

God's Five Loves



God's Five Loves

by Brian Johnston



God's five loves

(1) The difficult doctrine of the love of God, D.A. Carson, IVP, 2000

1. God's love within the Godhead

It has been pointed out (1) that there are five ways in which the Bible talks about God's love. In this book we hope to explore each of them in turn.

Perhaps it's worth beginning by saying what we'll not be talking about. We won't be saying that God's love has nothing at all in common with ours. If the Bible encourages us to love one another even as God loves us – and it does (1 John 4:11) – then does that not require there to be some overlap at least between the nature of our love and that of God? There is, of course, a certain kind of divine love which is very different from human love. And this has usually been referred to as '*agapé* love' after one of the Greek Bible words for love. But that's an over-simplification – one which forgets the golden rule which tells us we must understand the meaning of any Bible word by its context. In Matthew's Gospel, sinners are said to love other sinners, and it's this *agapé* word that's used (Matthew 5:46); and on at least one

occasion in the Bible when that same word is used for love, the context includes the rape of the young woman concerned – hardly a selfless act (2 Samuel 13:1 LXX). So there's nothing about this word that guarantees it's automatically always going to be referring to a very different divine kind of loving. Rather, its introduction into the Greek Bible was the result of understandable factors which have to do with the changing use of words in general circulation – just as still happens today. Yet, at a later time in history, the introduction of this particular word was seemingly re-interpreted by people whose view was that God's love was almost exclusively to do with the will – and not about the emotions. But, over against that, there are Bible passages that unmistakably present God's love to us in terms that loving human parents can easily relate to

whenever they are called upon to discipline their children (Hosea 11:8). In other words, God is most certainly not without feelings, although



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they are not flawed as ours so often are.

No, the old clichés won't do. The Bible uses different original language words for 'love' quite interchangeably when talking about how God loves us – and even of God the Father's love for his Son. So, let's follow a rather different approach in our study of God as a God of love: one that acknowledges five different contexts in which it's meaningful to talk about God's love.

The first is **the love of God within the Godhead itself**. The Bible statement that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8) conveys to us that God exists within a relationship in which love is expressed between distinct persons: those being the Father, Son and Spirit, who together comprise the Godhead. John's Gospel has things to tell us about the love of the Father for the Son; as well as telling us something about the love of the Son for the Father. What's more, we learn that the way in which the Father expresses his love for the Son is different from the way in which the Son expresses his love for the Father. We tend to see the cross, and our salvation, purely in terms of God's love for us. But John's Gospel presents the cross to us in the more sublime context of the Father's love for the Son, and the Son's reciprocal love for the Father. It humbles us to the point of worship when

we come to see how this mutual love within the Godhead lies at the very heart of everything in Christianity. And there's something more, something very practical, as we're shown how these two different ways of expressing love (the Father's for the Son; and the Son's for the Father) are applied respectively to how the Lord shows his love to us, and how we're to show our love to him. In other words, the love within the Trinity – specifically between Father and Son – while not presented as a model for all relationships, does have a direct relevance for love as expressed between Christ and his followers.

Twice in his Gospel, John tells us about the Father's love for the Son. Let's briefly examine the second mention which we find in chapter five.

For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."

For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of

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Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.” (John 5:16-20)

The background to all this is that on this Sabbath day in question, Jesus had healed a man and then told him to pick up his bed and walk. What had further provoked the hostility of these Jews was the fact that Jesus had then defended his working on the Sabbath by saying: “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” In other words, Jesus was acknowledging God the Father’s providential working on the Sabbath; but was also associating his own Sabbath day working along with it, even as he called God his Father!

