

The Loving God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning and let me add my word of welcome to what's already been said. I'm delighted you could be with us this morning. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the senior pastor at St Silas Church. It's great you can be with us as we look at this topic, the love of God.

There's actually a prayer in the Bible where the Apostle Paul says that he's praying for all the Lord's holy people in Ephesians chapter 3, that they would have the power of God to grasp the dimensions of the love of Christ for them.

So it's a great way to open our time together in God's word here. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in that prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time and we ask that out of your glorious riches, you will strengthen us with power through your spirit in our inner being so that together with all your people, we might grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

And to know that love that surpasses knowledge, that we might be filled to the measure with all the fullness of God. For we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

Amen. Well, we've been in a series looking at knowing the living God. Some weeks have made us feel uncomfortable as we thought about last week, God's sovereignty, that he's fully in control of everything.

[1 : 2 5] We thought about God's holiness, how he is frighteningly pure, that his holiness is a consuming fire. We thought about how God is working for his glory.

It's been challenging. But this morning, if anything, we've got actually the opposite problem. It's that when it comes to thinking about the love of God, we are perhaps too comfortable.

We think that we know it already. And we do, of course, hopefully, we know elements of God's love. But there are times when actually we're still in the shallow end and we need a deep end reflection on the love of God that is nonetheless challenging but helpful so that we grow rich.

We delve into the riches of God's love and our hearts are set ablaze by his love for us. So our first point this morning, the eternity of God's love.

The Bible makes that profound statement, God is love. Love is so central to God's character, we can define him as love. The reason that is true is because God is love in eternity.

[2 : 3 5] What was God doing prior to creating the universe? He was literally in love. He exists forever in loving relationship within himself.

That's only possible because of the Trinity, the three in oneness of God. That God the Father has always been a father. He's always had a son and he's always loved the son.

God the Son has always been a son, loving the Father. And that love has been in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever. However, when Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, the curtain is drawn back on that relationship between the Father, the Son and the Spirit in John chapter 17.

And we read this, John 17, 24. Jesus says, Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

And nor the God is like this. One God, three persons. Allah cannot be loved because he is unitary. I mean, he also can't be loved because he's not real.

[3 : 55] But if he was real, he couldn't be loved unless he was dependent on his creation. And a God can't be dependent on what they've made. But for Allah to be loved, he would have had to create things in order to be who he essentially is.

Because he would have had to have something else or someone else to love. But the living God, the true God, because he is Father, Son and Spirit, he exists in eternity in other person-centered loving relationship.

He doesn't create people because he needs them. He creates them to share his love. If we picture the love of God like a fountain, then that fountain overflowed out from these eternal loving relationships, creating us so that we could share in that love and experience that love.

In 1738, Jonathan Edwards, great American preacher, one of the greatest preachers of the English language, he preached a sermon, Heaven is a World of Love.

And he takes up this picture of love like water. He describes rivers of love and delight in heaven, flowing out from God the Father's love for his Son in the Spirit.

[5 : 13] And Jonathan Edwards says this, these rivers, these rivers of love and delight, listen to this, these rivers swell into an ocean of love in which the souls of the ransomed may bathe with the sweetest enjoyment and their hearts, as it were, be deluged with love.

It's such a glorious picture, isn't it, of our future that the gospel has saved us for and that God is drawing us towards, that actually our souls, the souls of the ransomed, will bathe with the sweetest enjoyment in this ocean of love, being deluged with the love of God.

Just think how different that is from the picture that atheists have, or people around us might have, of what God is like. The stingy, strict dictator who wants to spoil our fun, when actually God's revealed to us as the God of other person-centered delight and love.

But as that love from within the persons of God flows out from them to us, how do we experience it? That's our second point, the complexity of God's love. It's complex.

Who does God love? Well, in Psalm 145 that we had read for us, let's just look again at verse 13 from halfway through. It says, The Lord is faithful, the Lord is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.

[6 : 45] The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them food, you give them their food at the proper time.

You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving towards all he has made.

So across the world, every breath people take, every beat of their heart, every drop of rain, every rising of the sun, these are an expression of God's love for everyone.

It's God's love that enables non-Christians to achieve such incredible greatness, to show such extraordinary acts of compassion.

So we mustn't narrow God's love as though to say that, well, he only actually loves Christians. That's not true. God loves everyone.

[7 : 47] He loves everyone. And he loves the world even as it's rejecting him. So John 3.16, God so loved the world. Well, the world is the people God has made standing in rejection of him.

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. So he loves the world. He loves everyone enough to have offered out that opportunity to trust Jesus, not perish and have eternal life.

We mustn't narrow God's love. He loves everyone. We also, though, we mustn't flatten God's love and think that God loves everyone in the same way. God has a universal love for all the people he's made.

And at the same time, he has a special love for people who turn to him and trust his promises. We heard last week about the sovereignty of God, that if we have turned to God or we do turn to God, that's only because God has enabled us to do that.

