



Knowing You're Loved

Part 1

2 Thessalonians 3:5

David Sunday

May 4, 2014

Father, I pray the words Your servant Moses asked of You when he said:

*May my teaching drop as the rain...
For I will proclaim the name of the LORD;
ascribe greatness to our God! (Deuteronomy 32:2-3)*

Lord, I desire to speak of Your love. This love is vaster than the whole ocean—it could be drained dry and yet not exhaust the greatness of Your love for us. I pray the help of Your Holy Spirit would be upon our hearts. I pray You would give us attentiveness and free us from distractions and unbelief. I pray You would empower my preaching so it would “drop as the rain” upon this congregation and bring refreshment, nourishment and fresh life to us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Please turn in your Bible to 2 Thessalonians—a short letter of Paul’s. Today is the fourth anniversary of our church. We are waiting until next year—the fifth anniversary—to have a big celebration but we do want to rejoice that the Lord has done great things for us as a church and be glad for what He has done. I was thinking how grateful I am to be a member of this congregation. If I were not a pastor of this church, I would still want to be a member here. I love sharing life with you—God’s people. I count it an honor and joy to be able to serve as one of your pastors and am so grateful for the way God has bonded our lives together in these four short years as a new church.

We just completed a journey through the Gospel of Luke. My plan, Lord willing and with God’s help, is to spend some time in the book of Job in the summer months. It has been on my heart for quite a while to turn to that book with all its wisdom as members of our congregation go through various afflictions.

We have a little interlude in May and I want us to take a breather as a church. I want us to focus on a very sweet, precious theme—knowing we are loved by God. Oh, how He loves you and me. Our Scripture text is one short verse. Second Thessalonians 3:5. I’m going to read it out of the English Standard version, then out of some other versions of the Bible.

- *“May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ”* (ESV).
- *“May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ”* (New American Standard Version).
- *“May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance”* (New International Version).
- The New Living translation expands the meaning a bit. *“May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ.”*
- Phillips—a paraphrase from long ago—presents it like this: “May He guard your hearts into ever deeper understanding of His love and the patient suffering of Christ.”

That is the only verse on which I’m going to preach. I want it to be like a sweet lozenge that we put under our tongue and let it slowly dissolve. A lozenge soothes irritated tissues. I want this verse to sooth the spiritual ‘irritated tissues’ which cause us to lose our joy, peace and trust in God’s great love for us, His people.

This is a verse which has been rich to me for 16 years. I remember the first time it arrested my attention was on Good Friday, April 10, 1998. I was the associate pastor at Grace Community Bible Church and it was Pastor John Sale’s last Easter weekend with us. Nathan Martin—an elder at New Covenant Bible Church—had a construction accident on Tuesday of that week and was lying in a coma in Central DuPage Hospital. The whole church gathered on that Good Friday night with heavy hearts, great concern and much soberness.

Pastor John opened the Scriptures to this verse and told us that Good Friday evening about a journey God wanted us to take. It is a journey directed by the Lord—a journey into the safe spiritual harbor of His deep, deep love in Jesus Christ. This love motivated our Lord Jesus to endure the most excruciating sufferings on the cross for us. When this love captivates our hearts, it will enable us to endure and persevere amid sufferings, trials, afflictions and burdens.

I remember him preaching to the church in a way that was greatly moving. It was so moving that after the service concluded, a great number of us moved from the sanctuary into the little fellowship hall and continued in prayer until midnight that evening. The Lord was stirring our hearts deeply. We were praying God would direct our hearts into His love and Christ’s steadfastness. We were praying for Nathan. By God’s grace, he began coming out of the coma on Easter Sunday morning. He is alive and kicking today and we are thankful for that.

This week, I was writing to Pastor John about that Good Friday. As we were reflecting on that night, he told me he preached this verse again on April 3, 2011 at his church in Valley Center, California. This was right before he and Linda heard from their youngest daughter, Rebecca, who lives in Wheaton.

Rebecca's and Tim's first child had been diagnosed at seven months in utero with massive brain, heart and kidney defects. That baby was named Ellis when he was born at the end of June, 2011. His challenges were so great that he could not survive life outside the womb and only lived an hour on this earth after he was born

Pastor John and Linda rushed from California to Wheaton to be with Tim and Rebecca in the first week of April, 2011. Tim and Rebecca shared with her parents how they were trusting in the Lord's goodness. They weren't angry or bitter but believed God had good for them. Rebecca asked her dad, "What did you preach on the Lord's day just before you came? I've gotten all kinds of letters and cards from people in your church. So many of them mention this one verse—2 Thessalonians 3:5."

