

## Growing in Christ

### Part 6: 'This Love, this God'

The Apostle Paul was a teacher, pastor and passionate leader and as such his overwhelming desire was to see God's people grow in Christ. Here's just one of his passionate pleas in his letter to his old Church at Ephesus.

**Ephesians 3:17-19** " (I pray)... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

One of the most powerful forces on earth to bring us to into a Christ-like character is having a proper concept of God - how we truly see God; what we think God is really like! Our ability to love God as He desires us to love Him hinges on us having a proper concept of God. Those who have never experienced much human love often have a distorted view of God. The Bible tells us that we were created in the image of God, but unfortunately, some of us, in our imaginations, have been busy trying to create a God in our image, with all our limitations!

It's tragic but true that as many children have grown up, they have heard statements like, "If you do that, God won't love you." or "God's gonna get you!" With a picture in their minds of a God who is ready at every opportunity to dish out His wrath upon humanity, is it any wonder that as those children they grow they reject God? Their parents, or sadly even the Church, have introduced them to a God they cannot love! Some people like this do come to Jesus out of fear, but that kind of relationship seldom lasts! John Powell, in his book *Why Am I Afraid to Love*, says the following:

*"Fear is a fragile bond of union, a brittle basis of faith. The person who serves out of fear, without the realization of love, will try to bargain with God. He will do little things for God, make little offerings, say little prayers, etc., to embezzle a place in the heaven of his God. Life and faith will be a chess game, hardly an affair of love."*

How true his words are. I have seen it so many times and I have seen people set free from that fear too. The distorted and limited vision many people have of God is not at all the God revealed to us in the Bible and manifested to us through the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ! The Bible reveals to us the very nature of God:

1. God is holy (Leviticus 19:2)
2. God is light (1 John 1:5)
3. God is love (1 John 4:8,16)

These are not just attributes or character traits of God. This is the very substance and essence of God. He does not *have* holiness, God *is* holy. God does not *radiate* light, God *is* the source of light. God does not *have* love, God *is* love!

Paul tells us that if we are to be filled with all the fullness of God, we need to be able to comprehend or understand the greatness (the breadth, length, depth, and height) of God's love. Then after making such a statement, he concludes that "... the love of Christ ... surpasses knowledge." It is broader than the east is from the west. It is higher than the heavens, and deeper than the ocean. It knows no boundaries or limitations!

Literally thousands of books have been written in an attempt to help us understand this beautiful love, but when they are all compiled together, they still do little justice to this inexhaustible theme. That's what was on his mind in 1917 when Frederick Lehman wrote these words in his popular hymn, *The Love of God*:

*The love of God, is greater far,  
than tongue or pen can ever tell,  
It goes beyond, the highest star,  
and reaches to the lowest hell.*

*Oh love of God, how rich and pure!  
How measureless and strong!  
It shall forevermore endure,  
the saints' and angels' song.*

*Could we with ink, the ocean fill,  
and were the skies of parchment made.  
Were every stalk, on earth a quill,  
and every man a scribe by trade.*

*To write the love, of God above,  
would drain the ocean dry,  
Nor could the scroll, contain the whole,  
though stretched from sky to sky.*

And so continues the insurmountable task of trying to even describe, let alone understand, the greatness of this love, this God. Perhaps it is impossible for us to fully comprehend and define His love, but it is important for us to somehow deep inside of us know God's love and receive God's love. If we have an insight into and knowledge of the vast beauty of His person, it will greatly enhance our relationship with Him, and help us to love Him as He deserves to be loved!

### **The characteristics of God's love**

So let's look briefly at the characteristics of God's love. As we do so, we are again made aware that a vast gulf exists between our frail human love and that which manifests in and radiates from God. More than any other Old Testament writer, the Psalmist David seemed to have a good understanding of God's love. He did not use the word 'love' very much, but he chose rather to write about the characteristics of that love. One of David's favourite themes was the faithfulness of God:

**Psalm 36:5** *"Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies."*

**Psalm 119:90** *"Your faithfulness continues through all generations ..."*

The word *truth* as used in most Old Testament scriptures, comes from the Hebrew word *emeth*, and it means: stability, trustworthiness, truth, certainty, faithfulness. In this unstable world when it seems difficult to know whom we can trust, how wonderful to know that God is faithful!

