

UNFATHOMABLE LOVE

Ephesians 3:14-19

Dr. Trevor Brown

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Have you ever noticed that we're better at visualizing things by comparison than by measurement? For example, if I told you something was 360 feet long, you'd have trouble picturing that, but if I told you it was about the size of a football field, you'd nod in agreement.

This is why many writers use size comparisons rather than precise measurements in books. Data analyst Colin Morris carried out an experiment to show how these object comparisons change over time. Using Google Books he charted objects based on the occurrences of the phrase "the size of ____" between 1800 and 2008.ⁱ

"Morris found that items from the natural world have fallen into decline as reference points, while sports analogies have exploded onto the scene. [...] The undisputed champion across the centuries, however: peas. These tiny legumes were the most popular reference point in the 1800s, and they remain so today. The same is true of runner-up the walnut."ⁱⁱ

What works, however, for modern literature is not always as helpful in theology. We have often made the mistake of thinking that we can understand God by looking to the natural world. God is like us or our experience, only bigger or better. In our text this morning, Paul is passionately trying to communicate something which no comparison, dimension, or its unit of measure can possibly describe in full: the love of Christ. We will not discover God's love by looking at ourselves. No, we learn what love is by looking to God.

Paul is convinced that the power of God's Spirit can provide for these young Christians the strength they need for Christ to dwell in their hearts, and in so doing, allow them to discover something that is so far beyond what they are able to measure or comprehend.

One of the themes of the first half of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is the greatness of who God is to us and what are the riches of our inheritance as the household of God. In the first chapter of this letter, he spells out this great work of God through the redeeming blood of Christ. In chapter 2, Paul describes Christ's work as proclaiming peace to us who are far off and us who are near, for through Christ all of us have access in one spirit to the Father. We are no longer stranger and aliens; there is no separation of Jew and Gentile, but we are citizens of the household of God, with Jesus as the Cornerstone.

And with this beautiful depiction of all that God was doing in Christ and all that this meant for the new community to which he writes, Paul bursts forth in chapter 3, verse 14, to finish the thought that he had started back in 1:1. **"For this reason... I kneel before the Father"**

Whether he had intended to pray or not, Paul now enters into prayer. Scripture describes a whole host of ways to pray and postures in which prayer is carried out, but the more usual posture in Jewish and early Christian prayer was standing. Kneeling is not uncommon, but making this point suggests that the worshipper has such a sense of great reverence and submission that standing upright before God is no longer sufficient.

I imagine that Paul may be pacing the quarters of imprisonment, dictating to a scribe the magnificent reality of this new humanity that has been created in Christ Jesus, when, stopped in his tracks by the overwhelming love of God, he feels the need to pray that they, too, might come to know God's love in this way. So, falling to his knees, Paul dictates this prayer for this young church and every church since.

Before this God -- the one from whom every family in heaven and on earth get its name, the Creator of everyone, the one who has saved us and has given us all his name, Christian, the name which every family receives from him -- Paul speaks passionately in prayer as his words are meticulously penned.

(17b) "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep... is the love of Christ."

Having prayed that believers be strengthened by the Spirit "that Christ may dwell in your hearts," Paul prays that these young Christians might have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep (or breadth and length and height and depth) is the love of Christ. **"And to know this love that surpasses knowledge."**

Paul writes not as someone who is making an intellectual argument or simply speaking about something he learned, but as someone who has a rich and abiding experience with this love. He prays this for these believers, you and me, because he knows that if we really understood God's love, we wouldn't love our sin so much.

Today, your bulletin shares some of our graduating seniors here. It's a reminder that it's graduation season. All across the world, students will be awarded a degree or diploma, an acknowledgment that they have completed a program. If you have entered the Christian life, thinking that such an occasion might be somewhere down the road, you're mistaken.

This prayer of Paul's combines a few curious phrases. He tells us that this love of Christ surpasses all knowledge, and yet, he prays that we might know it. Clearly, he doesn't mean that if we accurately measure these four dimensions that we might have completed something. He is suggesting that Christians pursue the knowledge of something unknowable. He is inviting us to take hold of a life-long task, a journey in Christ. Come and see for yourself just how big the love of God is!

Amelia Hepworth was searching for a literary comparison for the love of a parent when she wrote a popular little children's book. It depicts a mother bear gazing at the sky and saying to her cub, "I love you to the moon and back." The book made it into our bedtime routine a few months ago. I had read it one night to our daughter. Before telling her goodnight one more time, I leaned in and got real close to let her know as I left: "I love you to moon and back." To which she replied "No! You love me *right here!*"

It will not be enough today to gaze into the distance at the love of God. For all we can say or think or admire about the love of God, Paul does not let us stay in the abstract. He does not pray that you would profess the immense vastness of God's love only to let it remain some distant, amazing force. He prays this "so that you may be filled" - so that may you love *right here*.

We are being called to measure out the love of God, to discover it again and again, so that our love might be like His. As we discover this love that is the very nature of God, it ought to affect the nature of his people.ⁱⁱⁱ Paul points us to four dimensions:

The Breadth

The Church Fathers heard in these words the wide extent to which the gospel was on the move. The ultimate cause of the failure of the Jews was that they never grasped this particular dimension. They thought that salvation only went to a certain, reasonable extent. But those of them whose eyes were opened by the Spirit, including Paul himself, who was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews," and had once held this exclusive view, had come to see that that narrow dimension was altogether wrong, and that in Christ there is "neither Gentile nor Jew, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free" (Col 3:11).

