

Breadth, Length, Depth, Height

by Martyn-Lloyd Jones

The sermon explores the dimensions of the love of Christ, including its breadth, length, depth, and height, and encourages listeners to meditate on its eternal character.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:17

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "The Love of Christ"

Description

Martyn-Lloyd Jones emphasizes the vastness of Christ's love for humanity, urging the Ephesians to comprehend its breadth, length, depth, and height. He explains that this love is not only immeasurable but also eternal, beginning before time and continuing into eternity. The preacher highlights that understanding this love transforms our perspective and encourages us to meditate on it, as it is the source of joy and strength in the Christian life. He reminds us that Christ's love is inclusive, unchanging, and deeply sacrificial, culminating in our ultimate glorification with Him. The sermon calls believers to recognize and rejoice in the profound dimensions of Christ's love, which surpasses all knowledge.

Transcript

We now come to the actual petition which was offered by the Apostle for the Ephesians. It is that, having been rooted and grounded in love, they may be fully able to comprehend with all saints "what is the breadth, and the length, and the depth, and the height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge". We must remind ourselves that we are dealing, not with our love to God and to Christ and to the brethren, but with His love to us. So far we have looked at it very generally. We now proceed to consider it in a more detailed manner. Before we examine the nature or the character of that knowledge we must consider the knowledge itself, and find out what can be known of the love of God. The Apostle sets this before us in an extraordinary manner in the words I have just quoted.

The terminology used by the Apostle in and of itself suggests vastness. And there is no doubt that he chose to describe it in this four-dimensional manner in order to give that very impression. It is interesting to speculate as to why he decided to do this. I agree with those who say that probably he had still in his mind what he had been saying at the end of the second chapter, before he began on the digression which occupies the first thirteen verses of this chapter. There he had been describing the Church as "a holy temple in the Lord", as a great building in which God takes up His abode and in which He dwells. I am ready to believe that that was still in his mind, and that as he thought of the vastness of the Church as an enormous temple, he felt it to be a good way of describing the love of Christ to His people. It is similar to

the breadth, length, depth and height of such a great building.

Whether that is so or not, the Apostle was certainly concerned to bring out the vastness of this love. Indeed in doing so he almost contradicts himself by using a figure of speech which is called oxymoron. He prays that we may "know" the love of Christ "which passeth knowledge". How can you know something which cannot be known? How can you define something which is so great that it cannot be defined? What is the point of talking about measurements if it is immeasurable and eternal? But, of course, there is no contradiction here. What the Apostle is saying is that, though this love of Christ is itself beyond all computation, and can never be truly measured, nevertheless it is our business to learn as much as we can about it, and to receive as much of it as we can possibly contain. So it behoves us to look at this description which he gives of the love of Christ.

We are about to look into something which is so glorious and endless that it will be the theme of contemplation of all the saints, not only in this world, but also in the world which is to come. We shall spend our eternity in gazing upon it, and wondering at it, and in being astounded by it. But it is our business to start upon this here and now in this life. It has ever been one of the characteristics of the greatest saints that they have spent much time in meditating upon the love of Christ to themselves and to all God's people. Nothing has given them greater joy. Indeed this is a characteristic of love at all levels; it delights in thinking not only of the object of its love, but also of the love it receives. Nothing therefore should give greater joy to all God's people than to meditate upon this love of Christ. Indeed, our chief defect as Christians is that we fail to realize Christ's love to us. How often have you thought about this? We spend time thinking about our activities and our problems, but the most important necessity in the Christian life is to know Christ's love to us, and to meditate upon it. This has always been the spring and the source of the greatest activity that has ever been manifested in the long history of the Christian Church. So let us try to look at it in terms of the dimensions which the Apostle uses.

Have you ever considered the breadth of this love? There are several places in Scripture where this particular dimension is put before us in a striking manner. In the Book of Revelation, for instance, we find the words: ". . . and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue and people, and nation". And again: ". . . and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands" (5:9, 11). The Book of Revelation seems to be particularly interested in the breadth of Christ's love. As it gives us the picture of the glorified saints, and of the Son of God with His redeemed, it uses these figures: "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" (7:9). One day, in the glory, we shall see that perfectly. But in a discouraging time like this in the history of the Church, what can be more encouraging and more exhilarating than to think of this breadth of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ? As Christians we are but a handful of people in this country today, a mere small percentage. That thought sometimes tends to depress us and to discourage us. The antidote to it is to consider the breadth of Christ's love.

