

THE LOVE OF GOD

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Occasionally we get hungry for certain kinds of food. As we look back over the years and think about the various kinds of food with which we have become acquainted, we feel a desire occasionally for Chinese, or Mexican, or Italian food. We feel an even deeper longing for "good old southern cooking", when we have been away from it for a while. Similarly, many a boy off at college or away in service, has eagerly anticipated getting back to "Mom's cooking". On a much higher level, we sometimes get hungry for certain of the great themes of the Bible. For some days past I have felt a kind of longing for a study of the love of God. I invite you to share with me some meditations on the old, but wonderful, theme of God's love.

Two Meanings

The expression "the love of God" appears in the Bible with two meanings, which actually point in opposite directions. The love of God can mean the love of God for man. I John 4:9 says, "Wherein was the love of God manifested in us, that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him." The love of God was manifested for us in that he gave his Son for us. This same idea is the one conveyed in the final verses of the eighth chapter of Romans, where, after listing a long number of things such as life, death, things present, things to come, principalities, and powers, Paul says, "I am persuaded that none of these can separate us from the love of God." (Rom. 8:39.) This is the wonderful feeling which God exercises on our behalf. It is the love of God for man.

In the same book of I John, from which we read a moment ago, the expression "love of God" is used with just the opposite meaning, thus, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments." (I John 5:3.) This expression means, a love for God in the hearts of men. The expression "love of God" may mean, therefore, the love of God for man, or the love of man for God. In this study we wish to emphasize the first of these themes--God's love for us.

Emphasizing the Love Too Much

It may seem a bit strange to say what I am about to say, but it is quite possible to emphasize the love and compassion of God too much, or, at least, too exclusively. They can be emphasized to the point where man becomes presumptuous and takes liberties with God. If we isolate the love and compassion of God, emphasizing these qualities over and over again it may have a bad result. God may be made to appear as a glorified over-indulgent grandfather. It is often said that grandparents are more indulgent toward their grandchildren than the parents of the same children. A child soon learns that he can take certain liberties with granddad, because he knows that granddad administers no punishment. He leaves the disciplining to mother and daddy. Some people have the idea that God is like that, and that he can be pushed around almost anywhere they want to push him.

While we want to emphasize the love of God, we certainly do not want to contribute to the idea that God is a grand old man with whom "anything goes". It is not a situation in which man can do as he wishes and then crawl up in God's lap and make it all right. The severity of God is another aspect of his nature. In order for man to know God as he really is, he must put by the side of the wonderful love of God the idea of God's grandeur, power, and severity. These complement each

other. God is no weakling to be pushed here and there by our wishes, yet that idea does not mean the ~~negation~~ ^{nullify} of the idea of his infinite love for us.

The Severity of God

In order properly to appreciate the love of God we need to remember the omnipotence of God. God spoke and the universe came into being. Our world and all the stars and planets came into being instantly. What power! Not only did he create them, he sustains them by his power. When you think of God, you are thinking of the author of the tornado. It is God's power which makes the ocean such a juggernaut. God's power created the almost inaccessible mountain peaks, as well as the frozen wastes of the Arctic and the burning sands of the deserts. The power of God is not to be underrated.

The omniscience of God is, likewise, not to be disregarded. God knows everything man knows and infinitely more. He knows the full truth about so many things concerning which we only have fragmentary knowledge.

The omnipresence of God is also something to ^{think about} be conjured with. We never go anywhere, but that God is there. The psalmist wrote, "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend unto heaven, thou art there: If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea: Even there shall thy hand lead me, And thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall overwhelm me, And the light about me shall be night; Even the darkness hideth not from thee, But the night shineth as the day: And the darkness and the light are both alike to thee." (Ps. 139:7-12.)

God is everywhere, knows everything, and has all power. God is also the God of infinite justice. He will sit on the throne in the hour of judgment, that great day of retribution which must inevitably come to us all. We need to remember also the infinite goodness of God. His holiness contrasts sharply with the evil of our lives. All of these attributes need to be included in our idea of God, lest we become ^{so confident} presumptuous and take God for granted. These qualities set God apart from man. He is "wholly other". Awesome! Fearful! Were these the only elements in God's nature, man would cringe in fear before him. It is at this point that the love of God comes into the picture.

Moonlight

It may be that you have at some time been out in a deep forest in the blackness of night, a night in which there was no moonlight and little starlight. If you have had such an experience you have felt some measure of fear as you groped in the strange darkness for the path. If only God's power and knowledge and goodness and justice were revealed that is the way our relation to God would be. But if you have been in such a forest and have seen the moon rise in its magnificent, soft light, you have seen the path come into view, the shapes of the trees appear, the dew sparkling in the beautiful moonlight. The dismal forest became a kind of fairyland, when the light came on. So it is when the love of God comes into this picture of his power and his justice and his holiness. Rather than being frightened, timid and afraid, we realize that God is our heavenly Father.

Throughout History

God has always loved man. He loved him when he created the world for him, when he put him in the garden of Eden with all of its blessings, and even when he cast him out of the garden, because of man's rebellion. In the same third chapter of Genesis which tells about man's sin, there is also the first promise of the

Messiah. (Gen. 3:15.) Even in the act of casting man out of the garden, God provided for man's salvation. God loved Abraham, and provided for him. God loved Isaac. God loved Jacob. God loved Joseph, in an unusual way. So it is throughout the Old Testament.

