



HOW OFTEN I HAVE LONGED!

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We say it so casually—sometimes, we almost sound flippant—“Jesus loves you.”

What is it that we’re really communicating when we say that? What do other people hear?

What we mean depends on what we know—both Biblically and experientially.

When I say “Biblically,” I’m not referring to intense scholarship, but familiarity—deep familiarity, the kind that emerges from frequently reading the Bible and thinking about what you’ve read, exploring its difficult passages and connecting the dots.

When I say “experientially,” I mean, more than intellectual musings, encounters with the Holy Spirit while reading, in which He reveals unanticipated meaning for your own heart and life, and further encounters while applying what has been discovered.

This is the kind of Bible knowledge that we all need. But what if we don’t have such experiential Bible knowledge?

If you only know the stories you learned as a kid in a children’s class, or what you’ve heard preachers say about the text, then you’ve only just BEGUN to know the Bible. And, if I may be frank, you don’t yet know enough to save your own soul, even if you gave your heart to Jesus as a child.

Faith in Jesus Christ is enough to save your soul, but what kind of faith is that? Because not all faith is saving faith. Saving faith is not an act or an event. It is a relationship with the Living God that has a beginning (a new birth) and has no ending—it grows, as we grow—for God has no end.

Knowing the Bible as we should, will mean cherishing it as the Word of Truth—for it reveals God and the purpose for which He made all things. And this should lead to knowing Jesus Christ. Not just intellectually—knowing about a person is not the same as knowing that person. And it is not enough to know about Jesus Christ, for many atheists have learned a great many historical, yet superficial, facts about Him, and still staunchly deny believing in Him as Savior.

Sex is not love. How do we know that? Because love is not a single act. But sex is a singular act. Love is an ongoing relationship. A commitment that carries you through good times and bad.

To know Jesus Christ through the Scriptures—especially the New Testament—is to love Him. Not just in a momentary flash of revelation or encounter with His Spirit, but in an ongoing, growing relationship through good times and bad.

Love is not something that happens to you. Love is something that rises up within you. Love involves you as an active participant. Real love takes control of you and won't let go. You can't put it down, you can't turn it off. It is compelling.

Compelling

As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: “The love of Christ compels us, because... He died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Yes, it's true: Jesus loves you. But what do you know of His love? How has He shown His love to you? How has Jesus loved you?

The Hebrew people were raised with the knowledge that God had set His love on them. They were a very religious people, training their young from an early age to recite from memory the words of Scripture. Numerous daily and annual rituals supported their sense of God and the bonds of fellowship among His people.

Jerusalem, their capital city, was known as the place God had chosen to dwell among His people. The center of that city was its Temple, first built by King Solomon in 957 B.C., as the house of worship to Jehovah, the God of the Hebrews. Their faith in Him was the heart of their households and their tribes and their nation.

But somehow, even with all of that, the lure of sin was strong and persistent. Sometimes, it was the attraction of wealth and power; sometimes, the intrigue of the gods of other people groups. Always, it was the inner burning to take life into one's own hands, and just go for it.

Four centuries had passed without a prophetic word from God, when Jesus first made His entrance into our world. Jewish nationalism was strong, but their rituals had become, for most, more cultural than religious. God seemed distant and uninvolved.

From time to time they recalled the promises of a coming Deliverer, but as the years passed, that promise seemed more like a fable told just to keep hope alive. Meanwhile, they were occupied with surviving from day to day in the face of Rome's occupation of their city and nation, and increasing corruption at every level.

This was the atmosphere into which Jesus came, and in which He ministered. (And you thought you have it tough.) For almost four years, Jesus traveled throughout Palestine, preaching the Kingdom of God, teaching the ways of the King, and demonstrating its life.

As Jesus neared the end of His ministry, when He would return to the Father, and leave His disciples behind to carry forward the work He had introduced, He expressed more reflection. It was with that transition in full view, that He and His disciples approached the Holy City for one last, brief season of ministry.

As they reached the crest of the Mount of Olives, just outside the eastern wall of the great city of Jerusalem, they paused to catch their breath. Looking down on that humming capital of commerce and religion, Jesus sighed deeply.

HOW OFTEN...!

Matthew 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it!

HOW OFTEN...!

More than just the last four years... (His reflection reached far back into their history...)

During their wilderness wanderings... God's rescue, provision, presence, protection... their faithlessness.

During their possession of the Promised Land... God's protection in battle, conquest... their disobedience.

HOW OFTEN...!

Throughout the period of the judges... deliverance from their enemies, restoration to the faith... their decline into idolatry.

During the period of their kings... their pride, unbelief, idolatry... yet He revived them by His Word.

HOW OFTEN...!

Even during the silent period, the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments... they were oppressed, they resisted, they grew religiously ritualistic.