Pastor John told me that verse has become so powerful and important in his life. He has it at the top of his prayer list and prays it every Sunday for me and for New Covenant Bible Church. He prays God would 'direct our hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance.' He told me, "I believe 2 Thessalonians 3:5 is one of the most important prayers we will ever pray."

I want us to be praying this prayer as a church. I want us to be praying that God would direct our hearts into His love and into Christ's perseverance.

I have a few observations which I believe will help us experience more of God directing our hearts into His love.

1. Paul is praying that God would do something for us, not that we would do something for Him.

Paul is not saying to the church in Thessalonica, "You need to feel God's love more and experience the steadfastness or patience of Christ more." No, he is saying, "God, would You do something for Your people which they cannot do for themselves?" Friends, the very fact that God's apostle is praying this prayer recorded in Holy Scripture is an indication that this is something God desires and delights to do in the lives of His people.

Grammatically speaking, the phrase "*...the love of God...*" could be referring to the love we show to God. Or it could be referring to the love we experience from God. Grammatically, it could go either way. Yet when you read Paul's letters, you will discover every time Paul refers to the love of God as "*...the love of God...*" he is speaking about the love God has for us. It is the love He demonstrated when He gave His Son to die for us when we were still His enemies (Romans 5:8).

It is very important for us to pray that we would love God more. But that's not what Paul is praying for here. Rather, Paul is praying the Lord would direct our hearts into a deeper knowledge and assurance of the great love God has for us. We can only love God because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

He says also, "*May the Lord direct your hearts...to the steadfastness of Christ*" —the patient endurance of Christ. This faithful endurance enabled Jesus to bear up under the most unspeakable

hardships and sufferings. Paul is praying God would direct our hearts into that steadfastness and that we would experience the same empowerment Jesus experienced in order to stand firm and persevere through spiritual battles, weariness and hardship.

Put these two petitions together and what do we see? When our hearts are full of the knowledge of God's love for us, we are enabled and empowered by that knowledge to endure, persevere and press on with the same power that enabled Jesus to persevere. I love the way Sam Storm summarizes this prayer request. He says, "Paul is praying for us that God would act in such a way that we are able to feel, experience and be refreshed by the love He has for us and to be energized by the spiritual energy and commitment Jesus Himself experienced during His earthly life."

How good that is when we are feeling burned out, exhausted, tired of demands and expectations people are putting on us, feeling we can't handle the responsibilities of family, work and church any longer. We may feel physically drained, relationally spent and emotionally exhausted. How do we go on? Paul says we go on as God directs our hearts into His love and into the steadfastness of Jesus Christ. That's how we fight burn-out and keep on going. *"May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ"* (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

2. Knowing God's love in a way that refreshes and energizes does not come naturally to us.

Everyone who has been to church for a while knows about the love of God. Even people who don't come to church or profess to believe the Christian faith will tell you, "God is loving." But Paul is not talking about a 'been there, done that' type of experience. He's not just saying, "You know God loves you. Move on." We sometimes do that. We can have in our minds the truth that God loves us but that truth is not refreshing and energizing us or bringing us joy, rest and strength.

Jonathan Edwards said, "There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet and having a sense of its sweetness." How do we get the sense of the sweetness of honey? It doesn't simply come from people telling you honey is sweet. You need to taste the honey.

Paul is praying God would direct the hearts of the Thessalonians into God's love in such a way that they taste that love in their hearts. There is a work which needs to happen in our hearts before we can experience God's love. We don't just accept it mentally and move on. We need a work of God to convince us and bring us beyond rational judgment into a sense of His love for us.

God loves all of humanity. Everyone is experiencing the love of God on a daily basis. Springtime, the refreshment of the sunshine, the food we enjoy are all ways God cares for us even when we are His enemies. This is a testimony to His love. Yet a lot of humanity does not rejoice in the love of God to the point of saying, "This is life to me." The Psalmist says,

“...*your steadfast love is better than life...*” (Psalm 63:3). That is not the experience of vast numbers of human beings. It doesn't come naturally to us.

