

The Love of God

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[0 : 00] We're thinking about the love of God, continuing from what we were thinking on previous occasions.! We looked at the love of God as a general map of how far and wide it went.

Then we thought of the love of God as specifically revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And if you would like to turn to Exodus 34, I'd like us to dip our toes into the subject of the love of God for his people.

I'm conscious it's a very deep subject and it is only a toe dip, I'm afraid. Indeed, hopefully we can immerse ourselves a little bit further in the subject next time.

We're going to think next time about walking in the love of God. But as God helps us then, in Exodus 34, this is Old Testament.

This is the Lord revealing who he is. Exodus 34, verse 4.

[1 : 14] So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning as the Lord had commanded him. And he carried the two stone tablets in his hands.

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

Moses bound to the ground at once and worshipped. I'd like us to look at that, first of all, at that description of God. As God shows himself to be the sort of God he is.

So we're in verse 6. And it says, The Lord, the Lord, the, well I, NIV says compassionate.

[2 : 44] ESV says? Merciful and gracious. Merciful and gracious. We've got compassionate and gracious. So I looked it up. Merciful is Rahum.

And it is generally accepted that this has a link to the word Rehen, which means womb.

So it's God's womb-like mercy. As a mother loves her child, can a woman's tender care cease towards the child she bears?

So God is the God of, it's almost like a feminine mercy towards her child.

The Lord is compassionate. It says then that he is gracious. So this is Hanan.

[3 : 43] And this is to do with the, well, a superior giving undeserved favour towards an inferior.

So I'm just thinking superior and inferior. It's when you've got the power over somebody not to be kind to them. And you decide that you will be kind anyway. So I suppose an example would be if you are pulled over on the motorway and you've been doing 90 miles an hour, you're pulled over by a police officer who has the power to put points on, penalty points on your licence or something like that.

So he's in the superior position and you're very much in the inferior position. And if he, I've seen nods and, oh yeah. If you say to him, oh please officer, please officer, can't you let me off?

Can't you do me a favour on this? And if he or she were to do that, it would be an act of grace. I will remember going round to the DIY shop that used to be round the corner there and asking whether they could give some money off a purchase.

And the man said, I'm very sorry sir, this is business not charity. We don't knock money off, we're here to make money. I suppose it's fair enough.

[5 : 16] But grace is when you do. Grace, this graciousness is when you don't have to be kind to somebody, let them off something. But you do anyway.

So the Lord is merciful and gracious. And he is slow to anger. Just one word in Hebrew, something like arek, arek. A.V. says long-suffering, E.S.V. says.

Slow to anger. It's a word which is to do with being slow. So I suppose some people are slow on the uptake. The Lord is slow to anger.

He doesn't just get angry straight off. But he is slow to anger. Long-suffering. And he is abundant. There's loads of this, much and many of this, what's coming next. Two things, love and faithfulness. So here we get specifically this word translated love.

[6 : 28] It isn't always translated love in our English translations. It's the word hesed, which is a key word. It is God's steady love. It's God's reliable love.

And God is full of this. And I hope to come back to this later. But it's a crucial thing for our understanding of who the Lord is and how he relates to us.

That he is full of hesed, steadfast love. And the next thing goes with it, emet. Or emet. Faithfulness. So these two things go together. A steady love. A reliable love. And faithfulness. Reliability. I think it's what you would look for in a good husband, actually. Somebody whose love doesn't just come and go, but who is steady in his love.

[7 : 29] And who is faithful. Who you can rely on and trust in. It certainly isn't related to, or it isn't particularly related to a husband-like relationship.

I'm just using that as an illustration. It says that God is full of this. He's full of hesed and emet. He's full of love and faithfulness.

Then it gives an example. He maintains love, using the same word, to thousands. Now, I'm not sure whether these are thousands of generations, or thousands of people, or dollops of people.

But it says that's what he does. And it goes on to say that he forgives. Abon, wickedness. Forgiving, the word is something like to do with lifting away. He lifts away wickedness, and rebellion, and sin.

[8 : 30] So, all the different dimensions of how obnoxious and perverse humankind can be. God is able to lift that away.

He doesn't just do that for everybody. There's a certain relationship aspect to it. That he's capable of doing that. Which is a pretty amazing thing, isn't it? That he can lift away wickedness, and rebellion, and sin.

He can take those things away. He can, as it says, to forgive them. And yet, it says, he does not leave the guilty unpunished. And as far as I can see, although that's three or four words in English, it's just one word in the original.

