



GOD'S TRUE LOVE

David Harwood





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Introduction

ONE SUMMER, IN THE BASEMENT of a church in Manhattan, I had the opportunity to teach a course built upon the contents of this book. That first day was...interesting. I stood facing thirty students. They were like a spiritual Special Forces detachment. It soon became apparent that some of them felt studying the love of God was irrelevant to their ministry goals or too elementary to be worth an investment of their time and effort. I looked at the staff. Some were skeptical. Their experience led them to apprehensively expect this emphasis to be a distraction from the pursuit of holiness and the work of the ministry.

I found that among this group there were a lot of misunderstandings about the love of God. I also found that many felt they already knew everything they needed to know about His love. To the surprise of both students and staff, by the end of the trimester their reservations were overcome, questions were answered, paradigms were altered, and lives were changed.

Like those students, many people carry misconceptions about the nature of God's love for them. Sometimes our spiritual experience is way ahead of our doctrinal understanding. Yet, our experience is interpreted by what we understand to be true. Many of us have systems of thought that block us from entering into a true encounter with God's love. Others entertain convictions that cut them off from deriving the full benefit of their intuitive exchanges with God.

This book will help you establish a solid foundation for relating to God on the basis of His love. Part of this process will be coming to terms with where our views of His love have been incorrect, and have thereby kept us from the fullness of the relationship He

desires, and for which we were created. Establishing the right foundation can only take place through becoming exposed to a Biblically-based theology of God's love. In this book we will examine the Old and New Testaments, the viewpoints of the Apostles, and Jesus' example and testimony. We will establish a Biblical definition of love and through Scripture determine what God's love for us is like. We will endeavor to provide an answer to the question: Why does God love us?

Our goal is to bring you into a knowledge of Scripture which will lead to faith – faith which is meant to shape your worldview and lead to spiritual experience. The primary assertion of this book is that God loves each of us deeply, sincerely, and personally, and it is His desire for us to live in an ongoing experiential awareness of this love: to abide in the love of God. Our goal is to guide you towards this end.


As you read, maintain a hungry attitude towards God and a thoughtful attitude towards this material. Be like those who “received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). While convinced that what is written here is essentially true, we recognize that, at best, it can only be part of the truth. “For we know in part and we prophesy in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9).

Yet, despite our limitations, we seek to imitate the attitude Paul exemplified: “But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, ‘I believed, therefore I spoke,’ we also believe, therefore we also speak” (2 Corinthians 4:13). As Peter and John testified, “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). So, in the spirit of faith, arrested by the love of God, believing that we are bearing witness to the testimony of the Spirit and the Scriptures, we commend this material to you.

Although you will be interacting with written materials, it is vital that you integrate the information and exhortation with your daily

walk with God. To really benefit from this study, you need to be in contact with Him. What you read will inform your mind, but only an encounter with the Spirit of God can truly change your heart.

Before you begin, make a choice to meditate on the Word, pray through Scripture, and spend time in the presence of God. Our desire is that everyone who is reading this book will be working towards life change. We hope and pray that God would grant you the power to grasp His love for you, and that your relationship with God would be changed as you are faithful to maintain that grace. The outcome should be growth in your relationship with God, fresh confidence in Him, and a firm understanding of His love. Ultimately, knowing the love of God will lead to the release of the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19). You may confidently expect that growing in your knowledge of God's love will benefit your life and affect your ministry for the better. Dive in with excitement and determination to receive all that God has for you; after all, you are God's true love!







PART 1:

RESTORING A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE



The more I study the New Testament and live the Christian life, the more convinced I am that our fundamental difficulty, our fundamental lack, is the lack of seeing the love of God. It is not so much our knowledge that is defective but our vision of the love of God. Thus our greatest object and endeavor should be to know Him better, and thus we will love Him more truly.

MARTIN LLOYD-JONES, *The Love of God*

Love is absolutely central to our understanding of God.

LEON MORRIS, *New Testament Theology*

The Bible teaches that “God is love” and that God loves you. Nothing else matters so much.

BILLY GRAHAM

I never knew up to that time that God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out; I could not keep back the tears. I just drank it in...I tell you there is one thing that draws above everything else in the world and that is love.

D.L. MOODY

God pursues us to give us himself.

JOHN WHITE, *God's Pursuing Love*

It becomes clear that the sort of intimate union Jesus promises the disciples is not merely a mystical experience, but a relational encounter, for he gives it content with the term “love” (John 15:9–10).

CRAIG S. KEENER, *The Gospel of John Volume II*

Chapter 1

Jesus, the Beloved Son

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you. Abide in My love (John 15:9).

