

KEY TO PUZZLE WHY SHOULD I KNOW GREEK?

*So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, **Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?** He saith unto him, **Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.** He saith unto him, **Feed my lambs.** ¹⁶He saith to him again the second time, **Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?** He saith unto him, **Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.** He saith unto him, **Feed my sheep.** ¹⁷He saith unto him the third time, **Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?** Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, **Lovest thou me?** And he said unto him, **Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.** Jesus saith unto him, **Feed my sheep.** (John 21:15-17)*

There are two different Greek words used in these verses for “lovest” or “love.” They are αγαπαω and φιλεω.

When you look in the *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, you will find at the end of the definition for αγαπαω that it says: “On the difference between αγαπαω and φιλεω, see φιλεω.” Therefore, you turn to the word φιλεω and it reads: “αγαπαω denotes a love founded in admiration, veneration, esteem. It means to be kindly disposed to one, wish one well. φιλεω denotes an inclination prompted by sense and emotion.”

Let me tell you in a simple way what these big words mean:

αγαπαω is love that is not concerned with itself, but wants to bless the other individual. The one who loves with αγαπαω love is not concerned about himself, but he is actually saying, “I would like to die so that you could be blessed. Whatever is the best for you, that is what I will do. My love is not about me at all, about my satisfaction. It is for your blessing so that you would be satisfied.” αγαπαω love is measured by your ability to lay down your life the same way as God

laid down His life.

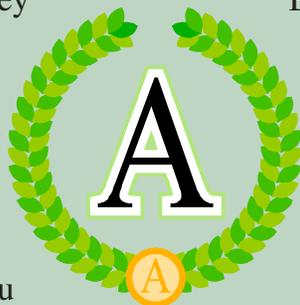
φιλεω love means that I am delighted in you or pleased to be with you because you have a good character. I love you for what you are. For example, I φιλεω chicken. I don’t have αγαπαω love for the chicken. I don’t care that the chicken has to die in order for me to be able to eat it up. But I φιλεω it very much.

As we now understand the meaning of the two Greek words used in our puzzle verses for “love,” let us go back to the conversation between Jesus and Peter. In Greek it sounds as follows:

Jesus asked Peter, “Peter, αγαπαω Me?” As if He was saying, “Peter, I don’t care whether you enjoy being with Me, whether you delight in it.

But do you αγαπαω Me? Would you lay down your life for Me?” Peter answered and said, “Jesus, You know that I φιλεω You.” It is interesting, isn’t it? Peter is not saying that he αγαπαω Jesus, but that he φιλεω Him, that he enjoys being with Him – he likes Him, Jesus is pleasing unto him.

Do you know why? Peter just denied Jesus a few days prior to this conversation and so he was not sure whether he would be able to lay down his life for Him. And he didn’t want to lie. But Peter’s response was not sufficient for Jesus for He asked him again, “Peter, it is good that you like me φιλεω, but I really need you to love me αγαπαω. I need you to be able to lay down your life for me.” And so He asked him again, “Do you αγαπαω me?” Peter knew what Jesus was asking, but he was resisting the word αγαπαω and said to him again, “You know that I φιλεω You.” And Jesus said, “OK, if you φιλεω Me, feed My sheep.” Finally, Jesus “came down” to Peter’s level and asked him, “Do you like me φιλεω?” And Peter replied, “Yes, I φιλεω You.” Jesus knew that one day Peter



would learn to αγαπω Him. And we know from history that, at the end, Peter really αγαπω Jesus and died for Him.

Now you know that when Jesus asks you, “Do you love Me?” and you have in front of your eyes this conversation in Greek, then you can say, “Hmm, Lord, it is a good question. Lord, I am sure I φιλεω You, I enjoy being in Your presence, but please help me to αγαπω You more so that I would know how to lay down my life for You.”

If you like definitions, then there is no better definition for αγαπω love than the 13th chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians. I would encourage you to read it. If you do, you will understand

even more what αγαπω love is all about and what Jesus was asking Peter.

As we can see, translations of the Bible are, and always will be, only translations. Even though some of them are very good, it is even better to be able to go back to the original text for we will understand much more of what the Lord is saying. Therefore, learn Greek and “dig” the original meaning of the Greek Bible words so that you would understand the mysteries that God has hidden in His Word for those who diligently seek Him.

Note: Some of the explanations and examples were taken from Greek seminars taught at the conference in Jamaica in 2004.