He doesn't clear. He doesn't condone, if you like. He doesn't, I suppose we would say, brush sin under the carpet.

It's interesting, isn't it? He forgives sin, but he doesn't brush it under the carpet. So, there's something going on there, which isn't unpacked in these verses. But, he is capable of forgiving in this very radical way.

[9 : 46] And yet, he doesn't just do that willy-nilly, if I can put it that sort of way. And then it says, I think this is a little bit of a difficult phrase, he doesn't leave the guilty unpunished.

He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. The word punish seems in English to be there twice, and yet, it wasn't there the first time, and it isn't there the second time either.

He doesn't clear, leave the guilty unpunished. And when it says he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers, I looked it up.

It's more literally, he visits the sin of the fathers upon their children, and their children to the third and fourth generation. And I don't know whether that, I think it's still a difficult concept.

So, what is it saying? But, I don't think it's been quite as definite as to say, punishing the children for the sins of the father. Because, that would be very problematic.

[10 : 59] But, I think he's saying, there is a repercussion. And, it's true, isn't it? I'm afraid that's the way a human race operates. It's true, isn't it? That, the sins and mistakes and muck-ups that our parents made will affect us, and maybe even affect our children too.

I think it's just the way that humanity is. And, I suspect that that's what's being referred to. So, we're starting off with what I think is a rather wonderful picture of who God is.

This is the sort of God that is the God of the Bible. This is Old Testament. People say that the Old Testament God is simply a God of wrath, and the New Testament God is a God of love.

That's a very, very unfair statement. Here is the God of the Old Testament saying who he is. He says, I am merciful like a mother.

I am gracious, somebody who lets people off when I don't have to. I am slow to anger. I am full of steady love, reliability.

[12:16] And, I keep that to thousands and thousands of people. Don't think I'm a pushover. I do forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin.

But, I don't just clear the guilty willy-nilly. So, don't think that. But, he starts off certainly with the saying, think of me in these ways. So, that is our starting point.

Is that fair enough? Yeah. Okay. Thank you. So, let's, with that as a starting point, let's think of the love of God for his people.

As this thought streams through the history of the Bible. And then when I, as soon as I'd said that, I thought, ah, I need to be a little bit careful about this.

I've put the love of the Lord for his people. The verses that we're going to look at, many of them will refer to Israel. And, my caveat, my thing to bear in mind is that we shouldn't take these to be statements about Israel, even as we see her now as an ethnic group or a political group.

[13:47] Israel, in the Old Testament, means the people of God. And, there is a sort of a trajectory. There's a pathway through, a timeline through the Bible.

And, in the end of it, Israel, ethnically, fails to be Israel spiritually. So, we must bear in mind that when the Lord speaks of his love for Israel, he's not thinking of his love for a geographical area, so much as he has his eye on a people.

And, he's looking at that people, sort of down through history, down into eternity. And, it's not the same. You can't make an equation between that people and the geography.

In fact, as we come into the New Testament, the geography just drops away. And, the love of God focuses in Jesus Christ. I hope I'm not being too complicated, but I wanted to say that at the beginning.

So, I've got one, two, three, four, and a bit things to say. Deuteronomy, chapter 7. To say that the love of God for his people is a choosing and electing love.

[15:06] Electing doesn't mean that much different to choosing, I don't think, but often in Christian speech, and indeed in the New Testament, the word election is used to mean choosing, or the elect, meaning the people who have been chosen.

And, in Deuteronomy 7, verses 7 to 11, the Lord says, well, this is through Moses, of course, but he says to his people, Israel, this is how my love to you operates.

Deuteronomy 7, 7 to 11. The Lord did not set his affection on you, and choose you, because you are more numerous than other peoples.

For you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you, and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers, that he brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is God. He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant and love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.

[16:34] But those who hate him, he will repay to their face by destruction. He will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him. So I'm just focusing on the love part of it, and saying, look what it says about the method and the motive of God's love for his people.

Anybody watch the Eurovision Song Contest last night? Deepest sympathy, Corinne. The way the Eurovision Song Contest operates is the person who does best.

Am I right? They'll get voted for, and the electing, the choosing, is on the basis of how many points? Do they still do that? Dix points? Douze points?

Whatever. So, it's a beauty competition, isn't it? The most beautiful, the most deserving, gets the prize. Theoretically.

That's the way it's supposed to work. And is this how God chose Israel? Did he have a Eurovision Song Contest? And he looked at, you know, Turkey and Belgium and, is Switzerland in the Eurovision Song Contest?

