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LOVE DEFINED: GOD IS LOVE

*The All-Encompassing
Love of God*

KEY THEMES

- ✿ God's love is steadfast, covenantal, merciful, gracious, and sacrificial.
- ✿ Knowing God's sacrificial love in Christ transforms us into people who love.

DAY 1

The assignment was simple yet seemingly impossible to me: draw an aspect of God's character. (It might have felt easier if I could draw!) It was the first night of a course called Spirituality and the Arts, and we had ten minutes to complete the exercise, so I picked up my pencil and began sketching. What I attempted to draw was a small, faded brown 1989 Subaru with a female

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The supreme expression of God’s goodness is still, however, the amazing grace and inexpressible love that shows kindness by saving sinners who deserve only condemnation: saving them, moreover, at the tremendous cost of Christ’s death on Calvary.

—J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*

stick figure sliding down its hood. Large, strong, sinewy arms encircled the whole scene.

Earlier that day, during a pleasant morning jog on a nature trail that wound through a Seattle office park, I had been struck by that same brown Subaru. A truck-driver had waved me across the crosswalk, but neither he nor I saw the little vehicle moving in the lane next to him; nor could its driver see me. When I finally did see the car approaching, too late, watching in horror, even as my left side was falling on the hood, I remember two things—first, the sentence that played in slow motion through my mind: “So this is how I’m going to die.” And then, sitting on my rear, cross-legged, just as I had landed on the asphalt, repeating to myself over and over, “I’m not dead. I’m not dead.”

What I wanted to convey that night in class was the sovereign, ever-present, shielding, powerful love of God I now knew in a brand new way. The Bible asserts that *love* cannot be defined without God: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love is a fixed reality about the nature of God—and God is a fixed reality about the nature of love. The narrative of Scripture characterizes God’s love as, among other things, steadfast, covenantal, merciful, gracious, sacrificial, and transformational. Love is God’s prodigally generous, contra-conditional, eternal gift. And it is in this love alone that we as humans know love.

ENGAGING SCRIPTURE

The entire narrative of Scripture is built on the undergirding theme of God’s extraordinary, redeeming, covenantal love. God

- ✿ Choose a verse from any of the passages in this chapter to memorize. Write it here and tell why you chose it.

DAY 2

COVENANTAL LOVE

Closely associated with God's steadfast love is his covenantal love—his powerful and perfectly faithful commitment to protect his people. As we saw in *Living God's Story of Grace*, God made and kept a covenant with Abraham, telling him that he would be the father of a multitude of nations. Throughout Scripture, God makes covenants with his people, who often break them.

In Exodus and Deuteronomy, God restates his covenantal love to Israel.

1. Read Deuteronomy 7:6-11.
 - a. What does this passage tell us about God's love for Israel?

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The wrath of God and his love are not to be set over against one another. His wrath was the expression of his love, no less than his justice was. For love is not soft indulgence; nor is the wrath of God a display of temper.

—H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*

- b. What does God promise to do for his people? What response is expected from them?

PARADOXICAL LOVE: MERCY AND WRATH

2. As we saw in *Learning God's Story of Grace*, God steadfastly holds up his end of the covenant, while the Israelites repeatedly rebel, forgetting his miracles and despising his provision. The only appropriate response of a holy creator God to rebellion is wrath—righteous anger against sin. The paradox of God's wrath is that it is actually a loving response to his people for two reasons: first, because evil and sin actually destroy our hearts, and second, because our iniquity keeps us separated from the only relationship that will truly satisfy—our relationship with our holy Creator.
3. Read Psalm 78:17-22.
 - a. What kindled God's wrath against his people?

- b. Based on these verses, how would you respond to someone who said, “God is not loving. Even the Bible says he is wrathful and destroys his people.”

4. Read Psalm 78:38. How does God himself deal with his wrath? What do you see about God’s love here?

GRACIOUS LOVE AND THE NEW COVENANT

The Israelites go their own way, worshiping false gods time and again, but God, because of his steadfast love, mercy, and grace, makes a way for relationship, atoning for their iniquity. (A quick definition of terms: To *atone* means to make up for by providing a sacrifice. *Iniquity* in the Bible points to the broader state of guilt borne by sinners. *Wickedness* and *evil* are also used

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to refer to iniquity.) Ultimately, God's love leads him to make the unimaginable sacrifice, giving Jesus his Son as the Messiah who would live a perfect life, die a saving death, and rise from the dead to restore God's kingdom of love. Though time and time again God's people rebel, remembering his own steadfast love, he makes provision for the covenant to be kept.

5. Read Jeremiah 31:1-2, 31-34.

a. What aspects of God's love are mentioned in these verses?

b. What does God's love for his people lead him to do?

✿ Review your memory verse by writing it here or sharing it with someone.

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2. Read 1 John 4:7-12.

a. How does John explain his assertion that “God is love” (vv. 9-10)?

b. According to John, how does God’s love change us (vv. 7, 11-12)?

c. What security, hope, or confidence do you receive from knowing the nature of God’s love?

- ✿ Review your memory verse by posting it on social media or writing it in a note or an email.

Theological Theme: Atonement

Atonement is one of those theological words that is really much simpler than it sounds. It is made up of two basic words, with a suffix: “at” “one” “-ment.” It refers to the “at-one-ness” between God and his people as a result of Christ’s sacrifice.

