

A Lenten Reflection From Preserving Bible Times

BELOVED BEYOND BELIEF

Ponderings for Passion Week

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13

PONDER THE FOLLOWING VERSES, QUOTES AND REFLECTIONS:

And it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. And immediately, while He was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens being rent asunder and the Spirit in the form of a dove descending upon Him. And a voice came out from within heaven, As for you, you are my Son, the beloved one; in you I am well pleased. **Mark 1:9-11, Wuest New Testament**

Reflection It is a remarkable scene. At a significant moment (commencing His public ministry), Jesus hears those words again that He belongs to God (“my Son”), that his Father loves him, and that He gives his Father pleasure. I think we are safe in assuming that this is not the first time that Jesus has heard these words. In their eternal fellowship, God has no doubt spoken those words a trillion times. It is a sentiment perpetually embedded in the DNA of their timeless Trinitarian fellowship. And yet, at this important moment in his Son’s life, the Father wanted to say it yet again, not only to “officially” inform the world of what has always been true, but because He wanted his Son to hear those reassuring and reaffirming words yet again because He knew what awaited Him three year later at Golgotha.

Do God’s children somehow need that “beloved” affirmation less than Jesus did, or more? Given His nature, God is not reluctant to consistently affirm His children by saying those affirming “beloved” words. Yet, paradoxically, we often seem to be either preoccupied with other things, or perhaps reluctant, or even unwilling to want to take the time to hear those transforming words.

For consider what he has done – before the foundation of the world he chose us to become, in Christ, his holy and blameless children living within his constant care. He planned, in his purpose of love, that we should be adopted as his own children through Jesus Christ – that we might learn to praise that glorious generosity of his which has made us welcome in the everlasting love he bears toward the Beloved. Ephesians 1: 1-4-6, *J.B. Phillip’s Modern English Translation*

Keep me the apple of Your eye; Hide me under the shadow of Your wings Psalm 17:8, *NGS Bible*

From all eternity, long before you were born and became a part of history, you existed in God’s heart. Long before your parents admired you or your friends acknowledged you, you were already ‘chosen’. The eyes of love had seen you as precious, as of infinite beauty, as of eternal value... That’s the truth spoken by the voice that says, ‘You are my beloved.’ Listening to that voice with great inner attentiveness, I hear at my center words that say: ‘I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I have carved you in the palm of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you the food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst.

Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

REFLECTION At first blush, it strikes us as so implausible, that we, as children of the King, are loved with the same perfect love as the Father has for his own Son. That we too have the same “beloved” standing as Jesus and that we also are the “apple of his eye” (Psalm 17:6). It is a huge thought, maybe the most important thought of all. C.S. Lewis underscores this point when he observed that the most important thing about a person is (their understanding of) how God sees them. Everything about a person’s life is shaped by that perception.

In taking a moment to ponder God’s perfect nature, it should dawn on us that this incredible reality has to be true! God’s perfection does not allow for degrees of love. The only issue is whether you are a child or His or not. And if you are His adopted child through Jesus Christ, then you are loved with all the fullness of His love. In Him, there is no second-class love, no leftover love, or no occasional love permissible in God’s perfected nature. And God our Father, always the Great Initiator, is constantly desirous of expressing and showing the reality of that love to His own. And as we approach Passion Week, He affirms that love yet again in the Cross and the Resurrection.

And it came to pass while He was praying in a certain place that when he ceased, a certain one of His pupils said to Him, Lord, teach us to be praying even as also John taught his pupils. And He said to them, When you pray, be saying, Father...

Wuest New Testament, An Expanded Translation

REFLECTION Jesus came to fulfill God’s restorative Salvation plan. As part of that plan, He also came to reveal much more about His heavenly Father. After all, if the Plan was to atone for our sins and thus restore our fellowship with the Father, how these newly-restored, adopted children viewed the Father would be a huge determinant in their desire for a more intimate relationship with Him. Heretofore in the Jewish religious tradition, God, the Holy One of Israel, had an awesome “glory” that caused men to have to “keep their distance”, e.g., the vision of Isaiah 6. The Holy of Holies, with the Chief Priest entering it but once a year, etc., all combined to re-enforce that view. In fact one of the names for God was considered so holy to an observant Jew, that to utter the name YAHWEH was to risk immediate death.

