain in us by the power of the Spirit. So as Christians, every good thing we do is enabled only by the Spirit.

[9 : 11] Even when we pray, when you just said Amen just now, that only occurs by the Spirit, as it says in Ephesians 2.18.

So while we want tangible signs of God's Spirit in our lives, and often we ask, oh God, where are you working in our lives? A lot of times we look outward to see what's going on, what we're doing and what we're saying.

Actually, the transformation is occurring all the time in our inner being. There might not be a lot of fanfare or fireworks that go with it, but it's no less miraculous because it is by the power of the Spirit that this is occurring.

And so Paul prays that God will continue in this, that the Spirit will keep on keeping on, if you like. With the result Paul says in the next phrase, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith.

Now sometimes we use that phrase, don't we? That when we try to comfort someone who has just lost a loved one, for example, we say, oh, so-and-so continues to live on in our hearts.

[10 : 22] Now by that we don't mean that the person is alive. It's our way of saying that, oh, we want to remain, and then to remain in our memories. Or, you know, we want the values that they champion.

We want to keep living by them so that they live on in our lives, as it were. But this isn't what Paul is talking about here, is it? Because Christ is physically alive.

So we're not talking about Christ dwelling, being his memory of him in our lives. No, for Christ to dwell in our hearts by faith is actually a spiritual reality.

Yes, Christ is not physically with us. He's seated with the Father in the heavenly realms. But his presence with us is no less real. Because it's Christ's Spirit that dwells in us.

After all, the eternal life that we talk about, that we have because we believe in Jesus, that is the very life of Christ. It is Christ himself that keeps us spiritually alive, because he dwells in us.

[11 : 24] So that when our earthly body fades away, we continue to live, don't we? Because Christ lives in us. And so, just as in chapter 2, verse 22, you remember, Paul talked about us as God's holy temple collectively, in which God dwells by his Spirit.

So here, each member of Christ's body has become a dwelling place for Jesus by his Spirit. And this is the first request of Paul, to be strengthened by the Spirit, so that Christ dwells in us through faith.

And the goal for this is very specific, because God's Spirit isn't given to us to try and allow us to achieve our selfish ambitions or agenda, or to chase earthly dreams, like wealth or fame.

Rather, as Paul now continues with his second request, the goal of having the Spirit in us is to help us grasp the love of Christ. Verse 17.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

[12:42] And to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. There's quite a few superlatives there, isn't there?

But the purpose of it is to grasp the riches of Christ's love for us. The power that's spoken there is the power of the Holy Spirit.

But again, do you notice that even though Paul's request is that they may know the love of Christ, what has already begun prior to this is that we're already being rooted and established in that same love.

Now, what is this love that Paul talks about? It's not the worldly view of love, the mushy kind, which is, you know, a romantic or erotic in nature. But no, this love, Paul has already mentioned earlier in his letter, right?

So, chapter 1, verse 4 and 5, you look on the slide. In love, we have been predestined to adoption, to sanction. Or, chapter 2, verse 4, that because of God's great love for us, he has made us alive with Christ and saved by his grace.

[13:52] If we go back to that Old Testament Psalm reading, the people there began by praising God for his enduring love. But as we read on, we discover that for them, God demonstrated his love by sending a saviour to freedom from the enemies, coming against them in Jerusalem.

Well, for us, God shows what his love is most clearly and extremitably at the cross. Our saviour is Jesus, and our enemy is sin.

And it's at the cross that we see most clearly the Father's amazing love for us. Of course, it's also the love of Christ, because he was the one who suffered and willingly laid down his love as well.

That's why Paul can say, we're already being rooted in this love. Because even before we had the faintest idea of God's existence, even before we were born, God has already poured out his love on us through his Son, thousands of years ago.

When we put our faith in Jesus, all we're simply doing is responding to what God has already done for us. Christ has already loved us.

[15:11] We're simply saying, yes, thank you. I want that for myself. Now, if you've grown up in a Christian home as well, where Christ has been Lord, then that love has been expressed in the home ever since you were a baby.

You know, you wouldn't have grasped as a little baby, or you're grasping as toys. You wouldn't have grasped the love of God. You were too young for that. But through your parents' love, and what they taught you, you were being rooted and established in that love.

Until one day, you become old enough to understand that this is the love that God has shown us. And even those of us who have become Christians as adults, it was God's love that prompted him to seek us out individually.

Like shepherd for his lost sheep to bring us home. You know, at the time, you would have not known. But the Spirit was already at work, wasn't he?

You were putting circumstances, prompting you, until one day you hear the Gospel, and then you respond by faith. That was the Spirit's power.

[16:27] That was God's love being shown to you, even before you recognized it. And it's not too different in a small way, isn't it, with parents and children.

Because often as children grow up, they don't really appreciate what their parents do for them. I'm talking about myself, not my children. They may think their parents are overly strict, too much discipline, insisting they practice their instrument.

Particularly Asian parents, no, they're not giving up their instrument. It's only later on, isn't it, when they, we, become adults, that we look back and we appreciate what our parents have done.

That, you know, now that they can play the piano to relax in the evening, woo their girlfriend or whatever. That they're thankful that their parents didn't give in to their protest to give up at the time.

And so it's the same with God, but in a much bigger way. And so Paul prays that we will come to know this more and more, just how much God has loved us.

[17:35] How much He has done for us. And we may think we know, but actually, Paul says, God's love, Christ's love, is always wider and longer and higher and deeper than we can have.

And that's why he says, it's a love that surpasses knowledge. Not that we can't know anything about this love, but more because the more we know, the more we realize how limited our understanding of God's love is.

