

The Love of God

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Introduction

At the beginning of time, God set in motion a grand and majestic plan. In a single creative act, He ushered the physical universe into existence for a very special purpose.

The planet Earth was destined to be the stage upon which the greatest drama of all time would unfold. Here, on a tiny, insignificant speck of dust in an otherwise unremarkable galaxy, the Creator of all things fought the greatest battle ever seen to consummate the greatest love ever known.

God created humanity in His own image as the pinnacle of His creation. Unlike the animals, God gave humans the unique ability and destiny to have an eternal relationship with their Creator. To make this relationship possible, God even gave His beloved Son Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for sin to redeem His wayward people from misery and death.

He did all this because of love. God did not need to create humanity, but He wanted to have a family with whom He could share His existence for eternity. The Bible reveals many important aspects concerning God's nature. This paper will explore the divine attribute of God's love.

Biblical Terms

The Bible uses several different Greek and Hebrew terms to describe God's love. Although the semantic range of each term overlaps somewhat with the English term *love*, there are unique aspects to each that are worth noting.

The verb *'ahab* (157) and the corresponding noun *'aha^abah* (160) are the most comprehensive terms for love in the Old Testament.¹ The root idea of the stem appears to have been "to burn, kindle or set on fire."² However, the verb itself actually conveys the sense of having a strong emotional attachment for and a desire to possess or be in the presence of the object of one's affection. This desire may be fixed on an inanimate object, some type of circumstance or action, or a relationship. It was used to describe the feeling between God and His people, family members, friends, or even the loyalty of a vassal.³

Garrett feels that God's *'aha^abah* signified His sovereign, unconditional "election love." God showed his election love by choosing Jacob over Esau although Esau was the elder brother (Mal 1:1ff).⁴ Israel's election as God's own people was due to His *'aha^abah* for their forefathers and not to any merit or inherent worth among the Israelites (Deut 4:37, 7:7). However, God turned Balaam's curse into a blessing because of His *'ahab* for Israel (Deut 23:5). Similarly, this election love is also extended to Christians under the new covenant (Col 3:12).

The noun *hesed* (2617) has three meanings, which always interact: strength, steadfastness, and love. Various translations render it as lovingkindness, mercy, grace, or favor. The Septuagint nearly always renders it with the Greek term *eleos* ("mercy"), and that tendency is seen in the New Testament as well. It appears throughout the Old Testament, but is especially frequent in the Psalms. It refers primarily to the mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations

¹ Each term is cited with the corresponding number in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*.

² James Lee Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 235.

³ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (1996), s.v. "Love."

⁴ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:326.

between the parties of a relationship. As such, it often refers to marital love, and the prophet Hosea describes God's covenant with Israel in marital terms (Hos 2:19).⁵

Garrett understands God's *hesed* as His determined faithfulness to His covenant. It sustained His covenant with Israel and Judah in contrast with their unfaithfulness. Indeed, the Decalogue promised His *hesed* to a thousand generations of those who love God and keep His commandments (Exod 20:6).⁶

The verb *agapao* (25) and the related noun *agape* (26) are the most frequently used terms for divine love in the New Testament. It is used throughout the New Testament to describe God's attitude toward His Son, the human race, and true believers (John 17:26, 3:16, 14:21). It also describes God's standard for Christian behavior (John 13:34) and expresses His essential nature (1 John 4:8).⁷

Jewett describes *agape* love as spontaneous and unmotivated. Its foundation is in God Himself and not in the extrinsic value of the object or person loved. His love reveals more about His nature than it does about the worth of humanity. His love stands apart from all considerations of value and worth. His *agape* does not recognize value; it creates value.⁸

However, Jewett also notes that divine love is not reserved only for the unworthy. While *agape* love is most clearly revealed in Christ's death for sinners, the essence of this love is the giving of self to the other freely and without reserve. The love that unites the members of the Godhead is not a love for the unworthy but a love that gives itself freely to others in an ongoing and outgoing spontaneity.⁹

The verb *phileo* (5368) connotes the love of friendship, but it is rarely used for divine loving. However, in John's Gospel, it described the Father's love for His Son (5:20), the Father's love for the disciples (16:27), and Jesus' love for His disciples (11:3, 20:2).¹⁰

Garrett maintains that the nuances between *agapao* and *phileo* cannot be determined by strictly philological inquiry but rather by exegetical and doctrinal study.¹¹ Since *agapao* was used to express ideas that were previously unknown, inquiry into its use in Greek literature or in the Septuagint throws little light on its meaning in the New Testament.¹²

However, theologians and exegetes have disagreed about the relationship between these two words. Garrett feels that these terms have been forcibly segregated into a perfect and altruistic love on the one hand (*agapao*) and a natural and sentimental love (*phileo*) on the other.¹³ Carson doubts very much that such a distinction is intended in John 21:15-19 and provides several good reasons for that conclusion, which need not be considered here.¹⁴

Berkhof affirms that God's love is not determined by an extensive investigation of what the word "love" means. However, such terms are "analogically adequate" when applied to God. His

⁵ Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, s.v. "To Love."

