

Ephesians 3:19: Knowing the Love of Christ that Surpasses Knowledge

Submitted to Thomas Chalmers Exegetical Scholarship

Introduction

Ephesians 3:14-21 is a rich passage, prayer rather than that is possibly expressing the conclusion of Paul's prayer begun in Ephesians 1:17-23, that each Christian would have the power to comprehend and know the incredible love of God. This essay will address one important aspect of the passage by diving into Ephesians 3:19 "and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." and understanding what Paul means when he says "to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge"

Paul uses the word to know and knowledge here and on the first look, it may seem like a contradiction¹, to "know" the love of Christ which surpasses all "knowledge". In this paper, I try to explain what is the knowledge here that Paul is talking about. Assuming Christ's love for us is unknowable according to this text is an oversimplified and frankly incorrect interpretation of this rich verse. I will unpack that it is possible to know and comprehend the infinite love of Christ and shed some light on what Paul possibly had in mind when he says γνώσεως.

The context of Ephesian 3:19

Applying one of the most important steps of good hermeneutics, which is reading the verse in its context² for an accurate interpretation. In the interest of time, we would do a small dive into the historical and literary context of this letter.

Γνώσεως in the historical context

When Paul wrote this letter to the churches in Ephesus, the word γνώσεως or knowledge meant more than how a modern reader might understand it. I don't mean to say it is different but having a better insight into what γνώσεως meant during Paul's time helps us understand the limitations of knowledge acquired a certain way. In ordinary Greek γνώσεως meant the "intelligent understanding of an object or

¹ John MacArthur, *Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 110.

² Wayne McDill, "7 Principles of Biblical Interpretation," Lifeway Research, March 12, 2014, <https://research.lifeway.com/2014/03/12/7-principles-of-biblical-interpretation/>.

matter”³. Γνώσεως is understood as the knowledge of what is real, which is what can be verified. The mode of knowledge was important and eyes were considered a much more reliable witness than ears. For the Greeks, at that time the mode of verifying the meaning can be verified by observation. The Greeks considered seeing as a more reliable means than hearing⁴. When Paul is saying “surpasses all Γνώσεως” (Ephesians 3:19) most likely means knowledge in the Greek sense of seeing and grasping what is seen⁵. Know in the Old Testament Jewish sense was that faith implies knowledge. It was a systematic theological knowledge gained from scripture as opposed to seeing and verifying through observation.

Ephesians as a Whole

The point made above regarding the historical context of Γνώσεως can be supported by the looking at the broader context of this verse. To support this claim we will look at a zoomed-out view of the verse within the context of the letter, then within the context of the passage before we go all the way into the said verse.

The letter of Ephesians is written to the church in Ephesus. It is a letter⁶! The letter to Ephesians is in the form of a personal letter and follows the structure and format⁷. It has a disclosure formula that was used to let the reader know the purpose of writing the letter. In the letter, Paul does not get to the disclosure formula until the fourth chapter. I do believe to link the purpose of Ephesians with this prayer would be a paper in and of itself so I would leave it here as a note that can be further explored by the reader. The first three chapters seem to be focussing on NT doctrine and are

³Bultmann, R. (1964–). [γινώσκω, γνώσις, ἐπιγινώσκω, ἐπίγνωσις, καταγινώσκω, ἀκατάγνωστος, προγινώσκω, πρόγνωσις, συγγνώμη, γνώμη, γνωρίζω, γνωστός](#). G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 1, pp. 689–714). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

⁴ As opposed to the OT Jewish way of knowing which came from hearing, specifically hearing of scripture.

⁵ There was also a Gnostic understanding of gnosis prevalent which did not involve seeing through observation but rather an esoteric knowledge and a mystical vision. Paul may as well have also been attacking that understanding of knowledge

⁶ Bruce Lowe saying this jumping with excitement.

⁷ John L. White, “Introductory Formulae in the Body of the Pauline Letter,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90, no. 1 (March 1971): 91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3262988>.

theological, whereas the last three chapters are more on the practical side and focus on Christian living and behavior.⁸

The book of Ephesians seems to cover many of the major teachings of Paul like the accomplishment and application of redemption in Christ Jesus. Paul in the letter points out the work of our triune God and also focuses on the work of each person of the Trinity⁹. This epistle provides a wonderful summary of the gospel and a reminder that our salvation is not our work but rather the working of our triune God, entirely of Grace.⁸

Diving into Ephesians 3:14-21

Ephesians 3:14-21 is a conclusion of a long prayer that started in Ephesians 1:17-23. Its focus is on deeply understanding the love of God. The theme of the prayer is about knowing so within the broader context it gives us some confirmation that Paul won't be contradicting himself by saying Christ's love is unknowable, but rather it can be known but not the way Greeks understood knowledge. But how can one know this love that surpasses knowledge? To unlock this mystery we don't need to go too far away from the verse but rather Ephesians 3:14-21 lays out the steps to know it. For the intents and purposes of this paper, we are going to focus only on Ephesians 3:14-21 but I am sure many papers can be written linking this verse and understanding it richly by utilizing the disclosure formula of Ephesians as well as the broader prayer in chapters 1 to 3.

