

Major Bible Themes

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CHAPTER XXXIX

LOVE

The attributes of God partake of His very Being. His holiness, wisdom, power, and love are as infinite as Himself. The truth that no one hath fully seen God (John 1:18) applies as much to comprehending His character as it does to seeing His form. Like all His attributes, it is as impossible to measure the love of God as it is to measure the Person of God, and all true love is from Him. The Bible alone discloses the source and nature of love. Turning to its pages, we discover (1) the direct, and (2) the indirect manifestations of the love of God.

I. THE DIRECT MANIFESTATIONS OF THE LOVE OF GOD

While the finite mind can at best comprehend but little of the infinite God, it can, nevertheless, comprehend to the full within the sphere of its own limitations. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3; Eph. 3:19).

Five characteristics of divine love may be mentioned:

1. Its Eternal Duration.

"God is love." He has not attained to love by self-effort or culture, nor does He hold love as a detached possession which might be abandoned at will. Love is a vital part of His Being. It began when He began. If His love were to cease, a very essential part of the Person of God would cease. He is what He is, to a large degree, because of His love. The love of God can know no change. To Israel He said, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3); and of Christ it is written, "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (Lit., without end; John 13:1; 15:9). In God's love toward an individual, there is neither fluctuation nor cessation.

2. Its Ceaseless Activity.

Though the love of God was once and for all manifested in the sacrifice of His well-beloved Son (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 3:16), that which was manifested in a moment of time is, nevertheless, the revelation of the eternal attitude of God toward men. Could we have gazed into the heart of God before the creation of the material universe, we would have seen every provision then made for His Lamb to be slain for the sin of the world (Rev. 5:6). Could we now gaze into the heart of God we would see the same undiminished compassion for the lost that was expressed in the death of His Son. The momentary death of Christ was not a spasm in the divine affection; it is the announcement to a lost world of the fact of God's eternal, unchangeable love.

3. Its Transparent Purity.

Concerning this aspect of the love of God no human words avail. There is no selfishness in divine love. God has never sought benefits for Himself. He receives nothing; He bestows everything. Peter exhorts believers to love God with a pure heart fervently (1 Pet. 1:22); but how very few love God for what He is in Himself apart from all His benefits! How different it is -with God's love! Judging by ourselves, we are sure He needs our money, our service, or our influence. He needs nothing from us; but He needs us, and only because His infinite love cannot be satisfied apart from us. The title "Beloved" when addressed to believers is most expressive; for, in their relation to God, their highest function is to be loved.

4. Its Limitless Intensity.

The most costly thing in the universe was the blood of God's only Son; yet God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. The sacrifice of His Son for men when they were "sinners" and "enemies" seems to reach to the outmost bounds of infinity, however, we are told of a "much more" love even than this. It is God's love for those who have been reconciled and justified through Christ's death (Rom. 5:8-10) -- yea, nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

5. Its Inexhaustible Benevolence.

There is no hope for this world apart from the marvelous fact that God loves even sinners. But divine love is not passive. Moved to an infinite degree by His love, God undertook in behalf of those whom He otherwise would have had to banish from His presence forever. God could not

ignore the just condemnation of the sinner which His own holiness imposed; but He could take upon Himself the curse which belonged to the sinner -- "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13) -- and this He did in order that, without violating His own holiness, He might be free to save the guilty (Rom. 3:26). Being free through the substitutionary death of Christ, God knows no limitations and does not cease working until, to His own satisfaction, He places the justly doomed sinner in Heaven's highest glory, even conformed to the image of Christ.

Saving grace is more than love; it is God's love set absolutely free and made to triumph over His righteous judgments against the sinner. "By grace are ye saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8; 2:4; Titus 3:4, 5).

There is also in God a perfect hatred for sin which, like a counterpart of His love, prompts Him to save the sinner from his doom. In like manner, this same hatred for sin, combined with His love, makes of God a Father who chastens His child. "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten" (Rev. 3:19), and "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Heb. 12:6).

Because of his living union with Christ (1 Cor. 6:17), the believer is loved of the Father even as Christ is loved (John 17:23), and this infinite love is never decreased even in the hour of correction or trial.

II. THE INDIRECT MANIFESTATION OF THE LOVE OF GOD

There is little reference in the New Testament to human love. Its emphasis falls rather upon the imparted divine love which is experienced only by the Spirit-filled believer. The message of Romans 5:5 is that the love of God gushes forth out from the Spirit which is given unto us. Since this divine love is "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22), He is its source. Thus passing through the believer's heart the divine love is indirectly manifested. The First Epistle by John emphasizes the truth that, if born of God, we will love as God loves, and 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, is a description of the superhuman character of that love. There is no ecstasy in this life comparable to that of experiencing the unhindered outflow of the love of God.

It should be observed that love for God is not under consideration; rather it is the love which is God's own. Concerning this love, certain things should be noted:

1. It is experienced in answer to the prayer of Christ (John 17:26).
2. God loves the lost world (John 3:16; Eph. 2:4), and as certainly He abhors the world-system which is evil (1 John 2:15-17).
3. God loves those whom He has redeemed (Rom. 5:8; Eph. 5:25; 1 John 4:12; John 13:34, 35; 15:12-14; 1 John 3:16).
4. God loves the nation Israel (Jer. 31:3).
5. God loves those who have wandered from Him (Luke 15:4, 20).
6. God's love is eternal (John 13:1).

7. God's love is sacrificial, even giving His own Son (1 John 3:16; 2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 5:2). In the mystery of this imparted divine compassion, the Apostle Paul was willing to be accursed from Christ for his brethren -- his kinsmen after the flesh (Rom. 9:1-3).

8. The exercise of divine love is the first commandment of Christ under grace (John 13:34, 35; 15:12-14), and should be the outstanding characteristic of every Christian (Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2, 15; 5:2; Col. 2:2; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9).

9. The imparted love of God cannot be cultivated, nor can it be produced by the flesh. It is the normal experience of those who, having met the simple conditions, are filled with the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

QUESTIONS

1. Why may it be said that the attributes of God are infinite?
2. Into what two classifications does the truth concerning the love of God divide?
3. To what extent can we expect to comprehend the One who is infinite?
4. Intimate the abiding character of the love of God.
5. To what extent is the cross an expression of the abiding love of God?
6. Point out the unselfish character of God's love.
7. What do we know of the intensity of God's love?
8. State the manner in which God's love has cooperated in the demands of His holiness to the end that sinners otherwise doomed might be saved.
9. What may be said of the divine hatred for sin?
10. Where in the love of God does union with Christ place the believer?
11. What passages teach the fact that the outflow of divine love is a possible experience of the Christian?
12. State exactly the love which is to be reproduced in the believer by the Spirit.
13. Name nine facts concerning this imparted love of God.
14. Who among the children of God are given the normal experience of the imparted love of God?