There’s probably a cultural understanding of father-son relationships assumed in this section which we need to surface at this point. Sons in those days and in that kind of society were trained to follow in the father’s business, and to learn their trade from their father. The cultural expectation was that the activity of any son would be the same activity as his father. This type of thinking lay behind a person being called a ‘son of encouragement’ (Acts 4:36). In other words, encouragement being so typical of his activity

leads us to suggest that his father must be someone extremely encouraging – in fact could well be encouragement personified! And so, from him, the son also learned to be encouraging. In a similar way, a peacemaker might be called a son of God (Matthew 5) simply because it was well-known that God was a God of peace and was in the business of making peace. However, it’s one thing to claim such a relationship with regard to a transferable attribute like being peaceable; but to base a claim to relationship with God – not on any shared attribute – but on divine providential working was in a different league – and these Jews realized that!

Jesus, however, didn’t leave it there, but went on to expand on this claim by explaining something quite wonderful. Let’s again try to understand it based on what happened in their culture. For example, any father who had a fishing business would show his son how to handle the fishing boat; where to look for the fish; how to interpret the weather; the way to mend fishing nets and so on. Now, remember Jesus’ words? He said:

“... the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the

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Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.” (John 5:19-20)

This first of all clarifies that Jesus, the Son, is in subjection to his Father. He doesn't do his own thing, but is subordinate. But in case that should raise the wrong thought in any of our minds that Jesus, the Son, is inferior to the Father, Jesus adds that he does whatever the Father does. Did you register the full significance of that? The extent of his working is as great as the extent of the Father's working. They are equal. And then, most wonderfully, and for the second time in this Gospel (see John 3:35), Jesus tells us that the Father loves the Son, and that's why the Father shows the Son all that he himself does. Recall that in village life at that time, a loving father would show his son how to do things just as he did them. That's why this explanation meant more than it does now perhaps in many areas of the world.

The Son's love for the Father, however, is expressed in a different way as the Lord's words reveal:

“... so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me.” (John 14:31)

The Father expresses his love for the Son by showing him all that he himself is doing; and the Son

expresses his love for the Father by obeying all his Father's commands. This is significant because nowhere is the Son said to commission the Father, nor do we ever read of the Father obeying the Son. And John's Gospel goes even further, and teaches us that this 'two-way street' (the Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for the Father) is a model that has special relevance for the Lord's relationship with us and our relationship with him. He says, *“You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”* (John 15:14-15)

As the Father lovingly shows the Son what he himself is doing, even so the Lord lovingly makes things known to us. And as the Son obeys the Father, even so we express our love for the Lord by obeying our Lord's commands (John 14:15). As Jesus said:

“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” (John 14:15)

What greater motivation could there be for our obedience to the things we've learnt than the incentive of modelling the relationship of God the Father and God the Son!

2. God's providential loving care for all creation

We've already thought of how there are unhelpful ways of thinking about God's love. They are unhelpful because they are generated by our own flawed human ideas about love. They are also a serious obstacle to evangelism. Back in the 60s popular singers began to sing,

'What the world needs now is love, sweet love

It's the only thing that there's just too little of ...' (Hal David)

It seems that since then we've continued to take an increasingly sentimentalised view of God's love. God's love is not 'love, sweet love'. God doesn't fall hopelessly in love with sinners.

But even in Christian circles, God's love gets purged of anything we might find disturbing, until all that seems to be left is 'love, sweet love.'

That's a totally mistaken idea of the love of God. I remember once after I had preached on the cross of Christ and shared the Good News of how we can have our sins

forgiven, someone commented there was little or nothing about God's love in the message. I had explained how our sin merited only God's judgement and how God's intervention through the sacrifice of his Son at the cross to die for us has provided us with the offer of eternal life. I would venture to say that if a message like that is not thought to be about the love of God, then we've got a very skewed and distorted idea of what God's love really is. But I had tried to show how God's love and judgement operate together, and that's not 'love, sweet love.'

But neither should we fall into the trap of thinking about God's love as doing good for others out of sheer willpower and with zero passion. In the great hymn of love in First Corinthians chapter 13, the apostle Paul says that we can be so determined to help others that we're at the point of giving away all our possessions and even sacrificing our own life, and yet there may be nothing of true love in our



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motivation (1 Corinthians 13:3).