Our God is infinite and I am not arguing we can ever fully and completely know His love for us and in some sense, it does surpass our limited understanding. But in His infinite kindness and mercy, He has revealed a way to know His love or rather the love of Christ. FF Bruce writes *"But how can human beings, finite creatures still, for all their endowment with spiritual blessings in the heavenly realm in Christ, ever hope to apprehend that which is infinite and eternal? Only in so far as that which is infinite and eternal has condescended to their estate and capacity"*¹⁰

⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, Tn: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 1770–72.

⁹ Michael J Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament : The Gospel Realized* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 270–80.

¹⁰ F F Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians : A Verse-By-Verse Exposition* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), 68,69.

Looking at the broader verse “ *that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner self, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God.*” (Ephesians 3:16-19 NASB)

There is no debate the love of Christ here means Christ’s love for us and not our love for Christ in verse 19.¹¹ However, there are various interpretations out there of what is the subject whose the length and breadth and height and depth Paul is talking about. Those who interpret this verse to mean something other than the love of Christ understand the text as “*that you may comprehend the length and breadth and depth and height of this subject and the love of Christ.*” The subject is argued to be redemption or salvation or the unsearchable riches of Christ borrowing from the previous verses and the list goes¹²on.

Using the hermeneutical principle of reading the text for its plain and obvious meaning first,¹³ it makes more sense that Paul is talking about the love of Christ in verse 18. The NIV translation translates the verses as “*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, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*” (Ephesians 3:18-19 NIV). Understanding this helps backtrack and unfold the way to know the love that surpasses knowledge.

John Bunyan does a great job of explaining this distinction: “*Although apprehending is included in comprehending; yet to comprehend is more. To comprehend is to know a thing fully; or, to reach it all. But here we must distinguish, and say, that there is a comprehending that is absolute, and a comprehending that is comparative. Of*

¹¹ I understand there may be articles and writers out there spilling ink over whether it means our love of Christ but in this context and also otherwise, it is very arrogant to say our love for Christ surpasses knowledge.

¹²Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Old Tappan, Nj: F.H. Revell, 1980), 189.

¹³ Wayne McDill, “7 Principles of Biblical Interpretation,” Lifeway Research, March 12, 2014, <https://research.lifeway.com/2014/03/12/7-principles-of-biblical-interpretation/>.

*comprehending absolutely, or perfectly, we are not here to speak; for that the Apostle could not, in this place, as to the thing prayed for, desire: For it is utterly impossible perfectly to know whatsoever is in the breadths, lengths, depths, and heights here spoken of.”*¹⁴

According to John Bunyan, there are levels of knowledge and understanding. These levels are dependent on a believer's walk with the Lord. When Paul says “you maybe able to”, the hurdle here is our human flesh and limited understanding by nature and Christians can overcome this not fully but to a large extent with the mighty help by the Holy Spirit. It's God's grace that He enables us through the power of the Holy Spirit to comprehend¹⁵ the length and breadth and width and height of the love of Christ. Now, we have a good insight into how one can go about understanding this verse and ultimately the love of Christ.

may be able to comprehend with all the saints: Backtracking further and focussing on “with all the saints” in verse 18. We would have the power to comprehend the love of Christ with all the saints¹⁶ and not alone. A Christian can know something of the love of Christ but without the saints and the experience with

¹⁴ John Bunyan, *All Loves Excelling : The Saints' Knowledge of Christ's Love* (Carlisle, Pa: Banner Of Truth Trust, 1998), 33.

¹⁵comparative and not full comprehension as Bunyan says in the above quote. The love of Christ is infinite and cannot be fully comprehended by us. *“But again, these breadths, lengths, depths, and heights, have in themselves naturally that glory, that cannot be so well discerned, or kept in view by weak eyes. He had need have an eye like an eagle, that can look upon the sun, that can look upon these great things, and not be stricken blind therewith. You see how Saul was served when he was going to Damascus (Acts 9): But Stephen could stand and look up steadfastly into heaven; and that too when with Jonah Wherefore the riches of this love in the utmost of it, is not, cannot be known by any: let their understanding and knowledge, be heightened and improved what it may. Yea, and being heightened and improved, let what search there can by it be made into this love and grace. “That which is afar off, and exceeding deep, who can find out?” (Eccl 7:24) And that this love of Christ is so, shall anon be made more apparent. But at present we will proceed to particular challenges for the making out of this, and then we will urge those reasons that will be for the further confirmation of the whole.”* - John Bunyan, *All Loves Excelling : The Saints' Knowledge of Christ's Love* (Carlisle, Pa: Banner Of Truth Trust, 1998), 60.