It is to this “Holy only” view of God that Jesus utters what some consider the most radical verse in all of inspired Scripture. Regarding the issue of prayer, Jesus shocks his disciples as He teaches them, when you pray, you can call him *Father*. While much has been made of the original word, *Abba*, rendered *Father* in this verse, its root meaning is much closer to “Daddy” than not. In deliberately using this word, Jesus is communicating another facet of God; the approachable, loving, endearing, winsomeness of God.

If God were ever to be boldly approached day after day by His “kids,” it would be this expanded approachable view of God that would need to be in place to draw them to Him. Remember, this is not just any Father, but the perfect “Daddy.” The “Daddy” who always says the right thing, does the right thing, and at the right time and in the right way to achieve the most long term maturing outcome in His own. This is inevitable because He knows everything about each of his kids, including just what each needs and when he or she needs it. He is indeed the source of “every good and perfect gift.”

Nothing twists and deforms the soul more than a low or unworthy conception of God...our notion of God must always determine the quality of our religion. From a failure to properly understand God comes a world of unhappiness among good Christians even today. The Christian life is thought to be a glum, unrelieved cross carrying under the eye of a stern Father who expects much and excuses nothing. It is most important to our spiritual welfare that we hold in our minds always a right conception of God. If we think of Him as cold and exacting, we shall find it impossible to love Him, and our lives will be ridden with servile fear. If, again, we hold Him to be kind and understanding, our whole inner live will mirror that idea.

The truth is that God is the most winsome of all beings and His service one of unspeakable pleasure. He is love, and those who trust Him need never know anything but that love. He is just, indeed, and He will not condone sin; but through the blood of the everlasting covenant He is able to act toward us exactly as if we had never sinned. Toward the trusting sons of men, His mercy will always triumph over justice.

The fellowship of God is delightful beyond all telling. He communes with His redeemed ones in an easily, uninhibited fellowship that is restful and healing to the soul. He is not sensitive nor selfish nor temperamental. What He is today we shall find Him tomorrow and the next day and the next year. He is not hard to please, though He may be hard to satisfy. He expects of us only what He has Himself first supplied. He is quick to mark every simple effort to please Him, and just as quick to overlook imperfections when he knows we meant to do His will. He loves us for ourselves and values our love more than the galaxies of newly created worlds.

How good it would be if we could learn that God is easy to live with. He remembers our frame and knows we are dust. He may sometimes chasten us, it is true, but even this He does with a smile, the proud, tender smile of a Father who is bursting with pleasure over an imperfect but promising son who is coming every day to look more and more like the One whose child he is. Some of us are religiously jumpy and self-conscious because we know that God sees our every thought and is acquainted with all our ways. We need not be. God is the sum of all patience and the essence of kindly good will. We please Him most, not by frantically trying to make ourselves good, but by throwing ourselves into His arms with all our imperfections, and believing that He understands everything and loves us still.

A. W. Tozer, *The Root of Righteousness*, from the chapter, "God is Easy to Live With", pages 120-122 (excerpts)

REFLECTION We recently became grandparents again. With each of our six grandchildren, it was truly "love at first sight." Watching our daughters and sons care for each new grandchild during that first year of birth has given us glimpses into the nature of God's unconditional love for His children. Certainly there were many times when our grandchildren were delightful and we all were absolutely enthralled with their being delightful! But a parent's love is never conditional on "delightful" behavior. In fact, when a real mess is made, or "upchucks" and meltdowns unexpectedly present, each of those grandchildren was/is still totally and completely loved by their parents (and grandparents!). Even when they are willfully disobedient, like when the applesauce in a bowl on a highchair tray gets deliberately pushed over the edge and onto the floor, and "Oh, oh" is exclaimed, each is still totally and completely loved. And when a messy diaper suddenly presents (yet again), it gets cleaned up and replaced (yet again). At all times and in the midst of each of these "messy" situations, those youngsters are still our "beloved."

