

# THE CHRISTIAN & THE CHURCH (18)

**August 10, 2008.**

## **Review.**

*“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”* This is the name of a poem written by **Elizabeth Browning** sometime before her marriage in **1846**. The poem is part of a collection that was dedicated to her husband. The first two lines of the poem reads, *“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach.”* This should remind you of **Eph.3:18-19** where Paul prayed that the Ephesian Christians “may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.”

Last Lord’s Day we looked at eight reasons why every Christian must become a member of a local Biblical church. And then we began to study the subject : **Loving the church**. As we shall see in our studies of this subject, every Christian must love the church. Every Christian should be able to say to the church from time to time, *“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”* Let us take a few minutes to review what we covered and then turn our attention to today’s study.

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** said church does not make our heart beat faster because we associate church with a sense of boredom. **Michael Griffiths** noted that the church today seems more like a ragged Cinderella than the bride of Christ. **John MacArthur** noted that evangelicals today are far too prone to indifference about the church.

We began our study by looking at the attitude of the godly Israelites in the Old Testament. We saw that the temple was in Jerusalem or Mt. Zion. The temple was the place of God’s special presence among the Jews. In time Jerusalem or Mt. Zion became

the alter ego for the temple. Before the temple was built the sanctuary of God was the tabernacle. In our study we looked at several verses from the psalms and took note of the following : “The Lord has chosen Zion” (*Psa.132:13*) speaks of the Lord’s electing love for Zion. Zion will be His resting or dwelling place forever. The Lord’s love for Zion is constant and ongoing. The Lord loves Zion more than the other dwelling places of Jacob.

The psalmist does not speak disparagingly of Zion. He has no contempt for Zion. For the psalmist and his fellow godly Israelites Zion is glorious, beautiful and the joy of the whole earth. But we saw that everything was not perfect in Israel. There were those godless Israelites who hated Zion even though they enjoyed the covenant blessings that came to them through God’s presence among them. And the psalmist invoked God’s judgment against these godless Israelites.

I noted by way of application that there are those in our world today who claim to be Christians, who claim to be **“born again”**, but who speak disparagingly about the church. They have great contempt for the church. What they do not realize is that if they are truly Christians they are speaking disparagingly of themselves. They are expressing contempt for themselves. Secondly, there are those who love the other dwelling places of Jacob more than Zion. They love the other ministries of the church more than they love the church. And then there is a third group who says, *“I love the church. I just do not love some of the people in the church.”* That’s equivalent to saying, *“I love the body of Christ. I just hate some of the members of the body of Christ.”* We closed by noting that the Bible explicitly declares, “The Lord loves the gates of Zion” and “Christ ... loved the church.” (*Eph.5:25*). And we are commanded in Scripture to imitate Christ.

## Loving The Church (continued).

We come now to continue our survey of the O.T. in order to take note of the attitude of the saints in Israel towards the temple or Zion. And we begin with *Psa.16:3-4*. (read). The godly Israelites were described as “saints” or “**holy ones**”. They are also described as “the majestic ones”. The word “majestic” also means “**glorious, excellent, magnificent, precious**”. The saints are not perfect. But the psalmist does not speak disparagingly of them. There is no contempt in his heart for them. In their various imperfections and struggles with sin they are not contemptible hypocrites. Instead, he sees them as majestic or glorious. And he takes great delight in them. Two other verses can be added here.

*Psa.101:6*, “My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me; He who walks in a blameless way is the one who will minister to me.”

*Psa.119:63*, “I am a companion of all those who fear You, And of those who keep Your precepts.” The word “**companion**” also means “**friend**”. It describes one to whom you are joined in various ways.

The immediate result of a person’s relationship with God is the positive effect it has on his relationship to the people of God. **VanGemeren** noted that delight in God finds expression in a joyful acceptance of the saints. **James Boice** stated this *“is a way by which we can measure our relationship to the Lord. Do you love other Christians? Do you find it good and rewarding to be with them? Do you seek their company? This is a simple test. Those who love the Lord will love the company of those who also love Him. Those who find their “good” in God will also find good in those who likewise seek Him.”* I think we have all heard the lame statement, *“I do not hate Brother or Sister So & So. I just do not love them.”* The apostle John had something to say about this.