As for God's love of sinners, God says some pretty amazing things through the Old Testament prophet Hosea:

So My people are bent on turning from Me.

Though they call them to the One on high,

None at all exalts Him.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I surrender you, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart is turned over within Me,

All My compassions are kindled. (Hosea 11:7-8)

After that, we dare not strip God of passion and emotion! In love, he refused to utterly destroy his ancient people. As we've just seen from Hosea, God has emotions, but they are controlled in a way ours so often are not. With us, our heart can easily rule our head. God's emotions, however, are in perfect harmony with his power, holiness and justice. To those who have embraced the Christian faith, the apostle Paul writes:

In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to

the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:5-6)

This is majestic, sovereign love with nothing of whimsy about it. God's love is not some fleeting feeling. It does not depend on – or react to – the circumstances of the moment.

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

Perhaps you've heard it said that: 'God loves everybody just the same'. This is another potentially mistaken idea about the love of God. It's true when we're talking about one category of God's love: namely when the context is his providential love or care for all his creatures. But if we apply this to other categories of God's love, we're going to end up in serious error. Sadly, this is precisely what some do who say that, because God loves everybody the same, then everybody will be saved. In that way, they end up in the error of

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universalism which teaches that the idea of a loving God is incompatible with the thought of any human experiencing a lost eternity.

Having thought already of what the Bible has to say about God's love in operation within the Godhead, let's now concentrate on **God's providential love for all his creation**. Later in our studies, we'll move on to think specifically about God's love towards a fallen world; and then his love for a select chosen number; and furthermore in this we'll see there's both a distinctly conditional as well as an unconditional aspect in that last category of God's love. Confusing these different contexts for God's love, only manages to confuse the whole picture which the Bible draws of both the nature of God and of his salvation. But in the category of God's providence we do actually find that God loves everybody just the same. Take, for example, this reading from Matthew's Gospel:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward

do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:43-48)

So God treats, in love, both the righteous and the unrighteous person in the same way in regard to his provision of rain and sunshine, causing both their crops to grow alike. But, for the believer on the Lord Jesus, our Lord continues to say some wonderfully reassuring things:

"For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not

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much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' Or 'What will we drink?' Or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:25-34)

It's great just to savour this insight which the Lord gives us of how the eye of God appreciates the splendour of his creation, even down to enjoying the grass of the field clothed with glorious lilies. Equally remarkable is the detail which the Lord picks out for us. The transcendent God sees, and we would surely have to say, his will sanctions every sparrow that falls, whether in

death or in simply swooping down to the earth.

What is the main teaching for us from the Bible's revelation of this dimension of God's love? Is it not that we can rest in a love like this? We're encouraged to rely on God's unfailing provision for us, just as the birds of the air instinctively do. Such reliance on God breeds a very proper and godly contentment. And contentment like this is liberating. It frees us from the distraction of worrying about everyday necessities so that we can concentrate on advancing God's kingdom on earth. This is quite something, is it not? We're invited to abandon all worry over details, and over daily necessities, by grasping the promise that none other than the God of Creation will attend to our personal needs, if we truly focus on advancing God's agenda in the bigger picture of his purposes for ourselves and others.

3. God's love for the whole world

'*God is love*' is a true statement, and we know that for sure because it comes from the Bible. But there's also a common saying – which is not a biblical quote: 'God hates sin; but he loves the sinner.' Is that true? Well, there's some truth in it, but taken at face value, it can also be misleading. You see, God's hatred against sin never changes, but his love for the sinner does need some qualification. For starters, there are sinners mentioned in John 3:36 about whom John's Gospel says, '*the wrath of God remains on them.*' And the Apostle Paul in Romans 11:22 invites us to consider God's goodness to some sinners and his severity to yet other sinners. There's a variation in God's love for sinners that's not reflected in his hatred of sin. That's my point.

