

Experiencing The Father's Love

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When I last shared my testimony with you of how I came to faith, I also shared that the first months of my being discipled was through listening to Christian radio. One of the most influential moments in that discipleship occurred while I was listening to a Bible Study called "Through the Bible," taught by Dr. Vernon McGee. He was reading Genesis 5:22-24, and I heard this:

"After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years, and had sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him."

"Enoch walked with God." "Enoch walked with God." I imagined Enoch walking alongside God in some kind of garden, and God was a tall fatherly figure, and there was a cloak of peacefulness over the whole scene. I couldn't get that picture out of my mind. And I decided then and there, that was what I wanted my relationship with God to be – to walk side-by-side with God, conversing with Him as Father and son. And, *baruch HaShem*, "God made it so."

Since that time I have sensed God's presence continuously and, not only that, I've experienced His fatherly love, and I've felt able to reciprocate with my own. Since the early days of my walk, I have read and been taught a considerable amount about God's love, but it had little really to do with how I related to God. What I am saying is that my perception of God's love and my love toward Him developed in a natural way, and not as a consequence of my knowing any Biblical fact or underlying theology. Now that's pretty important, so let me say it differently. When I first read in the Bible about God's attributes and loving nature, I didn't learn anything new because I'd already been living with God for some time, and you get to know Him when you do that. The Bible merely confirmed what I already intuitively knew. However, I soon became aware that for some of my brothers and sisters in Yeshua, relating to God as their Father did not come as easily as it had for me. And I also became aware that for some, the concept of God being their Father was not a welcome idea, and for some there was even a conceptual disconnect – I think because they had little or no experience with their earthly fathers that was positive. They ranged from drawing a complete blank about God, to coming to all kinds of erroneous conclusions about what God was really like.

There is a familiar expression known as "preaching to the choir." The assumption underlying it is that preaching to the choir is a waste of time because choir members are supposed to be disciple, and therefore don't need to be preached to. After all, would they be in the choir were it otherwise? It took me awhile in ministry to come to the understanding that the choir is sometimes a place where preaching is indeed needed; my apologies to the Cohens and the Ohev choir. Similarly, believers in a congregation often do not wear their spiritual needs on their sleeves and, therefore, I am proceeding on the assumption that some of you are not experiencing the Father's love – God's love – to the extent that you want to, and that God wants you to, and so, I am going to take the next fifteen minutes or so to try and help a little, while being acutely aware that the subject is much too extensive for the time we have allotted. And for those of you

who don't have the problem, I still urge you to pay attention because you may be called upon to minister the Father's love to others who do have the need. And a caveat: Although I will be emphasizing the Father's love, Yeshua reminds us in John 10:30, "*I and My Father are one.*"

The first thing we must have in order to experience the love of the Father, is absolute assurance that He is so close that we can reach out and touch Him. I can't do better than to quote two Scriptures that show this:

James 4:8a: "*Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*"

Jeremiah 23:23: "*Am I a God near at hand,*" says the Lord, '*and not a God afar off?*'"

The next thing we must have in order to experience the love of the Father is assurance that the Father actually loves us. To show this, we again go to the Scriptures:

1 John 4:19: "*We love Him because He first loved us.*"

John 16:26-27: "*In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God.*"

And lest you are disturbed by the conditionality of these two Scriptures, remember John 3:16 which is unconditional:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Okay. So now you are convinced that God the Father is very near us, and that He loves us. But we've heard these things before, and presumably most of us already believe them. So what's the hang-up? Where is the blockage that keeps some of us from experiencing the Father's love as a reality? Let's go back to something I suggested a little earlier. Could it be that for some, a lack of a positive experience with our own earthly fathers and mothers is interfering? I think that is so in some cases, but there is more to it. What kind of love from our parents is it that some of us have so dearly missed? There are many possibilities, but let's look at a few where the parent does contribute to the child yet still misses the mark.

