



TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

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COMPREHENDING THE LOVE OF CHRIST

EPHESIANS 3:18–19A

IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW HOW TO START ADDRESSING such a sublime passage as Ephesians 3:16–19. In the opening words of his message on verse 16, nineteenth century expositor Alexander Maclaren stated:

In no part of Paul's letters does he rise to a higher level than in his prayers, and none of his prayers are fuller of fervour than this wonderful series of petitions. They open out one into the other like some majestic suite of apartments in a great palace-temple, each leading into a loftier and more spacious hall, each drawing nearer the presence-chamber, until at last we stand there.¹

Indeed, no other prayer of Paul rises higher in content than this one. In fact, this prayer is one of the highest mountain peaks in all Scripture.

It should be carefully noted that Paul is concerned with the *spiritual*, not the *material*. That is, in fact, an underlying principle of Paul's life. Before we deal with what he *did* pray for, ponder for a moment what he did *not* pray for. First, he did not pray for himself. He did not ask for a change in his circumstances, nor did he ask for any physical thing for himself. Second, Paul did not pray some "general prayer" for other believers. We often hear "generic prayers," such as: "Lord, bless all the missionaries," or, "Lord, bless everyone in our church." In contrast, Paul prayed for specific spiritual realities in the lives of God's people. Third, Paul did not even pray so much for material things for others, rather spiritual realities.

Now, then, what *did* Paul pray for. Amazingly, four petitions progressively build upon one another. We can present them this way: *Paul prays that they would be strengthened by the Spirit, so that Christ may indwell by faith, so that they may comprehend Christ's love, so that they may be filled with the fullness of God.*

What a truth! We shall come back to this fact repeatedly in our study. As Alexander Maclaren again puts it: "Each [petition] is the cause of the following and the result of the preceding."² Like Paul, these are the petitions pastors should be praying for their people.

While I address all four of these in detail in my exposi-

tion of Ephesians just recently released (*The Christian's Wealth and Walk*), it is the third petition that captured my fascination, not only because of its sublimity but also because it has oddly generated some debate: **May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.** As the second petition flows from the first, the third flows from the second. Paul prays for the Christian's *comprehension*. While the English reader thinks of "understanding" when he reads the word **comprehend**, the Greek, *katalambanō*, is much stronger. The root *lambanō* means to grasp or seize, and the prefix *kata* (down from, throughout, according to, toward) then intensifies it. The full idea, then, is "to lay hold of so as to make one's own, to obtain, attain to, to take into one's self, to seize upon, take possession of" (Augustus Strong).

It has been debated, however, what exactly Paul refers to when he says **comprehend**. Some say he does not specify in verse 18 what we are to comprehend, so various suggestions have been offered: the Church, redemption, the mystery, the wisdom of God, and the like. But the object in view is clearly stated in verse 19—**the love of Christ**. In verse 17 Paul dealt with *our* love for Christ. He now speaks of *Christ's* love for us. It is this that Paul prayed for his readers—that they might truly lay hold of the truth of the love Christ *had* and *has* for us, that they might seize upon this truth and make it their very own. While many today speak of "God's love," few understand what it really means, so it is for this comprehension that Paul prays.

Notice also that Paul says **all saints** are to **comprehend** this truth. As we have noted before, **all** Christians are **saints**, not just a select few or those who have been "canonized" by the Church. So, such laying hold of this truth and making it our own is for every believer.

To help accomplish this, Paul depicts Christ's love as having four dimensions: **breadth, length, depth, and height**. Here is one of the profoundest truths of Scripture. That is why I found the following comment by one expositor very odd: Paul "is probably not thinking of anything special to be associated with each." I must disagree because *words always mean something*. While this and other similar comments are thank-

fully the minority opinion among commentators, they are nonetheless puzzling and troubling. For example, R. C. H. Lenski writes, "We are not to interpret the four dimensions but only the vastness of this love," and William Hendricksen adds, "Here, as I see it, the expositor should be on his guard. He should not pluck this expression apart, so that a separate meaning is ascribed to each of these dimensions." But on what do they base such a view? Certainly not the text! Yes, the idea is the vastness of God's love, but each dimension clearly pictures a separate aspect of this vastness. If words are not important, why does Paul not just write, "Might be able to comprehend with all saints what is the vastness?"

