### God’s Love

**1. Definitions and Terminology**

The Bible unwaveringly claims that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16). This oft-quoted verse from John’s first epistle highlights one of the Lord’s basic character qualities.

The following writers offer definitions of God’s love. According to Erickson, “(God) unselfishly seeks our ultimate welfare.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He continues, “(God) is concerned with our good for our own sake, not for what he can get out of us.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In the words of Charles Hodge, God’s love is “the disposition to promote happiness; all sensitive creatures are its objects.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Grudem proposes the following: “God’s love means that God eternally gives of himself to others.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Strong sees it as “that attribute of the divine nature in virtue of which God is eternally moved to self-communication.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Greek language has several words to describe the concept of love. The word ἔρος (*eros*) refers to love in a sensual manner. Φιλία (*philia*) is love between friends. Στοργή (*stroge*) describes familial love. The word for brotherly love is φιλαδελαία (*philadelphia*)*,* and for kindness or generosity is φιλανθροπία (*philanthropia*). Finally, we encounter the word ἀγαπη (*agape*). This word has an interesting history. The ancient Greeks rarely used it, and it was not clearly defined. Most likely, its original connotation was “satisfaction.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

We will further investigate how the ancient Greeks viewed love.[[7]](#footnote-7) Homer considered Eros, Earth, and Chaos to be the chief gods. The philosopher Empedocles taught the existence of two defining powers in the world: love (Aphrodite) and strife. According to Plato, ἔρος (*eros*) is the only type of love attributable to God. Aristotle understood God to be an impersonal force, totally self-sufficient, and independent from people. Therefore, God loves no one, since love involves weakness and dependence. For Aristotle, love is simply the force that preserves and moves the world. So then, we do not see among the Greeks any comprehension of a benevolent Divine Being.

The word for love in Hebrew is אָהַב (*ahav*). It has a broad meaning: God’s love, love between friends, or romantic love – only context can determine its meaning in any instance. Interestingly, the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) contains mainly the word ἀγαπη (*agape*) and occasionally φιλία (*philia*). Therefore, the term ἀγαπη (*agape*) carries a large semantic load, connoting God’s love, romantic love, or even love for evil.

Consequently, the New Testament authors, who were familiar with the Septuagint, ascribe to ἀγαπη (*agape*) a wide range of meaning as well. Although the majority of New Testament usages refer to God’s love, it can also mean love as friendship and even love for evil. An example of the latter is 1 Jn 2:15: “Do not love (ἀγαπη) the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves (ἀγαπη) the world, the love (ἀγαπη) of the Father is not in him.” The term φιλία (*philia*) is used both for love between friends and for God’s love as well.

**2. Biblical Data**

The history of God’s love predates creation. Since He has no beginning, His love has no beginning as well. Between the Persons of the Trinity, love has existed from eternity past. The Father has loved the Son “before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17:24).

The Lord manifested His love in creation. Hodge comments, “As the universe teems with life, it teems also with enjoyment. There are no devices in nature for the promotion of pain for its own sake; whereas the manifestations of design for the production of happiness are beyond computation.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Lord not only created the world, but also cares for it. The psalmist writes, “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:16). He even feeds the birds (Matt 6:26) and notices when one of them “falls to the ground” (Matt 10:29). Even those who do not appreciate the Lord’s benevolence in nature benefit from it: “He causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous” (Matt 5:45).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Yahweh’s shows special care for His Old Testament people, Israel: “On your fathers did Yahweh set His affection to love them” (Deut 10:15).[[10]](#footnote-10) He expressed His love for them in His election of them (Mal 1:2). In love, the Lord delivered them from Egyptian bondage: “When Israel {was} a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son…. I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love” (Hos 11:1, 4). God desires intimate fellowship with His people and to be personally present among them. His desire is “…to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7-8); “Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God” (Ex 6:7); and, “I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God” (Ex 29:45).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Because of His love for His chosen people, the Lord remains faithful to His covenant with them: “For Yahweh your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (Deut 4:31). When Israel keeps its part of the covenant, they can expect to enjoy the richness of God’s blessing (Deut 7:7-8). Yahweh’s love reaches beyond the borders of Israel as well – He shows special care for foreigners (Deut 10:18).

Yahweh considered Israel His bride: ”I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know Yahweh” (Hos 2:19-20). He tenderly appeals to His beloved: “Since you are precious in My sight, {since} you are honored and I love you, I will give {other} men in your place and {other} peoples in exchange for your life” (Isa 43:4), and, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness” (Jer 31:3). The Lord rejoices over His people: “Yahweh your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy” (Zeph 3:17). In spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness, He will draw her back to Himself: “I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely” (Hos 14:4).

God protected His people from the curse of Balaam, because “Yahweh your God loves you” (Deut 23:5). Even during the frightening manifestation of Yahweh’s glory on Mount Sinai, God’s love was on display: ”Yahweh came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir. He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones. At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them. Indeed, He loves the people. All Your holy ones are in Your hand” (Deut 33:2-3).

The following passage includes mention of the two most prominent aspects of Yahweh’s nature: holiness and love:

Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations (Ex 34:6-7).