In this chapter, I want to think about about God's stance towards this fallen world. Up until now, we've covered the topic of God's love for his Son; and then his providential love for all of creation as he

still actively maintains it. But the Bible makes two further affirmations. In John 3 verse 16 we're famously told that God loves the world. And then, Ephesians 5 says something slightly different; it's there that the Bible explains Christ's love for the Church. Now, obviously, the world and the Church are not the same. And that means two different things are being said here.

That's why we're into this discussion on the 5 dimensions or contexts of God's love. Statements that are capable of being criticised are made whenever a Bible verse expressing truth in one category of God's love is misapplied to another category of God's love. We're back to the well-known issue of needing to understand a Bible verse in the context in which we find it.



One of the most famous verses in the Bible, at least among evangelicals, is ...

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten

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Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

When we focus on God so loving the world that he gave his one and only Son, we're dealing with God's expressed desire that all should be saved. We read of this in the Apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy:

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. (1 Timothy 2:3-6)

Notice, Christ gave himself a ransom for all. God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). This is the same truth expressed in the Old Testament through Isaiah the prophet:

“Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth;

For I am God, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 45:22)

But, in this church age, for example – which is of most relevance to us because we are living in it – it's the 'all' who belong to the Church (the one mentioned in Eph.5) who will actually be saved, and not all who are in the world. By the

way, I should confirm that we're referring to the church Christ spoke of when he said, "I will build My Church" in Matthew chapter 16. It's this same church which the Bible discusses in the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, particularly at the end of chapter 1 and again in chapter 5. This is not to be confused with any so-called denomination; this Church consists of all truly born-again believers from the time of Acts chapter 2 until the time of Christ's return in 1 Thessalonians 4. Coming back to the distinction we were making between God's love for the world and God's love for the Church, we seem to be contrasting two different boundaries or limits of God's love: extending in the one context to all in the world who receive the offer of salvation, but in another context God's love extends only to the Church, that is, all in this present age of grace who experience the reality of salvation through receiving Jesus Christ in personal faith. For some, that will raise the question: 'For whom, then, did Christ die?'

To answer that, would we not have to say there's a true biblical sense in which he died for all, for everyone? The Apostle John writes:

And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins; and

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not for ours only, but also for the whole world. (1 John 2:2, RV)

So there, the Apostle John speaks of how Jesus Christ died for the sins of all believers, and then he adds 'but also for the whole world.' That's what I mean when I suggest there was a sense in which Christ died for the whole world.

But equally, there's a real biblical sense in which Christ died for 'his people', 'his own', or 'his sheep' – as the first part of that verse we've quoted shows. As we'll explore more fully in the next chapter, there's a different sense, which is just as clearly stated in the Bible, and it's a sense in which Christ died only for all who believe on him (Romans 8:32).

So, we're saying that God loves, and Christ died for, the whole world in a real sense, but in a different sense, God loves, and Christ died for, believers on the Lord Jesus. It's not so much the extent of God's love – or even the extent of Christ sacrifice – that distinguishes these two cases; it's more the intent behind each case that differs.

God's love for the world in providing Christ, and the availability of the offer of salvation through his cross to 'whoever' in the world, may differ in its intent from the love which God in Christ has shown to the Church, but it's still real love.

The Apostle Paul writes in the first couple of chapters of Romans to those who were in the world, but who did not belong to Christ's Church – that is, those who were not Christians ...

Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Romans 2:1-5).

They might wilfully forget and willingly suppress the truth and by doing so lightly regard God's kindness, tolerance and patience. But what they are regarding so lightly is God's genuine love for this world, and specifically towards them. God's stance towards a fallen world is a truly loving one – one that invites and entreats – and does so in

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kindness and faithfulness, even to the point of superintending the sending out of missionaries and apologists to a world that largely rejects him and makes nothing of his love.