⁶ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:327.

⁷ Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, s.v. "Love."

⁸ Paul K. Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 231-232.

⁹ Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation*, 238-9.

¹⁰ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:238.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹² Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, s.v. "Love."

¹³ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:238.

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 51-3.

love may be compared to the love of a parent, spouse, or friend, but it goes far beyond what is meant by these terms.¹⁵

God's basic character is love, and only God's revelation can explain this truth. God is spirit (John 4:24), and spiritual truth must be revealed because the spirit realm is beyond the ability of human senses to investigate. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the greatest revelation of God's nature (John 1:18, 14:9) because He is the embodiment of deity (Col 2:9).

God's love guides, motivates, and affects everything that He is and does. For example, without love, God would be an omnipotent tyrant. Without love, God's eternal existence would be an endless misery. Therefore, the remainder of this study will consider how God's other attributes help illustrate the meaning and significance of God's divine love.

Love and Holiness

Love and holiness are clearly two very important attributes of God's nature. However, theologians differ widely over their relative relationship to each other.

Dunning, for example, sees holiness as the background for all of God's attributes. For him, the essential nature of God is holy love. However, this holiness is understood as "otherness" rather than "remoteness." It emphasizes the divine aspect of God's love relative to the human capacity to express love.¹⁶ God's love is higher than human love but not divorced from it because God made humanity in His image.

Bloesch, however, sees God, in His essence, as both love and holiness. God's love, he says, exists in tension with His holiness and is informed by it. Therefore, while there is a basic distinction between them, there is at the same time an "interpenetration and indivisibility."¹⁷

Jewett, on the other hand, sees a paradox between God's love and His holiness. While God's holiness speaks of His transcendence, otherness, and remoteness, His love emphasizes His immanence and His giving of Himself. One affirmation is distance making, while the other is distance breaking. God's holiness and love are not synonymous, yet biblical authors never present them as mutually exclusive but as mutually inclusive. Hence, Isaiah writes of the Holy One who judges Israel and yet is her Redeemer and Savior (Isa 41:14, 43:3, 47:4).¹⁸

Chaffer notes that evil creates a conflict within the attributes of God. His holiness condemns sin while His love seeks to save sinners. Only love could make the sacrifice that was needed to save humanity. Therefore, God's love had its perfect manifestation in the death of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

For Chaffer, love is the primary motive of God. Indeed, this love is not something God attains or maintains by effort; it is the very structure of His being.²⁰ This point is underscored by John's comprehensive assertion that "God is love" (1 John 4:8).²¹

¹⁵ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Comp., 1973), 119.

¹⁶ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1988), 192-3.

¹⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 32-3.

¹⁸ Jewett, *God, Creation and Revelation*, 228.

¹⁹ Lewis Sperry Chaffer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 206.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

²¹ All Scriptures are quoted from the New King James Version.

Yet, Berkhof feels that there is no reason for regarding God's love as more central than any of God's other virtues.²² A careful consideration of God's other attributes indicates that Chaffer is more likely correct.

Love and Longsuffering

God's longsuffering is an expression of His love. Berkhof characterizes longsuffering as the love of God bearing with the froward and evil.²³ God demonstrates longsuffering by postponing well-deserved judgement against sinners in the express hope that they will come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9). Huffer suggests that God first revealed His love by not destroying the human race when Adam and Eve first sinned.²⁴ Instead, He gave them a promise of eventual redemption (Gen 3:15), which took nearly four thousand years to realize.

Love and Mercy

God's mercy is also an expression of His love (Eph 2:4). Berkhof describes God's mercy as "the love of God toward those who are in misery or distress, irrespective of their desires... It is exercised only in harmony with the strictest justice of God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ."²⁵

God's love is revealed through His mercy when He reaches down to the depths of humanity and lifts sinners from the sinking sand and places them on the solid rock.²⁶ In His love and mercy, God delivered sinful Israel from countless oppressors and afflictions (Isa 63:9). In His love and mercy, God performed countless healings through Jesus Christ and the apostles.

Love and Forgiveness

God's forgiveness is an expression of His love. The love of God grants forgiveness, but it is a costly forgiveness that resulted in the death of God's own Son. Consequently, God's love is costly for the Christian, since it calls him to a life of discipleship under the cross (1 John 3:16).²⁷ This love is even more remarkable because He opened the way to forgiveness before humanity had repented (Rom 5:6-11).

Love and Grace

God's grace is an expression of His love. Berkhof describes grace as "the unmerited love of God toward those who have forfeited it, and are by nature under a judgement of condemnation. It is the source of all the spiritual blessings that are bestowed upon unworthy sinners..."²⁸ God's love acting in concert with His grace results in everlasting consolation and hope for His children (2 Thes 2:16).

²² Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933), 67.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁴ Ava G. Huffer, *Systematic Theology* (Oregon: Restitution Herald, 1960), 109.

²⁵ L. Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, 67.

²⁶ Huffer, *Systematic Theology*, 109.

²⁷ Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 1:33.

²⁸ L. Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, 67.

Love and Reconciliation

God expresses love by His desire to reconcile all things to Himself (Col 1:20). Huffer notes that God's love initiated the reconciliation of humanity to Himself and continually fosters that reconciliation. God is always first. Believers love God because He loved them first (1 John 4:19). His love causes believers to want to serve and obey Him.²⁹

His love overflows in the hearts of His children (Rom 5:5) and reconciles them to each other. His calling puts an end to racial and ethnic animosities between peoples by making them members of God's household (Eph 2:14ff). Therefore, no man can rightly claim to love God and hate his neighbor because His love for all becomes the basis for all love (1 John 4:11, 20-21).

Love and Righteousness

God's righteousness is an expression of His love. Jewett notes that God's justice is not some impersonal norm to which He must conform. His love is a sovereign love that will create a new situation consistent with His justice. The Word of the Lord contains the promise of a new heart so that His love can have its way. The manifestation of such love clearly expresses God's very nature.³⁰

Many question how a loving God could allow evil to exist. The atheistic dilemma that is often advanced is that God is either not omnipotent or He is not loving and righteous.

However, Hills correctly notes that this is not a real dilemma at all. By creating moral beings, God consents to the existence of individuals whose moral actions are not controlled. Their character is not the work of omnipotence; they must be permitted to determine it for themselves.³¹

In the end, God will put an end to evil. His plan includes the creation of a universe wherein righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:11ff). The God who loves righteousness will cause the elements to melt away into a new heaven and a new earth (Heb 1:9-12). Anyone who does not conform to God's way of love will face His fiery wrath and eternal exclusion (Rev 21:7-8).

Love and Wrath

God's wrath is also an expression of His love. Of all God's attributes, His wrath might appear to be the one that would have nothing in common with His love. Yet, Bloesch rightly observes that His wrath proceeds from His goodness and love, because He is altogether light and there is no darkness or shadow within Him (1 John 1:5).³²

All the various feelings, desires, and emotions attributed to God are manifestations of His love. While this is obviously true of God's benevolent qualities (e.g., compassion, mercy, and longsuffering), it is no less true of God's feelings about sin (e.g. displeasure, jealousy, grief, and anger). In both cases, God expresses His desire to win men for Himself and His opposition to any obstacle that stands in His way.³³

²⁹ Huffer, *Systematic Theology*, 110.

³⁰ Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation*, 234.

³¹ A. M. Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology* (Pasadena: Kinne, 1931), 220.

³² Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 1:34.

³³ Williams Adams Brown, *Christian Theology in Outline* (New York: Scribner's, 1926), 109-10.

Bloesch asserts that holy love is not weak or permissive; rather, it has a severity that is totally foreign to the popular understanding of love. It uproots and attacks all that is not of God. “It entails the disciplining and chastising of the children of God... The holy love of a sovereign God evokes adoration, not admiration. It elicits awe, not pity, as might be the case if his love were indulgent or permissive.”³⁴

Jewett notes that the cross becomes the linchpin that brings and holds together the seemingly disparate truths that the angry God is also the loving God. Thus, the cross of Christ fulfills the imagery found in the Ark of the Covenant. The law, which slays the sinner, rests inside the Ark under the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat.³⁵

Rejecting the reality of God’s wrath leads to the heresy of universalism. It proceeds from the premise that since God is all-loving and all-powerful, He will relentlessly seek those who reject Him until He ultimately succeeds in saving everyone.

However, God’s love cannot be divorced from His holiness and justice in order to save those who reject Christ and die in their sins. Universalism advances an unbalanced view of God’s divine attributes and directly contradicts God’s revelation concerning final judgement (Mark 9:43-48).³⁶

Conclusion

Scripture reveals the nature of God’s love. His love is a sovereign and unconditional “election love,” which rests upon the unworthy and is beyond human understanding. His love is steadfast and faithful to His covenant and does not depart from His people. His love gives itself freely to others in ongoing and outgoing spontaneity. His love is a tender and affectionate filial bond, which promises peace and eternal fellowship.

Scripture also reveals that God’s love guides all of His other attributes and manifests itself in them. God’s holy love is higher than any form of human love but is not divorced from it because He created humanity in His image. His love is patient with the wicked because He desires that all should come to repentance. His love is compassionate toward those who are suffering because He understands suffering. God’s love is lenient toward those who seek Him and fosters reconciliation between all parties. God’s love reconciled His mercy and His righteous justice through the death of His Son on the cross, but His love is also jealous and severe for He will not allow anything to come between Him and His beloved people.

³⁴ Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 1:33.

³⁵ Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation*, 251.

³⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 40.

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