LET'S BEGIN WITH A FEW QUESTIONS: How important is knowing the love of God? Is concentrating upon knowing God's love a subtle distraction from what really counts, or is this vital to the spiritual life of the believer? Is it valid to pursue knowledge of this love, or is it a waste of time?

To determine how significant the love of God is supposed to be in the life of a believer, we need to let Scripture inform and direct us. Let's answer these questions by asking another, better question: "What do the Scriptures teach about the importance of knowing God's love?"

As we look at Scripture, you will see that the Bible teaches: (1) knowing the love of God is important, (2) it is for every believer, and (3) it is supposed to be foundational to knowing God.

Jesus' Example

If you scan the Gospels you will note that Jesus lived in an ongoing awareness of His Father's love. Jesus was very confident in His relationship with the Father. He knew that the Father cared for Him. He trusted in the Father. He entrusted Himself to the Father from the beginning to the end of His life (Psalm 71:6).

Let's look at a few clues the Scriptures give us about Their loving relationship. The heavenly Father communicated His affirmation and love for His Son at various times. At Jesus' immersion, He heard the voice of God. Father spoke directly to Jesus of His love:

You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased (Mark 1:11).

The Greek word which is translated "well-pleased" is *eudokia*. It is a strong word meaning *really pleased*, or *delighted*. Father's voice shattered the silent heavens as He declared how much He loved His Son. This formed Jesus' self image. This word branded His soul and provided self-definition, providing the foundation of the Messiah's inner awareness. This message from Father fortified Him against the devil's temptations and marked the future course of Jesus' ministry.

At His transfiguration the Father spoke of His love for Jesus to others. The Son was a witness to His Father's attestation:

Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" (Mark 9:7).

Jesus spoke about the love that He experienced; He knew that the Father loved Him:

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love (John 15:9).

He also knew why He was loved. He understood what it was about Him that the Father appreciated and esteemed. The Lamb of God knew why God was "well-pleased."

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again (John 10:17).

The Scriptures testify that the Father entrusted all things to the Son. Why? Jesus testified of John the Baptist that not only was he a prophet, he was "more than a prophet" (Matthew 11:9). John's

prophetic insight provided this answer: Jesus had authority because of His Father's love:

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand (John 3:35).

How much authority had the Father given Jesus? In the Gospel of John one need look no further than when He raised His voice and commanded, "Lazarus come forth!" John the Baptist's testimony was confirmed in John 13:3 where the apostle described the inner awareness of the Messiah: Jesus knew "that the Father had given all things into His hands."

The Messiah Jesus was viewed as a prophet who was on the same level as Moses (Acts 7:37; John 1:17). We have seen that John the Baptist understood Jesus' authority as originating in the Father's love. In the same way, the Son of God did not attribute His own prophetic insight to His holiness or His devotion to the God of Israel. The Messiah knew that He received revelation because of His Father's love for Him:

For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him greater works than these so that you will marvel (John 5:20).

As a result of knowing His Father's love, Jesus was supremely confident. Look at His boldness displayed even in the face of death:

I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me (John 11:42).

Jesus thoroughly knew the reality of this love. He knew it well enough to pass on the same quality of love to His disciples. The experience He received was an experience the Messiah could give to others:

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you (John 15:9a).

Immediately after Jesus washed His disciples' feet, He told them that He had given them a metaphor for their attitude and behavior. Then the Messiah told His disciples to love one another as He loved them. The truth of Jesus being our example was embraced by the Apostles. Peter exhorted us to "follow in His steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Paul told us to imitate his example just like he imitated Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:1). John expected the believers to purify themselves "as He (Jesus) is pure" (1 John 3:3). He wrote that as Jesus is, so are we in the world (1 John 4:17).

Many who read this will remember that John distinguished himself as the disciple who rested on Jesus' bosom. In this description there is a hint of Jesus' relationship to the Father. The same essential language is used to describe Jesus. He was called "the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18). In that prophetic declaration we have a picture of the Messiah resting upon the breast of God. What a picture this is. What a depiction of intimacy and reliance. Jesus knew the Father's love. He rested upon God's heart. We are to do the same. After all, He has told us that His relationship to Father is the pattern of our relationship to Him.

The Messiah really is our example in all things. Our ultimate destiny is to be conformed to the image of God's Son (Romans 8:29). The sanctification process in which we participate is one aspect of the beginning of that glorification. It is amazing; this intimacy is both integral to our arriving at our ultimate destination, and the absolute goal of our sanctification.

Through these verses and others, we see that Jesus, our example in all things, knew the love of God as part of His normal and ongoing experience as a man. Since we are to follow His example we can be confident that our normal life is also supposed to include knowing and relying upon the love of God.