[17:49] I don't know. And which of them is best? Which of them is most, you know, most beautiful, most talented? And I'll, I'll set my love on, on that nation.

Is that how it works? You see, it says absolutely not. This is God's policy. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

And presumably, it's not only numerousness, but anything else that might commend them to the Lord. No, it was because the Lord loved you. If you think about it, it doesn't seem to get us any further, does it?

Why did the Lord set his affection on you? It was because he loved you. It does say, and because he kept the oath he swore to your forefathers. So there's a, it goes back to a previous commitment, but it's not based on their winning the beauty competition.

He says, I love you. I set my affection on you because I love you. And the reason for that love is not found in looking carefully at Israel.

[19 : 09] The reason for that love is found in marveling at the depths of the wisdom and purposes of God.

it's an electing love. And I say this as a matter of policy because every Christian can identify with that or ought to be able to identify with that.

Why did the Lord love me? Well, he's continuing the same policy. It wasn't because I was cleverer or more good looking or more talented than anybody else.

The Lord set his love on me because he set his love on me. That is a very important thing for us to grasp. Because if we look inside ourselves to say, I'm told the Lord loves me, let's just confirm that by looking inside and seeing, yeah, I do deserve that.

Because you won't. And we'll look inside ourselves and say, what a mess. What a tangled, silly, unreliable, etc.

[20 : 19] person I am. The Lord can't possibly love me. Well, if it was depending on how good we were, then of course it would be, it wouldn't work.

But it's saying here, the Lord loves his people. because he liked to do that. He liked to do that.

I would just, I love, I would love to show myself and set my love on this person and this person and this person.

They'll be ever so surprised. They'll wonder why I did it. But that's good because throughout eternity they'll be filled with amazement and wonder at my electing love.

So, number one then, it's a choosing and electing love. And I move straight on. Number two, the love of God is a through, thick and thin promised love.

[21 : 24] And this time we're going to come back to that word hesed that I mentioned before. Let's give an example of it. Genesis 24 verse 12. So, this is in the middle of a human story of Abraham's servant being sent off to find a bride for Abraham's son.

So, off he goes to a land where he doesn't know. I don't think that he feels he knows anybody. he's sort of striking off on his own.

Got this very difficult task put in his hand to find a bride for his master's son. Rather a daunting task. And so, this servant, off he goes with his camels and everything. And he's at a well in the evening. he's pulled over for a cup of coffee and wouldn't have been at a burger would it?

But anyway, whatever. And verse 12 he prays, O Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success today and show kindness to my master Abraham.

[22 : 50] See, I'm standing beside this spring and the daughters of the townspeople are coming here to draw. You can see where he's going with this, can't you? But it's the word kindness. That's this word hesed.

That's this steady love. And you see what he's saying? He's saying, here I am. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I've no idea how this is going to turn out.

In many ways, I'm out on a limb. And what I'm asking you to do, Lord, is, I've got nobody really to turn to but you, but will you stand by me in this?

Will you show me steady, faithful love? I'm just turning to you because, well, I haven't got anybody else to turn to and I'm in a bit of a hole.

And I just need that hesed. It's a great prayer. I expect you've prayed similar sort of prayers, haven't you?

[23 : 52] and you might not have realized it, but what you're counting on is God's hesed. His steady, reliable love that we can lean on and sometimes we just have to lean on when we're in a hole.

And God is full of hesed. So there's an example of him being asked to show hesed. Let's look at Nehemiah chapter 1 verse 5.

Nehemiah was in my Bible when I looked at it earlier. It must be there somewhere. And I want to indicate how crucial hesed is to the whole experience of the people of God.

And this is Nehemiah chapter 1 verse 5. The situation is not that he's beside a well looking for a suitable bride.

But he's saying we are in deep distress. I'm surveying and considering Jerusalem, God's capital, his headquarters on earth.

[25 : 00] It's all totally devastated. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down. Its gates have been burned with fire. Enough to break your heart.

And he prays to God. And how does he pray? In chapter 1 verse 5, O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant and his love.

Hesed. Who do I turn to? The God who I can rely on to keep his promises, to keep his covenant, to keep his love.

love. I think that's so significant that that's the theology of the people of God.

Certainly the theology of praying for the kingdom of God. Praying for the purposes of God.

[26 : 02] Here's Jerusalem broken down. I'm praying to a God who keeps his covenant love for his people. In Psalms, there are 127 references to Hesed.

I started looking at them, but I sort of ran out of time. So, these are just some almost random ones from, as you can see, I didn't get very far through Psalms.