God is grieved by the sin of the Christ-rejecter, and finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). In fact, there's an emotional intensity about God's judgements and wrath in the New Testament as well as in the Old Testament. God was grieved in his heart at the wickedness of the world before the great flood in Noah's day (Genesis 6:6). Turning to the

New Testament, take, for example, how the Gospels record Jesus lamenting and mourning over the city of Jerusalem:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling." (Matthew 23:37)

Can we read such verses, and doubt the reality of God's love for a fallen world? (Even if it does not result in the salvation of all).

4. God's love for his children

'God is love' is a true statement, one which is found in the Bible, but we also often hear it said that 'God loves everybody just the same.' Now, that's not found in the Bible nor is it true – except perhaps in the sense of God's providential love. We've seen how:

[God] causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45).

True, the word 'love' is not used there, but from that verse it can be seen that God treats all his moral creation equally in terms of his caring provision of sun and rain in order to make their crops grow. Surely we'd say, on that basis, Gods treats everyone in the same loving way.

But that's not the whole story. And we'll see that there are very strong biblical reasons why we can't make any absolute claim that 'God loves everybody the same' – certainly not one which would imply salvation for all (see Matthew 25:41). It's true, as we learned from our previous study, that God loves the world, with a love that encompasses the

'whoever' among all of humanity (John 3:16).

And yet, from other equally clear Bible verses, we definitely get the clear sense that God loves some more than others. For example, take this short reading from the Old Testament. It's from the book of Deuteronomy and concerns God's selection of the people of Israel to be his special people in Old Testament times. It addresses the issue of why did God choose them and not some other people. Moses says to the Israelites:

"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your

forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of



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Egypt." (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

It seems from that, that there was no distinguishing feature in the object of God's love. Love like that is unusual, to say the least, by human standards. Sometimes, it's hard for us to think beyond the 'boy meets girl' kind of romantic love. Isn't it always true that something about the other person impresses us? Even if our attraction is not based on anything as shallow as is usually portrayed by Hollywood. Love that'll last will surely have to be based on more than the sparkle in the others' eyes, for likely that will fade with time. But even if our love is based on the appealing personality or even the character of the other person, that still becomes the feature which, in our eyes at least, distinguishes them from all others. But our text from Deuteronomy states that God wasn't impressed by any of Israel's credentials. We're told that God set his affection on them for no other reason than he loved them. This divine love for his people was an uncaused love, at least as far as it not being caused or brought about in any way by the object loved, namely Israel. Indeed, since God knows the beginning of a thing from its end, he already knew all about the treachery this people would be guilty of committing against

him. But not even that could deter him from loving them.

In fact, God goes out of his way in the Bible to show us that his love, in this sense, is not performance-related. The Apostle Paul pinpoints this key principle in operation at the time of the birth of Jacob who would come to be re-named as Israel, and from whose 12 sons the 12 tribes of that nation were to descend. Paul, writing by the Spirit of God, had this to say:

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Romans 9:10-13)

With this, the last book of the Old Testament is in agreement:

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have You loved us?" "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his

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inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” (Malachi 1:1-3)

Who would've thought the subject of God's love could be so difficult? We might have suggested God's knowledge or even his justice or wrath as being the really difficult subjects. But, because God's love must be consistent with all of God's attributes, it shares in their difficulties too. God's love is a challenging subject. It's made so clear that God's preferential love for Jacob, the younger son borne by Rebekah, was not based on him being a more likeable boy. The cause of God's love did not lie in Jacob. In fact, the narrative as it follows Jacob into manhood, reveals major character flaws in this object of God's love. Despite that, God says: 'Jacob I loved.' Once again the consistent message is that there's no distinguishing feature in the thing loved. God simply sets his affection on chosen ones in a way he doesn't on others. Jacob was chosen, Esau wasn't.