**Psalm 57:10** *"For your mercy is great unto the heavens, and your truth (stability, trustworthiness, faithfulness, etc.) unto the clouds"*

**Psalm 117:2** *"..the truth (stability, trustworthiness, faithfulness, etc.) of the LORD endures for ever."*

Another favourite subject for David's songs was the lovingkindness of God:

**Psalm 36:7** *"How priceless is your unfailing love!"*

**Psalm 63:3** *"Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you."*

Notice how eloquent David gets when he writes about the beautiful qualities that are a part of God's love: *"unto the clouds," "unto the heavens," "endures forever," "better than life."* But nowhere does David get more expressive than when he writes concerning the mercies of the LORD. Most churches have a hymn or chorus that seems to be the crowd favourite. It is sung all the time. Well, David's favourite theme was *"the mercies of the LORD."* Probably his favourite psalm was Psalm 136, a responsive psalm. The leader would sing a line, *"O give thanks unto the God of gods,"* and the people would answer, *"For his mercy endures forever."* Then the leader would sing, *"O give thanks unto the LORD of lords,"* and the people would sing again, *"For his mercy endures forever."* Twenty-six times the people repeated these words during the singing of that psalm. The chorus of this psalm was David's favourite, which he used in other psalms and on many occasions: *"O give thanks unto the LORD: for he is good, For his mercy endures forever."*

Psalms 106 and 107 start with the same chorus, while Psalm 118 starts and finishes with it. Lest anyone complain upon hearing these words repeated over and over, David seems almost to warn us in this verse:

**Psalm 89:1** *"I will sing of the mercies of the LORD forever."*

When the ark was brought up to Jerusalem from the house of Obbedom, and how the singers were singing David's favourite song. The Scriptures are careful to note that this had been ordered by David:

**1 Chronicles 16:41** *"And with them (the Levites) Heman and Jeduthun, and the rest that were chosen, who were expressed (designated) by name, to give thanks to the LORD, because his mercy endures forever."*

At the dedication of Solomon's temple many years later, what song do you suppose the people were singing when the house of the LORD was filled with the glory of God? David's favourite song again (2 Chronicles 5:13). Five generations later, its popularity had not diminished. The singers that were appointed to go out before Jehoshaphat's army could not just sing any song. It must be David favourite song again. (2 Chronicles 20:21).

Why was David so caught up with *"the mercies of the LORD"*? Indeed, why do we appreciate this aspect of God's love so much? Is it not because we realize our own weakness and frailty? We have all failed God many times and in many ways - yet He still extends His mercy towards us. As He does so, we are made aware again that God's love is so much greater than any that has ever been offered to us by others. It is unlimited and unconditional!

We all know that we are imperfect. We want to do better and most of us are striving to improve ourselves. Nevertheless, it is the joy of knowing that God loves us just the way we are that enables us to rise from our failures, brush off the dust of defeat and continue to walk with God. More and more, as we experience God's love and begin to comprehend its characteristics and dimensions, our love relationship with Him will grow. Only then will we be able to say with the Apostle Paul:

**Romans 8:38-39** *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

So how is this love demonstrated? Let's have a look.

**1 John 3:16** *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."*

Not everyone who is quick to say, "I love you," really possess what they profess. That is why John the beloved exhorts us:

**1 John 3:18** *"Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."*

When God was ready to demonstrate His love for mankind, he did not just speak pretty words, which came floating down from heaven out of the clouds. He took action. God was manifest in the flesh.

