

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 12: Love to the Core of His Being

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Love looms within us these days having celebrated another Valentine's Day recently and with the coming of spring (technically, anyway!) this month. As Alfred Lord Tennyson observed in Locksley Hall, "In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love." The young man has a lot of company.

As we think of the subject of love, those inclined to look beneath the surface of things see different kinds of love, including the highest form of caring, which the Apostle Paul disclosed as involving patience, kindness, rejoicing with the truth, always persevering. Some ask, "Where does love come from?" The Bible tells us it comes from God, whose essence is love, which is the meaning of 1 John 4:8, "God is love."

The converse of course is not true. As I mentioned in an earlier essay referring to this verse, we cannot say that love is God, which would be to improperly interpret the statement as a chiasmus, a popular grammatical and rhetorical verbal pattern, where the second half of an expression, when reversed, is also usually true or makes a point. An old example is the statement that in the prophetic part of ministry, "we need to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Nowhere does the Bible teach, in this passage or anywhere else, that love is God; that would be to make a false god out of love.

However, truly, truly, "God is love." This verse means that the essence of God's being is love; i.e., love characterizes who he is. Nevertheless, his love issues forth in other attributes as well.

What God has revealed through John's statement is that love describes the core of God's character. God's love is not just a part of him or something he does at certain times. Love depicts himself, his essential being. All else about him, including his acts, comes from his love, what the outstanding theologian Karl Barth portrayed as "an overflow of His essence." (*The Doctrine of God*, Part I, 273)

While we may not agree with everything Barth said, he was right about that observation. All of God's attributes emerge from his great and steadfast love. As we saw in the essay on God's holiness, God is not only holy but holy, holy, holy (the way the Hebrew language, lacking the superlative in its grammar, expresses the concept of most or greatest by repeating it three times).

Holy means set apart from that which is sinful and evil, uncommon, pure. It denotes that God is separated from the sin and evil of the world. That God has nothing to do with sin and evil, and that he therefore requires all who would be in his presence to be holy as well (e.g., Leviticus 19:2; Matthew 5:48; John 14:21; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Peter 1:13-16; 2:9-12), is surely and easily seen as an aspect of his love. All we need to do is imagine what

life would be like if it were not possible (with his help), and if we were not called, to live lives on a higher level than that on the level of degradation that is everywhere evident.

That God loves and acts out that love, including in the most wonderful expression of love ever in the mighty work of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, informs us of what love is and can be. God's love gives us a standard, not only for what he requires but for how we can shape our love toward him and others.

What would life be without his love? Indeed, we see the corruption of love in those who reject the one true God who has revealed himself in the Bible. What they call love is usually far removed from what Christ demonstrated and is largely lust, and typically in the basest forms. Where we do see instances of love among the pagans, it is due to an extra measure of God's common grace to them, whereby he gives to the unregenerate (those who have not been "born again") blessings that they have done nothing to earn. As Jesus said, God the Father, the giver of all that is good and perfect, "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45b)

As we'll see below, God's justice is also an expression of his love. Because he loves people, he is offended when they are mistreated, abused, and harmed in any way. He will bring to justice those who hurt those whom he loves.

Biblical Christianity is unique among all other religions in referring to God as love. Throughout history other faiths around the world describe their gods as beings requiring specific human actions in order to be appeased and to grant salvation, but they are not characterized as love and most all are not viewed as loving. For example, I am informed by Arabic-speaking scholars that the word love doesn't even occur in the Arabic version of Qur'an, which Muslims maintain is the only accurate version.

Also, while some Hindus see Brahman as a personal and loving god, usually he is described as an impersonal being above all creation and completely uninvolved with human life on earth. That concept is an oxymoron, for any meaningful love denotes involvement with the one loved. At the very least an expression of the feeling for the one loved is necessary and at best concomitant actions that benefit the recipient of the love. (A word for husbands: your wife will not be impressed if all you do is say you love her; she wants to see it in action, and life will go a lot better for you if you do so!)

Regarding love in the Bible, God's love for us, our love for him, and our love for one another, always involves behaviors that issue from the love. Look closely at the apostle Paul's definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13, especially verses four through seven, which we will consider more below.

"You say God is loving," people ask, "but what about where God tells the Israelites to go in and kill all those men, women, and children of the Canaanites? [Deuteronomy 7:1-9; 9:3-6; 20:16-18] How is that loving?" The complete answer takes longer than we have space for here, but a short answer necessarily begins with who God is and what he is like.