When Paul prays that the Lord would direct our hearts into God's love, I believe he is praying we would experience the same love that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have for one another. They have enjoyed this love for all eternity and have never had a spat, quarrel, fight or disagreement. They have loved One Another with an everlasting love. Jesus prays in John 17:24 to the Father Who has loved Him “...*before the foundation of the world.*” “*I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me*” (verse 23). He prays we would experience the love that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We need God to work on our hearts in order to experience this. It doesn't come naturally.

In our weekly newsletter Life Together, I wrote of a story told by Colin Smith, pastor at the Orchard Church of Arlington Heights, Illinois. He has a professor in his congregation who teaches counseling courses at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois. This professor asked her class of 120 students—all of them preparing for some form of vocational ministry—“Do you believe God loves you?” How many said yes? Two. “Do you seminarians believe God loves you?” Maybe they thought it was a trick question.

Why do we think it is a trick question? What is going on in our hearts that makes it so difficult to believe He loves us? That story had the ring of authenticity to me. I think one of the things God has put on my heart to pray often for New Covenant Bible Church is that we would know we are loved and know it deeply. I don't think we know it as well as we could know it or as well as God wants us to know it.

I was so encouraged by what happened in our Thanksgiving service last November. A dear sister in Christ spoke up (I have her permission to bring this up again). She said, “I know I'm supposed to believe that God loves me but I really struggle to believe it.” I was so happy she said that in the service. I was happy because—first of all—that shows she trusts the body of Christ and is willing to be open. That is healthy for us as a church. When we're not hiding, acting and pretending but being open about our heart struggles, that is healthy. I was also encouraged to see in the weeks following—and indeed months thereafter—this dear sister in Christ has experienced regular ministries of encouragement from this body. They have spoken to, prayed for and comforted her. Relationships are being deepened because of that.

I am also encouraged about something she told me this past week. She has had numerous people from our church tell her, “I struggle with the same thing. I'm so glad you said something because I feel like I'm not alone now.” This is good. This is healthy and is the way the body of Christ should be.

It is also indicative of the fact that it is not natural for us to believe God loves us. We can know it intellectually. But Paul is praying for something deeper—that our hearts would be “...*directed into the love of God...*” (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

3. There are pitfalls and obstacles in the way.

The word 'direct' means to make straight; to clear out the obstacles preventing us. It is the same word used by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 3:11 when he says, "*Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you.*" Paul is saying, "I want to come see you but there are dangers, obstacles and hindrances. I'm not going to get to Thessalonica unless the Lord clears the path of obstacles and brings me there. Direct me, Lord." When Paul uses the same word in 2 Thessalonians 3:5, he means there are obstacles in the way which keep the saints of God from deeply experiencing the love of God. I think those obstacles could be summarized with three 'S's.'

- a. Sins
- b. Situations
- c. Satan

a. Sins

You start down the path of "God loves me." Then, boom! A landmine blows up in your face. As you look at your own life, you ask, "How could He love me when I've done such horrible things? Remember what I've done? Do I know who I am? How could God love someone like me?"

As you hear the Word and come to this church, I hope you have a high view of God's holiness and a sense that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). Our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). He is holy, holy, holy. I hope those truths will never be diminished or watered down in the life of our church.

But you see something of His holiness and something of your vileness—the thoughts you think and suggestions that come into your mind. You think, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" (Romans 7:24). The gap seems so great to you and you realize God knows all about you. You think, "How could He love a wretch like me?"

The gospel tells us that God's love for us is not based on our performance. God's love does not waver depending on our goodness because His love is grounded in the performance of Jesus Christ on our behalf. The work of Christ is so perfect for us that God could not love us any more today than He will love us in all eternity when He sees us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

I love this old hymn.

Chorus:
What though the vile accuser roar
Of sins that I have done;
I know them well, and thousands more;
My God, He knoweth none

Bridge:
My sin is cast into the sea
Of God's forgotten memory
No more to haunt accusingly
For Christ has lived and died for me

(Words: Samuel W. Gandy, 1838, (verses & chorus); Zac Hicks, 2013 (bridge))

God looks at Christ's performance and says, "I love you. The blood of Jesus Christ My Son cleanses you from all sin." God doesn't say, "Yes, I'll love you when you get your act cleaned up." Matt Chandler said, "God doesn't love some future version of you. He loves you right now." Dare I say God enjoys His people—His children? God likes you, wants to be with you, "rejoices over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:19).

