

How Much Does God Love Us?

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, AI. Good morning, everyone, whether you're here in the church or on the live stream, or indeed if you're listening to the recordings of the service. Perhaps I could just give a very brief update about Maggie Shearer. As I start, Maggie, as most people will know, suffered a stroke on Boxing Day. She's in the Royal Infirmary. Yesterday, she was able to converse with people who visited her, which is very positive, but we don't yet know what the long-term health implications are. So please continue to remember, Maggie, in your prayers.

I was thinking as I was preparing that this is a subject I'm talking about that Maggie would identify with, because I want to ask the question, how much does God love us? Now, that's a question I know that we can never fully answer, but it is a really important question. When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus in Ephesians chapter 3, he said this was his prayer, I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. But then he goes on, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. So we're going to be thinking about the love of God this morning. I hope we'll be able to rejoice in the love that God has for us, but also recognise that we can never fully appreciate just how great God's love for us is. And I want to focus our thoughts around three verses from the psalmist, verses 11 to 13, if you're following in your Bibles.

And the psalmist gives us three things we can compare God's love with. And I divide them up into two sections. There's the quantity of God's love and the quality of God's love. And within the quantity, there's the extent and the effect of God's love. So the quantity, as far as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. The effect, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. And the quality of God's love, as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. I just want to take these three verses and we'll talk around them and have a think about what they mean for us. So the psalmist says, as far as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. So the question then, well, how far are the heavens above the earth? So let me give a few possible answers. If you look up, and it's a reasonably clear day, you can look up and see a blue sky. And the blue sky, you may know, comes because of the way that the light is refracted, light from the sun is refracted as it comes towards earth by the earth's atmosphere. The earth's atmosphere, I believe, extends for about 62 miles, and then you consider it to be in space. So I first thought, well, 62 miles is a lot higher up than any of us are ever likely to go. The heavens, in some sense, begin there. That's where space begins. But then if we're outside, it's a clear day, the chances are we'll also see the sun. Now, if you've been following the news this week, the spacecraft that has gone closer to the sun, I think, than any before, several times it's been said the distance to the sun from the earth is about 93 million miles. Now, that's an enormous distance, isn't it? It's new enough that they can't send us spacecraft to it. I think it took about eight years to get there. But it's a huge distance. But then if you go out at night and look up in the sky, you'll see the stars. And the brightest star, I believe, in the sky is called Sirius.

And it is about 50 trillion light miles away from the earth. So there's 12 zeros after the 50 in the distance of Sirius. That is an unimaginable distance. We really can't get a concept of just how far that might be. But astronomers tell us actually Sirius is a near neighbour in the universe.

[4 : 26] And again, if you've been watching the news the last few weeks, you may have seen that they've discovered a new galaxy in the stars. They're calling it Firefly Sparkle. And apparently, it is one and a half billion times as far away as Sirius. That's 75 followed by 21 zeros.

So you've got the distance Sirius is a way which we can hardly grasp. And you add lots of zeros onto that. And you still haven't got to the end of our universe. The heavens are absolutely vast.

And our God, of course, is even greater than his creation. Now, David, as he wrote the psalm, wouldn't have all that data. He wouldn't know about that. But he did know that the sky, when he looks up in the sky, that is far further away than he could really conceive of. And he says God's love is that great. That's the measure we need to use if we're thinking about how much God loves us, as high as the heavens are above the earth. Now, God's love comes to us, of course, in many ways. We couldn't exist for a second without God's love, without God's ordering of our universe. God's love comes to us day by day as we experience his presence with us, particularly if we're Christians. But of course, if we want to know the extent of God's love, the place we need to look to is Calvary, to think about the death of the Lord Jesus and what he did for us when he died on the cross. John says in his letter, this is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. Or Paul says, writing to the Romans, God demonstrates his own love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Now, to begin to grasp the implications of these verses, we need to recognize that there are two things there, which again are beyond our grasp, but we need to try to understand them. The first thing is the distance that there was between us and God. The Bible describes God as being holy. Holy literally means separate or different.

[6 : 48] And it's used to describe how God in all his fullness is so much greater than us. And it takes in all the aspects of God's character, but perhaps particularly when we think about God's holiness, we think about his justice, about his consistency, about his righteousness, that he is absolutely perfect in everything that he does. And in particular, that God can't even look on sin.

And then when we look at ourselves and make the comparison, all of us are sinful. All of us have done things that are wrong that go against God's way. And there was an enormous distance separating us from God. And there was a gap that we could never cross ourselves. And the only way that we could would be if God intervened for us. But why should he do that? Our sin is rebellion against God. There was nothing in us that should be attractive to God that would make him want to love us. And yet our God chose to love us. And he chose to do the one thing that would enable us to be reconciled to him. He sent Jesus into the world to be our saviour. And that's the second thing that we need to try to grasp as we think about the greatness of God's love. How much Jesus suffered for us. It was terrible. It was awful that Jesus was rejected by those he came to help. It was awful that he was subjected to possibly the most cruel form of execution invented by man as he was crucified in public on a cross. In agony, humiliated by those he had created.