And the hope is that it fuels us to, one more, to have a deep thirst to know more of God's love. And this knowledge is not hidden knowledge, by the way, but a deep appreciation that touches our core.

So that we become overwhelmed by how much we're loved by God. It's when, for example, you realize that though undeserving, you're deeply loved and valued by God.

That you are a person of great worth, not because of who you are, but just because God loves you. That your sins are forgiven. All of them. Past, present, and future.

[18:47] That you're free from the burden of guilt. That you are at peace with your Creator, the one who creates the universe. And that one day, you will live forever in His presence.

Friends, these are not some things that only spiritual, mature Christians have. No, these are things that every Christian who is in Christ has.

These are the basic blessings, if you like, of being in Christ. And so, if you haven't quite grasped this for your life, then Paul's prayer is for you.

That you may be strengthened by the Spirit, so that you will know how wide and long and deep and high the love of Christ is for you.

Because once Christ's death was accomplished on the cross, and you put your faith in Him, there's nothing that holds back God's love for you or any of His people.

[19:59] When that stone was rolled away to reveal an empty tomb, it opened the floodgates of God's grace and love. Poured out immeasurably on all of us in the resurrected life of His Son.

Of course, Paul reminds us again that this love is given to us with all the Lord's people. That is, not just you as an individual, but us together collectively as well.

And so, we know and experience this as part of the church, the manifold wisdom of God as we saw last week. As we live together, love one another, we're actually demonstrating God's love as well.

Continuing, God's continuing love for us as His people. And we'll get more to that in the coming weeks as we start chapter 4. We will begin to grasp God's love for us together as Christ's body.

And this is a virtuous cycle, isn't it? Because the more we know this love, the more we're strengthened by it. In turn, it makes us experience God's love even more, so that bit by bit, we're filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

[21:13] And you know, as you read that prayer, you might think, Paul is being a bit hyperbolic here, right? A bit over the top. I mean, to think that we can even be filled to the fullness of God.

I mean, really? We're all finite vessels, even as a church. We're limited. We're limited. How can we ever be filled to the fullness of God?

It's like trying to contain the ocean's water in a cup. It's not possible, is it? And yet, it's a prayer that can be answered in the definitive.

Because God can keep filling us with His love. It's not like we all have a certain limit, right? Joe, two liters. Oliver, two liters. Oscar, two and a half.

Yeah? And then once you've each got your fill, that's it. God's going to move on. No. We're not like petrol tanks, are we? Where sometimes on the day when the price is cheap, I feel like, wow, if only I could keep filling it.

[22:19] So that I'd have to come back when the price is high. Or our mobile phones. When the charge gets to 100%, I wish, wow, if only to go past 100%, then I don't have to keep charging it.

No, when these things are full, they're full, aren't they? But with God and His power and His love, there's always room for more in your lives. Right?

We may be overjoyed one morning, you know, past the exams or something, overwhelmed by His love and saying, wow, I'm satisfied beyond compare. But God's saying, no, actually, I've got more to show you.

I've got more love to give you. And you can take more. Just believe. That's how amazing this Christian life is, isn't it? To be filled with the fullness of God.

Never ending. And it's true even when we're going through the midst of suffering and trials. And I'd say, actually, it's often most true, isn't it, when we're going through such times.

[23:19] And so Paul, being filled with the fullness of God Himself, what it does is, of course, it overflows for him, isn't it? He's full, and so he overflows as he finishes his prayer with praise.

Verse 20. Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine, according to His partners at work with us, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen. What an amazing Savior we have in Jesus. What a wonderful God His Father is. Our Father is.

And how beautiful is this Church. This metaphor wisdom of God that we belong to. But Paul, as he ends, is saying that from the very beginning, God has been at work in His Church to do more than we can imagine.

And God is continuing to work to bring His purpose to pass. Or as he says in 1 Corinthians, Friends, we often, I think, as Christians, want to be better people.

[24:40] And that's a great thing. And as a church, we're always thinking, how can we do this better? Or how can we do that better? But sometimes, we have this sense that we need to always be doing something for God.

Which is true. And when we get to the second half of Ephesians, Paul tells us how all these things should translate to practical actions. But did you know that Paul did not start there, did he?

In fact, he spent half the latter, not talking about what we must do for God, but actually, what God has done for us already.

Because what God has done and is doing in our lives, is actually the most significant thing in your life. God is at work in us more than you can ask or imagine.

And that is, even right now, even if you have not asked, God is working when you have put your trust in Jesus. And any prayer request that we make in that sense is going to fall short, isn't it?

[25 : 46] Because we are asking less than what God will give us. But Paul says, no, pray anyway. Because whatever you ask, rightly, in a way that pleases God, he will match and then surpass.

Right? Ask, and then sit back, wait, and see what more God will do beyond your imagination.

And then of course, going back to earlier, Paul prays also that we might know this. That strengthened by God's Spirit, we don't just experience His love, we grasp, we truly understand more and more how boundless the love of Christ is.

Have your minds blown away by His love. Have your hearts overflowing with joy and gratitude. And then, when we experience and know this, the funny thing is, we will actually know what to do.

That will spur us on. When we live for Christ, it's no longer a burden and a duty. But it's an outflowing of praise. Because we just, we know how much God has done for us.

[27:04] How much He has loved us. So friends, don't be anxious that God's not going to answer this prayer. If we ask, He will. And I want to encourage you, actually, to make this prayer something that you might say every so often.

Maybe even daily for the next week. Pray this, and then see how God will answer it. And we will be amazed beyond our imagination what God will do to change our inner being.