According to the covenant of law that God made with Moses and the Israelites, God’s people were required to keep the Ten Commandments. If they did not, they had to make “atonement”—a sacrifice for their sin—to restore relationship with God. There was a Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:34), when the priest sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial goat on the “atonement cover” in the Most Holy Place.

However, as Psalm 78:38 makes clear, this system of atonement would never be enough to make up for the Israelites’ repeated and rampant sin. The fact is, we are born sinners, whose hearts rebel against God (Rom. 3:23). A permanent sacrifice for sins was necessary for unrighteous people to be united with a holy God (Ps. 5:4–6; Rom. 1:18). This is why God sent his Son into the world to live and die for us. In his holiness and justice, God removed his own wrath by offering the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his sinless Son (Rom. 3:25). In his death on the cross, Christ became our substitute and did for us what we were powerless to do ourselves—paid the debt for our sins (1 John 2:2; Heb. 9:28).

The result of the atonement is that we are reconciled to God, adopted as sons (1 John 3:1–2), created anew, and redeemed to bear Christ’s love into the world (2 Cor. 5:17–21).

It is one of the New Testament’s resounding paradoxes that it is God’s love that averts God’s wrath from us, and indeed that it is precisely in this averting of wrath that we see what real love is.

—Leon Morris, “1 John,” *New Bible Commentary*

DAY 4

ENTERING YOUR STORY

God is love; God's love changes humans. One of my favorite stories is of Mincaye, the murderer turned missionary.

He did not know that his tribe was nicknamed, by some, the "Aucas," which meant "naked savage." He did know that all of his life he had been taught to distrust and hate anyone who might threaten him, his family, or his territory. So he plunged the spear deeper. Yes, these men had dropped gifts from the strange gigantic flying machine, and his tribe had enjoyed them. But that didn't mean the intruders were welcome in tribal land. Mincaye and the others killed the men to keep them from stealing their women and burning their homes.

So goes part one of the story of Mincaye, the young Waodani Indian of the Amazon tribe. The second part is far more astounding. Some sixty years after Mincaye killed the white invader, he travels the world as a missionary speaking about the God that white man came to tell him about. He does so with Steve Saint, the white man's son. A few years after five missionaries refused to defend their lives with the guns they had, two women visited the Waodani tribe to show them the love of Jesus. They lived among the tribe, healing and teaching, and telling about the God who made a way to end the violence. It was this love that drastically changed "violent savages" into a spiritually transformed people.¹

1. The information on Mincaye and Steve Saint throughout this day comes from the following sources: Steven Curtis Chapman and Scotty Smith, *Restoring Broken Things: What Happens When We Catch a Vision of the New World Jesus Is Creating* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007); Michael O'Sullivan, "Friendship: An Incredible Act of Forgiveness," *Washington Post*, January 20, 2006, available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/19/AR2006011901309.html>; and Brian Mansfield, "Chapman Show's High Note Is Salute to Reconciliation," *USA Today*, April 18, 2002, available online at <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/music/2002/2002-04-18-chapman.htm>. To hear Mincaye tell this story yourself, visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JPlJzIn7k>.

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2. Steve Saint says that when his father was killed, his world was shattered, and he could see no way that God could bring good out of his loss. When Steve was eight, Mincaye, who had become a follower of Christ, asked Steve's mother who would teach her son all the skills he needed to survive in the Amazon (like making poisonous darts!). Steve's mother asked Mincaye who he thought should do it, and Mincaye offered himself. In a remarkable reversal, the man who killed Steve Saint's father became his substitute father.²
 - a. Tell about how God redeemed a tragic story in a remarkable or unexpected way.

- b. What sacrifices were made, and who made them?
What reconciliation or restoration resulted?

2. Discussed in Nell Minow, "Learning to Forgive," *Beliefnet*, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/2006/01/Learning-To-Forgive.aspx#>; and in O'Sullivan, "Friendship," *Washington Post*.

To come to see that God's love is a deep, warm love—a love constantly lavished on us quite irrespective of our merits, a love that cost the cross—is to reach a turning point. It is impossible to experience this love and remain unchanged.

—Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love*

- ✿ Review your memory verse by writing it somewhere or saying it aloud. (If you have a smartphone, consider recording the verse and playing it back throughout the day.)

DAY 5

LIVING STORY

1. Begin to think about specific qualities of God's love that you would like to see grow in your life. Write some actions you could take that would demonstrate this characteristic. What power will you need to live this story?

Example: I would like to be more merciful. This would mean being more patient and waiting for God to carry out justice, not taking matters into my own hands (or tongue!). I will need to keep my mouth closed, and I need the strong reminders of the Holy Spirit to overrule my tendency to make quick judgments.

PRAYING STORY

Write specific prayer requests for yourself and your group members, especially seeking God to change your heart by drawing you to love in new ways. Together, pray for one another, or pray the following prayer aloud.

Lord God,

Your compassion and mercy is bolstered by your steadfastness, discipline, and covenantal love. Your grace supplied the sacrifice for sin. Your tenacious love softened our hearts to receive the only love that will truly make us free. May we humbly and happily shout your love to the nations. Give us the words to speak and the lives to bear your how-can-it-be love into a world desperate to know it. May your name be glorified!

Moving Forward

With a deeper understanding of the wondrous love of our Maker and Redeemer, we are ready to explore further. In the next chapter, we will consider the nature of humanity and find ourselves completely undeserving of God's love. The reality is that without God's compassionate and faithful intervention, we are wandering, faithless lovers, seeking whatever god seems to satisfy at the moment.