

The Love of God

In Luke's Gospel 13:10-13: Before she opened her mouth it was comforting to know that the Lord knew her condition and knew what she needed. Above the cloud the sun is still shining.

Let's pray:

Lord, the faces of speakers can change, but Your Work continues. We pray that You will not only be with us, but You can also find room to work in us and among us. Open our eyes so we can better appreciate Your love to us. In Jesus name. Amen.

Ephesians 3:14-19: "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family of heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

I would like to talk about God's love, but God's love is so big; it is from eternity to eternity. God's love to us, according to Paul, is something beyond our comprehension, beyond our human reasoning. Then what is the use of studying something that cannot be known? What is the point of measuring the immeasurable and eternal? This job of explaining God's love to us puts Paul on his knees to pray. As stated in verse 16, he enlisted the help of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our understanding. At the same time, Paul had brought Jews and Gentiles together into the church who had been natural enemies to each other. We see an urgent need to know the love of God, and only the Holy Spirit can empower us to live in harmony and unity in the church.

The love of God itself is beyond any computation and cannot be wholly measured. Nevertheless, it is our job to know as much as we can about it and to receive as much of it as we possibly can contain. Then with the help of the Holy Spirit, the measure of Christ can grow and mature in our lives.

The problem as Christians (me included) is that we do not always acknowledge God's love. How often do we think about it? Isn't that true? We normally spend time thinking about our activities, our problems, yet the most important necessity of a Christian is to know God's love to us and spend time meditating on it. This way we may respond to it with a grateful heart in living our lives.

My knowledge of God's love is rather limited as you will find out in a minute, but it is like a large picture puzzle. I bring a few pieces of the puzzle today, and some other people will bring a few more pieces the next time. Together we may have a better understanding of God's love.

God's love is multidimensional. We humans do not use these terms. If we say to our loved one that our love to them is 4-dimensional, you will probably get a response of, "We already know you are square." Now if you allow me I will follow the sequence of the Chinese Bible which describes God's love in the order of length, width, height, and depth.

God's Love Is Long

Let's start with "God's love is long." In my childhood I had the opportunity to attend Sunday School in China. There was one Sunday School teacher who could tell Bible stories in vivid color. I loved to sit in her class, but unfortunately my name was on (scout's honor) her list of students whom she had a burden for their souls. Back then most Chinese did not have access to a telephone, so it is tradition or customary that visitors would show up at the door unannounced. My Sunday School teacher visited me often, perhaps too often, but her excuse was she was in our neighborhood. In addition she would not leave unless I would pray with her, but I did not have a prayer life back then. What would you do to get rid of her under the circumstances?

Because of her Christian faith she was put in jail for over twenty years. Later, she had the opportunity to visit America, and she ran into my mother in California. The first thing she asked my mother, "Is Enoch saved?" She went on to tell my mother she had been praying all these years for me while she was in that jail. That touched me. Somebody cared to save my soul and was willing to spend twenty years praying for me. God did not give up on me. God's love is long.

I had a mother who loved the Lord. She was not able to send her son to study abroad. Thank God, He opened another channel, but she prayed for me every day while I was in college. Fast forward: when our children went to college, I thought I would emulate my mother by praying for them. I found out that four years is a very long time, especially there were days I did not feel like talking with God.

I attended a conference one time, and one of the sessions was devoted to the nonbelievers, the so-called "Evangelical for Gospel Meetings". Towards the end of that session, the speaker tried to explain what he would do. When he finished his talk, he was going to ask anybody who accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord to come to the front. Before He had a chance to finish the sentence a man jumped up from his seat. Later we were able to talk to this guy, "Why did you stand up prematurely?" "He explained that he was a cook, a chef who must work on the weekend. The last time he heard the altar call was in Hong Kong twenty-six years ago, and he had never heard a second altar call until now; so he wanted to make sure that he did not miss this opportunity. At that time he had already decided to accept Jesus as his personal Savior. So he jumped the gun, so to speak, to receive Jesus into his heart." God patiently waited for him to come home. Oh, God's love is long.

