

Deepening prayer 2024

A couple had two little boys, ages eight and ten, who were excessively mischievous.

The two were always getting into trouble and their parents could be confident that if any mischief occurred in their town, their two young sons were involved in some capacity. The parents were at their wit's end as to what to do about their sons' behaviour.

The parents had heard that the local vicar had been successful in disciplining children in the past, so they contacted her, and she agreed to give it her best shot. She asked to see the boys individually, so the eight-year-old was sent to meet with her first. The vicar sat the boy down and asked him sternly, "Where is God?"

The boy made no response, so the vicar repeated the question in an even sterner tone, "Where is God?"

Again the boy made no attempt to answer, so the Vicar raised her voice even more and shook her finger in the boy's face, "WHERE IS GOD?"

At that, the boy bolted from the room, ran directly home, and slammed himself in his closet. His older brother followed him into the closet and said, "What happened?"

The younger brother replied, "We are in BIG trouble this time. God is missing and they think we did it!"

Despite what Richard Dawkins and others would like to think God is not missing or dead. God is very much alive as those who have encountered his presence, his love and his forgiveness will testify.

'Blaise Pascal was a Christian believer and philosopher, and one the great minds of history. When he died it was discovered that he had sewn into the inner lining of his coat the description of an experience he had had one night. It read: "In the year 1654, Monday, 23rd November, from about half past ten in the evening until half an hour after midnight.....FIRE... God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, and not of the philosophers of the learned. Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace." Pascal was not talking about a sight of literal flames but an experience of the presence of God – what fire in the Bible so often represents.

He had believed in God, but when he said he had met the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob –not the God of the

philosophers – he meant he now knew in the heart what he had known in the abstract.’

It is one thing to know the love of Christ and to say ‘ I know all that Christ did for me, I know about his death and resurrection, I know that because of him and my belief in him I am saved.’ It is quite another to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ for us. It is the difference between knowing something that is true, and living it, living it deep within your inner being – having your very core saturated in Christ's love.

‘Imagine if you will, that you receive a letter telling you that you have been left some money, for various reasons, you assume it is a very modest amount. You get busy and don't get around to checking on it for quite a while. Finally, you do and are gobsmacked to discover it was a fortune, and you had not been doing anything with it. You were actually rich but had been living poor. This is what Paul wants his Christian friends to avoid. In Ephesians he prays that by the Spirit's power we may have our hearts and affections engaged and shaped by the truths of the faith we hold in our minds. Only through encounter with God in prayer can we avoid being rich but living poor.

When the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus at his baptism, he hears a voice say, "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased. You are my son, and I delight in you" In the same way, Romans 8:16 tells us that the Spirit bears witness to our hearts that we are children of God. Part of the mission of the Spirit is to tell you about God's love for you, his delight in you, and the fact that you are his child. These things you may know in your head, but the Holy Spirit makes them a fiery reality in your life if you will but let her.

One day a father and son were walking along the street. Suddenly the father swept the boy up into his arms and hugged him and kissed and told him how he loved him. And then after a minute he put the boy back down. Was the boy more a son in the father's arms than he was down on the street? Objectively and legally, there was no difference, but subjectively and experientially, there was all the difference in the world. In the fathers arms, the boy was experiencing what it means to be loved and to feel secure in that love.

Paul asks the Holy Spirit to give power to grasp how wide and long and deep is the love of God. To go deeper in prayer means wrestling with this knowledge and acceptance of God's love, and I think sometimes we hear this message so often we almost take it for granted, but the love of God really is quite extraordinary.

How wide is the love of God? Look at Jesus on the cross. Look at his arms outstretched. The physical span may not measure much in feet and inches but those arms actually reach out around the world and across the universe. No matter who you are or what you have or have not done, nothing, nothing, can ever separate you from the love of God that is yours in Christ Jesus.

How long is the love of God? John 10 says I know my own, I give them eternal life and no-one can pluck them out of my hand. God's love is infinitely long. Because he loves before the beginning of time, he is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, his love lasts for all time.

How deep is the love of God? To genuinely understand the depths of god's love you must know the depths to which Jesus Christ went in order to love you. How deep did he go? "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" That is hell. He was thrown into the deepest pit anybody ever went into, and he went in voluntarily. He went down and down and down, to the depths. Because of the gospel, you can know that God's love is infinitely wide and infinitely long because it is infinitely deep.

Ever since Eden we have been people who wandered empty and destitute, the face of God lost to us. In Jesus we begin to see in faith, though only partially, the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

When we meditate and pray the gospel and its truths pour into our hearts by the power of the Spirit, our longings are slowly satisfied, and other things in life become gifts rather than gods, and we slowly but surely and radically change in our character and in all our relationships. Does the way you engage with those meaningful relationships in your life reflect the love of God? Where do we fall short and need to make a change?

Going deeper in prayer is to know the gospel truly and fully in our hearts, that can only be done by reading the gospels, praying through them and listening to what God is saying through them. A good way to practice this is through the practice of Lectio Divina where you read through the passage 3 times – first to see if any phrase or word jumps out at you. Second – what is God saying through that – third how is that applicable in my life today.

Going deeper in prayer is to draw closer to God, to hunger for him and to delight in him as he manifests his presence with us in our prayers. We talked about this last week. Practice

sitting with God, just being with him, without words, without agenda.

Going deeper in prayer is to know how wide and long and deep the love of God is for all. We may know this in our heads, but do we know it in our hearts?

We see how wide his love in is, in the arms of Jesus on the cross.

We see how long the love of God is throughout all time, he is the alpha and omega the beginning and the end.

We see how deep the love of God is when Jesus cries 'my God my God why have you forsaken me.'

I end with this from the book Love Wins by Rob Bell

'One night when I was in elementary school, I said a prayer kneeling beside my bed in my room in the farmhouse we lived in on Dobie Road in Okemos, michigin . with my parents on either side of me, I invited Jesus into my heart. I told God that I believed that I was a sinner and that Jesus came to save me and I wanted to be a Christian.

I still remember that prayer. It did something to me.

Something in me. In an innocent grad school kind of way, I believed that God loved me and that Jesus came to show

me that love and that I was being invited to accept that love.'

That's the power of prayer – may you know go deeper into his presence today.

Let us pray

I pray that out of God's glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power 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. And in knowing all this, I pray that you experience a deepening in prayer that blesses you. Amen