

Philippians 2:5-11; Ephesians 3:14-19 Glorying in the Dimensions of Christ's Love

That ye...may be able to comprehend...what is the breadth and length and depth and height and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge – Eph. 3:17-19

Ruben sent me an interesting article this week that was written by a preacher who was lamenting his failures. The reason for his failures is not hard for any preacher to relate to. He attributes it to the fact that the subjects he handles are beyond him. That's certainly true when it comes to the topic of Christ's love. Paul says as much in v. 19 when he says that *the love of Christ passeth knowledge*. He prays for the saints at Ephesus to know the dimensions of that love more fully. He wants them to know the breadth and length and depth and height of it but then he adds that the love of Christ passes knowledge.

How can a preacher expound a subject that goes beyond him? The solution, of course, is for the Spirit of God to utilize the word of God and apply the reality of Christ's love to our hearts. And when it comes to the Spirit's work, he is most definitely able to enlarge our hearts to a fuller capacity to take in more of the simple and sublime and incomprehensible truths of Christ's love. If the Spirit of God will make the means of grace effectual today through his word and through the sacrament of the Lord's supper then we will come away with our hearts deeply effected by the love of Christ.

What I'd like to do this morning is revisit this passage we've been studying from Philippians 2. In previous studies I've tried to consider these verses from the perspective of the purpose they serve in their context. I've pointed out that the reason Paul goes into this description of Christ's deity followed by his humility and exaltation is that we may draw from these glorious statements that pertain to Christ the things that we need to have the mind of Christ.

What I'd like to do this morning is to simply look at these verses for what they say about Christ with the simple aim of glorying in who Christ is and what he's done for our salvation. We may glory in him by remembering him around his table. So instead of drawing from the context in Philippians 2, I want, instead, to use the words of Paul from Eph. 3 as our guide to studying Philippians 2. Simply put –

I Want You to Remember the Dimensions of Christ Love

We're going to look again at Philippians 2:5-11 with the aim of considering the breadth and length and depth and height of the love of Christ. Let's begin by considering first how:

I. We Must Remember the Depth of His Love

We cannot adequately appreciate the depths to which Christ plumbed without first knowing who he was and is. Our text makes it plain he thought it not robbery to be equal with God. The reason he would not consider it robbery is because he is God. He was in the

beginning with God. All the attributes of deity are ascribed to him – eternity, omnipresence, immutability, and omnipotence.

Divine works are also ascribed to him. The works of creation and providence. We know also that the prerogatives of deity are assigned to him. Angels in their glory are not allowed to receive worship from men but Christ does receive such worship and is worthy of such worship. In his prayer to his Father in Jn. 17 we find a statement spoken by him that shows us his previous glory. Jn. 17:5 *And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.*

It is this glory which Christ had with his Father before the world was that I believe is particularly in Paul's view when he writes that Christ thought it not robbery to be equal with God. It is this view of Christ that we need to try to grasp in order to appreciate his condescension and humiliation. But here again as Preachers we fail because we're considering something that is beyond us. We hardly know how to fathom the eternal glory of Christ before the world was.

We certainly know that he existed in the pure atmosphere of holiness. We know that he shined with a radiance that would cause angels to cover their faces. We know that he knew the fullness of bliss and peace and joy in the presence of his Father and that he didn't lack in anything. It is from such scenes of heavenly tranquility that we can only see darkly through a glass but that we must strive with the Holy Spirit's help to grasp so that we may have some understanding and appreciation of the depths to which he would descend.

It is from such heights of glory that he would make himself of no reputation and take to himself the form of a servant. Think of that – being made of no reputation in the very world that was created for his glory. We read in Col. 1:16,17 that *by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.*

Though all things were created by him and for him and though he be before all things and though all things be held up by the word of his power still he would make himself of no reputation and take upon him the form of a servant. This is condescension beyond our capacity to grasp. And in taking upon himself the form of a servant he would condescend even lower to be made in the likeness of men.

It is during this time of year in particular that even our pagan and materialistic culture reluctantly admits that Christmas is the celebration of his birth. Whether or not you are in agreement with such holidays or not I cannot deny that I love the efforts that are made by ministries such as the American Family Association who call on Christians to boycott those places that seek to take Christ out of Christmas. I love it when, for whatever reason, businesses find themselves compelled to acknowledge the birth of Christ.

