

Lesson 9: The Story of the Love (43)

In this present section of our course, we're trying to understand the nature of this book called the Bible, *so that*, we might better know how to know what to believe.

- We're not just asking, "What does it say? That is, what's the content of the book?"
- We're not just asking the question, "What should Christians believe about topic "x"—God, man, sin, the end times, abortion, government, and so on?"
- Rather, we're asking something in between those two questions—a question in the middle—which is, "*How* does the Bible say what it says?" If you don't understand that, you're likely to make mistakes about the first two questions. You're going to misunderstand the content, and you're going to misunderstand that content to what we should believe.

This week, we're going to consider the story of love, in order to see what that teaches us for our lives. How do you know when someone loves you? I don't mean likes you. I don't mean admires you. I mean loves you! A child knows his parents love him when they provide for him. You know your friends love you when they accept you despite your faults and even stick up for you against your detractors.

On a wedding day, a man says to a woman, and a woman to a man, that out of all the others out there, out of all the possibilities and options, "I choose you." Families grow up together in one home and love one another, friends love each other too but they go home at night and don't have to call tomorrow. But spouses are another matter altogether. My wife could have married anyone else, or even chosen not to marry anyone else rather than marrying me. But she chose me until death us do part. You all know me, so you know that's true love, or you know Erin's out of her mind!

Love is a topic for which it's especially important for us to get our biblical theology right if we want to get our systematic theology right—if we want to know what to believe about God's love for us, and the love we should have for others. After all, we can all take our favorite 'love verse' and use it to say, "This is what love is like," or "This is what God is like." For some John 3:16 is a favorite proof text: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." They use this to say, "God loves everyone equally. He doesn't choose some and not others to salvation."

Probably one of the most popular proof texts in the Bible must be 1 John 4:16—"God is love." Why is that so popular? We can use it to say whatever we want to about God's love. Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has observed that the topic of love, as much as any other topic, is susceptible to the temptation to project our desires onto God. But what does the Bible mean when it says, "God is love"? It is especially important for us to pay close attention to how God reveals his love in the course of redemptive history before we answer that question.

Like last week, we'll look briefly at the story of love in the Bible. Then we'll observe some patterns. Then we'll draw some systematic lessons, all of which will help us understand what John means when he says "God is love."

THE ULTIMATE LOVE STORY (43)

Let's start with the Bible's story. In the beginning, *God displays his love for all humanity by providing a perfect and beautiful world for us.* Beauty isn't necessary for function, but God's love went beyond the pragmatic. He made a beautiful world, and then made us so that we would be attracted to beauty. Adam and Eve loved one another, but ultimately they were created to be attracted to and in love with God, the most beautiful person in their experience.

Unbelievably, Adam and Eve reject God's love when they decide to reject his word. God excludes them from the Garden. But he continues to love them. He places enmity between them and their greatest enemy, the serpent who deceived them (Genesis 3:15). He reunites them in love. Practically, he loves them in the simple act of covering their shameful nakedness with clothes.

God continues to love the descendants of those who first rejected him. Though Cain and his heirs are rejected, Seth is loved by God, and his son after him, down the long generations to Noah. *While humanity's wicked hatred of God finally culminates in the Flood, even that is not enough to completely extinguish God's love. He chooses Noah and his family to save from destruction, and then particularly blesses Noah's son Shem, and the line that descends from him. Notice the pattern here. God loves all by giving all life. But he also seems to love some specially. Seth, not Cain. Noah, not all those around him.*

In Genesis 12, the story comes into sharp focus with God's call of Abram out of idolatry and into friendship and covenant with Him. *He promises Abraham that he has chosen him and that his descendants will become a great nation. He then gives that nation a covenant and calls them to be a blessing, an expression of love to the whole world.* At Mount Sinai, he betroths the nation of Israel to himself as his own special and uniquely loved people. **Again, notice the pattern:** *a covenant is given to the ones he specially loves.*

Like Adam, Israel rebels against God by turning to other lovers, idols their hands have made. God judges Israel, but throughout the judgment, God continues to love his people. Perhaps no more moving picture of God's reconciling, patient, forgiving love is given than in the book of Hosea. *There God tells the prophet to take a wife named Gomer. She is a prostitute. When she returns to her prostitution not long after their wedding day, God tells Hosea to go and reconcile with her. This, says God, is what his love for his people looks like and feels like.* Incredibly, God's people continue to spurn his love, preferring their idols instead. So God leaves them. Like a husband jealous for his wayward wife's affections, he refuses to live in the house along with her and her lovers.