The Width of God's Love

John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world." This includes people of every tongue, tribe and nation. God gave us His only begotten Son to die on the cross. Jesus has already paid the debt of our sins, so whoever receives Him will have everlasting life. The Bible also says that God will freely or broadly pardon. So what does that mean? It means if you confess your sins, God will not keep a record of your past sins. No matter how bad they turn out to be, no matter how loud your conscience accuses you, you can come to the Lord as you are. He wants to lead you away from sin; God broadly pardoned.

A rich man was reading the story of the prodigal son according to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15. He was so impressed that he wished to have a picture of the story for his house. But unfortunately he could not find one in the market so he decided to consult an artist. Perhaps the artist could capture the story on canvas. So he told the artist, money would not be a problem here, but can you capture the story in painting? The artist said, "I am not a Christian, what exactly do you want me to include in the drawing?" The rich man was not sure himself, so he decided to leave his Bible with the artist. "Make sure you read the story before you start painting, and take your time. Money is not an issue here," the rich man assured the artist. So they reached an agreement for the rich man to view the picture in two months.

Two months later, the rich man returned to the studio, "Have you finished the painting?" "Yes, it is finished, but it is in the studio in the back. You can go there now, and I will join you in a little while." So the rich man went to the back. He was shocked! The picture did not resemble anything he expected. The painting was of an old man's head. To be exact, it was the back view of an old man's head with a broad shoulder. He could not figure out the meaning of the picture. What does that have to do with the prodigal son? When the artist appeared, he asked the artist, "What is the meaning of this picture?" The artist asked him, "Do you want the picture or not?" He said, "I just want an explanation. What story are you working on? I asked you to paint the story of a prodigal son, and you drew an old man. What does it mean?" The artist said, "I told you that I am not a Christian. So I read the story carefully and repeatedly. By the way do you want the picture or not? If you do, you can take it home. If you do not, take it home anyway because I am not going to change anything; this is how this picture will stand." The rich man said, "I just want you to explain to me why you drew the picture this way?" The artist said, "Okay, I will explain, but I am not going to change anything. You Christians are all confused." This statement made the rich man further confused. The artist said, "When I read the story, I did not get the picture that it is the story of a son. I got the picture that it is the story of the father. To me this prodigal son is a worthless person. He took the inheritance and squandered it and spent it all. Even if he would return home, I would kick him out of the house. But where would you be able to find a father like this one here who will be anxiously waiting for the return of his wayward son day in and day out? When the prodigal son returned home, the son knows it, but the father had no clue of the timing of it. So how come he spotted the son when he first appeared in the horizon? My guess is that he must have been waiting for him the whole day every day. That is why I drew the picture of an old man waiting anxiously.

Even so, did you see a path in the middle of the picture?" The rich man put on his glasses and looked carefully: "Yes, yes, I see it." "Did you see that there is a figure next to the path?" "Yes, I see it. That is the prodigal son, that is him." To the artist it was not about the son; it is about the love of a father. but it is true. Sometimes we pay too much attention on the prodigal son and neglect the love of the One who loves sinners. Maybe it is with good intention. Maybe we want to put them in the best seat in the house with the wish of them returning to worship again. At the same time, we become careless and wasteful of the Father's love. You say, "I know now God's love is wide."

The Height of God's Love

My colleague and her husband are animal lovers. One time they came to visit us. When they stepped into the house, they asked us if we would like to meet their new family members. I took a peek through the window, and there were four Dobermans in the open truck. Maybe I was hallucinating. All I saw was that they were baring their teeth at me in slow motion. None of my family members volunteered to greet our canine guests. So I asked my colleague: "What did you do when you and your husband were at work? What happened to your poor cats in case there was a fight?" "Oh, that was no problem. All the cats know the high places in the house. If it happened outside the house, they know how to climb trees and sit calmly on the branch. The dogs may be mad and challenge the cat, "Cat, you come down!" But the cat just ignored the dog. Or say something like this, "If you want, you can come up here."