Most gladly do we acknowledge his birth not only during this time of the year but every time we partake of communion. The bread preaches to us the message that *the Word was*

made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14).

But his condescension took him lower still. It wasn't enough that he was born in a lowly condition or that during the years of his earthly ministry he had no place to lay his head – in spite of his deprivation of things that others would take for granted he would render obedience to his Father. As the second Adam he would do what the first Adam had failed to do. He would obey the law. The one who gave the law would be made of a woman and would be made under the law. The One qualified to judge the world would himself, in a sense be judged by his Father and would render perfect obedience to his Father.

And unlike the first Adam who had everything in his favor and was created in a perfect environment where everything was very good, Christ would render his obedience in a sin-cursed world where everything would be devoted to causing him to stumble. The devil would tempt him; the Pharisees and Sadducees would take turns trying to trip him up. His own disciples in their ignorance would try to discourage him from his work.

Nevertheless he would persevere in any and every circumstance to render obedience to his Father even when that obedience would cost him his life. Our text tells us that he was obedient unto death. In our sin-cursed world we're familiar with death and the many causes of death. Such is the nature of our world that we thank God when a man can die a peaceful death. We hope for the kind of death in which we can, more or less, lay down to sleep and awake in heaven or for the kind of death that extinguishes life quickly.

Christ would know no such death. He must die a slow death; he must die an agonizing death; he must die a visible death a public death, a degrading death. He must, you see, be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. And it's for good reason he must die this way. He must, you see, make atonement for sin and he must show to all the world what sin deserves. Sin does not deserve a merciful death, sin deserves the wrath of God and so Christ would bear that wrath.

And though our text doesn't go any further in describing Christ's humiliation we know from the accounts of the gospel that his humiliation would also include time in the grave. He cannot make satisfaction for sin and then come down from the cross, he must instead know the severance of his soul from his body and his body must be laid in a tomb.

Now keep in mind the connection between our text in Philippians 2 and Ephesians 3. And let's make Paul's prayer our own around the Lord's table that we *May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height* of his love. We do well to be humbled by his humility especially when we think that his condescension shows us so clearly and so fully the depth of his love.

But not only must we remember the depth of his love but consider with me next that:

II. We Must Remember the Depth and Height of His Love

And just as we had to begin our consideration of the depth of his love by trying to scale the height of his glory from which he descended we must now do the very opposite and

strive to grasp with the depth of our own sin and depravity that we may know how high he takes us.

We begin with something of an advantage here because we do know the reality of sin. We must strive hard in our minds to try to grasp the bliss of heavenly glory but we need not strive terribly hard to know the reality of our sin – or do we? You wouldn't think that sinful beings born in sin and born into a world of sin would need to be convinced of sin. It's everywhere and in every realm. It's in our politics; it's in our economics; it's in our music and art; it's in our churches, in our homes, in our hearts.

And yet I can't help but remember a news article I read the other day in the wake of our Presidential election in which this New York Times journalist was reflecting on what he thought was the great improvement of morality in America over the last 50 years or more. And this man typifies the mindset of those that think we live in an enlightened culture because of what our culture has come to sanction and allow.

And so we may find ourselves thankful around the Lord's table today that by the grace of God we've been granted an awakening to our sinfulness. What others are blind to we have come to know full well and among the truths that we've learned is the truth that the wages of sin is death. You would think that men would catch on, wouldn't you, to the obvious truth that things are not right in this world.

Death is not a part of some natural circle of life – death is the penalty of sin. And the reason that all die is that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. And by the law of God comes the knowledge of sin and not just the knowledge of sin but as Paul writes in Rom. 7:13 *But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.*

The description that's given by God of Israel's condition in the book of Ezekiel is applicable to us all. Listen to these words from Ezek. 16:4-14. They show us the depth to which Christ came down to save us as well as the heights to which God's love brings us.