As the New Testament opens, almost all the tokens of God's love are gone. Suddenly, into this seeming picture of love's labor lost comes the greatest demonstration of love the world has ever seen. God sends Jesus, who again talks about a covenant in his blood. Then he takes upon himself our penalty for spurning God's love, he dies our death on the cross. But death cannot hold him, for "love is as strong as death." (Song 8:6) *In love Jesus rises from the dead, so that whoever repents of their sin and turns in faith to this Savior, this demonstration of God's love, will be forgiven of their sins and welcomed back into God's loving embrace.* Through Jesus, God proves His faithful love to His unfaithful people. Again, there's a covenant for God's special people.

Interestingly, the New Testament, especially John's Gospel, lets us peek into the story behind the story. The story of God's love doesn't begin with creation, but with the eternal love that God the Father has for the Son, and that God the Son has for the Father. Jesus says in John 5, "The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" and in John 17, "Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." God's love for a special people, it turns out, is wrapped up in his love for his Son.

Today that love still transforms unlovely people, sinners like you and me. Now we wait in hope once more for the demonstration of God's love to return. On that day, Jesus will take his Bride home to a New Heaven and a New Earth, truly a world of love. That's the story of God's love. What does it teach us about who God loves, how he loves, and why he loves? Before we answer that, let's consider some patterns in the story.

PATTERNS IN THE STORYLINE (45)

1) The story was about marriage.

We've noticed before how the Bible begins and ends with a wedding. In Genesis, we see Adam and Eve established as husband and wife. Then in the history of Israel, we see God and the nation of Israel discussed in the same terms. The same is said to be true for Christ and the church: Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church. Sure enough, heaven is described as a wedding feast.

2) The story was structured by covenants.

Given that the story was about marriage, it's not surprising to see it structured by covenants. God gave a covenant to Israel. Christ gives a covenant to the church. What should this be telling us about God's love? Well, we haven't drawn our systematic conclusions yet, but weddings and covenants speak of distinctive love, don't they? If I'm to love my neighbor as myself, there's a sense in which I'm universally called to love all people, even all women. But I've covenanted with my wife because I distinctly love her.

We see distinction in Genesis 3, when God put enmity between the seed the serpent and the seed of the woman—the world and God's people. In Genesis 4, God rejects the line of Cain but loves the line of Seth. We see it again with Noah's sons, when God rejects the line of Ham and chooses to bless the line of Shem. Ultimately, we see it in God's choice of Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 12. But even then, not all of Abraham's descendants are chosen in love by God. Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar, is rejected. Isaac is chosen. Esau is rejected, but Jacob, his twin brother, is chosen. King Saul is rejected; King David is chosen. Later, the whole northern kingdom is rejected, while the southern kingdom is chosen. And every time God makes his choice the blessings of his love are attached. The patterns here are very clear.

3) The story had discontinuity and continuity. (46)

So just to follow up on this pattern of distinguishing love, the distinguishing love *continues*; but the focus on an ethnic nation *discontinues*. Eventually, it's given to believers from every nation and from every age. Paul says in Ephesians 1,

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ [How can we know this?] For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”

We see continuity and discontinuity in between the first and last weddings. Both are weddings, but the very first marriage in the Bible was arranged. Adam had no choice in the matter. But not so the last marriage. The last marriage is the marriage between Christ and his people. Ephesians 1 says that Christ chose us before the foundations of the very world were laid. The last marriage isn't an arranged marriage – it's a marriage for love.

4) The story was filled with patterns (typology).

All these observations we're making depend on patterns we're seeing. That's called typology. *In the Garden, you get a type of something—a marriage. Then that type is repeated, but this time between God and a group of people—Israel. Then, when the New Testament comes along and uses this same language about Christ's love for the church, instantaneously, as it were, we have a ton of historical data for helping us understand what that means.* What does it mean that Christ loves the church as a bridegroom? Well, go back to the Old Testament types. See what it says about marriage in Genesis and even Song of Solomon. Then, look at about God's special love for his people in the Old Testament. All this will be very informative. The same is true for New Testament statements like, “God is love.” What does that mean? Well, go back and look at the whole storyline.

SYTEMATIZING IT ALL (46)

As we observe all these things, we're able to see that the topic of love may not be as simple as we often make it out to be. It's actually quite complex, and God does seem to love people differently, and in different ways. Which is why D. A. Carson actually refers to the “Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God.” God is love. But what does that mean? Let's do our systematic work by organizing our doctrines under three questions: who does God love, how does he love, why does he love?

WHO DOES GOD LOVE?

