



## **GOD IS ... LOVE** (Exodus 33:18-23; 34:5-8; I John 4:7-12) Becky Douglass

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If you were to ask people if they believed in God, a majority of people here in Australia would still say that they did. They might have trouble describing Him or how they relate to Him, but they have some sort of picture of a God in their minds. We would expect people from different religions to have a different view of their god or gods, but even among those who would classify themselves as “Christian” there is a wide variation in ideas about Him. This results in a wide variation in ideas about how He relates to us and us to Him. It isn’t enough to just say “I believe in God” or even “I have a relationship with God”. It is important to know what God you are talking about!

In this series, we are taking some time to explore what the Bible says about God and to fine-tune our own ideas about Him. So far, we have looked at God’s being – what he is. This is like describing a human being in such a way as to differentiate a human from a dog or a rose, for instance. Each have unique characteristics that help us to know what they are and how they are different from other forms of life. As we have looked at God’s being, we have caught a glimpse of an amazing and wonderful God.

However, if God is just defined by his greatness, he could be an immoral being, exercising his limitless abilities in capricious or even cruel ways. How His power is used is determined by His character and it is to this that we now turn. We will group God’s character under two main headings: God is love and God is good. These simple words bring together a collection of terms the Bible uses to describe God and together, they are the essence of what we call God’s holiness. God would not be the God of the Bible if he wasn’t holy.

### **Review of God’s love**

We start this week with the truth that God is love. His very essence is love and out of this comes his loving actions towards us. When we looked at the Trinity, we saw that the three persons of the Trinity have existed forever in loving fellowship which drives everything God does. “To say ‘God is love’ implies that all his activity is loving activity. If he creates, he creates in love; if he rules, he rules in love; if he judges, he judges in love. All that he does is the expression of his nature which is – to love.” (Dodd)

As I look back over the past year, I realise that we have talked about this quite a bit. So, I want to begin with a quick review of what we’ve said so far and then organise those thoughts under a couple of headings.

This time last year, we had a series on the Psalms. I spent a couple of weeks on Psalm 145 which is based on the Exodus passage we read this morning and expands on the picture of God that is revealed to Moses there. We spent quite a bit of time exploring the meaning of compassion and grace. We saw that the Hebrew word translated compassion or mercy was a deep feeling word particularly associated with gut-

wrenching parental love that gives everything for one's children. We also saw that God's love acts in grace. He is a gift-giver and everything we have comes as a gift from Him.

Our next series was based in the Gospels and we looked at people who encountered Jesus – and through Him, God - and were changed by Him. We saw Jesus showing compassion for the suffering, bringing physical and spiritual healing to the broken. We saw a God who didn't ignore the sinfulness of the leaders but acted in justice. Ultimately, we saw a God who loved humanity so much that He went to the cross to bring reconciliation between Himself and us.

Finally, in Joshua we saw a gracious, giving God who gave the Israelites the land and everything they needed in the land and who gave acceptance to even non-Jews who sought Him. God was faithful to fulfill all His promises. We also saw the other side of God's love - a love that would not tolerate the destructive cancer of sin and who sometimes had to act strongly to preserve justice.

### Conclusions about God's love

This is what we have learned about God as we have read across the Bible. I'd like to bring all these together by looking at the second part of the Exodus passage read this morning. Soon after leaving Egypt, Israel arrives at Mt Sinai to receive the laws which will govern their life as God's people. But while Moses is up the mountain receiving these from God, the people get impatient and make a golden calf to worship. When God sees this, He threatens to abandon them in the wilderness and start all over again with Moses. But Moses deals with the idolatry and petitions God on the people's behalf, asking God to give them another chance to follow Him. God agrees, prompting Moses to ask for a new revelation of His glory. God warns that He is too glorious for mere humans to look at fully, so He will just give Moses a glimpse of His glory, his back, or what remains when He has passed by.

What follows is one of the key self-revelations of God. The passage is quoted throughout the Bible and shaped the Israelites' picture of God. It is key for us as well. From these verses we can see that God's love is comprised of at least three elements.

- Compassion – The deep feeling God has towards us

God's love is no sterile mental choice. It comes from the depths of his being and involves real feelings. God feels deeply for us and because of this, he is affected by our actions. God **really** suffers when people sinfully destroy his creation or suffer from another's sin and God **literally** rejoices when one sinner repents. Isaiah says of God's relationship with Israel: *"In all their suffering he also suffered, and he personally rescued them. In his love and compassion he redeemed them. He lifted them up and carried them through all the years."* (Is 63:9 NLT) This sounds like that gut-wrenching love that parents know for their children.

But even the best of us parents sometimes waver in our love or are side-tracked by our own selfish desires. God's compassionate love is steadfast, based on His faithfulness, not ours. And the wonderful thing about God's compassionate love is that because he is all-powerful and all-knowing, he can do something about His love for us. Sometimes as parents we feel impotent to help our children, to show them our love. This is not a problem for God.

- Grace – God's sacrificial giving

God's love acts in the eternal giving of himself for the welfare of his creation. From the moment of creation, God has generously given us life, sustenance, guidance, forgiveness and renewal. As Dallas Willard says: "Grace is not just about forgiveness — if we had never sinned, we would still need grace! Grace is God acting in our life to do what we cannot do on our own. Grace is what we live by and the human system won't work without it." Every breath that we take is evidence of God's grace to us.