And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all. 5 None eye pitied thee, to do any of these unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, to the loathing of thy person, in the day that thou wast born. 6 And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live. 7 I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field, and thou hast increased and waxen great, and thou art come to excellent ornaments: thy breasts are fashioned, and thine hair is grown, whereas thou wast naked and bare. 8 Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine. 9 Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. 10 I clothed thee also with broidered work, and shod thee with badgers' skin, and I girded thee about

with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk. 11 I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. 12 And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head. 13 Thus wast thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and brodered work; thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil: and thou wast exceeding beautiful, and thou didst prosper into a kingdom.

The spiritual truths of this passage are plain. In a word: we were polluted and spiritually dead and God condescended to come to us in our depravity and granted us cleansing and beauty and life. We begin now to scale the heights of God's love. In his love he has called us forth from our spiritual graves. In his love he has joined us to his Son. In his love he has taken away our condemnation by bearing it for us. In his love he has clothed us with his perfect righteousness and we have, by virtue of our union to him, ascended with him to heaven where we are joined to him on his throne and where our lives are now hidden in him.

And what has happened spiritually will also happen one day physically. Our bodies will come forth from their graves and death will be defeated and what is corruptible will become incorruptible. As Paul writes in 1Cor. 15:54 *So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.*

Do you begin to perceive in some small way the height of the love of Christ? Philippians 2:9-11 speaks of his exaltation. *Wherefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name.* And in his exaltation we find our own exaltation. We are given new names in him. And what happens to each one of us on an individual level will happen on a worldwide level. There will be ushered in a new heaven and a new earth wherein righteousness dwells. And every tear will be wiped away and there will be no more death and no more pain and no more sorrow and no more rebellion for every knee will have bowed to Christ and confessed him to be Lord.

To know the condescension of Christ's love, then, we must first ascend into heaven to see the heights of glory from which he humbled himself. And to see the height of his love we must descend into the abyss from which he rescued us and then know the heights to which he takes us.

Our aim around the Lord's table this morning is to think on the depth and height of his love and to remember his love and to glory in his love. It remains for us to consider finally that not only must we remember the depth and height of his love but:

III. We Must Remember the Breadth and Length of His Love

It is true that the final scene in our text in Philippians brings us to the day of judgment. On that day every knee will bow to Christ and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. The thing that can leave you wondering, however, is how does this scene tie into the theme we're considering on the love of Christ?

This past summer when some of us went to the PRTS conference in Grand Rapids we had that question answered for us in a sermon preached by Bart Ellshout. His theme was the love of the Father for his Son and how that love is the compelling factor behind the terrible revelation of judgment.

You think about it for a moment. *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.* God's love for the world was great enough for God to give to the world the One that he loved most dearly. And Christ's love for the world was such that he was willing to take to himself the form of a servant and be made in the likeness of men and then be obedient unto death even the death of the cross.

Yet in spite of such love he's still a rejected Savior even today. I dare say that there are those here this morning that think nothing of such love and they still reject him. If you're in that condition today I hope your heart will be won by God's love and Christ's love. But if you persist in your rejection then you should know that God's love for his Son is such that he will honor his Son and will vindicate his Son's name through your condemnation.

The point I want to leave with you with, however, is that the breadth and length of God's love is seen in the truth that *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.* God's love is worldwide in scope. It spans the globe and it spans every kind of person from the least to the greatest and it spans every kind of sinner from the most respectable sinner to the most debauched sinner.

And just as the breadth and length of Christ's love encompasses every people and tribe and nation you can also say of it that it spans the breadth and length of time and eternity. Before man fell into sin the provision of God's love was already in place. Christ, you see, is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). The gospel was preached to Adam and Eve immediately following their fall into sin.

And everything in the Bible from that moment forward has to do with setting the stage for the greatest manifestation of God's love in the giving of his Son. The calling of Abraham was for that purpose – the Levitical system of worship was designed to illustrate that purpose. And now Christ has come and has demonstrated a love that is greater than any love. Jn. 15:13 *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

And this love is durable for time and eternity which means simply that God will never stop loving those that believe in his Son. Nothing will ever separate you from his love. The circumstances you face in life cannot nullify his love and not even death itself can sever you from Christ's love. You are, therefore, secure in that love forever.

So as we partake of the Lord's table this morning let's remember the love of Christ and let's glory in the love of Christ. May this sacrament be made effectual to your soul so that you *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, that ye might be*

filled with all the fulness of God. It is specifically in this context of knowing that which passes knowledge that Paul goes on to write:

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.