God has always loved man, as evidenced by his providing the sunshine, the rain, the seasons and the productivity of the soil. More than that, he has provided guidance concerning how to love and how to be happy. God loved Israel with an infinite love and when Israel listened to God Israel prospered as no nation on earth has ever prospered. It was only when Israel decided to go its own way that Israel suffered. Only when man has turned his back upon the love of God has he failed.

The Text

The greatest of all evidences of God's love, however, is that presented in a passage in the New Testament. No sentence in all the New Testament has been preached more often nor with greater enthusiasm than John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." While this passage is very familiar I wish to turn to it again.

John 3:16 contains three things which stand out. First, it speaks of the love of God--of God's attributes. We have spoken of his power, but there is no verse in all the Bible which says "God is power". He has infinite power, but power is not the center of God's being. There is no verse in all the Bible which says "God is justice". There is a sentence, however, which says, "God is love." (I John 4:8) When you want to evaluate all the qualities of God's nature, each of them infinite in degree, you finally come back to say, as the apostle John said, "God is love".

The text being considered has in it not only the greatest attribute of God, but also the greatest exhibition of that love. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. Going back to the beginning of history, going on beyond our own time, even to the end of history, we find no event that is a finer exhibition of love than God's sending of his Son into the world to redeem mankind.

This passage also tells of the greatest of all results, the salvation of man. All who will can believe in God and be saved. I do not know who first called this passage the "golden text" of the Bible and I do not know whether he had specifically in mind these things that we have been saying, or not, but I do know that he could have made no finer choice, for anytime you take the greatest of God's attributes, combine it with the greatest manifestation of that quality, and then go on to show its great result; you have come very close to the central theme of the Bible. God's infinite love, manifested in Christ, for the salvation of man?

Christ Loves Us, Too

Christ loved us infinitely. He loved us by being willing to be born in a manger. He loved us by being willing to live on the earth in a time when life was very hard, for nearly a third of a century. He owned nothing. As he said on one occasion, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head," (Matt. 8:20.) To be willing to give up the treasures of heaven in order to live here is a manifestation of the limitless love that Christ felt for us.

Perhaps even more difficult than these physical ^{things} ~~privations~~ was the bearing of the tremendous hatred and jealousy of the religious leaders of his day. We do not like to have the ill will of anyone, and when someone becomes critical of us it makes us feel ill inside. Most of us do not have very thick skins so that it hurts

when someone criticizes. Sometimes it hurts deeply. What must it have been like to the sensitive soul of Jesus, who loved all men, to have not only the ~~cover~~ *hidden* hatred of the religious leaders of his day, but also the open, outspoken hatred that eventually led them to call for his death on the cross? Can we not know that he must have spent many an agonizing night as one by one these men who professed to be the best men on earth, the Pharisees, the priests, turned their backs on him. Yet, he paid that agonizing price in order that we might be saved.

The Garden and the Cross

Finally, in the garden that night Jesus was praying to his Father in heaven. He had eaten the last supper with his disciples, and was there in the garden praying that, if it were possible, the cup might pass from him, when Judas betrayed him. The price that Jesus paid was the price of being crucified on a cross in order that we might enjoy heaven. I cannot reach for the words or the sentences of the paragraphs that will say all of that to you. You have read it and heard it a thousand times. I have no means of making it as real as I would like to make it. It is the most wonderful thing that our world has ever known.

Why did he do all of this? For the single reason that man was lost, and he wished man to be saved in heaven. "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6.) Jesus said that. The only door into heaven is Christ and we can go through that door only by loving him and obeying his commands.

Unconditional Love

This love of which we have been speaking is the purest love that this world has ever known. Sometimes men describe it as an "unconditional love", in contrast to the love that most men bear for others. Most of the love that we have, even for those who are nearest to us, is a love based upon the fact that they have loved us and done things for us. A child loves mother, rather than some other woman, because mother has brought him into being and nurtured him through the years. Out of those many services there grows a bond of affection for his mother which goes with a man as long as he lives. A man loves his wife and a wife loves her husband, at least in part, because there has been a return of that love, and because that love has been bound up with loving service.

But think of God! God loved man even when he was rebellious. There is a passage in Romans which says, "For God commended his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners (~~while we were yet rebels~~) Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8.) Even when man was taking the name of God in vain, even when man had no thought of, nor love for, God, God loved him. Even today when some profane person blasphemously speaks God's name in vain God still loves him. If he is willing to change the course of his life, there will be no recriminations. God will forgive. I do not have the words to convey to you fully the idea of the unconditional nature of God's love, but I do know that it is the greatest love, the most far-reaching love that this world has ever known. Remember the words of that great hymn:

"Oh love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be."

If you want your life to be rich and full, give it to God, for in doing so you become God-like. When you love God you are at your best. God has first loved us, it is our privilege to love him back. The only way that we can return his love is to give him our allegiance and our service. Or to way it another way, we must become Christians.

"God first loved you; love him back.
God first loved you; love him back.