The Old Testament poetical books add their testimony to the love of the Lord. Yahweh is a father to His people: “Just as a father has compassion on {his} children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him” (Ps 103:13). As a good father, the Lord trains and disciplines His children (Prov 3:12; cf. Rev 3:19). His love is boundless: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him” (Ps 103:11, сf. Ps 57:10). His love is eternal: “For Yahweh is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Ps 100:5; сf. Ps 52:1).

During His earthly ministry, Christ clearly demonstrated His love for the world. He taught the crowds, healed the sick, delivered the demon-possessed, fed the multitudes, and raised the dead (Matt 11:5). His gentle manner toward children revealed His fatherly care (Mk 10:16). His heart was full of compassion for people: “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). Even during the sufferings of His passion, He thought of others first. While He was carrying His cross to Calvary, He said to some women of Jerusalem, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children” (Lk 23:28). From the cross, He did not curse His enemies, but asked His Father to forgive them (Lk 23:34).

The sacrifice of Calvary was not only a manifestation of Christ’s love, but that of the Father as well: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). The Father’s love is actually defined and measured by Calvary: “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). In the light of the sacrifice made there, one cannot doubt God’s love for us and His desire to aid us. The apostle Paul assures us, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32).

In other passages from Paul’s epistles, he continues to contemplate the love of the Lord. To the Ephesians, he wrote of the greatness of God’s love shown at the cross: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph 2:4-5), and, “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). He expressed a similar thought in his epistle to the Thessalonians: “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace…” (2 Thes 2:16).

The apostle Paul penned what are likely the most moving words recounting Yahweh’s love for people, which highlight its boundlessness and consistency:

…may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph 3:18-19).

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 (Rom 8:35-39).

In spite of the passages cited above, the biblical author who emphasized God’s love most of all is the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” i.e. the apostle John.

First, throughout the entire Gospel of John, he repeatedly refers to the love relationship between the Father and the Son (see 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:31; 15:9-10; 17:23-26). Moreover, Jesus freely shares this love with His disciples: “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love” (15:9). He showed them by example how they were to love one another (13:34). Those who keep His word would especially experience His love (14:21; 15:10).

As was mentioned above, the apostle John also speaks of the Lord’s love displayed on Calvary (Jn 3:16). He speaks of it also in his epistles: “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son {to be} the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:9-10; cf. Rev 1:5). God also manifests His love in receiving us into His family: “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God” (1 Jn 3:1).

Finally, we must not fail to mention that John considers love to be the essence of the Lord’s nature. In the forth chapter of his first epistle, he asserts twice that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). An important, but controversial question is whether God’s love is His primary attribute. In other words, does love hold primacy over all His other qualities? First, we must keep in mind that God is completely holy and completely loving. It is inappropriate, then, to divide God’s nature, as if He was 60% loving and 40% holy. At the same time, Scripture testifies that the Lord desires to manifest His love (Isa 30:18) and takes no pleasure in punishing (Ezek 18:23). In addition, in Exodus 34:6, cited earlier, we find a straightforward description of God’s character. We note that the description of His love precedes the description of His righteousness. This does not imply, however, that God takes sin lightly or would ever compromise His holiness. Nonetheless, this passage confirms that the Lord prefers showing love than exercising wrath.

**3. Conclusions**

In light of our discussion above, we affirm that, although love is not higher or greater than His other attributes and in no way displaces the others, God desires to express His love most of all. Chafer comments, “As no other attribute, love is the primary motive in God.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Similarly, Lidgett also holds to the primacy of love in God’s nature – it is the primary motive for His actions. Lidgett adds however, that only a righteous God can display genuine love.[[13]](#footnote-13) Bray also affirms that only when we comprehend the Lord’s wrath can we fully appreciate His gift of love granting to us salvation.[[14]](#footnote-14)

To further clarify the concept of God’s love, Pink observes that He does not love us because we are worthy of His love, but because that is His nature. This is shown by the fact that He is a God of love from all eternity, even before He created people.[[15]](#footnote-15) Bloesch embraces a similar view – the world does not hold for God intrinsic value, but His love for it gives it value.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In the next section, we will investigate in more detail the main features or expressions of the Lord’s love, namely: grace, mercy, and patience. By “grace,” we refer to God’s generosity in providing His creation with every good thing. “Grace” designates an undeserved gift from the Lord. The term “mercy” relates to God’s readiness to forgive sin and assist the needy. In His “patience,” God is able to restrain His indignation for sin in anticipation of people’s repentance.

We might call these three features “love in action.” Grace is love in relation to the undeserving. Mercy is love in relation to the sinner and those in special need. Patience is love in relation to the unrepentant. At times, all three aspects of the Lord’s love are mentioned together in Holy Scripture:[[17]](#footnote-17)

- Yahweh is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness (Ps 103:8).

- You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth (Ps 86:15).

- You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness (Neh 9:17).

- You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness (Jonah 4:2).

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2. Ibid., p. 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hodge C. Systematic Theology. – 1872. – V. 1. – P. 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. -- Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 6. – P. 345-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., v. 6, p. 340-343. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hodge, v. 1, p. 427 (see also Chafer L. S. Systematic Theology. – Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – V. 1 – P. 206; Strong, p. 266). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Henry, v. 6, p.340, 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kaiser W. Toward an Old Testament Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978. – P. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Chafer, v. 1, p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lidgett J. S. The Fatherhood of God in Christian Truth and Life. – Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902. – P. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bray G. L. The Doctrine of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 79-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Chafer, v. 1, p. 206; Grudem, p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)