John wrote, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” (*1Jn.3:14-15*). John added, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (*1Jn.4:20*). For John love and hate are two clearly defined realms and there is nothing in between. You are either dwelling in the realm of love or in the realm of hate. The companion of love is eternal life. The companions of hate are lies and death, spiritual death that leads to eternal death.

In *Psa.16:4* the psalmist’s love for the Lord and the people of God is contrasted with his attitude towards the ungodly. He is turned away from the ungodly. **Boice** wrote, *“do you find it uncomfortable to be with those who sin openly? Are you troubled by their values, shocked by their desires, repulsed by their blasphemies? Or are you at ease among them? If, like Peter, you have no difficulty warming your hands at the fire of those who are hostile to your Master, it is because you are far from Him. You had best get back before you deny him as Peter did.”*

The second passage I want you to turn to is *Psa.26:6-8*. (**read**). Let us note the following here. Firstly, the psalmist affirms the integrity of his heart and his privilege to draw near to God. He draws near to God with joy by participating in the worship of God in the temple. In his worship the psalmist brings sacrifices of devotion and thanksgiving to God as expressions of his loyalty to God. At the same time the psalmist proclaims to his fellow-worshippers the acts of God’s goodness. The word “wonders” or “**wonderful deeds**” speaks of the recounting of the history of salvation in which the psalmist shares. “Wonders” describes Israel’s salvation history as an extraordinary work of the Lord.

*“The psalmist’s concern with integrity, acts of devotion, and words of praise flows out of a heart filled with love for the Lord and for God’s house. It is motivated by a zeal for the Lord.... The psalmist says he loves the Lord by declaring his love for the house of the Lord.”* (**Van Gemeren**). For the psalmist the Lord’s house was

more than brick and mortar. The Lord's house symbolized that the Lord had taken up abode in the midst of His people. The point is that the psalmist's love for the Lord's house was in reality an expression of his love for Lord. The psalmist could not separate the Lord's house from the Lord. To love the one was to love the other.

The Lord's house was also the place where the people of God gathered to worship the Lord. In the context of this psalm we find the psalmist desiring and choosing the company of God's people rather than the company of sinners and choosing the glory of God rather than the way of wickedness. In *vs.5* the psalmist declared, "I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked." Note carefully again that the psalmist could not separate the Lord from His house and could not separate the Lord from His people.

In *vs.12b* the psalmist said, "In the congregations I shall bless the Lord." The word "**congregation**" speaks of a group of people gathered together for a common purpose, especially for worshiping the Lord, the God of Israel. In this verse the psalmist numbers himself with the godly congregations in Israel. And among them he will praise the Lord for the evidences of His goodness.

For our third passage please turn to *Psa.27:4*. The psalmist wrote, "One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek; That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in His temple." The psalmist's deep desire is to experience more fully the presence of God. The longing for God's house expresses the intensity of the psalmist's seeking after God Himself. The enjoyment of God's presence assures the psalmist of the evident goodness and love of God. Note carefully that the psalmist's deep desire to experience more fully the presence of God is expressed in terms of his longing to dwell in the house of the Lord. The two concepts are joined together.

Now Brethren, keep in mind that for the Jews the visible expression of God's presence was the house of God. While in the house of God the psalmist wants to "behold" or

gaze upon “the beauty of the Lord” and to “meditate” or seek Him or inquire after Him. What is the “beauty of the Lord”? The beauty of the Lord is an expression of His goodness, compassion and lovingkindness to His people. (cf. *Exod.33:18-19; 34:5-6*). Week by week, when we gather to worship, we are reminded of the Lord’s “**beauty**” in the songs, in the reading of the Scriptures, in the communion, in the preaching and in the prayers. We are reminded of the Lord’s “**beauty**” as we fellowship with each other.

The fourth passage I want us to turn to is *Psa.122*. (**read**). “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” can be also translated, “I rejoice whenever they say to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’.” The Israelites went up to Jerusalem three times a year to celebrate the great feasts of Passover, First-fruits, and Booths. These feasts held a special redemptive-historical significance, as they commemorated God’s goodness to Israel in the Exodus, the Conquest, and His continual care throughout the history of Israel. (cf. *Deut.16:16*). (**VanGemeren**).

Going to Jerusalem and the house of the Lord was no burden. It was a joy. It was the psalmist’s joy to hear others encouraging him to go up to the house of the Lord. It was a joy because he was going to celebrate God’s redemptive and preserving work on behalf of himself and his fellow Israelites. For many the journey was long and filled with many hardships and dangers. But the hardships and dangers paled in comparison to the joy and the purpose for going up to the house of the Lord.

