

Beyond Words (Limitation of Language)

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INTRODUCTION

Many people buy greeting cards to communicate thoughts that they otherwise may feel unable to express. Mother's Day is the third most significant day in the year for giving and receiving of greeting cards, standing behind only Christmas and Valentines, but ahead of Father's Day.

Based upon a lunch-time conversation with Emilee Mayberry, who works for Hallmark, I performed a Bing Search this afternoon, asking "How many cards are sold on Mother's Day?" The very first search linked to information provided by the Greeting Card Association [<http://www.greetingcard.org/>], a U.S. trade association serving the greeting card and social expression industry. Here is some information on their general facts page:

- Americans purchase approximately 6.5 billion greeting cards each year. Annual retail sales of greeting cards are estimated between \$7 and \$8 billion.
- The most popular Everyday card-sending occasion by far is Birthday, followed by a number of secondary occasions that include Sympathy, Thank You, Wedding, Thinking of You, Get Well, New Baby and Congratulations.
- The most popular Seasonal cards are Christmas cards, with some 1.6 billion units purchased (including boxed cards). This is followed by cards for Valentine's Day (145 million units, not including classroom valentines), Mother's Day (133 million units), Father's Day (90 million units), Graduation (67 million units), Easter (57 million units), Halloween (21 million units), Thanksgiving (15 million units) and St. Patrick's Day (7 million units).

We send greeting cards, thank you cards, sympathy cards, birthday cards, etc. to express love, appreciation, concern, sorrow, etc. They aid in communicating deep and profound sentiments.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Sacred Scripture is God's way of communicating with mankind (1 Cor. 2:6-13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). The gospel is the power of God for salvation and a revelation of His righteousness (Rom. 1:16-17). The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, revealing and judging man's innermost thoughts (Heb. 4:12-13).

Accordingly, the angelic messenger instructed Cornelius, “Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:13-14). We must humbly receive the word implanted, which is able to save our souls (James 1:21-25).

Yet, in some regards, words are unable to fully communicate certain concepts. That’s why we say, “A picture is worth 1,000 words.” Yet, photographs cannot communicate touch, texture, scent or other sensations. So, in this lesson, let us consider passages that reveal certain limitations of language.

THE LIMITATION OF WORDS

A Gift Indescribable

Urging the Corinthians to complete their contribution for the needy saints in Jerusalem, the apostle Paul spoke of the blessings showered upon us from above, and concluded by saying, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:6-15, esp. vs. 15).

The Greek adjective *anekdiēgētos*, translated “indescribable” and occurring only in the present context, a compound of the negative prefix and *ekdiēgeomai* [to tell in detail], refers to that which is “inexpressible” [Thomas 411]. BDAG define it as “indescribable, in (a) good sense.”

The KJV says, “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.” The ESV reads, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” Both the NIV84 and the NRSV both say, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

Jesus is God’s great gift to mankind. Speaking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (John 4:10). Urging his audience to obey the gospel and be saved, Peter said, ““Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 2:38–40). Paul referred to the gift of God’s grace that he had received (Eph. 3:7). Discussing the offices that have been set in the church for our equipping and upbuilding (i.e., apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers), Paul said, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7ff). Truly, the gifts of God are rich and varied beyond description.

A Joy Inexpressible

Describing the blessings that come through facing and overcoming trials, the apostle Peter refers to joy that is “inexpressible” (1 Peter 1:6-9, esp. vs. 8).

The Greek adjective *aneklalētos*, translated “inexpressible” and occurring only in the present context, a compound of the negative prefix and *eklaleō* [to speak out, divulge], refers to that which is “unspeakable” [Thomas 412] or “inexpressible” [BDAG].

The KJV says that believers “rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.” The ESV says that they “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and (are) filled with glory.” The NRSV connect the two thoughts, saying they “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.” The older NIV (1984) echoes this approach, saying they are “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”

Joy is a distinctive characteristic of Christianity. On the night of His betrayal, Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11). While the disciples would weep and lament at His death, their grief would be turned into joy at His resurrection (John 16:20). Furthermore, Jesus said, “I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (John 16:22). Praying to the Father, He said, “But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves” (John 17:13). Truly, the joy of believers exceeds description.

Words Inexpressible

Regarding the occasion when he was caught up to the third heaven, the apostle Paul says that he heard words that were inexpressible (2 Cor. 12:1-6, esp. vs. 4).

The Greek word *arrētos*, translated “inexpressible,” a compound of the negative prefix and *rhētos* [stated], refers to that which is “unspeakable” [Thomas 731]. BDAG say it is descriptive “(1) of something that cannot be expressed, since it is beyond human powers, inexpressible; (2) of something that must not be expressed, since it is holy, not to be spoken.” It only occurs in the present context.

Actually John describes heaven in great and varied detail. This task was not given to Paul. Scripture is not speculative. Divine revelation is specific, distinguishing between things revealed and secret things (Deut. 29:29). Respecting that authority of Scripture, we must “learn not to exceed what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6).

Avoiding the sins of addition, subtraction, and/or alteration (Deut. 4:2; 2 John 9), let us heed the admonition of Peter: “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God...” (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

CONCLUSION

Communication is rooted in language. God speaks to us through the Bible, and we speak to Him in prayer. Yet, certain emotions transcend language; some groanings are too deep for words

(Rom. 8:26–27; 2 Cor. 5:1–3). Paul refers to the peace of God, “which surpasses all comprehension”(Phil. 4:4-9).

Let us be thankful for the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God (Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:8–10)! We are blessed with a gift that is indescribable, and a joy that is inexpressible. For these, let us rejoice and be glad. We are blessed with a revelation of God’s will and word. In this let us be obedient and content, knowing that God has given us what we need.