God, who created and owns the universe, is most holy. The Canaanites, and the others whom God told his people to destroy, practiced a vile religion that involved grim rites of child sacrifice and cult prostitution that were detestable in God's sight. (For starters, on a micro level, how would you feel if someone in a Satanic cult decided to take your children whom you love and sacrifice them on an altar with an iron furnace in the shape of a false god where the child is placed on the red-hot arms of the false god and it slides kicking and screaming down the arms into the furnace-stomach of the god?! The one true God, who loves perfectly, was patient long enough. [Genesis 15:16]) The Canaanites had a sufficient knowledge of God, and enough awareness of what he is like, to be without excuse for the extreme evil characterizing their existence. (Romans 1:18-20)

In his love, God demonstrated his patience toward the Canaanites, giving them time to repent and change their ways. When they didn't, out of love for others God, who is not only holy but holy, holy, holy, (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) judged their excessive and over-the-top wickedness and caused it to cease. Does not the maker of something have the right to do with it as he or she wishes...even more the perfect and all good Creator and Owner of the cosmos? God knew that if he allowed his people, whom he commanded to be holy, to live with the nations whose religion was full of evil, his people would become corrupted and unable to fulfill their place in his plan for redeeming his creation. In effect he had us in mind. His love for others to come, including us, is a key factor in his using Israel to judge the Canaanites. If he didn't preserve at least a remnant of faithful Israelites, his plan of salvation would have been jeopardized, along with our eternal well being.

We can see the love of God revealed on every page of the Bible, the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Some people say that the God of the Old Testament is a god of wrath, and the God of the New Testament is a god of love. Read more carefully. Both testaments reveal that only one true God exists, the same one, and they both disclose that he is loving, indeed that love is the core of his being. (1 John 4:8) To cite just one example, even the persecuted and puzzled Psalmist proclaimed to God, "I trust in your unfailing love." (13:5) The Scripture says that God's love is not only unfailing but that it endures forever. (Psalm 100:5)

In the famous passage, John 3:16, the apostle's statement that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life," (John 3:16, NASB) is one of the most familiar of all Scripture. The term "only begotten" translates the Greek word, μονογενής, transliterated *monogenēs*, meaning the only one of the same essence as God, clearly communicating Christ's divinity. That there is only one God is indicated in the Greek of this and many other passages by the inclusion of the definite article, which sadly is not typically translated in English versions: "the God" gave his only begotten Son. Further, John uses the Greek word κόσμος, *kosmos* for "the world" in this text. Especially in John, the word *kosmos* means the world in its present fallen state, not just the beautiful aspects of the universe. Thus, God is revealing that he loves his creation so much that he wants to redeem it, and in the process obliterate all its sinfulness and evil. In order to do so and yet maintain his

justice, he sends his only begotten Son to make the redemption and at such great cost to himself: What supreme love!

In that famous verse we see the concept of forgiveness in God's love. Of course God's love that issues in forgiveness is not seen for the first time in the Gospel by John; it is firmly grounded in the Old Testament. For example, we read in Psalm 86:5, "You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you." The word used in Psalm 86:5, translated love is חֶסֶד , *chesedh*, a major term in the Old Testament that denotes God's love as an enduring commitment of his love, often translated as steadfast love. The term also means grace, as it is translated in other places when the context warrants, and in Psalm 86:5 it contains that concept in referring to God's love, indicated in the Greek translation, the *Septuagint*, as "plenteous in mercy." What a wonderful God we have, or more accurately who has us, since we belong to him! That we belong to him is powerfully conveyed in our baptism, which we will discuss in a later section.

Whenever we speak of God's love we must clarify what we mean, because our society's understanding of love has been shaped by Hollywood's misunderstanding as well as other cultural influences contrary to the Bible. The Apostle Paul defined that special type of love which characterizes God, called $\alpha\gamma\acute{\alpha}\pi\eta$, *agapē*, in the New Testament, including in 1 John 4:8, and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as being patient; kind; not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, or delighting in evil; but instead rejoicing with the truth; always protecting, trusting, and persevering. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Theologian Emil Brunner explained that "The Love of God...*Agape*...does not seek value, but it creates value or gives value; it does not desire to get but to give; it is not 'attracted' by some lovable quality, but it is poured out on those who are worthless and degraded...Here the One who loves does not seek anything for Himself; all He desires is to benefit the one He loves. And the benefit He wants to impart is not 'something', but His very Self, for this Love is...self-giving to the other, to whom love is directed." (*The Christian Doctrine of God*, 186-187)

Brunner makes this statement in the context of his observation that God's love must be seen in connection with his holiness, which he rightly refers to as an indissoluble connection, "the characteristic and decisive element" in the Christian understanding of God. To understand the love of God as fully as possible, we must keep in mind his holiness, his justice, and our sinfulness, three subjects we'll explore more in upcoming chapters.