In *vss.6-9* the psalmist desires three things for Jerusalem. His first desire is for peace. His exhortation is, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” His second desire is for security. *Vs.7* says, “May peace be within your walls, and prosperity within your palaces.” The word “prosperity” also means “**security**”. His third desire is for prosperity. *Vs.9* says, “For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.” The word “good” can also be translated “**prosperity**”.

The psalmist was conscious of the fact that the peace, security and prosperity of the Israelites were intimately tied to the peace, security and prosperity of Jerusalem and the

house of the Lord. Finally, note the psalmist's prayer in *vs.6b*, "May they prosper who love you." This prayer can be also translated, "May those who love you be secure." What must be noted here is that those who love Jerusalem are the ones who experience the great joy of going up to the house of the Lord. And they are the ones who are committed to seeking the good or prosperity of the house of the Lord. And they are the ones upon whom the blessing of *vs.6b* is pronounced.

Now, let us fast forward to the captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem has been destroyed. The temple has been burnt to the ground. And the Israelites are in exile in Babylon. They are living among pagan idolaters. What is the response of the godly? In the midst of making a good and prosperous life for themselves in Babylon, what do we find? The answer is in the following passages.

Firstly, *Psa.137:1* answers the question very clearly. The psalmist wrote, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." The place of God's presence; the place where they used to gather together to worship the Lord; the place that brought them joy; the place that was the very center of their lives, that place has been destroyed. With no place to gather, they gathered by the rivers of Babylon. But instead of worshiping, they sat down and wept. And in their weeping they could not sing the songs of worship to the Lord. (cf. *vs.4*).

In *Psalms 42 & 43* we find a broken-hearted, weeping, despairing community. Turn to *Psa.42:1-4*. (**read**). I am sure you know the saying, "*You never miss the water until the wells runs dry.*" There was a time, says the psalmist, when "I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with the voice of joy and thanksgiving". But that was all over now. The pains from these wonderful memories are very intense and he is driven to despair.

What is the state of the psalmist while he is living in exile in Babylon? He is longing for God. He is thirsting for God. He is like a deer dying of thirst, panting and searching for the water brooks of fellowship with God. There is an increasing intensity in *vss.1-2*.

His intensity moves from panting for “You, O God” to thirsting for “God ... the living God”. But then panting and thirsting becomes a physical longing and craving expressed in a heart-wrenching cry, “When shall I come and appear before God?” When shall I come and meet with God? When shall I come and appear before the face of God?

In the midst of deep despair there is a small flickering light of hope that is repeated three times in *Psa.42:5, 11; 43:5*. The words are basically the same in each verse, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, For the help of His presence.” This hope gives rise to prayer. Note the psalmist’s prayer in *Psa.43:3-4*. (read). The psalmist will not be satisfied until he is fully restored to His God. He will not be satisfied until he is back in the Lord’s house, worshiping the Lord and enjoying fellowship with God.

In *Psa.84:1-2* we find a similar expression of longing from the psalmist. *Psalms 42, 43 & 84* are attributed to the sons of Korah. *Psa.84:1-2* says, “How lovely are Your dwelling places, O Lord of hosts! My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord; My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.” Note the intense language in this verse. The word “lovely” is an adjective that actually means “well-loved”. The verb “longed” expresses a strong affectionate desire. The verb “yearn” means to pine away to the point of fainting.

In *vs.5* we read, “How blessed is the man whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.” Godly Israelites are pictured here as always thinking about Zion and having a Spirit-given homing instinct for going to Zion to come and appear before God in celebration and worship. (note *vs.7*).

How do we compare with these godly Israelites? Do we have in our hearts the highways to Christ’s church? Do we have that Spirit-given homing instinct for wanting to come and appear before God and join His people in celebration and worship?