Now I want us to come to Paul's letter to the Ephesians where the Apostle Paul begins by saying:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He

predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3-6)

And then Paul goes on to say, clearly in its context, in the flow of the letter, this is to the same ones he's described as being chosen in Christ – he goes on to refer to them as Christ's church, fully known biblically as the church which is his body – and this is what he's got to say to them, now in chapter 5:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:22-27)

So, God loves, and Christ died, for the world in a real sense, as we've previously seen in our

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studies, but in a different sense, God loves, and Christ died, for believers on the Lord Jesus: those who by God's own choice become his children. It's not the extent of God's love or even the extent of Christ's sacrifice that matters in these two cases of God's love for the world and Christ's love for his church, but it's the intent behind each that differs. God's desire for the salvation of all in the world and his will for his children to be saved have different intents, but they both express his love.

There's a true biblical sense in which Christ, God's son, died for all, for absolutely everybody. The Apostle John, in First John chapter 2 and verse 2 speaks of how Jesus Christ died for the sins of all believers, and then he adds 'but also for the whole world.' But equally, there's a real biblical sense in which he died for 'his people', 'his own', 'his sheep.'

At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we read:

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

Jesus didn't die with the intent of saving everyone from their sins. That's what I mean when I say there was a sense in which Christ died for the world, and a different sense, also found in the Bible, in which he died for all who believe on him, and it's this second sense that Ephesians chapter 5 deals with. God's chosen children, Christ's church, are the ones whom he loved and the ones for whom he died - such that he's made them holy through his death, and cleansed them (which is effective when the preaching of God's Word is responded to). If Jesus is your personal saviour, rejoice in his love today!

5. God's conditional love for believers

I've heard it said, and I'm sure you have too, that's God's love is unconditional. Sometimes in a counselling context, someone assessed as an over-committed 'workaholic' may be told that even if he or she were to lie on the floor of the church building for a month (instead of following their usual frantic schedule), then they should realize that God would love them just as much.

It's always worth clarifying biblically that no true believer on the Lord Jesus can ever lose his or her salvation. We have ultimate security in God's love mediated through Christ and his cross. The end of Romans chapter 8 makes that abundantly plain:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him

who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

However, in this series of studies, we've been covering 5 different dimensions of God's love. Putting that in another way: we've been studying God's love in 5 different contexts. God's love for his Son, God's love for creation, God's love for the world, and God's love for his children have all occupied our attention. We've noted certain distinctive features in each of these categories. For example, in the context of one category God loves everybody the same, but that doesn't apply across the board. Lastly, we want to

consider a conditional aspect of God's love. Now, when we were last thinking of Christ's love for his Church, we were certainly thinking of



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unconditional love – a love from which nothing can separate us, no matter how we respond to the trials of life. While we acknowledge that's true, we're moving on now to explore a context where God's love is described as being conditional. Jude says:

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. (Jude 1:20-21)

Clearly, this is something we're held responsible for. It's something we must do: we must keep ourselves in God's love. As if to reinforce it, the Lord had earlier said directly to his disciples:

"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." (John 15:9-10)

In John chapter 15, in the vine-and-branches metaphor, we see how just as a branch grows through its connection with the vine, so we grow because of our connection with Christ. Also, a branch is nothing apart from the vine, and similarly we can do nothing apart from him. A branch draws strength from the vine,

and we become strong through him.

In this picture or metaphor of John 15, Christ is the Vine and the Father is the vinedresser. He prunes the fruit-bearing branches to make them bear more fruit. He removes the fruitless branches, and they are burned. Through continual pruning, the fruitfulness of the vine is increased. The branches that abide in the vine grow and bear fruit, and the Father lovingly tends them.

Some think that only the branches that remain or abide in the true Vine represent those who are genuinely saved. They say the branches that don't remain are people who pretend to be Christians but have no real connection to Christ. In other words, they say the removed branches were mere professors. But that is to misunderstand this beautiful picture.