So, for our "tough text" this month, I would submit that while taken *together* these show the all-encompassing nature of Christ's love, each one *individually* demonstrates a unique dimension of it. Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes another observation of why these dimensions are important:

I am convinced that the Apostle Paul specified these particular measurements in order to encourage the Ephesians, and us through them, to work this out in our minds. To meditate upon the love of God in an abstract manner is not very profitable. We have to work it out in detail as it has been revealed.³

In other words, the concept of "the love of God" is so broad, so wide, so expansive, that it is necessary to look at its separate dimensions if we are going to have any understanding of it at all. We should also note that each of these is illustrated somewhere in Paul's previous thoughts in the letter.

The "Breadth" of Christ's Love

Breadth is *platos*, which is used figuratively here (and Rev. 20:9) to mean the great expanses of the earth,⁴ so the **breadth** of Christ's love shows the *extent* of His love, that is, just how all-encompassing it is. This extent of Christ's love is in view back in 2:11-18, which declares God's acceptance of Jew *and* Gentile equally in Christ. Remember that the Jews thought salvation was only for them. The Jews had been *told* of Jehovah's love, but they never *understood* the extent of that love. God's love is upon all people without distinction. Revelation 5:9 also declares the **breadth** of Christ's love in that he "redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation." In 7:9 John again records what he saw as the result of this **breadth** of love, namely, *worship*:

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

Indeed, how we should praise and worship Him for His love!

The "Length" of God's Love

Length is *mēkos*, which simply speaks of length and pictures here the *duration* of Christ's love; that is, it shows that His love is eternal. The love of Christ for us spans eternity past and future. As we discovered in 1:4, God loved us in

eternity *past*: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." We then read in 2:4 and 7 of His love in eternity *future*: "for his great love wherewith he loved us. . . . That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus." What a beautiful thought God conveyed to Jeremiah the prophet: "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3). As many scientists consider time to be the "fourth dimension," so it is that God's love for His people transcends the physical universe to include time itself. Time is a created reality, and so it is that God loved His people before time existed, and he will love them after time ceases.

Ponder another truth: *God's love is a constant*. Man's so-called "love," on the other hand, is variable and terribly fickle. A child might get angry at a brother, sister, or even parent and say, "I don't love you anymore." Many divorces are based simply on the grounds, "I just fell out of love with her [or him]." Such an attitude demonstrates how clueless many are of true love. But the antithesis of that is that God's love is an unwavering constant; His love is consistent, faithful, and reliable, always the same. God will not love us any less tomorrow than He does today or any more today than He did yesterday, because He loves us with an infinite love. So, the length of His love is an unbroken line from eternity past to eternity future.

The story of the prodigal son perfectly illustrates (Lk. 15:11-32). That foolish young fellow spurned his father's love and went his own way. Despite that, however, his father loved him and showered him with blessing upon his return. Likewise, God's love is always waiting for us. It never wavers, weakens, or wilts.

Consider also Paul's discussion of this in Romans 8. He asks, "What shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (v. 35). He then goes through a list of things we might think can separate us from this love but then concludes, "[Nothing] shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39). How tragic it is that there are many who refuse to accept the fact of the security of the believer when the Word of God clearly says *nothing* can separate us from Him. As the Lord Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:27-28). *That is eternal love, from the past to the future and for that little brief period called "time."*

All this truth is not only a *grand encouragement*, but it is also a *great exhortation*. Oh, how dreadfully fickle we are in our spiritual affections! Personal desire often outweighs spiritual desire; worldly values are allowed to overpower spiritual values. But seeing the length of Christ's love should shame us. Dear Christian, be encouraged to "love Him because He first loved [you]" (1 Jn. 4:19).

