

The Love of God

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Frederick Martin Lehman, 1868-1953

My name is Frederick Lehman and I want to tell you my story and the history behind my most famous hymn, one loved by many people in your day and by your pastor, The Love of God.

My early years were not unlike some of yours. I was born in Mecklenburg, Germany in 1868. When I was 4 years old my parents emigrated to America and settled in Iowa where we lived in a one-room log cabin. I was the oldest of five children. When I was 11 I had a profound experience, a vision sort of while walking alone on a country lane. It was then I came under the conviction of my need for a Savior and I felt the presence of God in a way that led me to joy and praise.

In my twenties I felt a call into ministry so I attended Northwestern College in Naperville, Illinois and did pastoral ministry in churches in Iowa, Indiana and Missouri. I married my sweet Emma and together we were blessed with nine children. From an early time in my ministry I started writing hymns and Gospel songs. Hundreds of them would eventually be compiled into books and published.

That led me in 1911 to move to Kansas City and help found the Nazarene Publishing House. But life is hard and things don't always go the way we plan or hope. Some business ventures didn't go well and I lost everything.

In 1917 I found myself in Pasadena, California in a packing house packing oranges and lemons into wooden crates. It certainly was not the most ideal environment for writing songs about loving God but that was the very place the Lord chose to use.

As you can imagine when you are doing mindless repetitive work your mind has time to wander and ponder. On one such occasion the words to a song started to form in my mind, so I soon grabbed a scrap of paper and a pencil and started scribbling down words for two stanzas and a chorus. When I got home I worked on them some more, but then I was stuck. In those days a song had to have three stanzas or it was considered incomplete. (I know things are different in your day, some of your songs only need three sentences or even three words.)

Anyway, I tried and tried, but the words would just not fall into place. And then as if out of nowhere I started to remember something. Years before back in the Midwest I had been to a revival camp meeting and the evangelist had told a story that really grabbed my heart.

The preacher quoted some lines of a poem that had been found 200 years ago penciled on the wall of a patient's room in an insane asylum after he had been carried to his grave. The assumption was that this inmate had scratched out the words in a moment of sanity. When I heard those words I quickly wrote them on a card which I kept and was able to find.

There it was, my third verse, a feeble attempt to describe the incomprehensibly great love of God.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
and were the skies of parchment made;
were ev'ry stalk [tree] on earth a quill,
and ev'ryone 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.

My oldest daughter Claudia helped me with the arranging and writing a tune, and that's the story of God's grace giving me the words for the Love of God, words that God preserved from the walls of an insane-asylum a couple of hundred years before.

But I died in 1953 never knowing the rest of the story.

Those words are actually translated from an Aramaic poem written around 1050 by a Rabbi Meir in Worms, Germany. They were written as a part of a Jewish liturgy read before the reading of the Ten Commandments on the first day of Shavuot, a joyful festival celebrating the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

O the love of God to miraculously prepare and preserve these words. The story of this hymn testifies that indeed God's love goes "beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell." first choosing a Rabbi who didn't know the greatest love of God in the Messiah, yet poetically painting a picture of God's love in words, and then translating them through centuries to a prisoner in an insane asylum, and on to a revivalist evangelist, to a humble Gentle hymn writer born in Germany, living in America, who inscribing them on a scrap of paper, to be kept and later found. The love of God knows no limits, no tribe, no station of life! It is far greater than any could ever tell!

The Love of God.

How would you try to capture it, how would you describe something impossibly huge. Beyond comprehension and beyond telling!

C.S. Lewis was not just a great writer, he was also a professor of English Literature at Oxford and Cambridge. He taught writing and had "15 Rules for Writing" Rule number 14 said, "Use words appropriate for the subject. Don't use words too big for the subject; don't say 'infinitely' when you mean 'very,' otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to take about something that's really infinite." That's good writing advice!

That's good advice just for everyday life, because we walk out of a movie and we say, "Oh, that was amazing!" We go to a theme park: "It was just incredible!" Or we have a really good dinner

or we enjoy a really wonderful song and we say, “It was just wonderful! It just blew my mind!” Really? Dinner? I mean, dinner’s great, but... We over use superlative language, so that when we come up against something that’s really amazing and really mind-blowing and really wonderful, there are no words left.

Well, the Bible is not careless with its language; the Bible is very careful with its language. The Bible uses superlatives to try to talk about God, God’s love, God’s grace.

With the help of Google I did the math of Frederick Lehman’s hymn:

352 quintillion gallons

3 trillion trees

7.7 billion people

12 billion cubic miles

His language reflects the words of Scripture. The poetic words of the Psalmist.

Psalm 103:11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.

Psalm 108:4 For your steadfast love is great above the heavens,
Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.

The prosaic words of Paul.

Romans 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... 38 For I am sure that
neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,
39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the
love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 3:17-19 Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and
grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is *the breadth
and length and height and depth*, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

David and Paul tried to put some measurements to the love of God.

How high are the heavens? What tape measure would you use to measure the breadth, length,
height and depth of the love of God in Christ Jesus? How do you measure the fullness of God?

Ephesians 2:4-7 God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5
even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you
have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in
Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the *immeasurable riches* of his grace
in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Immeasurable riches of God's grace and kindness.

How do you measure the immeasurable? How do you define the undefinable, the limitless?

Eternity will not be long enough to exhaust the telling of it.

For every day for all of eternity the riches of God's grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus will become more and more known, more great and more beautiful. Get this, there will always be more. More than the grains of the sand. God is an infinite being with infinite thoughts, infinite grace, infinite blessings.

Psalm 139:17-18 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
18 If I would count them, they are more than the sand.

How do you say it? How do you speak of the love of God?

This is how God says it. A loaf, a cup, the broken body and shed blood of the Son of God. The greatest gift, given to the least worthy people at the greatest cost.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love one another as God has loved you.

John 15:11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.