These human pictures of newborns and their parents are but a weak shadow of God's love for us. The moment He first thought of us, it was also "love at first sight". His delight is in who we are in Christ, which is always constant. Like our grandkids, we do indeed mess up, we "upchuck" into the lives of other people and meltdown periodically in our pride and arrogance. And we to deliberately push our own applesauce equivalents over the edge of the tray of obedience and onto the messy floor of the human condition. And as guilt and remorse set in, we tend to emotionally react as if God's love and care for us must be conditional. Without realizing it, we function as if His love must surely be withheld from us for some "probationary period" until we earned the right to move back into His good graces and be affirmed again as His "beloved."

How unfortunate this conditional view of God's love is for our daily spiritual lives. Part of this dynamic seems to be that we desperately seem to want our righteousness, incredibly meager though it may be, to be worth something in God's sight. Because we are always "earning our keep" everywhere else in our lives, and we have been comparing ourselves to others in our culture from our earliest days, we can't seem to stop projecting that onto God. As a result, our view of what it means for God to truly be "Our Father" needs to be

redeemed, which is (in part) why Jesus came. We also tend to so easily slip back into our limited and conditional stereotypes of what we think God's love is towards us, and how conditionally we then think it should manifest itself towards us. As a result, we need to remember to let Him tell us again and again this always-radical message about His unconditional "belovedness" towards us. The more we realize that Jesus came and died for our sins to restore us to our eternal "beloved" identity state in Christ, the more precious He becomes to us.

For above all else, the Christian life is a love affair of the heart. It cannot be lived primarily as a set of principles or ethics. It cannot be managed with steps and programs (8). Most Christians have lost the love of their heart and with it, their romance with God (10). Somehow our head and heart are on separate journeys and neither feels like life (30). We long for intimacy because we were made in the image of perfect intimacy (73). We were made for glory, for the attention that the Trinity gives to each other, and we can't live without it (92).
Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *A Sacred Romance*

REFLECTION In a New Testament sense of head and heart, we Hellenistic Western thinkers tend to believe much more with our heads than with our hearts. While we know certain propositions to be true in our minds, it doesn't necessarily follow that they quickly or effectively travel 15 inches south to marinate (and tenderize) our hearts with this reality. While we can affirm many tenants of the faith in our minds, it does not mean they are pragmatically operational in our heart, at least to the point of making a difference in how we live each day. This is certainly true when it comes to the reality of God's love for us. After all, we can recite many of the verses in the Bible that attest to that fact. But our wounded hearts and our fragile (and hidden) self-concepts can still be an incredible redoubt, the wrong kind of "a mighty fortress," that resists this loving reality. Like the father in Mark 9, we too can echo those words, "I believe (you love me in my mind), help me where my faith falls short (in believing that in my heart too)" (added).

You have loved us first, O God. Alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if you have loved us first but a single time, rather than without ceasing. You have loved us first many times and every day and our whole life through. If I rise at dawn and turn my soul toward You, You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You have loved me first.
Soren Kierkegaard

I kept running around... in large circles or small circles, always looking for someone or something able to convince me of my Belovedness. It was as if I kept refusing to hear the voice that speaks from the very depth of my being and says: "You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests." That voice has always been there, but it seems that I was much more eager to listen to other, louder voices saying: "Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular or powerful, and then you will earn the love you so desire." Meanwhile, the soft, gentle voice that speaks in the silence and solitude of my heart remained unheard or, at least, unconvincing.
Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone (believer) hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. Rev 3:21 (added).

Reflection Dining in the time of Jesus was an intimate, leisurely, affirming and accepting affair. In a meal covenant setting, people would recline side by side at table for an evening resting on their left arms, while eating with their right hand. For the reclining diner on the right to talk to the one on his left, he would lean back and rest his head on the chest of his "neighbor," looking straight up into the other's eyes. Yes, that is the kind of intimate banquet dining Jesus has in mind for His adopted children. That is the intended ambiance of the "Last Supper." The Kingdom of Heaven, its intimacy and the fullness of His love awaits each child of the King who responds (again) to the invitation to come (home) to the banquet table and recline again with Him. A love feast is always prepared and is always ready for partaking. Is it time for you to "come home" again like that younger prodigal son in Luke 15?

