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## EPH 3:14-21 : AN APOSTOLIC PRAYER [9]

*No. EE17*

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**W**e are still looking at the second petition of this prayer in Eph 3. Last time we considered the two concepts *to grasp* and *to know*. We saw that the former verb had to do primarily with mental insight into a truth, and the latter more with experiencing it.

We now take a look in v.18 at what it is that Paul wishes the Ephesians - and therefore also us - to understand more fully. *His prayer is that they should keep on growing in their understanding of the wonders of Christ's love for them.*

### THE DIMENSIONS OF CHRIST'S LOVE

It is the apostle's prayer that the Ephesians may grasp how *wide* and *long* and *high* and *deep* the love of Christ is. They need to grow in their knowledge of the multi-dimensional character of this love. Of course, the apostle realises that nobody can fully grasp it (the next verse does indeed say that it surpasses knowledge). But this should not prevent us from pleading with the Lord for more and more insight, and a deeper experience.

#### The width of Christ's love

We are concerned here with the extent of Christ's love, something to which the New Testament attaches great importance. It is certainly a non-negotiable principle. Think of Jesus' great command that disciples should be made "of all nations". Think of Col 3:11: "Here there is no Greek or Jew,

circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all". Moreover the book of Revelation rejoices in the fact that God's people in the hereafter will be made up of people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 14:6; 21:24-26).

Let us never forget, Christ is the universal Redeemer and King. He has loved ones worldwide! That is why one and all can identify with Him: miserable lepers in India; American billionaires in Los Angeles; illiterate pigmies in Central Africa; Nobel prize-winners at Harvard and Princeton; doll-playing girls in Chili; old men in wheelchairs in Japan; merino farmers of Carnarvon; slender members of London's Royal Ballet.

- Because the Lord's love is so *wide*, the gospel is to be preached to all nations before the advent of Christ. Surely, we must harness the technological explosion to spread the gospel and to build up the church. If the sovereign God could use Nebuchadnezzar 2500 years ago for the furthering of his plan, why not Bill Gates in these times?

- The *width* of Christ's love makes special demands of his church. In view of the great diversity within the worldwide church it is of the utmost importance that we recognise, understand and hold on to the absolutes - the foundation stones - of our faith. This was never truer than in today's global village. Otherwise we stand in danger of falling into one of two traps: Either to create our own unholy exclusivism which elevates aspects of secondary importance to acid tests for purity of faith. Or we get lost in a religious world of immeasurable diversity and soon become so myopic that we embrace all manner of heresies propagated by the false church.

#### The length of Christ's love

Probably Paul is referring here to the eternal and timeless love of Christ.

Do we sufficiently appreciate the fact that the

love of the Lord Jesus on the cross was the basis for the salvation of every single person who has been saved since the fall? Old Testament believers were justified by a faith which looked forward to the promised Lamb of God; we are saved by a faith which looks back to Him. Do we appreciate that his love did not dry up after Calvary, but that we are even now being kept by Christ's High Priestly intercession? And have we embraced the fact that there will never come a time in all eternity that we will be able to cope without it?

Is Rm 8:35-39 written on your heart? "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship ... 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 ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Things may be going well for you now, but the time may come very soon when you will need to cling desperately to these words about the love of Christ - if only on your deathbed. Paul also knows it, hence this prayer.

- If you are one of those whom the Father entrusted to the Son (Jn 6:37, 39; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 24), do you know when it is that our Lord Jesus Christ started loving you? From before the creation of the earth! When the three Persons of the Trinity entered into the covenant of salvation in order to glorify themselves through the salvation of sinners, our names were entered in the book of life, the book of the Lamb (Rev 13:8; 17:8). Jeremiah was told, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3).

You need to understand this very clearly: God did not start loving you only when you said "Yes" to Him. No, you bent your knees and your neck to Him because He first loved you (1Jn 4:19).

Many of us can testify of the radical effects this truth has upon a person's life once something of its full implications dawns upon him or her. Paul also knows it, hence this prayer.

## The depth of Christ's love

Some interpret this as meaning that no sinner can sink so low that Christ's love is incapable of saving him or her. This is true of course, but I think Paul is thinking here more of the price that Christ had to pay for our redemption.

According to Phil 2:5-11 the depth of Christ's love for us came to expression in two ways. Firstly He did not consider equality with God something to be held on to, but for our sakes made Himself nothing by taking on the very nature of a servant (6-7). Secondly, he humbled Himself to suffer scorn and torture for the sake of our salvation (8).

- How can we ever begin to understand the full extent of the Son's sacrifice when He became man? The One who had been above time since all eternity, the One who created time, became subject to all of time's limitations. The Unchangeable became changeable. The Creator and Sustainer of all became dependent. The Omnipotent became weak. The Immortal came to die. The Heir and Lord of the universe became a servant!

When John writes that the Word became "flesh" (Jn 1:14), he is not merely saying that the Word became a human being or that He took on the body of a human being. The Greek word he uses is almost too shocking, too crude to be applied to the eternal Son of God. It literally means that He became *meat*, indicating humanness in its weakness, its dependence and its mortality. The Creator of heaven and earth entered the physical, mundane world of ordinary mortals, in fact, became one of them!

In Rm 8:3 Paul makes a shocking statement which takes him to the brink of blasphemy. He says that God sent his Son "in the likeness of sinful man". The apostle could definitely have put it more mildly, but he wants to drive a point home. He wants to emphasise the fact that Jesus Christ became a human being in the fullest sense of the word. His identification and solidarity with us was absolute. He

became as close to sinful man as possible - without becoming a sinner himself. Like the writer of the Hebrew letter says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin" (Hb 4:15).

What Paul prays for here is for the Ephesians to understand more and more of Christ's love - so that it would change them in their innermost being.

- What shall we say about Christ's suffering? The humiliation of becoming human and being human! Gethsemane! The cross!

As penal substitute He took upon Himself the sins of millions. He became sin for them (2Cor 5:21). He bore God's wrath against every sin of each of his loved ones for whom He assumed responsibility before creation. How little do we understand his exclamation of utter loneliness, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

Enough said. But let us often and prayerfully contemplate this. The Holy Spirit will certainly enlighten us. This is what Paul is praying for.

## The height of Christ's love

Here Paul is probably thinking of the wonders of our inheritance in Christ - the heights to which His salvation takes us. We see that in both our present privileges and our eternal glory.

- In 1Sam 2:8 we read, "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour ... " Is this not how millions experience it? Nothing lifts us like the truth of the gospel, biblical disciplines and the rule of Christ. Even the plainest of Christians who are solidly anchored in the love of Christ can comfortably associate with the nobility.

This is because Rom 8:16-17 has become a reality in our lives. Literally the Greek language says

that *the Spirit testifies in us that we are co-heirs with Christ, because we are co-sufferers with Him, with the result that we will be co-glorified with Him.*

Concerning our current inheritance in Christ we could say much - but space does not permit.

With regard to our eternal salvation a single quotation will suffice: "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 22:3-5).

## CONCLUSION

Most of us, when we pray, tend to plead that our love for Christ may grow. And of course there is nothing wrong with that - on the contrary! But Paul has insight which many of us lack. He knows something that you and I should learn in the here and now, something of immensely practical value: *my love for Christ grows to the extent that I delight in his love for me!*

When you see a person who denies him or herself and follows Christ with uncompromising love and dedication, you see someone who knows more than the average of Christ's love for sinners.

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