For our final O.T. passage please turn to *Psa.102:12-17*. (**read**). The Israelites are in exile in Babylon. Zion is destroyed and the temple lies in complete ruin. The psalmist is anticipating the end of the seventy years of exile the Lord imposed as judgment. The exile has taken its toll on the psalmist as expressed in *vss.1-11*. But he has not given up hope that Zion and temple worship will be restored. And so he prays for the restoration of Zion. He prays because he believes the Lord loves Zion and will have compassion on Zion and be gracious to her. He also anticipates that in the rebuilt Zion there will be a renewal of covenant love and even the universal worship of the Lord. (cf. *vss.15, 21,22*). We find a similar prayer in *Psa.51:18-19*. (**read**). *Psa.51* is David's prayer of confession. Godly Israelites in the exile made David's prayer of confession their own and added the prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem, the temple and the worship of God.

Now let us summarize what we have seen. As we do, we must keep in mind that Zion or Jerusalem is the alter ego of the temple or house or dwelling place of the Lord. Zion is the place of God's special presence with His covenant people. The Lord, Zion, the temple of God and the people of God are so intimately related, you cannot speak of one without thinking of the others.

We begin by noting the godly Israelites saw one another as majestic or glorious saints. And their desire is to be close to one another, to be friends with one another. Godly Israelites love the habitation of the Lord's house and their earnest desire is to dwell in the house of the Lord. In other words, their earnest desire is to experience more fully the presence of God. In the house of the Lord they had the peculiar opportunity to meditate on the history of the Lord's goodness towards them.

Godly Israelites rejoiced when they were exhorted and encouraged to go up to the house of the Lord. In other words it was a joy to their hearts that fellow believers cared enough to ask them, "*Are you going to church today?*" They didn't see the question as a humbug and / or an unwanted intrusion. They saw it as an expression of love. Furthermore, their deep love for the Lord's house motivated them to pray for its peace, security and prosperity.

One day the ungodly Israelites' cup of idolatry and apostasy was filled and the Lord brought the judgment of destruction and exile. The godly were taken away with the wicked. During this period of exile we find among the godly despair and weeping over what has been lost. We find intense longing for God, the worship of God, the restoration of the temple and fellowship with the people of God. We find intense expressions of prayer for God to arise and be gracious and compassionate to Zion and rebuild Zion.

The temple was the very center of the lives of the godly Israelites and by implication, the center of their lives was the Lord, the worship of the Lord and their fellowship with the people of God. Without this center they were in despair. Without this center the tears flowed. Without this center they had no songs in their hearts and on their lips. Without this center they had no joy. Without this center the Lord was far away and life was like living in a desert without water. (cf. *Psa.63:1*).

My question is this : Is this the kind of mindset God requires of us to have towards His church under the new covenant? We seem to have this idea that under the old covenant of Law the demands of the Lord and His promised judgments were harsher. But now that we are under grace we are dealing with the revealed fullness of the Lord's love and His demands and promised judgments are more compassionate and may even be to some extent lax. What we fail to realize is that the grace of God manifested to us in our Lord Jesus Christ intensifies the new covenant requirements and promised judgments. The writer to the Hebrews warned a church drifting from the Lord that the new covenant of grace brought upon them a **“how much more”** intensification.

Turn to *Heb.2:1-3a*. (**read**). Let us note the following. The word **“must”** is a Greek verb that sets before you a strong divine compulsion. As I have said in the past, when you see the verb **“must”**, you must pay attention to it. This Greek verb appears approximately **99** times in the N.T. and it is translated **“must” 56** times and **“ought” 17** times. **“Much closer”** is literally **“more abundantly”**. It calls for paying attention with extreme care. Why?

Under the old covenant God's word was unalterable. How much more it is unalterable under the new covenant! Under the old covenant transgression and disobedience did not escape God's just penalty. Under the new covenant the question is : "how will we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" The question has the force of a strong negative and conveys the idea : "*still less will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation.*" "**So great**" implies that the gospel is so much more greater than the Law. The writer is arguing from the lesser to the greater. If under the lesser, the old covenant, there was no escape, should you expect that there will be escape under the greater, the new covenant? The answer is that the prospects of escaping under the new covenant are lesser than it was under the old covenant.