He is the one who opens our eyes to see who he is. He's the one who opens our hearts. The special love of God for those who turn to him is right there in the next verses of Psalm 145.

[9 : 01] So verse 18. So we mustn't narrow the love of God.

He loves everyone. But God has a special love that is a saving love for everyone who turns to him. And it's just spelt out so well in those verses, isn't it?

Verse 18. That when you trust God, he is near to you. He is your cry. He satisfies your desires. Verse 20.

He watches over you. These are the aspects of the special love of the relationship that God's people have with him whenever any of us turn to him and trust him.

So it's complex. That's our second point, the complexity of God's love. And as we think about God's special love for those who trust him, let's come to our third point, the nature of God's love.

[10 : 12] What does it even mean to say that God loves us? It's not the same as human love for one another.

So I'm going to think about a couple of aspects of that. The first is about love as a feeling. When we think about falling in love humanly, we're describing usually a feeling, a feeling of attraction towards someone, a finding of them desirable, a thrill in getting to know them.

When I was, I think, about 12, I liked a girl in my school. And I got a Valentine's Day card on Valentine's Day. And I opened it up. And when I opened it up, there inside was her name.

And I felt this exhilarating feeling, this special glow of yes. It turned out that it had actually been written by one of my mates.

It was a joke. It was quite a sad day. I am over it now. It's worked out fine. But the point is that there's this feeling that we sometimes describe as love, like the thrill of getting a card or of holding somebody's hand and then holding it back.

[11 : 27] But in fact, that can't be all there is to love. Partly because, I know this is quite hard to accept, but when you think about it, quite a lot of that feeling that we think of as love is actually just our own ego.

It's just a thrill that we feel about ourselves because we discover that we are attractive to somebody else. Or it's selfish because we think we lack something that this other person could give us.

So love becomes something born out of poverty in ourselves. We think, well, there's something empty in me and I need this other person to fill that emptiness. So actually, it's about what this will give us.

And the thing is, God's love would never be like that. For God is fully satisfied in himself. He doesn't need us.

He doesn't need our praise. And that's a really good thing because it means that his love for us is only ever selfless and pure. But there's another way of thinking about love that also needs correcting.

[12 : 41] The traditionalist, sometimes he is about romantic love, sentimental love, and they say, oh, these days it's just all about feelings. That's not love.

Love is about commitment. It's about sacrifice. It's about doing your duty. But there's a danger that that's a very incomplete understanding of love as well.

You know, if I came home and said to my wife, Kathy, I brought flowers home, and I said, I've bought you flowers, Kathy. It is my duty. She's not going to feel very loved by that.

There must be more to love than just a sense of, well, I did that because I was obliged to. It was my sense of duty. So what is love if it's not quite the same as the human feeling of romantic attraction?

It's not quite, there's more to it than duty and obligation. Well, Jim Packer, again, in the book *Knowing God*, he helps us with this. He says this about love. He says, love is identifying yourself with the welfare of another.

[13 : 50] It's identifying yourself with the welfare of another. That is true love. So this is the astonishing, wonderful truth about God, that he has bound his heart with ours.

Let me give you some scriptures that tell us about this mystery. Isaiah 63, 9, talking about God's people. In all their distress, he too was distressed.

And the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy, he redeemed them. Judges 10, verse 16. Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord.

And he could bear Israel's sin. He could bear Israel's misery no longer. Hosea 11, 8. As God's people suffer because they have turned from him and loved other things.

He talks about their spiritual adultery. But he says this, how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart is changed within me.

[14 : 50] All my compassion is aroused. So God is speaking in the scriptures as though he is in want. He is grieved because his people are grieved.

He's suffering anguish because they suffer anguish. And on the other hand, in Luke chapter 15, God tells us about the father and the lost son is run away.

And the lost son coming back to the father, picturing God and his people. And he says, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God when we turn back to him over one sinner who repents.

The presence of the angels of God. Who's in the presence of the angels of God? God is rejoicing when we turn back to him. In Zephaniah 3, 17, it's the Lord your God is with you.

He's mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing. It is weird and wonderful that God would love us like that.

[15 : 54] This is God who needs nothing and nobody. He has everything in eternity. He's self-sufficient. He depends on nobody for his happiness. And yet, mysteriously, he has voluntarily chosen to bind his heart to ours.

To identify himself with our welfare. That's the essence of his love. So how far does that love go? That sharing our grief, that working for our joy?

Well, that's our fourth point. The culmination of God's love. And you know where I'm going. The culmination of God's love starts with how we have not loved him. In the time of the prophet Hosea, God's people were, he calls them Ephraim, Israel and Judah.

And he says this about their love for him. This is so typical of human love for God. Hosea 6, 4. What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah?

Your love is like the morning mist. Like the early dew that disappears. It's such a helpful picture, isn't it? Maybe you think of looking out over a field. Maybe if you're in the mountains or you're camping or you're just looking out of your window in the morning and you see mist.