The ultimate cause of the failure of the Jews was that they never grasped this particular dimension. They thought that salvation was only for the Jew. But those of them whose eyes were opened by the Spirit, including the Apostle himself, who was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews", and had once held this exclusive view, had come to see that that narrow, naturalistic dimension was altogether wrong, and that in Christ there is "neither Gentile nor Jew, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free" (Col 3:11) Nothing is more encouraging and invigorating than to recollect that even in these days of religious declension there are in the world, in every country, in every continent - though differing in colour, in culture, in background, in almost

everything men and women meeting together regularly to worship God and to thank Him for His dear Son and His great salvation. In the glory we shall all be amazed at this, as we realize what the love of God in Christ has accomplished in spite of sin and hell and the devil.

Ten thousand times ten thousand,

In sparkling raiment bright,

The armies of the ransomed saints

Throng up the steeps of light.

'Tis finished, all is finished,

Their fight with death and sin;

Fling open wide the golden gates,

And Jet the victors in!

That is the glorious prospect on which we must dwell and meditate.

We have no conception of the greatness of this plan of salvation and of its scope. In Luke's Gospel we are told that certain people came to our Lord one day and asked the question, "Are there few that be saved?" (13:23). I do not know the precise answer to that question, but I do know that Scripture teaches that we shall be astounded when we see all the redeemed gathered in - the "fulness of the Gentiles", the "fulness of Israel", "all Israel" saved, and the redeemed standing in the presence of their Redeemer. It is not surprising that the Apostle should pray so earnestly that these Ephesians might know this because this changes your entire outlook when you tend to feel depressed, when you are tempted to doubt whether there is any future for the Church seeing that we are but a handful of people. The answer is to look at the breadth of Christ's love, to look ahead, to look into the glory and see the final result of His finished work. Once you begin to realize the breadth of His love you will lift up your head again, your heart will begin to sing once more, and you will realize that you are having the precious privilege of being one humble member in a mighty army, one in this thronging multitude who will spend their eternity in the presence of the Lamb of God, and enjoy Him for ever. The breadth of His love!

But let us attempt to look also at the length of His love. I am convinced that the Apostle 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. The length surely conveys the endless character of the love of Christ. Sometimes we read in Scripture about the "everlasting" love of God - "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3)- Have you ever considered the eternity of Christ's love towards you and towards all the saints? The dimension of length reminds us that this is a love which began in eternity. It was always there. The superiority of the Reformers, the Puritans and the evangelical leaders of the eighteenth century over us is seen in the fact that they were more theologically-minded than we are. We foolishly think that the most important thing is to be practical. We agree that the practical is most important; but the men who have accomplished most in this world have always been theologically-minded. A man who rushes into activity without studying theory is finally seen to be a fool. Think of a man who desires to begin to play with atomic power without knowing something about it!

The great evangelical leaders of the past saw the importance of theology and doctrine, and they spoke and wrote much about what they called the Covenant of Redemption which led in turn to the Covenant of Grace. What they meant was that, before time, before the world and man were ever created, an agreement was entered into between God the Father and God the Son. It was an agreement concerning the salvation of those who were to be saved by the Lord Jesus Christ. The Fall of man was foreseen, everything was known; and the Son, as the Representative of this new humanity, entered into a covenant with His Father that He would save them and redeem them. The Father covenanted with the Son to grant certain privileges and blessings to the people who were now given to the Son.

How important it is to meditate upon such a theme! To do so brings us at once to the realization that the love of Christ to His own began before time, away back in eternity. Christ's love to us did not suddenly come into being, it was there before the beginning of time. Hence we read that our names were "written in the Lamb's book of life from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8; 17:8). This is, to me, one "of the most staggering things of all, that I was known by Christ in eternity. 1, in particular, and every one of us who belong to Him, in particular. We were known to Him, and our names were written in His book. What a dignity it adds to human life, and to our existence in this world, to know that He has set His heart upon us, that His affections rested upon us even in eternity! That is the beginning - if such a term is possible - of the length of His love towards us. Before time!

But let us look at this dimension of length as it works out in life in this world. The love of Christ for His own is from eternity to eternity. It began in eternity, and it continues in time. We can therefore always be sure that it will never change, that it will never vary, that it will always be the same. "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever" (Heb 13:8). And His love is always the same. There are no interruptions in it. This "length" is an unbroken line. Whatever may happen, it goes on; it is not a variable, it is a constant. It does not suddenly cease, and then start again. "Thine is an unchanging love". It is a line, a straight line, it is not variable. It is a love that never gives us up or lets us go; it is a love that never despairs of us.