A Challenging Thought Right after Jesus heard those Mark 1: 9-11 words about being the “beloved” in whom His Father was “well pleased,” He was ushered into the desert to be tempted for 40 days and nights. Could it be that part of His Father’s plan for “preparing” His Son for this encounter was to remind Jesus’ of His “beloved” nature yet again? Could it have been part of the “whole armor of God” for this showdown with His Adversary? The parallel for our own lives is clear. The more we are rooted in the daily reality that we truly are His “beloved,” the more prepared we are to “stand firm” in the power of the Holy Spirit in the marketplace of life against the ever present wiles of Luther’s three enemies of the Christian: the World, the Flesh and the Devil. Stated in the converse, if the daily reality of God’s love for you is not present, real, and operative in your life, you are more at risk to yielding to temptation to find your “love” somewhere else. Being continually in touch with the reality of God’s love is intensely practical in its power. That’s just part of the protective reality that comes from abiding in the Vine.

The Value/Price of Calvary It is a fundamental principal of decision making that people will make a positive decision to do something if the perceived value they expect to receive exceeds the perceived price they expect to pay. And the reverse is equally true. When someone decides not to do something, it is because the perceived received value does not exceed the perceived price that needs to be paid. We can illustrate these “yes” or “no” value/price decisions with the following graphics:

$$\frac{V}{p} \geq 1 \text{ (yes)} \qquad \frac{V}{P} \leq 1 \text{ (no)}$$

This **V/P** relationship helps us understand yet another (personal) dimension to Calvary by asking: Did Jesus come to be born at Bethlehem, and did He die on Calvary’s Cross? Of course He did. Then the subsequent question that needs to follow is: What did it cost Him to do that? What was the **Price** for Him to first come and then die? What **Price** was Jesus willing to pay to come down to earth to establish the great **Value** to Him of people being restored into a right relationship with God? Let’s revisit Philippians 2:6-8.

Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

We can’t get our minds around what it meant for Jesus to empty Himself (we always have to leave room for mystery), to set aside the glories of Heaven to come and be “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14) and dwell among us. But we do know the **Price** for Him and His Father was indescribably infinite. But even with that **Price** in view, He did it! Thus for Jesus, the **Value** of coming to die to set people free from the consequences of their sin so they could be restored back into a “beloved” relationship with His Father was immensely infinite and totally indescribable! It exceeded the **Price** that He, the Holy One, would have to pay to come to earth to live armpit to armpit, day after day with incredibly sinful people. That **Value** exceeded putting aside all the accoutrements of Heaven and to come to earth to be misunderstood, wrongfully condemned, spit upon, mocked, scorned, flogged and crucified on a shameful Cross.

So the next time you think you’re not worth much to God, ponder the cost of Calvary - the **Price** that was paid for you. That **Price**, that beyond infinite cost, defines your **Value** as one of God’s beloved children, “beloved beyond belief” in His extravagant love. How do we know that? Because He did it! He laid His life down for His “friends!”

Some thoughts prompted (again) by walking the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem several weeks ago on our “The Life and Land of Jesus” Study Program.

REFLECT UPON

- Deep down do I really believe that God truly does love me, finds favor in me, and wants to communicate that reality to me on an ongoing basis?
- What helps me remember (and know in my head and heart) that God really does truly and totally love me?
- What is it that keeps me from opening myself up to God's unconditional, Fathering love in ever-fuller measure?
- How would my life be different if I knew and experienced the reality of God's unconditional love for me on a regular basis?
- If God's perfect love "casts out all fear," what concerns, worries and anxieties would vacate my life if I "knew" the reality of that?
- How much has your worth to God, your incredible value to Him, penetrated and soothed your soul?
- What would make this a truly special Easter for you?

BE STILL AND SILENT AS YOU WAIT UPON THE LORD

RESPOND TO GOD BY TALKING TO HIM

RECORD YOUR THOUGHTS, INSIGHTS, DIRECTIONS AND REACTIONS.

Shalom Doug Greenwold, PBT Teaching Fellow Reflection #4211 © Doug Greenwold 2011

Doing What We Do Because Context Always Matters

Mailing List If a friend has forwarded this "Reflection" to you and you would like to receive future contextual "Reflections," just let us know at info@preservingbibletimes.org and we will add you to the distribution list.

