

Text: Eph. 3:13-19

Title: "How Big Is God's Love?"

Time: 2/18/2024

Place: NBBC

Introduction: I am looking forward to being with brothers in Christ in OH in a couple of weeks, but I do miss home when I am away. One of the thoughts of home that I always have when I am traveling comes to me early on Wednesday morning. That is when some of us men normally get together for our weekly men's prayer time. I miss that time when I am away, and I am encouraged on those trips by the thought that brothers are home praying for me.

I think to a man, the group that prays together during that time would tell you that it is a spiritually strengthening time. Our Wednesday morning does not start that way – we often start tired or cold or discouraged. But by the time the last man says, "Amen," God's Spirit has strengthened us. One of the explanations for that renewed strength, I believe, is that in our prayers we have taken some time to reflect on the magnitude of God's love for us in Christ.

The apostle Paul would not have found our experience surprising. He prayed for the Ephesians to have this spiritual strength, and when he did so he prayed that they would be able to comprehend God's love for them. I think this prayer of Paul tells us that we are strong spiritually when we know God's love for us, and we are less strong to the degree we have forgotten about God's love for us.

Note that truth from the passage with me. Paul prayed for weakened believers in danger of fainting (v. 13), and so he prayed that their inner man would be strengthened (v. 16). And it turns out that when this prayer is answered in a person's life, that person knows the love of Christ (v. 19), a love that passes understanding, a love that fills us with all the

fullness of God. As your pastor I pray every week this prayer for you.

So we can say with confidence that Paul prayed for Christians to be strengthened by understanding that God loves them. But more than that, he also prays that the Ephesian believers would understand *how much* God loves them. It is one thing to know that someone loves you; it is another to take the time to think about how much.

Paul tells the Ephesians how much God loves them by speaking about how big God's love for us is in verse 18. God's love for us in Christ is dimensionally huge. It has length and breadth and depth and height. Knowing these dimensions of God's love through His Spirit strengthens our inner man.

This morning I want us to spend some time thinking with the help of the Holy Spirit about the measurements of the huge dimensions of God's love for us. We are going to use the dimensions Paul mentions, breadth-length-depth-height, albeit in a different order, to think together about the answer to the question, "How big is God's love for us?"

I. Height: God's love for us is very high, for it has perfection in mercy that come from heaven (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:35-36).

Illustration: College basketball fans know the name *John Wooden*, as do many others who know nothing about basketball. John Wooden was the coach of the dominate UCLA Bruins for 27 years, a team that won a staggering 10 NCAA championships under his leadership.

Many looked up to Coach Wooden because of the moral qualities they saw exemplified in his life. He was married to his wife Nell for 53 years. She was the only girl he ever kissed. She died on March 21, 1985, and Wooden died more recently, but on the 21st of every month, as a token of his love to his

departed wife, Coach Wooden would write a love letter to her. Some quick math says he produced about 300 of these.

In the last year of his life, Wooden granted an interview to ESPN in which he spoke of the importance of love to a successful life. In that interview, Wooden called love “the most powerful force on earth.”

Application: Earthly human love may be the most powerful force on earth, but it is not the most powerful form of love. The most powerful form of love is higher than the earth; it is transcendent. It comes from heaven, not earth. Coming from the height of heaven, the love of God is more perfect and more merciful than any earthly love. God’s love is the love of *our perfect Father, who is in heaven* (Matt. 5); it is the love of *the Highest, who is a merciful Father* (Luke 6). To know the height of the love of God is to understand its heavenly power to transcend merely earthly love in perfection and mercy.

God’s love transcends earthly love especially in that God loves His enemies, not merely His family or friends: “for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45); “for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke 6:35). God loves us whether we are evil or good. He loves us every single day the sun comes up, and He does so in spite of our ingratitude and sin. It is a love that has heavenly perfection to overcome our lack of lovableness. It is mercy to love the undeserving, the sinful, the evil, and the unthankful. It is the power to love us.

The Psalms express the high, heavenly power of God’s love:

Ps. 103:11, “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him”;

Ps. 108:4, “For great is your love, higher than the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies.”

We know the height of the love of God when we realize that it is the love of the Most High God, which is the omnipotent heavenly love of a perfect and merciful Father. It is a love that can never be extinguished, even by the opposition and hatred of His enemies.

What this means for us this morning is that whether or not we are loved by God never depends on our lovable-ness. You and I are not lovable, but in spite of that awful truth, God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son to die for our sins (John 3:16). The hymn writer asked, "How can it be that God should love a soul like me?" The answer is that God's love is very high, more powerful than mere earthly love. His love is powerful enough to love an unlovable world – us included.

II. Depth: God's love for us is very deep, for it is rooted and grounded in Christ for the storms of life (Rom. 8:31-39).

Illustration: The oldest known trees were thought to be about 5000 years old until the discovery of a tree in Sweden dated to be 9550 years old. In his highly publicized 2014 debate with creationist Ken Ham, evolutionist Bill Nye used this tree to argue against the biblical account of the global flood. His point was that we should not have a tree that is 9550 years old if all the trees were wiped out by the flood more like 5000 years ago. What he did not explain in the debate was that the part of the tree in Sweden that was 9550 years old was its roots. For this kind of tree, the root system regenerates a new tree every 600 years or so. The tree could withstand even the global flood, because its roots went down deep.