Turn now to **Heb.10:26-29**. (**read**). Once again the writer is arguing from the lesser to the greater. The lesser is what took place under the Law of Moses. (**vs.28**). Under the old covenant of Law there was death without mercy. Death without mercy was regarded as severe. The greater is found in **vs.29** and expressed in the words, "How much severer" or "**how much worse**". The lesser called for death without mercy. The greater calls for a punishment much worse or much severer. **William Lane** wrote, "*Contempt for a privileged relationship with God through Christ in the new covenant will involve retribution more terrible than the death penalty attached to violation of the law.*"

As we shall see, the N.T. requires that we have a greater love for the church, a greater delight in the church, a greater joy in the church. When I speak of the church I am not speaking of this building of brick and mortar. I am speaking of the people whom Peter describes as the living stones in God's spiritual house. (**1Pet.2:5**). We shall discover that we all need to work on and revolutionize our thinking about the church, our views about the church, our attitudes towards the church, our actions towards the church. But then, this is what Christianity is about. It is about transforming our lives. This is what sanctification is about. It is about daily and ongoing transformation of our lives. It is about daily and ongoing transformation of our knowledge, our thinking, our decision making, our choices, our attitudes, our conduct. It is about daily changing the old into the

new, about putting off the old and putting on the new. Your Christianity must be an ongoing spiritual and moral revolution taking place in your life. And there is no discharge from this revolution. There is no time off from this revolution.

Regarding the church, we must come to grips with the reality that the church is God's most prized possession upon this earth. What is the most prized possession in your life? Your most prized possession is as insignificant as a speck of dust compared to God's most prized possession of the church. You treat your most prized possession with all the tender loving care you can muster as a finite human being. God is infinite. His love for His church is infinite. His cherishing of His church is infinite. His care and compassion towards His church is infinite. The members of the church are the apples of His eye. He loves the church with a love we will never be able to fully comprehend.

The song writer wrote, *"Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made, Were every stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade; To write the love of God above Would drain the ocean dry; Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky."*

Paul took the time to meditate on Christ's love for him and for the church and it revolutionized his life. Paul was overwhelmed with the truth that the Son of God loved him and died for him. (*Gal.2:20*). The impact of this truth made Paul seem like a mad man in the eyes of others. Paul wrote, "if we are beside ourselves, (that is, **if we seem to be mentally imbalanced**), it is for God (that is, **it is for God's glory**); if we are of sound mind, it is for you (or, **it is for your benefit**). For the love of Christ controls us...." (*2Cor.5:13-14*). Paul's critics were accusing him of being a mentally imbalanced religious fanatic. Note the verb "**controls**". Paul is saying that Christ's love is a compulsive force in the life of believers, a dominating power that effectively eradicates choice in that it leaves believers with no option but to live for God.

If you take the time every day to meditate on God's love for you in particular and by extension, God's love for the church, it will revolutionize your life and change your

attitude towards the church. This love will become the compelling dominating force in your life.

What would you do if members of the church started calling you on Saturday and asking you, *“Will you be in church on Sunday?”* What will you do if ten people called you and exhorted you and encouraged you to be in church on Sunday? Will you switch off all your phones the next Saturday? Or will you testify, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’”? Will you say, “I will always rejoice when they say to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’”? When people pray for you, will they be able to say, *“Lord, prosper Brother or Sister So & So because they love your church. They are working hard for the peace, unity, security and prosperity of your church.”*

Do you look forward to joining with the people of God to offer to God fragrant aroma sacrifices of devotion, thanksgiving and worship to the Lord? Do you look forward to singing with them songs that recount God’s wonderful salvation works towards His people? How do you respond when you are truly providentially hindered from attending worship with the rest of the church? Are you in sadness and in despair? Do you earnestly wish you were here? When the time comes for the worship to begin do you have a sense of jealousy over those who are present? Do you feel even for a brief while a sense of emptiness and loneliness, a sense of wanting to be in the house of God to drink at the fountain of life to quench your thirst for God?

When I am not here I find myself looking at my watch and thinking, the Sunday School has begun, the prayer time has begun, the worship has begun, the communion is being shared, the word is being preached, the service is over and the people are mingling and fellowshiping. And even though I am with another group of the people God, I find myself wanting to be here because you are the household of God that I belong to. I find myself experiencing emptiness and loneliness in the midst of being with churches that cherish my fellowship with them.

My closing question is this : can you truly say that the Lord, the worship of the Lord and fellowship with the people of God are the center of your life? Please note that I am not asking you : can you truly say that the Lord, the worship of the Lord and fellowship with the people of God are **at** the center of your life? The word “**at**” is not in the question. I am asking you : can you truly say that the Lord, the worship of the Lord and fellowship with the people of God are the center of your life? Without this center the godly Israelites had no joy and no songs. They were in despair and the tears flowed. They were like thirsty deer panting for water in a desert. What about you?