In Ephesians 2 it says, "Even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ, (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." That is our high place, and sometimes God wants us to see things from His point of view.

Once I was standing in front of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York before the event of September 11th. I was in awe of its height. If you wore a hat, you had better hold on to it because you could easily lose it; those skyscrapers were so tall. When the planes flew over New York City, you would say, "Ah hah, that is where Americans put their chopsticks." Sometimes we see things that seem so important, but you have to see it from God's point of view. Maybe it is just seemingly important on earth. Some of us think heaven is too far away. Maybe you have acrophobia, which is fear of heights. You can just think of Jesus like Hymn 285 says, "Where Jesus is, it is heaven there."

In John chapter 11, Jesus and His disciples went to Bethany, but Martha thought they came too late to heal Lazarus. And Jesus said, "Your brother will rise," and Martha took it to mean, "He must be referring to the end days." So she said, "Yes, he will rise in the last days." And Jesus explained to her, "You know why Lazarus can rise in the last days? It is because I will be there." He is the Lord of resurrection and life, "but I am here now; you do not have to wait." Of course, we know the rest of the story.

A bird can stretch their wings and fly, and America chose the eagle as their emblem. Why an eagle? It is because a little bird can fly just so high, but an eagle can fly to the sky in no time. So if we fly with one wing of faith and another wing of hope, we can soar heavenly. Besides, where Jesus is, it is heaven there. Here on the East coast we have the Atlantic ocean, and on the weekends people like to go to the beach. Suppose we get a boat ride and leave the shore further and further away. How much water is beneath you? We may not know, but the important thing is that you know you are in the water. Similarly, although we cannot give a quantitative report on God's love to us, we know that is the important part. I thought that Mariana Trench is supposedly the deepest part of the ocean water, which is about seven miles deep. If it is possible to put Mt. Everette into Mariana Trench, you still have more than a mile of water above the peak. That is how deep that thing is. But God's love is deeper than that.

Some years ago there was a teacher from Taiwan who came to Richmond in October. Now it is difficult for a teacher to take time off in the middle of the school year, but her daughter, who was attending a local school here, did something that her mother felt she must come to talk to her face to face. But the daughter felt bad in talking to her mother so she sneaked into the bedroom and disappeared. Now this lady had no friends in Richmond. Somebody told her there was a Chinese Christian in town, and that is how I met her. I took her to all the places where her daughter might be found, but no luck. It was getting dark, so I told her maybe we should quit for the day and continue the next day. But before we went home we dropped by the police station to file a missing person report. But It turned out that she was over eighteen so we could not file her as a missing person. But the policeman was very kind: "If we hear anything we will give you a call." So I left my telephone number with them. In the middle of the night there was a phone call, "They found her roaming endlessly on I 64, and the worst thing that could happen happened. She was beaten up, and she ended up in MCV Hospital. When I went to pick up the mother, I hardly recognized her. While we were asleep apparently she was crying nonstop, and her face was all swollen. Have you ever met a parent with a missing child? She had agony written all over her face, but the mother was so eager to see the daughter again. When we arrived, we found out that she had left a note at the front desk that she did not want to see her mother. So what do we do now? So I became the go-between, and I will never forget. Her mother told me in no uncertain terms, "Tell her, no matter what has happened, I still love her." So I went to the daughter and told her, "You do not need to go through all these dramas. Your mother already loves you unconditionally. No matter what happened, she still loves you." I do not know anybody here today that has not talked to God for a while, but God wants me to pass this message to you, "No matter what happened before, He still loves you unconditionally. No matter what has happened, He still loves you unconditionally."

Let's pray:

Lord, You know our condition and know our needs. And we thank You that You chose not to focus on our imperfection. Instead, You look at our faith, submission and obedience, no matter how little they are. You always treat all believers with tender care and affection, right down to the present. and we thank You. In Jesus name. Amen.