Application: Paul refers to the depth of the love of God for us in his prayer for the strength of believers in Ephesians 3. He prays too that they would be rooted and grounded in this love. God's love for us is very deep, and that means that it provides for us deep roots that can ground us securely in the midst of the storm and flood of life's trials. Knowing this

depth, we must not ask, “Master, carest thou not that we perish?” This is Paul’s message for us in Rom. 8:32. There are roots of God’s love for us that run deep in this verse — “God spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all.” God’s love for us was deep enough to keep Him from sparing His own Son, whom He also loved very deeply. His love for us is as deep as His love for His own Son.

Jesus Himself rejoiced in the amazing truth that God loves us with the love that He has for His Son (John 17:23-26). As we contemplate that, our natural response is “Surely, God must love Christ more.” But oh the wonder of it all, Jesus says: “thou . . . hast loved them, *as thou hast loved me*”; and Paul confirms that His love for us was such that “He . . . spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all.”

Having done that, what act of love shall He withhold now? Or as Paul puts it, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” and “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect?”

In light of the knowledge of the depth of God’s love, it never makes sense to conclude that God has failed to love us, for He would never fail to love Christ. As he writes, Paul knew the depth of God’s love for him in Christ in spite of his imprisonment, and that gave him strength enough to be imprisoned.

Satan might have said to Paul that the fact he was in prison was evidence that God did not love him. He would have answered, “No — the evidence that He does love me is greater, for He spared not His own Son for me.” What form has Satan’s lie taken causing you to doubt whether God really loves you? Do we have Paul’s answer when we hear Satan’s lie? Do we understand that God’s love for us is as deep as His love for Christ? He spared not His own Son for you and me.

III. Breadth: God’s love for us is very wide – as far reaching as the sin of sinners (Rom. 5:6-8).

Illustration: It is the business of military men to stand in harm's way to protect our freedoms. They do so as patriots who believe their cause is just and their nation is good. When faced with the threat of the enemy, it is especially their love for one another and country that stiffens their defenses.

Application: The love of country demonstrated every day by our military personnel in harm's way is a truly wonderful love. It is exceptional, and the apostle Paul calls it that in verse 7 when he says, "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die." Every good soldier would risk his life to protect his brothers in battle. That is a daring and sacrificial love.

But Paul goes on to say that the love of God is more exceptional, because it reaches even wider than this kind of commendable love (v. 8): "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." It is while we were sinners that God loved us and Christ died for us. We were not His brothers, nor His countrymen, but His offenders.

A soldier's love can run cold when the cause seems no longer just or the country no longer good. Our nation experienced the effects of that truth to some degree during the Vietnam War. When iniquity abounds, man's love grows cold (Matt. 24:12).

God's love does not grow cold when iniquity abounds. There is no sinner that hates God too much to be beyond the reach of His love; there is no sin too dark to be beyond the reach of His love; there is no betrayal too harmful to be beyond the reach of God's love. God's love is as wide and as far-reaching as the sin of man. Where you find a sinner in sin, His love is there. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Where sin abounds, God's loving grace super-abounds in Jesus Christ.

Do you remember Jesus's love for Peter? He had boasted that though all men failed Christ, he would not. Jesus informed

him that he would soon deny that he even knew Him three times. Peter denied Christ in Jesus' darkest hour. Jesus still pursued Peter, giving him an opportunity to affirm his love once for each of those original denials. The breadth of God's love is wide, and it reaches further than the destruction of man's sin can reach.

IV. Length: God's love for us is very long – it is everlasting (note that time is the fourth dimension; Jer. 31:1-3).

Illustration: I mentioned the touching example of the love John Wooden had for his wife Nell and the ESPN interview that spoke of this. The interviewer for ESPN was a man named Rick Reily, who introduced his segment with some insights about the age in which we live. Here is what he said:

“You know, we live in an age of sand castle loyalties, of dissolvable love, of best friends forever at least until next-week's episode. And when I'm sure that nothing lasts anymore, and nothing means anything anymore, and nobody stays true anymore, there's one place I can always go to prove myself wrong – Coach Wooden's house.”

Application: Mr. Reily communicates a lot of insight about the world in which we live. The longing he speaks of is a longing for a love that lasts, a longing every human heart shares.

The problem with his solution, however, is that he can no longer go to Coach Wooden's house to be proven wrong, to find that example he seeks of everlasting love. Coach Wooden is not there anymore. He has passed away. Even the best of human love can endure for only so long, and then it is gone. And as temporal as human love is, it is equally fragile. Many in our day find no place they can go that can convince them that there is any such thing as an everlasting love.

But God's people know where to go to be convinced in this way. Paul tells us that God's love has this length. The prophet Jeremiah said the same (v. 3). God loves us with an everlasting love. May the Lord strengthen us in His love, in our world of "sand-castle loyalties, of dissolvable love, of best friends forever at least until next-week's episode."

Conclusion: Oftentimes, when I am in need of spiritual strength, I find it on a walk singing about God's love for me. I often sing, "I am His and He is mine." It is #66 in our hymnal.

Does the size of God's love give you spiritual strength this morning? Can you say, "I am His and He is mine"? Have you been led by grace this love to know? Has the Spirit taught you it is so?

Full peace, rapture divine, strength with might by God's Spirit in the inner man – these are the blessings that await you and I when we measure accurately the dimensions of God's love for us.

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*