And yet we still can't really grasp the enormity of Jesus' suffering, even if we can begin to understand the suffering of crucifixion. Because the thing that Jesus really suffered was having our sins put on him by God and being separated from his Father. So he could cry out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And that's the measure of God's love. Giving the one who is most precious to him to be our saviour. And Jesus taking on himself the most awful suffering, unimaginable suffering, on our behalf. This is love, said John, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. David puts in the psalm, the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever. He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

As I was thinking of that, I was reminded of the old hymn that many of us will know. Give me a sight, O Saviour, of thy wondrous love to me, of the love that brought thee down to earth to die on Calvary. O make me understand it. Help me to take it in, what it meant to thee, the holy one, to bear away my sin. The love of God is as high as the heavens are above the earth.

But then David says, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. So this is the effect of God's love on us. So how far is the east from the west?

[10 : 57] Commentaries tend to say something like, it's an infinite distance, or it's immeasurable. I think actually that just shows that they don't teach astronomy at Bible College, because I don't believe, and I'm not an astronomer myself, but I don't believe there is an absolute concept of east and west in space. There is a technical definition by which planets might be east or west of each other. But mostly east and west directions are specific to heavenly bodies. If we take the obvious one, the earth. North and south in our world is defined by the axis that the world spins on, and east and west are at right angles to that wherever you happen to be standing. I'll put it a bit more simply, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. But if you start here and you go east and keep going east across land and sea, you actually end up going round in circles and come back to where you

started. At this point, I realised I was kind of overthinking things, and I need to put myself into David's shoes. So let's do that now. How far was the east from the west for David? Well, if David was standing in Bethlehem or perhaps in Jerusalem, he could look east and he could think if he gave someone a burden that he wanted to get rid of, they could head off in the direction of what we can now call China. Potentially he could head off west in the direction of what would now be Morocco, and would get further and further away from that burden. And before too long, it would be gone completely. He could forget about it. It wasn't going to come back. It was someone else's problem now.

I think that's the way we need to think about the distance from east to west here. It is that our burden of sin has been removed from us if our trust is in Jesus. David probably had in mind as he was writing this the Day of Atonement in the Jewish calendar. And on the Day of Atonement, as they were going through the wilderness, there was an animal sacrifice for the sins of the people. But there was also a goat that the high priest laid his hands on, and it was sent out into the wilderness. And symbolically, the sins of the people were being put on it, and they were being carried away from the camp. And David said, my sins have been carried away as far as the east is from the west. I don't need to worry about them anymore. That's a tremendous lesson for us if we are Christians. Because many Christians,

I wouldn't exclude myself from that, many Christians, we bring back things from our past, and we feel a sense of guilt about them, and we really can't, in that sense, let go of them.

But God says, your sins have been removed if they're confessed and you're trusting in Jesus. There's no need to be burdened by them. I think there are two things in particular that can destroy the joy that we should have if we're Christians. One is if we've got sins that we haven't confessed. [14:15] Perhaps we don't even recognise them. Perhaps we enjoy them too much, or perhaps we even feel too ashamed to bring them to God. We need to regularly bring our sins to God and confess them, and then experience the joy that we know we've been forgiven by our loving Heavenly Father. But equally, we need to make sure that these sins that are in the past, we need to understand they really are gone. God has forgotten them. We need to put them behind us and need to move forward in our relationship with God.

Again, I was reminded of, in this case, an old chorus. Slightly different analogy it uses, but very similar. Gone, gone, gone, gone, gone. Yes, my sins are gone. Now my soul is free and in my heart's a song.

Buried in the deepest sea. Yes, that's good enough for me. I will live eternally. Praise God. My sins are gone. If your trust is in the Lord Jesus today, be aware that he has forgiven all your sins from the past and that you can put them behind you. Let's move on to our third picture. Slightly different now, because David writes about the compassion a father has for his children and says the Lord God has the same compassion for us. Now let's recognize first that not all of us have good experiences of fatherhood. Some of us have wonderful fathers who we could look up to and could seek to emulate. Others have fathers who perhaps are not worthy of that respect. And those of us who are fathers, I'm sure, are very aware of our own deficiencies, that we don't live up to the standard that we should as fathers. But I hope we can all think about what it would mean to be the perfect father that God is. I think fathers have two big responsibilities, particularly when their children are young or are young or are frail. One is to provide for them and the other is to protect them. And of course, God does that for us. Again, a slightly different analogy, but Psalm 23 is very much about God's protection and his provision for his sheep. But what I think is particularly significant about this here is that God's love for us is individual. I'm a father of three children and they're all different in their character and their needs. And it wouldn't be right if I was to treat them all in the same way.

And when we think about God as our father, we need to recognize that he cares about all of us individually. That God so loved the world that he gave his only son is a wonderful truth that we can never fully understand. But Paul said, the son of God loved me and gave himself for me. And it's not as if God has just given a kind of blanket forgiveness to everyone who trusts in Jesus. God cares about each of us individually. He knows our needs better than we know them ourselves. And he is able to meet that need and to work things for our good. Jesus said he knows the number of hairs on our head. And he says in the same section of Matthew that God knows every, she's every sparrow when it falls. How much more will he care for those who love him for those who are his children? I think that's even more mind-blowing than what we were thinking about earlier. You just can't

understand how God could love each of us individually, know everything about our lives and be directing things for our good. But that's the truth that's in the Bible, that God loves me, that Jesus died for me, and that I can know God's presence and God's help individually in my life.