One of the most perfect expressions of this element of dimension is found in our Lord's own parable of the prodigal son. In spite of the fact that the younger son had been a fool and had gone to the far country, spurning the love that had been shown him in his home, and had wasted his substance on the gaudy and tawdry pleasures of that far country, his father still loved him and was waiting for his return and showered blessings upon him. This is the picture of the love of Christ towards His own patient, long-suffering, bearing with us, never giving us up. Nothing is more wonderful than to realize that, even when we in our folly turn our backs upon the Lord, and even sin grievously against Him, His love still remains. George Matheson's hymn expresses it perfectly: "O Love, that wilt not let me go". It is a love that follows us wherever we may go; it "will not" let us go. God has said, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee".

How important it is that we should meditate upon this love and contemplate it! It is because we fail to do so that 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). Nothing can ever cause it to change or to fail. As Augustus Toplady says:

Things future, nor things that are now,

Not all things below or above,

Can make Him His purpose forego,

Or sever my soul from His love.

What comfort, what consolation, what strength it gives; what a stay in times of trial and adversity! If He has set His heart and His affection upon you, they will remain there. Nothing will ever be able to pluck you out of His hand, nothing will ever rob you of that love. Nothing! If hell be let loose, if everything goes against you, nothing will ever cause Him to let you go.

And this will continue even into eternity. It has started in eternity, it manifests itself in time, and it goes on again into eternity. This line is unbroken. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states it thus: "Wherefore" - in other words, because Christ has an eternal priesthood - "He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (7:25). He will save us "to the uttermost". Nothing will be left undone. Whatever may happen, His love for His own will continue until the plan of redemption has been completed. Our Lord is in heaven making intercession for us now, and He will always be there. He is not like the earthly priests of the Old Testament dispensation who went in and out of the Holiest of all. They lived and did their work, and then they died and others had to take their place. "He ever liveth"; He is always there and always will be. That gives us some idea of the length of His love.

But let us look at the depth of His love. As we look at each dimension we are tempted to say that it is the most wonderful of all, the truth being that that is true of each one! As we consider the depth we can do nothing better than to read what the Apostle wrote to the Philippians in the second chapter, where he shows that the depth of Christ's love can be seen in two main respects. First, in what He did! How guilty we are of reading hurriedly and perhaps thoughtlessly some of the most staggering words ever penned. In eternity our Lord was "in the form of God". He was God the Son in the bosom of the Father from all eternity. But the Apostle tells us that "He thought it not robbery to be equal with God". That means that He did not regard His equality with God as a prize to be held on to, to be held on to at all costs. Rather He humbled Himself, He divested Himself of those signs of His eternal glory. And He came into this world of sin and shame in the likeness of man, in the form of a man.

This is entirely beyond understanding; as the Apostle says, it is "the love of Christ which passeth knowledge". These are facts. He deliberately did not hold on to what He had a right to hold on to, but rather humbled Himself, and entered into the Virgin's womb, and took unto himself of human nature, and came and lived as a man in this world. Recall what we are told about the poverty and the lowliness of the home into which He was born. Recall what happened to Him while He was in this world, how He performed a menial task; He who was equal with the Father, the Son of God eternal.

Next consider what He suffered at the hands of men, the misunderstanding, the hatred, the malice and the spite. Think of His suffering from weariness and hunger and thirst. Think of men laying cruel hands upon Him, arresting Him and trying Him, mocking Him and jeering at Him, spitting in His most holy face. Think of cruel men condemning Him to death and scourging Him. Look at Him staggering under the weight of the heavy cross on His way to Golgotha. Look at Him nailed upon the tree, and listen to His expressions of agony at the thirst He endured and the pain He suffered. Think of the terrible moment when our sins were

laid upon Him. He even lost sight of the face of His Father for the one and only time, and gave up the ghost and died, and was buried and laid in a grave. He, the Author of life, the Creator of everything, lies dead in a grave. Why did He do all this? The astounding answer is, because of His love for you and me; because He loved us. Such is the depth of His love 1 There is no other explanation.

His love shows yet greater and deeper when we remember that there was nothing in us to call forth such love. "All we like sheep have gone astray". We all have "come short of the glory of God". In our natural state we all were hateful and hopeless creatures. That we may have some true conception of our actual state and condition, and the depth of His love, let us turn to what Paul tells us about the condition of mankind until the grace of God in Christ laid hold upon us. We find it in the third chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, where we read, "There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongue they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (vv. 10-19). It was for such people that Christ came, enduring the Cross and despising the shame. The Apostle makes the same point in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. Our Lord had said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends"; but says Paul, "God commendeth His love toward us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" and "If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled unto God by the death of His Son. . ." He did all this for sinners, for His enemies, for those who were vile and full of sin and who had nothing to commend them. That is the measure of the depth of His love. He came from heaven, He went down to the depths and rose again for such people. It is only as we meditate upon these things and realize their truth that we begin to know something about His love.

