
EPH 3:14-21 : AN APOSTOLIC PRAYER [10]

No. EE20

We are looking here for the last time at the second part of this prayer - the part dealing with the way we understand and experience God's love for us.

We have seen that Paul uses two concepts in this prayer which at first sight appear to mean the same thing but are not really synonyms: *to grasp* (18) and *to know* (19). The first term has to do more with cognitive knowledge; the second with the way we experience it - in this case Christ's love.

Last time we looked in v.18 at those dimensions of Christ's love which we as human beings can more readily *understand* - its width, length, depth and height. We now look at v.19a, in which Paul prays that the Ephesians may *experience* Christ's love.

LOVE THAT SURPASSES ALL KNOWLEDGE

□ It is necessary to emphasise again that Paul's prayer here is not that the Ephesians may have more love for the Lord. Of course he wants that, but this is not what he is praying for in this instance. What he *is* praying for is that they will grow in their understanding of *God's love for them!*

He knows that a person's love for Christ increases to the extent that he delights in Christ's love for him!

□ The apostle makes a paradoxical statement. He wants the Ephesians - and therefore also us - to get to know something that surpasses all knowledge. He employs an interesting word (Gr.

hyperballo) which, translated literally, means "to throw right over." It is like Jonathan who shot an arrow over the head of David to warn him.

What the apostle is therefore trying to get across is that we will never be able to *fully* comprehend and experience Christ's love for us. There will always be *more* of it. But that should not stop us from pursuing it to an ever fuller extent.

We are therefore concerned here with progression in a process which never comes to an end - *experiencing the love of Jesus*.

CHRISTIANS ARE ALLOWED TO FEEL

□ Many devout churchgoers hesitate when you start talking about Christian feelings and experience. Why are some of the Lord's people so wary of emotion when it comes to our relationship with God? There are mainly two reasons, it seems to me.

Some have an aversion to hearing people witness about intense spiritual experiences. This is so because it reveals to them that they themselves do not have a love-relationship with Christ. They might be very orthodox, but an orthodoxy which does not walk with the Lord is dead.

Others, on the other hand, recoil from Christian experience because of an overreaction to emotionalism - something which is unfortunately rampant in too many circles.

□ The apostles teach us however to maintain a sensitive balance when it comes to emotions. No one can doubt that the New Testament insists on pure doctrine. But emotion also enjoys a prominent place. Just consider a few of the many incidences. They describe intense experiential faith, and most certainly in some cases intense emotion.

Jn 15:9-11: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love ... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Rm 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness,

peace and joy in the Holy Spirit..."

In Ephesians Paul calls on us not to live a life given to drunkenness and debauchery but rather to be filled with the Holy Spirit, which will bring its own joys - praise and hymns and mutual love (Eph 5:17-6:9).

Peter too understood: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy..." (1Pet 1:8).

It stands to reason that the early believers also experienced that which God's people in the Old Testament had known only too well. One example will suffice: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever" (Ps 73:25-26).

Throughout church history the lives of God's children have been characterized by profound experiences. We find this over and again in their biographies. And almost always it had to do in one way or another with the realisation of the unmerited and free grace of our Father in Christ!

We need only consider our own experience. Do you remember the time when you discovered the doctrine of sovereign grace - when you saw it against the backdrop of your total inability to meet God's standards? The wonder, the awe, the joy! And to this day, is it not so, hardly anything touches one more profoundly than feasting on this truth.

And this, more than anything else, gives birth to a reciprocal love in us for Him. Paul understands this, and therefore prays as he does.

HOW CAN I GROW IN MY APPRECIATION AND EXPERIENCE OF CHRIST'S LOVE FOR ME?

Firstly I need to understand that my expectation that the Lord must do something, on the one hand, and the acceptance of my responsibility, on the other, are not contradictory.