Today, all around the world, people in every country, in every continent – though differing in color, in culture, in background, in almost everything - men and women will meet together to worship in breadth the God of creation. The love of God is transnational and transcultural. It will manifest itself in every language and transmit itself into every culture, and when we look to God's promised future, we're reminded that we will be amazed at the rich diversity of those that the love of God will surround in glory.

As we begin to measure out the limitless dimensions of God's love, I wonder today, what is the breadth of your love? We love to measure out God's grace in our proportions. We're willing to love those who are like us, those who agree with us. If the breadth of your love for the world matches the breadth of your party, that is not a love from God. If the width of your love is enough for your friends but turns away from your enemies, we have fallen short of the love of God. Worse, we have pretended as if we were not once enemies of God ourselves.

God's love stretches wide. What is the breadth/width of your love?

The Length

The scriptures remind us that the love of Christ does not begin on the Roman calendar but is a love that began in eternity and will remain for eternity. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Heb 13:8). "His steadfast love endures forever!" Psalm 136.

The length of God's love is an unbroken line, and it never changes.

D. Martyn Lloyd Jones has pointed out, "We tend to think at times that He has forgotten us, or that He has left us. When troubles and problems and trials come, and we meet difficulties and disappointments, we tend to ask, 'Where is His love?' The answer is that it is there, always there. The fault is in us, that we cannot see it, and have not meditated upon it, have not realized its eternal character, and have not grasped its dimension of length. The Apostle Paul expresses this truth in these words: 'I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height, nor depth nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8: 38-39)."^{iv}

Scripture also tells us of a God who long-suffering. His gracious patience brings us mercy at length. How long does it take someone to find the end of your patience? God's love is long enough to wait for the prodigal son and long enough to reach him when he returns. What is the length of your love?

The Height

The height of God's love is as vast as the distance between the highest of heavens and lowest of earth. For though he was God, he made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant. The love of God we meet in Christ is a love which moves from highest heavens to the lowest of earth to announce that he will be exalted in that final day before all creation.

Christ descends from the greatest of heights to reveal a love that is with you in the lowest of lows. He is the king from on high, and he comes to rescue the lowest of society. The height of His love is unmatched, and he comes that he might raise the dead in Christ to the heights of the heavenly places with him. If God's love moves from high to low, can yours be content watching from on high? If God's love is most concerned with lifting the lowly, does your love need a new stature?

What is the height of your love? Is it willing to be made low?

The Depth

How deep is the Father's love is for us, but depth is more difficult to pin down. How do you measure depth? Depth in photography refers to the range of distance in a picture that appears acceptably sharp. Depth in sports refers to the number of players on your bench who can be

subbed in without any level of talent being lost. Depth can refer to intellectual complexity or the range of one's understanding.

One of the major areas of this field is to measure the depth of the ocean. Before the development of echo sounding, boatmen used what is called a sounding line to measure the depth of the ocean. A sounding line, or lead line, refers to a length of rope which would have some sort of plummet weight. There would be marks along the line, whether by knots tied in the rope or pieces of leather attached along the way.

These marks on the line were called fathom points. The points not marked on the line, in between the fathoms, were called deeps. The word fathom comes an Old Norse word which means "outstretched arms," which is the distance of 1 fathom, or what would later be standardized as about 6 feet, the average distance between a man's outstretched arms as he held up the line. So after allowing the weight to plummet to the bottom, the leadsman would measure its length, quickly pulling it up.

Before echo sounding, this method meant that there was only so much water that could be measured. Water near the coast that was less than 100 fathoms was considered a level not too deep to be fathomed. The area offshore beyond 100 fathoms was considered too deep to be fathomed.

I don't know what methods you employ to measure God's love. But Paul's prayer is that you would come to know, by a true and ongoing experience with the risen Christ, that the love of God, no matter what length of rope you have in hand, is too deep to be fathomed. We Christians are called, together with all the Lord's holy people, to venture out into the vast waters of God's love and cast a line over the side only to discover that, no matter how long our rope or how much we try, no number of fathoms could convey what is the unfathomable love of God.

As one commentator describes, "It is wide enough to reach the whole world and beyond, long enough to stretch from eternity to eternity, high enough to raise both Gentiles and Jews to heavenly places in Christ Jesus, and deep enough to rescue all people from the depths of sin."^v

"And I want you to know this love," Paul says, "because then you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

If we pay only lip service to God's love, or if we ascribe to God whatever glimpse of love that we think we've experienced here, or if we allow ourselves to muddle through the Christian life just sort of aware of the fact that God loves us, we will never understand what is the measure of all the fullness of God. This begins and ends with the breathtaking reality of the magnitude of God's love.

If we had all the rope ever made to measure with all the arms that ever lived, we would still not exhaust the depth of God's love. But, when we could not understand it, he came and stretched

his own arms out to show us a love without end. As we gaze at the cross, we see the height they raised him to, the width of his arms stretched out, the length he suffered in anguish for us, and the depth of his love for all the world.

So, may we never stop looking to the one whose outstretched arms reveal a love without end. As the power of the Spirit helps us to measure what is the immeasurable love of God, may we too be filled with that love, and may we love “right here.”

ⁱ Colin Morris, “The Size of a Pigeon?: What Authors Used for Size Comparisons in the 1800s and Now, Charted,” Nov. 2, 2017: <https://digg.com/2017/size-comparisons-words>

ⁱⁱ Bess Lovejoy, “As Big as a What? How Literary Size Comparisons Change Over Time,” Nov. 4, 2017: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/513638/big-what-how-literary-size-comparisons-change-over-time>

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC, 99.

^{iv} D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “The Breadth, Length, Depth, and Height of God’s Love.”

^v William Klein, *Ephesians – Philemon*, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol 11, pg. 52.