The "Depth" of Christ's Love

Depth is *bathos*, which metaphorically means greatness, immensity, profoundness, inscrutability, and abstruseness.⁵ Paul uses this word in Romans 11:33-34 to show that God's riches are unfathomable, as are His judgments. Paul also uses this word in 1 Corinthians 2:10, "For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep [i.e., unfathomable] things of God." So,

the **depth** of Christ's love shows us the *condescension* of His love; that is, it demonstrates that God has reached down from His level to ours. This dimension is indeed the most wonderful of the four. As 2:1–3 makes vividly clear, it is impossible for man to be any lower or more depraved than he already is. "But God" (v. 4) has reached down and redeemed man through His love and grace. We have often heard the excuse, "Oh, I am too great a sinner to come to God." But that is utterly impossible! Every sinner is just as depraved as another.

At this point, some say, "But surely a mass-murderer is more sinful than a person who lives a moral life." No! While a mass-murderer has committed more "sins," or certain sins that seem more heinous, a moral person is *positionally* just as depraved in heart and life. A person is not lost and on his way to hell because of individual "sins," rather because of the one "sin" of unbelief, the sin of rejecting the message of Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:36; 16:8–9; etc.). This thought takes us back to the first dimension ("breadth"): God's *love* must be all-encompassing because *sin* is all-encompassing.

But if I may go one step deeper, consider Philippians 2:8: "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." What a staggering truth! Christ was always God, co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But He willfully set aside His heavenly residence and reached down to His creation that had become totally depraved. Why did He do that? *Because He loved us.* This truth is even more astounding when we remember that there was absolutely nothing lovable about us. Romans 1:21–32 and 3:10–18 are two other passages that clearly outline man's wickedness. But praise be to God that *His love* is deeper than *our depravity*.

The "Height" of Christ's Love

Height is *hupsos*, which figuratively means elevation and dignity. It appears, for example, in James 1:9–10—"Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation"—meaning that "the poor, in contrast to the rich, are lifted up on high by God."⁶ The **height** of Christ's love, then, shows the *position* to which the believer has been elevated; that is, it demonstrates God's ultimate and final purpose for us. Not only has Christ's love come down to us, but it also elevates us to a new and exalted position.

Notice 2:6 once again: "And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Think of it! Christ loves us so much that He has actually joined us to Himself. Think of it! *We have been raised from the depth of our sin to the height of His glory.* Consider one other related passage (1 Jn. 3:1–3):

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.

Oh, to what greater height could we possibly be elevated!

Commentators Jamison, Fausset, and Brown summarize these four dimensions with this observation: "The breadth

implies Christ's worldwide love, embracing all men; the length, its extension through all ages (v. 21); the depth, its profound wisdom, which no creature can fathom (Rom. 11:33); the height, its being beyond the reach of any foe to deprive us of it." John R. W. Stott also writes: "The love of Christ is 'broad' enough to encompass all mankind (especially Jew and Gentile, the theme of these chapters), 'long' enough to last for eternity, 'deep' enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and 'high' enough to exalt him to heaven."⁷ And once again, Alexander Maclaren exposit:

What is the breadth of the love of Christ? It is broad as mankind, it is narrow as myself. . . . The length of the love of Christ is the length of eternity, and out-measures all human sin. . . . The depths of Christ's love go down beneath all human necessity, sorrow, suffering, and sin . . . and this is the height of His love, that it bears us, if we will, up and up to sit upon that throne where He Himself is enthroned.

Think of it! In whatever direction we look, we see the love of our Lord!