There are also the sins that have been done against you—horrible things. Words spoken which have scarred your mind: abusive actions, violations by others that make you feel ashamed and dirty. The good news of the gospel is that "Your history is not your identity" (Sam Storms). What other people have said is not your identity. Your identity is in Christ alone.

b. Situations

Sometimes we think it is God's job to give us a happy life and to make everything go nicely for us. If everything is not going nicely—if there are family and relationship problems which we can't solve; if there are financial or health problems—we start to assume hardship and adversity are signs of God's displeasure and disappointment in us. The truth is it's not God's job to make us happy in this fallen world. God is more concerned with making us holy right now and preparing us for eternal bliss in the new creation where Christ will reign forever. Our circumstances are not an indicator or barometer of how much He loves us.

I love Romans 8:35-39:

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

Sometimes verse 36 is left out but I hope that never happens at our church:

*³⁶ As it is written,
"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."*

People say, "I don't want to hear about that. I just want to hear about how 'nothing can separate us from the love of God.'" Paul is saying as famine, distress, nakedness, danger, sword and persecution are going on day after day in the lives of God's people, they need to know this:

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Don't measure God's love for you by how good or bad you think your situation is.

c. **Satan**

In addition to sins and situations, there is Satan—the roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). You are going down the path deeper into God's love when you suddenly hear a terrible roar in the thickets. You have enemies biting at your ankles. Satan hates you. God loves you but Satan hates you and wants you to doubt God's love for you. He does not want you directed into the love of God and is actively working to do all in his power to get you to doubt and disbelieve God's love.

Our final wonderful observation about God's love for His children is so simple.

4. **God wants you—His child who trusts in Jesus—to know you are loved.**

If you don't trust in Jesus, God wants you to do so. He wants you to put your hope in Him and know you are loved. I love John Owen, the Puritan theologian who had such a high view of God, said, "The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to Him is not to believe that He loves you." Wow! Even worse than sinning? Really, John Owen? Yes. God wants you to know you are loved. How?

Colin Smith says, "We glance at people we don't like. We look at people we like. And we gaze at those we dearly love." We gaze and can't get our eyes off of them. How do you grow in the knowledge of God's love for you? You gaze upon the wondrous cross and the treasures of the gospel written for us in God's Holy Word until you find your soul being transformed, convinced, persuaded and warmed by these truths. You ask, as Paul does in 2 Thessalonians 3:5, "Direct my heart to Your love."

Frederick Buechner says, "If you have never known the power of God's love, maybe it's because you've never asked to know it. I mean really asked, expecting an answer."

I have an assignment for the week. I hope no one is thinking, "I'm not going to pray this prayer. Why is this preacher going on and on about one verse?" If that is what's going on in your heart, this prayer is like an alarm bell, saying, "Wake up! Don't let your heart be so cold. You don't care that the God of the universe wants you to know He loves you? Wake up!" To know you are loved is the most important thing that could happen to you.

Here's my request of you this week:

- Monday – Pray the prayer in 2 Thessalonians 3:5 for yourself. Paul prayed it. Pray, “Lord, direct my heart into Your love and into the steadfastness of Christ.
- Tuesday – Pray this prayer for every member of your family. “Lord, direct my dear wife’s and children’s hearts into Your love and into the steadfastness of Christ. Help them know how much You love them.”
- Wednesday – Pray this prayer for our church family and for your care group.
- Thursday – Pray this prayer for our missionaries who are alone and often deeply distressed.
- Friday – Pray this prayer for neighbors, friends and co-workers who don’t know God’s love. They may have a rational knowledge of God’s love but have never tasted its sweetness.
- Saturday – Pray this prayer for next Sunday. We are looking forward to learning more in Ephesians 3 about knowing we are loved.

Right now, start praying this prayer. Jesus is present at the Lord’s Table. For all who are spiritually hungry and thirsty, who mourn and are tempted, tried and weary, He is here. He is saying, “Come where I can direct your heart more deeply into the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.” If you want to know that love more deeply, this is a great place to experience it. Actively engage in prayer as you take the bread which represents His body broken for you and as you take the cup which represents the blood He shed for you when you were still an enemy. This blood cleanses you from all your sins. Ask God to direct your heart into His love.

If you don’t trust in Jesus, don’t come to this table. Just pass the tray; no one will think badly of you. Take that time to pray, “Lord, direct my heart into Your love. Enable me to trust in Your Son, Jesus.”

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