One person remembers his father mainly as a financial supporter of the family. Security is what that father is remembered as having contributed. Another person mainly remembers his father as holding to strict – even biblical behavioral standards, correcting him, not harshly, but regularly. Standards of morality, ethics and conduct is what that father has contributed. Another's main remembrance of his father is that he was a volunteer fireman, sacrificing his personal time and pleasures in order to serve his community. That father contributed an example of personal sacrifice for the greater good. And just one more – a father who is remembered for bringing his family to *Shabbat* services, and bringing Jewish traditions into the home. That father contributed to passing on Jewish identity to future generations. All of these are valuable, virtuous, and even loving contributions, but if the son's or daughter's remembrance of their father stops there, there

is still something for which the child yearns, and, if he is pressed for it, he will reveal that he missed his father's affection, and, on some level, concluded that his father didn't love him.

Affection? Touchy feely emotional affection? How does that stand up against *agape*, the Godly kind of selfless love that wants nothing but the best for its recipient and for whom the giver of *agape* is willing to sacrifice all? We remember Yeshua Himself emphasizing *agape* in John 21:15-17 when he asks Peter:

"Simon, son of Jonah, do you agapao Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I phileo You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you agapao Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I phileo You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you phileo Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you phileo Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I phileo You." Yeshua said to him, "Feed My sheep.

A great amount has been written about this exchange because, although in English versions of the Bible the Greek words *agapao* and *phileo* are both translated as "love," in the Greek text, they are distinct and, although Yeshua apparently intended the difference (after all, he switched from *agapao* to *phileo* the third time he asked the question), Peter either did not recognize the distinction or he was avoiding it because all three times he answered that he *phileo'd* even though two of the times he was not asked that. Now the reason that this difference in the Greek words is relevant to today's discussion is that we have probably all been taught that God's love for us is *agape* love and not *phileo* love. For example, in John 3:16, we read that God so *agapao'd* the world that He gave His only begotten son; it does not say that He *phileo'd* us. So because we want to experience God's love, we need to know the kind of love to expect from Him – in other words, what *agape* means. And since our understanding of *agape* has mostly come through Christian teachers, I am confident that we have all been taught that *agape* is the godly kind of love – divine, selfless, deliberate, unconditional, and unencumbered by feelings, while *phileo* is more like brotherly love – an affectionate cherishing, fraught with the imperfection of human emotions.

So, if the love we expect from God is *agape*, we are probably not looking for nor expecting to have a relationship with Him that includes emotional attachment. And here is where I believe many of us have been led astray by our former teachers. On closer inspection, I am seeing that the classical Christian view of *agape* as being a pristine divine kind of love, devoid of passion, is born out of a Hellenistic way of thinking, rather than out of pre-Hellenistic Jewish roots. While it is theoretically possible to distinguish *agape* from *phileo*, when the Father's love for us and our love for Him is what we are talking about, the two go hand in hand and they add up to the Hebrew word for love found in the *Sh'ma*, which is *ahavah!*

Let's just look at *ahavah* for a minute as it appears in Deuteronomy 6:5:

"Vahavta -- And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."

It is clearly a commandment, but is it devoid of emotion? Is it calling us to love God by sheer effort of obedience? If so, what does it mean to love God with all our heart and soul and strength? Are not these words emotion-packed if not outright passionate?

Yes, it is true that *agape* love of God is connected to our obligation and willingness to obey Him, but in the doing, the love part should come first, and the obedience part should grow out of the love; so in John 14:15 we have Yeshua saying: “If you *agapao* me, keep my commandments.” You see? The *agape* came first. Yeshua was presuming that there was a relationship between Him and his disciples that would cause his disciples to want to obey Him.

And this is interesting: You know that the Septuagint is an early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, translated by Jews. When we look in the Septuagint at the *Sh'ma* to find out which Greek word was used for *v'ahavta*, the love we are to have for God with all of our heart, soul, and strength, we find that the translators chose *agape* – not *phileo*! The translators must have understood the emotional component of the *Sh'ma*, so I conclude from that that *agape* has an emotional component.