It is all this that is behind Paul's statement: **And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge. Knowledge** is *ginōsis*, "experiential knowledge." **Passeth** is *huperballō*, a compound comprised of *ballō*, "to cast," and *huper*, "above, over, beyond," and so literally "to throw beyond the usual mark" and figuratively "to surpass." Think of it! *God wants us to comprehend (lay hold of, seize upon, make our very own) that which is beyond knowing.*

But wait! How can we know the unknowable or comprehend the incomprehensible? Is this contradictory? Indeed not. God wants us to know what cannot be known by the *natural man*, what cannot be known apart from the Spirit's working. As Paul told the Corinthians, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Arthur W. Pink put it well:

But since the love of Christ is so transcendent and mysterious, so infinite and incomprehensible, how can it be comprehended and known by us? Completely and perfectly it cannot, yet truly and satisfyingly it may be. Christ's love to us is discovered in the Word of truth, and as the Holy Spirit enlightens our understanding we are capacitated to apprehend something of its wonders and blessedness.⁸

So, the full meaning of Paul's statement is: *while we are constantly learning, no matter how much of Christ's love we experience or how much of His Word we know, there are still oceans of love our experience has never touched.* This is to me the greatest blessing of the Christian life: *no matter how much we see and know, there is always more.* Meditate a moment on that third stanza of John W. Peterson's "Isn't the Love of Jesus Something Wonderful!":

Love beyond our human comprehending,
Love of God in Christ—how can it be!
This will be my theme and never ending,
Great redeeming love of Calvary.

Indeed, can we possibly comprehend a love that encompasses

the world, a love that spans the ages, a love that spans all time? Can we comprehend the greatness, immensity, dignity, position, and profoundness of God? Do you remember Zophar, one of Job's critics? He also spoke of God's multiple dimensions and God's secret wisdom, although he didn't apply it to himself: "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as *high* as heaven; what canst thou do? *deeper* than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is *longer* than the earth, and *broader* than the sea" (Job 11:7-9, emphasis added). Like Paul, Zophar spoke of God's multiple dimensions. We should also recognize, however, that while God here reveals the four dimensions of His love, there are dimensions to God we cannot possibly perceive. This challenges us never to deny God's sovereignty or question Him about what He is doing and why He is doing it. Yes, we see here four dimensions, but how many more are there?

Dr. J. D. Watson

NOTES

- ¹ Alexander Maclaren. *Ephesians*, Vol. 13 of *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (Baker Book House, 1982), 132.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ: An Exposition of Ephesians 3:1 to 21* (Baker, 1980), 221-22.
- ⁴ Spiros Zodhiatus, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (AMG Publishers, 1992), 1167.
- ⁵ Zodhiatus, 307.
- ⁶ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley - "Little Kittle") (Eerdmans, 1985), 1242.
- ⁷ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (InterVarsity, 1979), 137.
- ⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings from Paul* (Moody Press, 1967), 179.

ANOTHER EXCERPT FROM:

The Christian's Wealth and Walk: An Expository Commentary on Ephesians

WHILE the first half of Ephesians 3 concerns "The *Explanation* of the Mystery" (vv. 1-12), the second half offers "The *Encouragement* to the Saints" (vv. 12-21). Interestingly, verse 12 not only *ends* the first half, but it also *begins* the second: "In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him." The content of this closing passage is the second of two prayers. The first (1:15-23) can be summarized as a prayer for *appreciation*; that is, Paul prayed that God's people will realize and appreciate all the riches they have in Christ. This second prayer is one of *application*; Paul prayed that God's people will now *practice* what they *appreciate*, that they will be what God desires them to be. It is impossible, indeed, to apply something to our lives if we do not appreciate it. One expositor contrasts these two prayers: "[Paul's] first prayer is for believers to know their power; the second is for them to use it. Two things a pastor should be most concerned about are telling his people they are in Christ and then urging them to live like it. In other words, the pastor helps members of the flock understand their spiritual power, and then he motivates them to use it. Like the apostle Paul in this letter, the faithful pastor seeks to bring his people to the place of maximum power as full-functioning Christians." It is one thing to tell the people something, but it is quite another to help them use it. As we saw in our study of preaching, this is what preaching is all about—the *exposition* and *application* of Truth. That is what the pastor is called to do.