At Christmas, our grandson actually didn't mention it, I don't think, just now, but one of the things he got was a keyboard. And it took my mind back to when my mum used to have an old piano, and I learned to tap out a tune one note at a time on it. And I think the first hymn that I ever learned was one which is particularly relevant to what I'm saying just now.

[18 : 57] And it went like this, I am so glad that our Father in heaven tells of his love in the book he has given. Wonderful things in the Bible I see. This is the dearest, that Jesus loved me.

Jesus loves me, and I know I love him. Love brought him down my lost soul to redeem. Yes, it was love made him die on the tree.

Oh, I am certain that Jesus loves me. I am so glad that Jesus loves me. Jesus loves even me. If we know the Lord Jesus is our Savior, let's rejoice in that this morning, that Jesus loved me, Jesus died for me, and Jesus still loves me.

And he is with me every step of the way. I've got some final thoughts in a minute, but just one thing to look at just before we get to that. Verse 17. It's another verse that tells us more about God's love. And it says, It's not just that the size of God's love is greater than we can imagine.

[20 : 14] It's that God loved us from before time began, and God will continue to love us through eternity as we go to be with the Lord Jesus.

God's love is eternal and unchanging. But I want to finish with something I've kind of skipped over until now. We've read verses, but I've not really commented on this.

Again, if you've got a Bible, you might like to look at the verses. Verse 11 says, For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

Verse 13 says, As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. And verse 17 says, From everlasting to everlasting, the Lord's love is with those who fear him.

So the experience of God's love, our experience of God's love is not unconditional. That experience is for those who fear the Lord, and not everyone will benefit from it.

[21 : 20] Now, it may strike you this is a bit different from how it's presented in the New Testament. As we read the New Testament, it is very clear that we come to know God and to experience his love through faith in the Lord Jesus.

Paul, when he was in prison in Philippi, and the jailer asked him, What must I do to be saved? Said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

More explicitly, even than that, John in chapter 3 of his gospel writes, Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

In other words, our status before God is dependent only on our relationship with the Lord Jesus and whether we have trusted in him or not. So is that different from what David is writing about here, about fearing God?

I don't think it is. When the Bible talks about fear of God, it's not generally talking about terror or dread. Now, sometimes when people encountered God, that was their immediate reaction.

[22 : 32] We've been thinking over the last couple of weeks of the shepherds, and in the fears over Bethany, as the glory of the Lord appeared to them, they were terrified. But in general, when the Bible talks about the fear of God, it's talking about our reverence, about an awe that we should have for God, about recognising how much greater our God is than we are, and recognising his holiness and his unworthiness.

And that's exactly, I think, what was involved for most of us in coming to trust in Jesus. Now, when some of us became Christians as young children, maybe it was the love of Jesus that gripped us, we weren't so aware, perhaps, of our inadequacy.

But certainly for all of us, I think if we are truly trusting in Jesus, we can only do that if we understand why we need to.

Why is it that we need to put our trust in Jesus? Why is it that Jesus needed to come and die for us? And it's because our God is so much greater than us, and we are so unable to do anything to help ourselves.

We don't come in any sense to God the Father, or to the Lord Jesus, thinking we're equals. They are so far above us. We come with a sense of inadequacy.

[23 : 56] But when we know the Lord, we come with a thanksgiving, and a wonder that his love is so great that we can approach God as our Father. So this morning, each of us, we need to make sure that we really do fear the Lord in the true sense, that we recognize our inadequacy before him, and that we recognize also the love that he has for us, the love that sent Jesus to die on the cross, the love that can be with us every day, beyond our understanding, but something we can rejoice in, and we can bask in, as we think of all God has done for us.

I want to finish as I started with Ephesians 3, and I think as we go towards a new year, as we come to the end of 2024, and move into 2025, Paul's prayer would be a really good one for us as a church, and for one another.

He writes this, I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

May that be our experience. May all of us know the Lord Jesus as Saviour, and come to know more and more his love for us. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for the wonderful truth that God is love, that your character is one of love for your creation, love that was enough to give up your most precious Son to be our Saviour, love that is with us every day, as we meditate on all that he has done for us, and all the blessings that we constantly receive through him.

We pray that you will help all of us to have that fear of God that David talks about, that we may recognise how much greater you are than us, how unworthy we are in ourselves, but that we may be able to rejoice in the fact that we have trusted in the Lord Jesus, and through that we can experience your love, the love of a Father, and a love that is measureless beyond our understanding.

[26 : 28] Be with us, we pray over the coming weeks as we go into a new year, that we may experience more and more your love in our lives, and that our love for you may grow.

Thank you for being with us. We just commit ourselves to you now, and pray for your blessing in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.