[17 : 12] And by kind of late morning, it's clear. The sun has burnt it through and heated things up and the mist just clears. That's just, that's what our hearts are like.

Even when we are trying to love God. That we take the good things from God. Sometimes our hearts feel warm towards him. But then we love those things too much and we forget God in our hearts.

That is what our love is like for God. It affects our other relationships as well. There is a fickleness to human love. And then we read of a different love. 1 John chapter 4 verse 10.

A love that meets our fickle love. 1 John 4 verse 10. This is love. Not that we loved God. But that he loved us. And sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

So where our love is fickle, God's love is faithful. It's unchanging. It's steadfast. It's constant. It's dependable. Secure. Where our love is about getting.

[18 : 18] About what we can get. We love the things that give us things. God's love is about giving. It's sacrificial. Even sending his son. Who was the man Jesus on the cross.

Endures a broken relationship with his father. He is shut out from the love of his father that he's always known. As he bears the cost so that we can be welcomed back to God and restored.

And that is because the son is fully God. That is God within himself fully absorbing the cost of the way we've treated him.

You see that? Whenever we break a relationship or damage a relationship there is a cost to bear. And God in himself absorbs that cost for us at the cross.

In the book Captain Corelli's Mandolin there is at one point Captain Corelli is with his troops and they have to stand before a German firing squad.

[19 : 15] And as the firing begins his sergeant Carlo who loves Captain Corelli grabs. He steps sideways in front of Captain Corelli and he grabs Captain Corelli's wrists behind him and pulls him towards his back.

So that Corelli is just staring at the huge man's back as Carlo takes the bullets in his place. And then eventually Carlo falls backwards onto Captain Corelli.

And the writer Louis de Benia says this. That Captain Corelli lies underneath Carlo's fallen body. Paralysed by his weight. Drenched utterly in his blood.

Stupefied by an act of love. So incomprehensible and ineffable. So filled with divine madness. There we have a wonderful description of the love God's shown us at the cross.

That it's incomprehensible. Ineffable. And it's full of divine madness. Incomprehensible to us because we give our fleeting fickle love at best to God.

[20 : 24] And God meets it with a love that radiates towards us with immense, constant, everlasting, faithful, sacrificial, reconciling affection. So that it's love that grips us and transforms us.

It's love that you can build your life on because it will last forever. Don't build your identity on your achievements or on your health, your fitness or on even on another human being's love for you.

The Apostle Paul having discovered this love for him says this. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

That's his identity. Christian. Christian. Jesus loved you. He gave himself for you. It's love to use as a lens through which to view your whole life. Have you thought about this?

That when you look at the cross you can trust that one day every moment of your life will be understandable in the context of God's steadfast, inexhaustible love for you.

[21 : 30] And it's love to inspire us. That God's love for us is holy. It's pure. It's compassionate.

He helps us because he loves us. And it's wise, always acting for our best. And God is a lover who calls us to love like him. To love faithfully, dependably, sacrificially in our marriages, in our friendships, that we would be good friends who love our friends.

That we would be faithful in our marriages. In our church family. That we would love sacrificially. 1 John 4, 11. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

And Jesus in John 15. My command is this. Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this. That he lay down his life for his friends.

Could we keep praying about that? Even in lockdown. Asking God to help us find ways to love others.

[22 : 41] Longing for the day that we can be with others without restriction again. Not just to see the people we like. But actually so that we can love people who are not like us.

We love others. Not because it's rewarding. Not even because it's satisfying. Not even because we find them lovable. Because they're like us. But rather because all the reward we need.

All the energy we need to love others. Comes from knowing how deeply we are loved. By God. Let's pray together. We praise you. God the Father.

God the Son. God the Holy Spirit. That you are the source of all love. That you are the bountiful, bottomless, inexhaustible fountain of love. And we thank you for choosing to direct that love towards us.

That you are the best of us. Identifying with us. That you would not spare your own son. But gave him up for us all. Help us by your spirit to ponder this love deeply.

[23 : 43] That our hearts would be deluged by it. And would in turn overflow. In practical, costly, joyful, life transforming love. For you and for others.

That in turn draws others in to know your special saving love. We ask this for the glory of your name. The name of love. Amen.

Well we're going to sing in response. And we're going to pray as well. We're going to talk to God. And we're going to sing again. Our next song is one we've not sung before. It's a familiar tune. But this hymn.

Written by John Newton. Who also wrote Amazing Grace. It is hard work. The words. It's poetry. Poetic language. It's rewarding if you take the time to look at it.

But it's an appropriate one to sing. The New Scottish Hymns Band recorded last week. And I just wanted to draw your attention. To it taking up that image.

[24 : 40] That I used in the talk. Jonathan Edwards uses. Of God's love as like a fountain. So in the second verse. See the streams of living waters. Springing from eternal love.

Well supply your sons and daughters. And all fear of want remove. Let's sing together of God's great love. For his people. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.