

Spiritual Growth Lessons

LESSON 4 of 32

♥ THE LOVE OF GOD ♥

"That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 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" (Ephesians 3:17-19).

One of the most powerful forces on earth to bring us to a Christ-like life is a proper concept of God- -how we truly see Him, and what we think He is really like! Our ability to love God as He desires us to love Him hinges on 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 its limitations!

As children grow up, they often hear such statements as, "If you do that, God won't love you." "God's gonna get you!" With a picture in their minds of a God who is ready at every opportunity to mete out His wrath upon humanity, is it any wonder that as they grow older they reject God? Their parents 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," states: "Fear is a fragile bond of union, a brittle basis of religion. 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 religion will be a chess game, hardly an affair of love."

The distorted and limited vision most of us 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 declares to us the very nature of God:

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

These are not attributes or characteristics of God. They are what God is! He does not have holiness, He is holy. He does not have love, He is love!



UNDERSTANDING THE GREATNESS OF HIS LOVE

Paul tells us that if we are to be filled with all the fulness 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 . . . passeth 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, trying to somehow enable us to understand this beautiful love, but when they are all compiled together, they still do little justice to this inexhaustible theme. No wonder that in 1917, F. M. 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."

Then comes to beautiful chorus:

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

Finally comes the climatic verse that says it better than anyone else has ever been able to say it before or since:

"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."

The late Brother A. L. Clanton expressed it this way in his song, "My Thanks to Him":

"But mortal tongue could never tell the whole,

Nor thank Him for such wondrous love."

And so continues the insurmountable task of trying to understand, let alone describe, the greatness of the love of 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 it, and be persuaded of it. If we have an insight 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

Now that we have studied about the nature of God and the dimensions of His love, we will look at the characteristics of that love. As we do so, we are again made aware that a vast gulf exists between our frail human love, and that which is offered by Jesus Christ.

More than any other Old Testament writer, the Psalmist David seemed to have a good understanding concerning God's love. He did not use the word "love" so much, but chose rather to write about the characteristics of that love.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

One of David's favourite themes was the faithfulness of God:

". . . thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds" (Psalm 36:5).

"Thy faithfulness is unto all generations . . ." (Psalm 119:90).

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

wonderful to know that God is faithful!

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

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

GOD'S LOVINGKINDNESS

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

"How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings" (Psalm 36:7).

"Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee" (Psalm 63:3).

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," "endureth forever," "better than life." But nowhere does David get more expressive than when he writes concerning the mercies of the LORD.

DAVID'S "HYMN NUMBER ONE"

Most churches have a hymn or chorus that seems to be "the crowd favorite." It is sung in almost every service. When the song leader announces, "Hymn Number One," some faces light up with obvious pleasure, while others make a face which can be interpreted to mean, "Oh no, not that song again!"

David's favorite theme was "the mercies of the LORD." Probably his favorite 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 endureth forever."* Then the leader would sing, *"O give thanks unto the LORD of lords,"* and the people would sing again, *"For his mercy endureth forever."* Twenty-six times the people repeated these words during the singing of that psalm.

The chorus of this psalm was David's favorite, which he used in other psalms and on many occasions: *"O give thanks unto the LORD: for he is good, For his mercy endureth 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, *"I will sing of the mercies of the LORD forever" (Psalm 89:1).* When the ark was brought up to Jerusalem from the house of Obededom, the singers were singing David's "Hymn Number One" (I Chronicles 16:34). The Scriptures are careful to note that this had been ordered by David: "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 endureth forever" (I Chronicles 16:41). 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 "Hymn Number One" (II 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 "Hymn Number One" (II Chronicles 20:21).

GOD'S LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL

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 Him many times, in many ways. Yet He 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 unconditional!

Some time ago, I was given a figurine by a person who considered himself to be my friend. It was an ugly thing--a fat man standing on a scale, which read: 330 pounds.

But the little inscription on the figurine says something that we all like to hear: "I love you just the way you are."

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 come to comprehend its characteristics and dimensions, our love relationship with Him will grow, so that we are able to say like the Apostle Paul:

". . . 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" (Romans 8:38-39). (ds)

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