God has feelings.

Up to this point we've been considering the results of God's love, the actions he takes that flow from his love, which as Paul indicates is at the core of what the highest form of love means. Love in the Bible is behavioral, expressed in action. Yet, it's also important that we see God as having feelings; he has emotion as well as intellect. God is not an

impersonal force that is devoid of sensitivity, feeling, and emotion. Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

God reveals himself as having concern for his people. God cares! In Exodus 3 he tells Moses that “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them...” (3:7-8 NIV) An examination of the original Hebrew in which God is speaking to Moses, the English words, “I am concerned about their suffering” are in the Hebrew, “I know their pain.” The root word for “I know” is יָדָע *yādha*, a covenantal word meaning to know in an intimate, personal, relational, experiential manner, a term that involves a thorough and complete knowing due to an intimate loving relationship. He cares deeply for his people and plans to relieve them of their pain, their suffering, through Moses’ leading them out of Egypt to the land God was giving them. Because God loves and cares, he acts accordingly.

One of the expressions of God’s emotion is his compassion. “The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.” (Psalm 116:5) The Hebrew word translated “compassion” is רָחַם *rācham*, to love, to be merciful, showing compassion (love in action stemming from the core of God’s being), a deep affection for another. This word is only used once for a person having and showing such affection to God (Psalm 18:1); all other times it is used to describe God’s love for or on occasion his withholding such love for people.

We read in the Bible of God’s anger, even wrath. Yet that is due to his love for people who are being unjustly victimized or who are acting in ways counterproductive to their own spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being or counter to God’s will, what he sees as ultimately best for all. We are assured in God’s Word through Isaiah and others that God’s love will always remain with us.

In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:8-10 NRSV)

Similarly, King David urges us, “Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30:4-5 NRSV)

Paul tells the Ephesians and us to “not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. (Ephesians 4:30-31) We sadden the Holy

Spirit when we act in these and the other ways in chapters four and five that “are improper for God’s holy people.” (Ephesians 5:3)

Instead we are to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10) and to act in those ways that please him. The original Greek word in this verse is εὐάρεστος, *euarestos*, well pleasing and acceptable. When we obey him, and act in accord with his will, he has a pleasant feeling about that; we give him pleasure.

Further Benefits for Us

“We love, because [God] first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) Moreover he loved us before we loved him, while we were alienated from him by our sin, as the Apostle Paul writes: “Vary rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:7-8) John adds, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

Because God, who is most holy, righteous, and just, is essentially loving, he has chosen to not destroy us. Those credited with the righteousness of Christ by faith will be saved. Truly, God’s love for us cost him dearly! Throughout this Lenten season, we reflect on the meaning for us personally, as well as corporately, of *this most wonderful demonstration of love ever! The next time you doubt your worth, question the value of your life, or wonder whether your existence has meaning to anyone, remember what God went through as he watched his Son be so cruelly crucified and abused in many other ways...for you.* Pass this Good News along to others as well!

God’s love is also referred to by other words in the Bible, depending on its expression being explained. As Louis Berkhof observes in his *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (67-68), *grace* refers to the unmerited and undeserved aspect of his love revealed in his pardoning our sin at such a huge cost to himself. (Ephesians 1:6-7) The expression of his love in relieving the misery of those bearing the consequences of their own or others’ sin is known as his *mercy* or tender compassion. (Luke 1:78) What great comfort! When God’s love continues to bear with unrepentant sinners who don’t heed his warning and instructions, as he postpones their judgment, giving them sufficient time to repent and change their ways, we see his *patience*, also called longsuffering. (Romans 2:4)

As contemporary theologian, J.I. Packer, observed (*Knowing God*, 111), “the statement ‘God is love’ means that His love finds expression in everything that He says and does. The knowledge that this is so [also] for him personally is the Christian’s supreme comfort. As a believer, he finds in the cross of Christ assurance that he, as an individual, is beloved of God; ‘the Son of God...loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.’ (Gal. 2:20) ...Even when he cannot see the why and the wherefore of God’s dealings, he knows that there is love in and behind them, and so he can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. He knows that the true story of his life, when known, will prove to be, as the hymn says, ‘mercy from first to last’—and he is content.”

For Reflection and Discussion

1. The next time you hear someone express the false dichotomy, “the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and the God of the New Testament is loving,” how will you respond?
2. To what objective evidence can you point for assurance that God loves you?
3. As we consider how God loves, what does that suggest as to who and how we should love?