We should also notice something very important in Paul's prayers. His most significant prayers have been dubbed "Paul's prison prayers," those recorded in the Prison Epistles. Two of them are here in Ephesians, one appears in Philippians 1:9-11, and one more appears in Colossians 1:9-12. Significantly, they all address *spiritual realities* rather than *material needs*. While there is nothing wrong with praying for physical needs, this is often the primary emphasis. Much of the teaching on prayer is shallow because it fails to point out that prayer should ultimately lead to spiritual results. In fact, when we do see Paul pray for something *physical*, we find that the final result is actually *spiritual*.

Verses 12-13 are not actually part of Paul's prayer rather a "prelude." The reason for the prelude is because after their reading about the sublime purpose of the Church, Paul fears that his readers might be so overcome by awe that they might shrink away from personally applying this truth to their own lives. Perhaps they were thinking, "How can these amazing truths, these unreachable riches, these grand mysteries apply to us?" So Paul reassures them with what these truths mean to all believers personally. In this chapter, and the three that follow, we will examine a fourfold thrust: The *Attitudes* of Prayer (vv. 12-13); The *Approach* to Prayer (vv. 14-15); The *Appeal* of Prayer (vv. 16-19); and The *Ascription* of Praise (vv. 20-21).

AN EXCERPT FROM: *SEEK HIM EARLY: DAILY DEVOTIONAL STUDIES ON KNOWING, LOVING, AND SERVING OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST*

Praying in Jesus' Name (AUGUST 15)

And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it. (Jn. 14:13-14)

IN my early years of ministry, I taught in a Christian school. One of the students often commented that he didn't understand why we need to pray in Jesus' name, so he ended his prayers with, "In Jesus' name we pray, because we're supposed to, Amen." Thankfully, he came to understand the reasons why, but his earlier perplexity is actually shared by many.

Far worse, some think this phrase is simply a magic formula that ensures we will get what we pray for, even obligating God to give it, no matter what it is. It's hard to think for even a moment that such an attitude comes from a heart that truly loves God. Those who lovingly commune with Him will understand three reasons we pray in Jesus' name.

First, it means to pray in *accordance* with God's *purpose*. As our Lord made clear in "The Model Prayer," we pray in this manner: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Every request we make must be consistent with God's will and the purposes of His kingdom. The Apostle John understood this principle: "If we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" (1 Jn. 5:14). I know of no uninspired writer who puts it as well as did Robert Law: "Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man's will done in heaven, but for getting God's will done on earth." Our Lord's words, **If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it**, must not be divorced from His will and ways.

Second, praying in Jesus' name means to pray *admitting* our *poverty*. While the world (and sadly many in Christianity) believe in and live a life of *self-sufficiency*, the godly Christian's attitude is one of *Christ-dependency*. The latter is simply because of our spiritual poverty, recognizing that we have nothing in ourselves and depend upon Him to supply every need (Matt. 6:25-32; Phil. 4:19).

Third, praying in Jesus' name means to pray *acknowledging* God's *praise*. Once again, a misunderstanding of many is that prayer is primarily for our good, just getting things from God. I still recall a book on prayer I was required to read in Bible college in which the author insists that prayer is only about asking—it's not about praise, adoration, meditation, humiliation, or confession—just asking and nothing else. But even the most cursory look at the seven Greek words used for prayer in the NT reveals several of its aspects, including intercession, supplication, requests, and giving of thanks.

Our text, therefore, underscores the ultimate reason for prayer: we **ask . . . that the Father may be glorified in the Son** by the answer. We align our requests with the Father's own goal of glorifying His Son. To pray in Jesus' name is to concern ourselves with His person, His purposes, and His preeminence.

Scriptures for Study: What do the following verses tell us about prayer: John 15:7; 16:23, 26; 1 John 3:22; 5:14?

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The Christian's Wealth and Walk: An Expository Commentary on Ephesians

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

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