¹⁶ John R W Stott, *God's New Society : The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, ©, Printing, 1979), 134.; F F Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians : A Verse-By-Verse Exposition* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), 68.

them, the experiential knowledge¹⁷ is missing and is almost vain. Knowing according to scripture is not just theoretical but also has experiential aspects, including our feelings.

The strengthening of the inner man through the Holy Spirit. One understanding of this that Roman Catholics and Pelagians believe is the inner man is the rational soul or ego of man that is living in harmony with the divine, but it needs the Holy Spirit to be strengthened so they can overcome the sinful lusts of the flesh¹⁸. The correct understanding however involves knowing the total depravity¹⁸ of man. The conflict is between the old man and the new regenerated believer, the new man. The inner man here is the outcome of the powers of the Spirit of God (**2 Cor 4:16**). It is the spiritual man and not the totally depraved flesh that is being strengthened. The strengthening is needed to receive the blessings Paul is praying for the Ephesians¹⁹. "The inward man is the true and enduring self that, which delights in the law of God (**Rom 7:22**) and experiences daily renewal in Christ however much the outward man may waste away (**2 Cor 4:16**)" - F F Bruce¹⁶

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love: Christ dwells in the heart of believers through faith. This indwelling in Christ is the same in nature as the Spirit that strengthens the inner man. Hodges does point out in his commentary that a born-again Christian is always indwelt by the Spirit. Rather, he is talking about Christ's dwelling in believers' hearts is that is confirmed in love. There seems to be levels or degrees of Christ's dwelling in the heart of believers. The degree of Christ's indwelling in a believer's heart can be confirmed by this rooting and grounding in love which can in turn help to comprehend and know this love of Christ.

¹⁷ John R W Stott, *God's New Society : The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, ©, Printing, 1979), 134; Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Old Tappan, Nj: F.H. Revell, 1980), 189. John Stott goes as far to say that a Christian needs the varied experience of people from different background like Jews and Gentiles, young and old, black and white and male and female. Only thing I would be cautious about is not too focus too much on the external diversity of the body of Christ but rather the diversity in their walk with the Lord. A new believer vs matured believer both have so much to learn from each other. No two believers even if biological twins have exact same walk with the Lord and exact same experiences.

¹⁸ R C Sproul, "TULIP and Reformed Theology: Total Depravity," Ligonier Ministries, May 25, 2017, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/tulip-and-reformed-theology-total-depravity>.

¹⁹ F F Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians : A Verse-By-Verse Exposition* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), 67-69.

MacArthur in his commentary on Ephesians writes:

Being made strong inwardly by God's Spirit leads to Christ's being at home in our hearts, which leads to love that is incomprehensible. The result of our yielding to the Spirit's power and submitting to Christ's lordship in our hearts is love. When Christ settles down in our lives He begins to display His own love in us and through us. When He freely indwells our hearts, we become rooted and grounded in love, that is, settled on a strong foundation of love. "A new commandment I give to you," Jesus said, "that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Peter wrote, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22). It is God's supreme desire that His children sincerely and fully love each other, just as He loves us. Love is the first fruit of the Spirit, of which joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are essentially subcategories (Gal. 5:22-23).²⁰

Loving other saints is possible when we let the Spirit of Christ dwell in our hearts and work in our hearts. Love is an act of obedience and when we obey Christ and the Spirit dwells in our hearts, it becomes more and more natural to love the saints.¹⁸

And to know the love of Christ that passes knowledge: These seemingly impossible tasks on our own become possible through Christ. Knowing Christ's love is not through human understanding on our own but is from an infinitely high source that only Christ can place in our hearts.¹⁷ The Spirit reveals the mystery of Christ (Ephesians 3:4) and it makes effectual the knowledge of Christ (Ephesians 1:17-19) as well as the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:17-19)⁸

that you may be filled to all the fullness of God: It is beyond our understanding to comprehend the fullness of God, His power, majesty, patience, love, kindness, mercy, and all his attributes and characteristics ⁸ But reading the entire verse and following it in context can lead to spiritual strength by the grace and mercy of God, to be so fully dominated by the Lord, compelled by the love of Christ.⁸ Paul talks about

²⁰ John MacArthur, *Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 100-120

all three, the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13), the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19), and the fullness of Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) in the letter.

Conclusion

At this point, I would like to look at verses 16-19 in Paul's prayer and lay out the steps to acquire this knowledge. Upon reading this prayer of Paul it is hard to miss that it is not our works yet again but God's grace and gift. It is according to His riches of Glory and through His Spirit that our inner man may be strengthened. It is through this strengthening Christ dwells in our hearts and manifests His presence causing us to be rooted and grounded in love with the body of Christ, that we can know this infinite and surpassing love of Christ. This paper barely scratches the surface of the richness of this passage but is an attempt to understand in more detail what is the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

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