Especially during the brief ministry of Jesus... His popularity... their disillusionment, their resistance, their prideful fear, their opposition.

Through all of this, God continued to reach for the hearts and minds of His people.

Reaching, reaching, reaching. Calling, calling, calling.

Longing deeply for the day when His undying love would command their attention and capture their hearts.

God's mercies are often ignored, neglected, despised, presumed, exploited. Yet, they are NEW every morning! His compassions NEVER come to an end!

The Olivet Sermon

There, at the crown of the Mount Olivet, as they paused in their journey, Jesus preached an impassioned sermon concerning the all-too-frequent misapplications of Scripture and the resulting abuses of power—many of which still survive in Christianity today.

Let's listen with fresh ears to His heartfelt concerns (Matthew 23:1-39):

Matthew 23:3 Therefore pay attention to what [the Scribes and Pharisees] tell you and do it. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

Matthew 23:9 And call no one your 'father' on earth, for you have one Father, who is in Heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one teacher, the Christ.

Don't these two passages underscore our need for personal experience with the Bible?

No one practices the Word without mistakes—not me, not you.

I am encouraged as others live what they believe, but I need to get my cues directly from the Holy Spirit, not just second-hand from another follower.

Matthew 23:11 The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

We are all leading someone—if only briefly and informally. People watch each other—how they speak, how they behave, how they treat one another.

Somebody is watching you. What can they see? Can they see Jesus' influence in your life?

Matthew 23:13 You keep locking people out of the kingdom of heaven!

Matthew 23:15 You make him twice as much a child of Hell as yourselves!

Some people are fastidious about religious details. Their life is guided (and they wish to guide others) by a great many rules, such as, do this, don't do that... Their mind works that way, and it's natural for them. But it can become controlling, and squeeze other, higher, values out—like, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Matthew 23:19 Which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? [The temple or the One who dwells in it? Heaven or the One who sits on its Throne?]

Matthew 23:23 You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness! You should have done these things without neglecting the others.

Religiousness can create blindness—a blindness that relationship forbids, for relationship involves accountability. And the Holy Spirit has been given to keep our relationship with God fresh and alive, and our sense of accountability strong and active.

He convicts us of wrongdoing—even subtle wrongdoing, that others would not notice. He does this because He loves us, and wants to guide us and help us do right.

Matthew 23:25 You clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside may become clean too!

Matthew 23:28 On the outside you look righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Sometimes, we think, the way to live beyond our past is to ignore it. Just move on. But Christ teaches us that moving beyond your past is not possible without acknowledging it with repentance. Ignoring it only buries it; repenting lets God remove it.

Matthew 23:31 You testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up then the measure of your ancestors!

Matthew 23:36 I tell you the truth, this generation will be held responsible for all these things!

Matthew 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it! ³⁸ Look, your house is left to you desolate! ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see Me from now until you say, 'Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!' "

Only one confession captures Christ's attention and gains His ear. Only one confession wins an audience with the Living God. It is the recognition that Jesus Christ is the One who comes in the name of the Almighty, the One whom the Father has sent, the only ONE who saves us.

And so, they took up this very chant as Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day on the back of a young donkey. Amid excited crowds of admirers, whose hopes included murderous thoughts of the overthrow of their oppressors, Jesus was welcomed.

Their chant angered the Pharisees, and troubled the whole city. Who was this Man? What were His intentions? What was about to take place?

Who was He...?

Such a vital question! He is so much more than the sum of His deeds or His teachings. Do you know Him?

He is the Son of the Living God—the God-Man, God in human form. He is the God who identifies with humanity, not a god who abuses us or ignores us. Do you know Him?

What were His intentions...?

He came to seek and to save those who were lost. He came to give sight to the blind. He came to mend broken hearts. He came to heal sick bodies. He came to raise the dead. He did not come to condemn, but to save.

What was about to take place...?

"The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to Myself." He said this to indicate how He was going to die. (John 12:31-33)

"[God] loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1 John 4:10)

"Christ also loved us. He gave His life for us as an offering and sacrifice." (Ephesians 5:2)

Someone asked Jesus, "How much do You love me?" In response, Jesus stretched out His hands and died. He paid the debt we could not pay.

This is what we mean when we say, "Jesus loves you."

This is what I now invite you to respond to.

Whoever you are. Wherever you've come from. Whatever you've done, or left undone. You can make a fresh start today. You can have a clear conscience today. If you will own up to your past and repent, you will have God's forgiveness today. This is what Jesus Christ came to do for you.

This is what we long for others to know... People must know. We must let them know.

I will let Apostle Paul speak for me, as I close, by the doxology he sent to the church in Rome:
Romans 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how fathomless His ways!

³⁴ For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? ³⁵ Or who has first given to God, that God needs to repay him?

³⁶ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever! Amen.