That brings us, in turn, to the height of His love. By this dimension the Apostle expresses God's ultimate and final purpose for us. Or we may say that this is the way in which he describes the height to which God proposes to raise us. Most of us tend to think of salvation only in terms of forgiveness, as if the love of Christ only purchases for us the forgiveness of our sins. Anyone who stops at that has clearly never known anything about the height of the love of Christ. Something of this height is seen in the fact that He died not only that we might be forgiven; He died to make us good. He died not only that our sins might be blotted out, but also that we might be given a new birth; not merely to save us from punishment, but also that we might be made children of God, sons of God, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ. Such is His purpose for us, and all He did had that end in view. Furthermore, having given us this new birth, this new principle of life, He causes to dwell in us the same Holy Spirit that was in Himself. "God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him", we are told (John 3:34). He gives the same Spirit by measure to us. That is the height of His love to us.

But, as the Apostle has already been reminding these Ephesians, His love to us is so great that He has actually joined us to Himself. We are united with Christ, He has made us part of Himself, of His own body. That is why we were "quickened with Him" and "raised with Him" and are "seated in the heavenly places" with Him. In the fifth chapter of the Epistle he goes on to say: "We are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones". It is His love that has done that for us. But we read in the Epistle to the Philippians that He is not only saving us in a spiritual sense, He is even going to save our bodies. He purposes to redeem

us entirely, so we look for the coming from heaven of the Saviour, "who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (3:20-21). Have we realized that Christ will not be satisfied until our very body is glorified as His own body was glorified ?

We must go even beyond that, and remember how in His last prayer on earth to His Father, He prayed these words, "Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory" (John 17:24). Our Lord's love toward us knows no bounds; His desire for us is that we should be with Him and see something of that glory which He has shared with the Father from all eternity. He is not satisfied with purchasing our forgiveness and delivering us from the Pollution of this sinful world, He wants us to be there with Him in the glory and to spend our eternity there.

The Apostle John in his first Epistle, describing this height, says: "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" (3:1-2). A lover always desires that the object of his love should share all his privileges and blessings and enjoyments, and so our Lord desires that we should enjoy something of His eternal glory. He will not be satisfied until, as the Apostle says in the fifth chapter of this Epistle, We shall be "a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (v. 27). This is His ambition for the Church and for all whom He loves. We shall be glorified in spirit, in soul, and in body: there will be no fault, no blemish, no wrinkle. We shall be perfect and entire and filled with "all the fulness of God". The final word is, "and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (I Thess 4:17)

Thus we have tried feebly to catch a glimpse of the love of Christ to us. Have you been feeling sorry for yourself, and somewhat lethargic in a spiritual sense? Have you been regarding worship and prayer as tasks? Have you allowed the world the flesh or the devil to defeat you and to depress you? The one antidote to that is to meditate upon and to contemplate this love of Christ. Have you realized its breadth, its length, its depth, its height? Have you realized who and what you are as a Christian? Have you realized that Jesus is "the Lover of your soul", that He has set His affection upon you? Have you realized the height of His ambition for you? "Child of God, shouldst thou repine"? Are we but to shuffle through this world? We should rather respond to John Cennick's exhortation:

Children of The heavenly King,

As ye journey, sweetly sing;

Sing your Saviour's worthy praise,

Glorious in His works and ways.

One great cause of the present condition of the Church is that we do not know Christ's love to us. We spend out time with petty things, and in fussy activities and discussions. Were we to be full of this love and of the knowledge of this love we would be entirely transformed. It is this knowledge that makes us mighty. That is why the Apostle prayed without ceasing that these Ephesians might "with all saints comprehend what is the breadth and length and the depth and the height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge". Oh that we might know it, and grow in it and rejoice in it. Let us follow Cennick as he continues in his hymn:

Shout, ye little flock, and blest,
You on Jesus' throne shall rest;
There your seat is now prepared,
There your kingdom and reward.
Lift Your eyes, ye sons of light,
Zion's city is in sight;
There our endless home shall be,
There our Lord we soon shall see.
Fear not, brethren; joyful stand
On the borders of your land;
Christ your Lord, the Father's Son,
Bids you undismayed go on.
And then let us join Cennick in saying
Lord, obediently we go,
Gladly leaving all below;
Only Thou our Leader be,
And we still will follow Thee.

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