This is one of the most fundamental principles of the Christian life. God uses means, and I myself am his

first instrument to bring about the answers to my prayers. It is *I myself* who must work out my salvation with fear and trembling, *for* it is God who works in me to will and to act according to his good purpose (Phl 2:12-13).

Secondly, I need to grow in my insight into the perfect standards that God sets for man. I must get an in-depth understanding of his law.

How is this possible, you say? One wants to grow in one's understanding of his loving grace - not shudder with fear of his unattainable standards!

God deals with us in wonderful ways - so often quite paradoxical. This is how it works. To the extent to which I understand God's standards, to that extent do I appreciate how totally dependent I am on his saving grace - and to that extent his inexpressible love for me in Christ touches my heart.

Preaching the holy justice of God may totally discourage a non-believer (and the more this happens, the closer he gets to the Kingdom), but true believers grow in their understanding and experience of Christ's love for them - and therefore in their love for Him.

Thirdly, I need to remember that God reveals Himself to us through the means of grace.

The means of grace are the channels that God has instituted and is using to let his grace flow into our lives. There are more, but in the holy pursuit we are considering, prayer, Bible study and the preaching of the Word are the most important.

Without regular and persistent *prayer* we have no hope of advancing a single step towards getting to know God. And at the heart of our knowledge of God lies our understanding and experience of his love for us in Christ. Ask and keep on asking, even a thousand times per year, for the triune God to reveal Himself to you more and more - in Christ and through his Word. It pleases Him exceedingly when we hunger and thirst after Him. Truly, to know Him is our highest calling.

Bible study goes hand in hand with prayer,

because it is in the Word where we find God's self-revelation. Trying to get to know Him by any other means would be an exercise in futility. It would soon leave me floundering without an anchor on a sea of subjectivism and mysticism. Without God's Word as basis and guideline, there is no certainty. In fact, I am bound to become totally misled, and very quickly too. Let us then make sure that the way we experience Christ is indeed Scriptural.

Today few things in the church are as underrated as *preaching*. This is in direct contrast with the teaching of the New Testament and the history of the church. The preaching of the Word has always played a vital role in the edification of God's children.

Take for instance the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers mentioned in Eph 4:11. Surely these are first and foremost preachers. And look what their ministries deposit in the lives of their hearers: "knowledge of the Son of God" (4:13) and growing up "into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (4:15).

Do not rest, therefore, until you find a place where you can listen every Sunday to preaching that builds you up in the most holy faith. Just remember, real preaching is not made up of a few sentimental and moralistic stories, but is God-centred and Christ-focussed teaching of the Word - followed by the application of the text to the Christian's everyday life.

Fourthly, make sure that you live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Without the Holy Spirit our prayers, our Bible reading and our preaching are lifeless.

Just remember that our quest to live full of the Spirit has two components. On the positive side we must pray for it ceaselessly. We have the wonderful mandate of our Lord Jesus Himself in the parable of the persistent friend in Lk 11:5-13. On the negative side it should be our earnest desire not to offend the Holy Spirit. Scripture gives us clear warnings. Sin grieves Him (Eph 4:30). And contempt for his work extinguishes his fire (1Ts 5:19).

Fifthly, seek the Lord himself, not just the truth about Him.

Embrace this truth with both arms: God wants to reveal Himself to you and walk with you. See how central this is in his Old Testament promises about the Messianic dispensation (Hos 2:18-19; Jer 31:31-34). And be assured that there is nothing that pleases Him more than revealing to you his loving grace in Christ.

Make God *personally* the object of your quest. The Giver, not just his gifts! Can there be a greater insult to anybody, than being interested in him just for what you can get out of him?

Sixthly, persist in a lifelong search after the knowledge of God in the face of Christ.

There is no terminus on this road. There is always something more. In fact, the search for and acquiring of the knowledge of God - and accordingly a deeper experience of the love of Christ - is one of the main ingredients of a Christian life which never gets boring.

THE HIGHEST AMBITION

Let us close with a single call from the prophet Hosea: "Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth" (6:3, ESV).

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