Of course, His grace is ultimately shown in the giving of himself in His own death, *"forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"*. This forgiving grace is what frustrated Jonah. He didn't want God to forgive the Ninevites, but He knew that God's grace extended to even these perverted and violent enemies of Israel. When they repented and God forgave them, Jonah quotes this passage in frustration, knowing that God is

acting according to his character. (Jonah 4:2) God's love is *steadfast and faithful to thousands* – thousands of individuals across thousands of generations.

- Justice – God's action against the destruction of sin

God's love equally causes Him to act in justice. Because He passionately loves his world and everything in it, he has an eternal concern for its welfare, and this leads Him to righteous anger at all that destroys the objects of his love. Sin destroys and twists everything that is good, and God cannot allow it to continue. We often flinch at the descriptions of God's wrath in the Bible, but would He really be loving if He was not angry at sin and evil? When we are suffering from evil, we want Him to act on our behalf. When we are the ones sinning, however, we want Him to overlook it. Maybe this is because we don't see the damage we do with even our little sins. If we could see our sin the way God sees it, I think we would understand His wrath against it.

The wonder of God's love is that He is slow to anger, giving us opportunity after opportunity to repent and come to Him for cleansing. However, there is a limit to his long-suffering. Paul says: *"... do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."* (Romans 2:4,5) There does come a time when God's love causes him to act in justice, *"...by no means clear(ing) the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation"*. This may sound harsh, but it comes from God's love for all of humanity. Sin spreads in families, and in the time of Moses, all the generations were involved in and held accountable for the actions of the family. We have occasional instances in the Bible when God saved children or other individuals from a condemned family, so we know this was not carried out capriciously. But sometimes God must perform radical surgery to stop the cancerous spread of sin.

God's love leads him to act in both grace and justice. True and strong love can act in no other way. It is an awesome thing. In the presence of God's love, we must join Moses who *"quickly bowed his head towards the earth and worshipped."*

### **Results of God's love**

In the 1 John passage we see some of the results of God's love as we experience it as Christians today.

- A relationship of delight

God is love and we enter into a love relationship with Him. *"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us."* The relationship we enjoy with God begins with Him, as he reaches out in love to us. Not only does He love us, but He does everything necessary to overcome the barriers to our relationship with Himself. John tells us that God *"sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"*.

Don't be afraid of the word propitiation! It is just a big word for the idea that Jesus took on the consequences of our sin by offering himself as a sacrifice in our stead. Have you read C. S. Lewis' book, [The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe](#)? The climax of the story comes when Aslan offers himself to the White Witch to pay the penalty for Edmund's betrayal. Aslan dies instead of Edmund. This is propitiation. But in the story, as with Jesus, that is not the end! *"... though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still ... when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."* Jesus dies for us, but he also rose for us so that we can have new life in Him. This is God's love for us acting in both justice as He deals with sin, and in grace as He gives us forgiveness and new life through Jesus.

And there is more! God doesn't just make us His children through Jesus. We are his beloved children, and he takes great pleasure in us. Zephaniah, a prophet of Israel penned some beautiful words of love that apply to us as well:

*The Lord your God is in your midst,*

*A Mighty One, who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness,*

*He will renew you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.* (Zephaniah 3:17 MEV)

Dear friend, God rejoices over you with gladness! If you are hurting or burdened with sin, He will renew you with His love. Don't be afraid to open up your heart to Him. And As you open your heart to Him, you will find that you delight in Him as well. This is worship. "It's what happens when God's delight in us inspires our delight in him sparking an endless loop of joy between Creator and creature; between Lover and beloved." (Skye Jethani) This isn't emotional ecstasy, but the settled feeling that you are where you belong, at home in His love. This is the relationship for which you were created.

- A love reflected

John goes on to say: "*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another – anyone who does not love, does not know God*". We must become reflections of His love. This reminds me of a bumper sticker that used to be popular.

**Know God    No God**  
**Know love   No love**

John is saying that the natural result of experiencing God's love is to pass on that love to others and if we aren't loving others, then we have to question if we really know God's love. Because we are sinful, love does not come naturally to us. Our love, however strong, is always tainted by sin. But as we allow God to fill us with Himself and His love (Romans 5:5), His love will overflow to others.

Together as a community we need to be asking God to give us His heart for others. To show us how He wants us to be sharing His love with those who don't know Him. Why is this important? Firstly, because this is how God made us to live. As we saw when we studied the Trinity, God created us to share in the love of the Trinity and to invite others into the spreading goodness of His love. We were made to love God and each other. When we love others, we experience life as God intended.

Secondly, in a world that doesn't know God, or has confused ideas about God, our love points people to a true picture of Him. John says: "*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*" People can't see God, but they can see us and as God's love is perfected in us, they get a clearer and clearer picture of who He is. Could someone observing the quality and degree of love that I show to others – to my wife, my husband, my family, my neighbours, people at church, people at work – could they learn anything at all about the greatness of God's love to me? What picture of God are people getting from us?