You can see that I am building a case for broadening our understanding of *agape* to be similar to *ahavah* – a kind of love that can have emotion attached to it. I believe this is important because God *agapaos* us and if we expect no emotional component in it, how can we even hope to “feel” the Father’s love? We will not be looking for it, so nothing we normally associate with love will be perceived, and our loving God and He loving us will become a mere theological concept instead of a real flesh and blood relationship as we would have with a loving father.

This is not the only case where Hellenistic ways of thinking have led us away from Jewish understanding. Hellenistic thinking and the Greek language that mirrors it tend to focus on idealizations, abstractions, and expressing things in logical constructs, whereas Jewish concepts are more down-to-earth, practical, and, frankly, day-to-day human. We see this difference in the Greek word *agape* which seems to be almost unreachable, while *ahavah* is much more intuitive and tangible. But the culprit in misunderstanding *agape* is not the Greek language; it is wrong teaching that has been perpetuated from writer to writer throughout the centuries, and which may have landed on some of us. Let me illustrate by showing you a common wrong teaching about *agape* that I found on the Internet – one that many of us have been taught:

“The Greek word for love in Galatians 5: 22 is *agape*. And *agape* love is a very specific kind of love. The definition of *agape* love is not sexual love or brotherly love. It is a divine, godly love; it is Christian love.”

In calling it a “divine godly love, the writer was no doubt influenced by Scriptures such as John 4:19, which teaches: “We *agapao* because He first *agapao*’d us.” If we look no further, we can easily draw the conclusion that God is the source of all *agape* love. And and of course, we are all familiar with John 3:16, which states that “God so *agapao*’d the world that he gave His only begotten son.” The problem is that a few verses later, in verse 3:19 we read:

“*And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men agapao’d darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*”

So while *agape* is the kind of love with which God loves us and we are to love Him, it is a word, like other words, that can apply to both God and to things not of God.

My friends, just think over what you know about the Bible and what you know about how God relates to man. Is it not personal? Is it not relational? Is it not emotional at times? Do we not read about times when God was angry as in Numbers 22:22? Anger is an emotion. What about times when God had regret such as in 1 Samuel 15:35? Regret has an emotional component to it. What about when God rejoiced as in Deuteronomy 30:9? Joy can be emotional, and rejoicing is clearly emotional. And what about disappointment? We gave God plenty of reason for disappointment throughout the years, and disappointment has an emotional component as well. So why not also love? Why wouldn't God have an emotional stake in loving us whom He created in His image and foreknew? The clear answer is that He does, and we can receive it. And one of the impediments we have to deal with in order to receive it, is we have to get rid of the Greek idea that to be pure godly love, *agape* must be emotionless.

Now let's not go too far in the other direction though. There is a place for ministering *agape* out of sheer obedience to *Torah* even when we seriously dislike the person we are commanded to love. Consider, for example, Matthew 5:44:

“But I say to you, agapao your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,..”

We can clench our teeth and force ourselves to do good to those who hate us because doing good is somewhat objective, and it can be a decision of the will. However, we cannot bless a person or properly pray for a person unless we have some kind of a positive attitude toward that person, for to utter words of blessing and prayer that we do not mean would be hypocrisy; our words would have no power, and we would not be fulfilling *Torah*.

It is true that to *agapao* a person you don't have to like him. When God *agapao*s us even while we are deep in sin, do you think he likes us at those moments? So, we do not have to like our enemy or our neighbor, but we do have to care about him.

Make no mistake. *Agape* as a commanded obligation is a high and godly ideal and we are sometimes called upon to administer it even though warm feelings and positive emotional relationships are lacking. What is important to realize though, is that the highest ideal of *agape* involves caring, and caring means feeling.

If this seems difficult, remember that our Heavenly Father can handle *agape* love a whole lot better than we can, so, in our relationship with the Father, we don't have to settle for less than experiencing His love on a deep feeling level. God desires our *ahavah* love – our *agape* love – and, when it is genuinely given with all our heart, soul, and strength, He feels it much as we do when we offer it. And our Heavenly Father, in turn, offers us – all of us – a fulfilling love relationship with Him on a very tangible and intense feeling level. Remember, Enoch walking with God, and we can too. It is within our grasp; it is there for our taking.