Many totally genuine believers, sadly, grow cold in their love for the Lord. In his famous parable of the Sower, the Lord spoke of categories of true believers whose hearts he likened to either rocky ground or thorny ground. These represent truly genuine Christians whose lives sadly proved shallow or became overcrowded with other temporal things such that they never brought much fruit to God's glory. However, it's a serious

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misreading of the Bible to think that someone who has received God's gracious gift of salvation can ever lose it. Yet others, who do also accept eternal security, conclude that if a person 'falls away' from faithful discipleship, this reveals that they were never a true Christian at any time. While this is trying to defend the biblical truth of eternal security in Christ, it commits another error. A plain reading of the Bible, for example in Hebrews chapter 6, shows that a true believer can fall away. But we misread our Bible if we say it's a falling away from Christ and salvation. It is not.

Rather, God's Word teaches us that we're saved for a purpose. We're saved not so that we can do as we please, but so that we can honour God with our lives by serving his Son as we live according to the Bible's instructions for Christian service. The Lord when he left this world, left behind in his teaching an original mould which he intended to shape all Christian service for all time (Romans 6:17). The Bible tells us that quite clearly in Romans chapter 6 verse 17. There's a mould or form or pattern of teaching that's was given by the Lord through his apostles and this comes down to us on the written pages of our Bible (2 Timothy 1:13). It's God's command and expectation that we obey this prescription for

serving him. But the world around us influences us to consider it outdated or only advisory. The result is that many true Christians fall away from following this pattern of biblical teaching. This, in context, is the falling away the Bible speaks about. It's a falling away from service, and not at all from salvation – which is impossible. In Revelation chapter 2, the Lord's message to the Church of God at Ephesus was that their hearts had grown cold and they'd fallen away from their first love. Such a falling away from love would be reflected in a falling away from keeping the Lord's commands, because we show our love by our obedience. If our love wanes, our obedience will be the first thing to suffer.

But let's be positive again! How can we avoid such a falling away from loving obedience to the Lord? It's by daily enjoying our contact time with the Lord who directs our service. We maintain our loving obedience by practical communion, delighting to be in his presence through time spent with him in Bible reading, meditation, prayer and praise. And these all belong together, they flow one into another. In our life as a believer, we simply must cultivate an attitude of dependence on Christ. That's the picture of the branch in the vine, as it draws all its resources from the vine. Independence is the

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way to ineffectiveness. By ourselves, without him, we can do nothing.

The Lord who died to save us, and for whose glory we live, desires to spend time with us each day. Isn't that amazing?! He appeals, 'remain in My love.' And he personalises it, by telling us that through obeying all his Father's commands, he kept himself in his Father's love.

How can we begin to understand this? Perhaps we're Christian parents: imagine then the heartache of discovering a son or daughter wasting their lives by drug-abuse. Perhaps before this took place they once had a happy marriage, family and home. We loved every minute of the time we spent with them laughing at the meal-table and enjoying fun activities on summer vacations. But then it all changed somehow – whether by drug use or some extra-marital affair or whatever. Something shattered the picture. Now, there's a real sense in which we still love our son or daughter, but those happy love-filled earlier days are gone. There's a distance now between us that wasn't there before. In a similar way, sin stops us actively remaining in

God's love. In this connection, there are some thrilling verses in John's Gospel which introduce us to a way in which we can experience the Father's love for us which is presented as being conditional (14:21,23; cf.16:27).

In Ephesians chapter 3, as Paul prays for those in the Church of God there, one reason for requesting that they might be spiritually empowered, he says, is so that they might grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love. Paul's prayer is asking that they – and we – might grasp the dimensions of Christ's love in our experience. We can't be as emotionally or spiritually mature as we ought to be unless we're supernaturally empowered to grasp the length and breadth and height and depth of Christ's love. We need the Spirit's power to help us grasp it – and so to peel away our self-centredness in order that we might reach maturity, and become fully the person God wants us to be.

May we even now come to live as Christians with a real sense of God settling us down in his love as he exults over us with loud singing (Zephaniah 3:17)!

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