31. Psalm 31 verse 21. And here's the psalmist saying things like, in the shelter of your presence you hide your people from the intrigues of men.

In your dwelling you keep them safe from accusing tongues. And this is Psalm 31 verse 21. Praise to the Lord for he showed his wonderful Hesed to me when I was in a besieged city.

Get the idea of that? When I was surrounded on every side by problems and enemies and things I couldn't get out of, couldn't get round.

[27 : 28] I thank the Lord for his wonderful, strong word, absolutely amazing, wonderful Hesed.

Praise the Lord for he showed his wonderful Hesed to me when I was in a besieged city. It's rather brilliant, isn't it? not only brilliant, but it's the bread and butter that we Christians need to live on.

The God who shows us Hesed day in, day out, through thick and thin. Chapter, Psalm 36 verses 5 and verse 7 your Hesed, your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. How great, that's what he's saying, isn't it? How great is your reliability. How great is your reliable love.

God isn't patchy in his reliability for his people. You know, sometimes people are a bit patchy, aren't they? Blow hot, blow cold. They're all over you one day and then you'd never hear anything from them for weeks on end.

[28 : 53] Human beings are like that, but God's care isn't patchy. Your love reaches to the heavens, your Hesed reaches to the heavens.

Verse 7, how priceless is your Hesed? Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 100, verse 5. 100, 100, a, what do I say, a psalm that God's people have been singing, Old Testament and New Testament, and keep in coming back to, shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Verse 5 says, the Lord is good and his Hesed endures forever. His faithfulness continues through all generations.

It's a cause for the praise of God's people. That was number two. Number three, his love has a future vision. This is Zephaniah three, so prizes for people who can find Zephaniah.

[30 : 27] Work backwards from Malachi. Zephaniah three, 14 to 17. I'd be quite interested to know what the ESV says.

Could you read this to us, Adam? Zephaniah three, 14 to 17. Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, and shout, O Israel, rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.

The Lord has taken away the judgment against you. He is clear where your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. You shall never again fear evil.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, fear not, O Zion, that not your hands were evil. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.

He will rejoice over you gladness, he will be, he will cry to you by his love. Is there another phrase? Was that it? Oh yeah, yes. Yeah, that's not my question.

[31 : 31] The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will cry to you by his love. He will exult over you and loudly sing.

Thank you. In the authorised version it says he will rejoice with joy, he will rest in his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.

So I'm simply pointing out that this appears to be largely future. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.

I think it's a statement of what God envisages that he, although his people have rebelled against him, although some of them have turned their backs on him, yet he insists, I will have a people, they will be what they should be.

It's a bit like the idea of the bride, isn't it, that she's spotty and obnoxious, and yet she will be a radiant bride.

[32 : 51] So I'm saying this is a future thing, probably worth noticing. The NIV says he will take great delight in you. I was quite sparing with its use of the idea of delight.

This verse, I think, is future. He will look at you and find nothing in you to repel him. That's what he will do.

That's what he's aiming for. There's a future vision for his beloved people. Two more things. That future vision is fulfilled in Christ and in Christians.

Galatians 2. Galatians 2. 17 to 21. There's actually lots of verses in which the idea of the vision for Israel being fulfilled in Christians is present.

They're quite extensive and I thought rather than try to squeeze them in, I would simply give you an illustration of the fact that this love for his people is fulfilled in Christ.

[34 : 08] And in Galatians 2, Paul is distinguishing himself as a Christian from the Jewish people who rejected Christ, certainly fully paid up Jews, but they weren't trusting in Christ.

And he says, well, they've missed out in their trust in the law of Moses. I'm by God's grace, I find myself in the place of his blessing.

So verse 17, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners. Does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not. If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove I am a lawbreaker.

In other words, if I go back to the Jewish way of doing things, that's what he's getting at. For through the law, I died to the law, so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.

[35 : 26] Law keepers, then why did Christ die on the cross? He says, no, that's not what it was like at all. The fulfilment of all this is in the grace of Jesus Christ, and that's by his grace where I am.

I live by faith in him, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

That's where it's at. The love of Christ, it's fulfilled in Christ, and in those who believe in him. And the love of God for his people is shown overwhelmingly in the cross of Christ.

Let's read this and we'll come back to this in 20 minutes time. This is Romans 5 from verse 3 where he says, we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope.

And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

[36 : 48] Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die, but God demonstrates his own love for us.

In this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Let's do some singing.
singing. ending Thank you.