1. The Father Loves the Son

There was never a time when God was not expressing love toward another and receiving love from another. Love is bound up into the very nature of the Trinity. God cannot be God without love, because God is love. Is this idea new in the New Testament? Yes, but the Old Testament prepares us for it, and even teaches us about it through God's love for David. See Psalm 2, 20, 110, and more. *God gives a special covenant of love to David, which helps us to understand the covenant of love between divine Father and Son when it's finally revealed in the New Testament.*

2. God Loves the World

Second, God loves the world, and that in two ways. First, God loves Creation, the work of his hands. Proverbs 8 tells us that he delights in every part of creation. Second, God loves rebellious humanity. So Ezekiel declares, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the

wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’ (Ezk. 33:11). We read in John’s Gospel the proof that God loves the world that hates him: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) *Jesus is the display and demonstration of God’s love for sinners. If anyone would know God’s love, he must know Jesus.*

3. God Loves His Own People Distinctively

Not only does God love the world, God also loves his people. Throughout the story of God’s love, God makes a distinction between people and then places his love on the ones that he has chosen. *The biblical language for God’s love for his people is election; the language of choosing. People sometimes recoil at this word because it seems to make God mean, narrow, and unloving. But we need to understand that in the Bible, to be chosen is the very nature of what it means to be loved by God in the same way a man loves a woman by choosing her.*

In Deuteronomy 7, Israel stands on the brink of the Promised Land. Moses explains that God is going to give them the land and how he’s going to do it. He also warns them to remain faithful to God. Then in verse 6, Moses says, “*For you are a people holy [that means set apart] to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.*”⁷ *The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.*⁸ *But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”*

Why did God choose Israel? Because they were better than everyone else? No. Because they were bigger than everyone else? No. Because they were more righteous than everyone else? No. No. No. God chose them simply because he loved them. And he loved them simply because he did.

4. God Loves Sinners

What all of this is driving us to see is that God loves sinners. Paul says in Titus 3: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” God’s saving electing love is not only not merited, we’ve earned just the opposite—God’s wrath. “But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). *God is not like us. We love people who deserve to be loved. But not God. God’s love is free, it’s gratuitous, it’s unconditional. You cannot earn it. You can only receive it by faith in Christ Jesus.*

HOW DOES GOD LOVE? (32)

If that’s who God loves, we need to consider more carefully *how God loves.*

1. God Loves Providentially

To begin with, God loves everyone *providentially*. That is, he shows it by providing for everyone. Jesus noted that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” *His providential love is generous and impartial (Mat. 5:45-48). This is the point of continuity between the Old Testament and New.*

2. God Loves Sacrificially

God also loves sacrificially. We see this typologically in the Old Testament (Abraham and Isaac, the Levitical sacrifices, etc.). But all these pictures are pointing us toward and teaching us about—each in its own way—the costliest love that this universe has ever seen. On the cross outside of Jerusalem, God poured out his just wrath on the Son that he has eternally loved. Christ became a substitute to pay the penalty for our sins. And why did he do it? He did it for his enemies! He did it for people who hate him; for sinners like you and me. *It’s in the vicarious, substitutionary, propitiating sacrifice of Christ that we humans most clearly encounter the amazing love of God. Sacrificial love alone saves us, for it atones our sins. But also, sacrificial love alone assures us. Since we cannot earn it, we cannot lose it.*

3. God Loves Perfectly

Finally, God loves us *perfectly*. The Bible describes God as a perfect Father, who *in love has adopted us in Christ, and then who always loves his children in exactly the way they need to be loved. And in that process, his love perfects them.* John puts it this way, “*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*”² *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*”³ *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.*” (1 John 3:1-3) God’s love in Christ is changing us to be like Christ.

WHY DOES GOD LOVE? (48)

Why does God love people like us in this extraordinary way? To answer that question, Paul very clearly makes use of the Bible’s typological devices. In Romans 9, Paul points to the example of Jacob and Esau, twin brothers. He recalls that “*before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—Rebekah was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’*”

1. Because God Chooses To Love

Why did God choose to love Jacob and not Esau? The same reason God chooses to love anyone. *Not because he sees something in advance that is lovely and attractive. Not because there’s anything about us that can coerce or demand his love.* God loves his people...because he chooses to. And in that free and unconditioned choice, the glories of God’s electing love are displayed.

2. Because God Loves His Son

In Ephesians 1, Paul says that the reason God elects some to adoption is “to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” God loves us, because ultimately God loves His Son. *There is nothing that he desires more than to display his glory in and through His Son, which he has accomplished through our salvation.*

CONCLUSION—GOD IS LOVE (32)

What does the Bible mean when it says that God is love? To answer that question, we need to read the Bible’s story of love. A holy God chose to love an unholy people at the incalculable price of the very life of his holy Son whom he had loved from all eternity. He did this so that he might transform an unlovely people into a radiantly beautiful bride for that same Son. Our salvation is all about the display of God’s glory in this eternal love of Father for Son and Son for Father, as each tries to outdo the other in love. To our eternal joy and happiness, the good news is that our lives can be caught up in that incredible story of love.