Since God is love, the very nature of God was revealed to mankind in a hundred thousand ways during the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth. Every healing was an act of love. Every person set free from demonic spirits was a testimony of the compassion of our loving Lord. The turning of water into wine; the multiplying of the fishes and bread; the calming of stormy seas – they were all miracles that not only exhibited the power of God, but also displayed to us the love of God. Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, this love was made known. Yet it was by His death that the greatest expression of God's love was given - love that would draw people from the grips of Satan to the crucified Christ:

**John 12:31-33** *"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."*

Now a very common use of this verse today is that if we praise Jesus, our praise and worship will draw people to Him. In this way the *"lifting up"* refers to praise and worship. Whilst this is a valid interpretation that is consistent with other Scriptures on worship, we must be careful not to use these verses out of context and take anything away from the power of the cross. As is plainly understood by verse 33, Jesus was referring to the demonstration of God's love at Calvary as the power that would draw men and women to Himself.

It is interesting to note that although the Apostles expected the second coming of Jesus Christ to take place at any time, this was never the major theme of their preaching to sinners. The second coming of Jesus Christ is the hope of the Church and the apostles freely used this theme in an effort to challenge the Church to walk closer to Jesus Christ. (See 2 Peter 3:1-14, and 1 John 3:2-3.)

The theme the apostles always presented to a lost world was "the crucified Christ." I have heard thousands of sermons in my time but I have never seen any message touch the hearts of men and women more powerfully than the message of the cross! What took place on that old rugged cross at Calvary was designed by God to bring us to Himself. That beautiful demonstration of His love toward us, if truly understood, should cause us to love Him in return.

**1 John 4:19** *"We love, because he first loved us."*

Paul summed up his own evangelistic preaching when he wrote to the church at Corinth:

**1 Corinthians 1:17-18, 23-24** *"For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel - not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God .. but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."*

The cross stands at the centre of our faith - because the cross is the pinnacle of the revelation of God's love. No single event in all of history has demonstrated God's love for His children more than the cross. It is God's love, as shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which leads us to repentance and faith and it is God's love which must lie at the foundation of our Christian experience if we ever hope to press on to maturity as we grow up into Christ.

I was reflecting on this whole theme of God's love one day many years ago and the Lord gave me these words for a song. The key Bible verse which lies at the heart of this song is Romans 2:4 which reminds us that it is God's love that leads us to repentance. Let me close by sharing these words with you which God have me many years ago.

### **Your Grace has Captured my Heart**

*Your kindness led me to repentance, Your grace has captured my heart  
Your overwhelming forgiveness Has given my life a new start  
My freedom's secured with the life of Your Son  
My ransom is paid and my victory won  
My pardon is signed with the blood of the Lamb  
So now in Your grace I can stand.  
I cannot repay You for what You have done  
My rebellion and sin are exchanged for Your Son  
I can't understand the reason why  
You loved me enough to die*

*I grew up hearing sermons that told me I was bad  
The list was very long of things that made God mad  
His judgement and His wrath were all I ever heard  
Until the day His Spirit helped me hear God's Word  
Jesus took the punishment instead of me  
He bore the wrath of God so now I am free  
Sin, death and judgement are no longer mine  
I'm reconciled to God until the end of time*

*The message of His grace has simply not been heard  
Millions still in bondage need to hear His Word  
The Church has held this secret for two thousand years  
Yet so many still are trapped in shame and fear  
They know of sin and judgement and the hell they face  
But now they need to know of His amazing grace  
Their hardened hearts will soften as His mercy flows  
But if the Church remains asleep - they'll never know!*

*His kindness will lead to repentance, His love will capture their hearts  
His overwhelming forgiveness will give them all a new start  
Their freedom's secured with the life of His Son  
Their ransom is paid and their victory won  
Their pardon is signed with the blood of the Lamb  
So now in His grace they can stand.  
They cannot repay Him for what He has done  
Their rebellion and sin are exchanged for His Son  
They'll never know, until we all go  
And tell everyone the good news:  
Jesus died for them too.*