

A Theological Analysis of the Love of God

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Thesis: The statement that “God is love” does not mean He relates to all people in the exact same manner; rather, it refers to the reality that love is an essential and inherent aspect of His nature and that love characterizes His purposes and His relation to His creation.

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Introduction

Two of the most profound words in the English language would have to be “God” and “love.” Yet, when the Bible states in I John 4:8 that “God is love,” many people presumptuously assume that they understand exactly what this entails. In reality, the depth of this proposition is hard to fathom, and as one considers the inspired message of the Scriptures, there arises a humble realization that we are entering the vast and awe-inspiring canyon of thoughts concerning the infinite and incomprehensible God of the universe and of His unfathomable, glorious love. We must, therefore, enter this topic with great care, lowliness of mind, and openness of heart. What this paper aims to show is that the statement that “God is love,” contrary to popular belief, cannot be taken simply to mean that He relates to all people in the exact same manner; rather, it refers to the reality that love is an essential and inherent aspect of His nature and that love characterizes His purposes and His relation to His creation.

The Source of God’s Love

In trying to understand the concept that “God is love,” it is essential to see how this correlates to His own Being. A common theme among Biblical theologians is that this statement alludes to the fact that God’s love is inherent to His divine nature. Lewis Chafer, for example, states, “God has not attained unto love, nor does He by an effort maintain love; it is the structure of His being.”¹ There is nothing outside of God which causes Him to love; He loves because it is a part of His very nature. John MacArthur concurs with this viewpoint and further states that God “has always loved, even from eternity past, before there was any created object for His love.”²

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1947). Vol. I, 205.

² John F. MacArthur, *The God Who Loves* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 29.

How is it possible for God to love apart from the objects of His creation? The answer is found within the doctrine of the trinity.³ First of all, the Scriptures reveal that the Father loves the Son. Jesus said that the Father loved Him “before the foundation of the world.”⁴ This reveals the amazing truth that God, within His very being, has possessed an eternal relationship of love. Reflecting on this truth, John Piper says, “[T]his ever-living God has not been ‘alone.’ He has not been a solitary center of consciousness. There has always been another, who has been one with God in essence and glory, and yet distinct in personhood so that they have had a personal relationship for all eternity.”⁵ Piper goes on to show that the picture presented in Scripture is that God the Father has always delighted in the perfection of His glory reflected in the face of His Son,⁶ leading Him to be eternally well-pleased in His Son.⁷ He is, therefore, everlastingly fulfilled, or blessed, within Himself through this relationship of love.

This love of the Father for the Son is also reflected back in the Son’s love for the Father. This is evidenced in the Son’s perfect understanding of the Father and His perfect obedience to the Father.⁸ Jesus Himself stated clearly, “But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do.”⁹

Finally, within the Trinity the concept of love must be related to the person of the Holy Spirit. Wayne Grudem points out, “The love between the Father and the Son also presumably characterizes their relationship with the Holy Spirit, even though it is not explicitly

³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ John 17:24.

⁵ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), 41.

⁶ II Corinthinans 4:6.

⁷ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 42–43.

⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 35–36.

⁹ John 14:31.

mentioned.”¹⁰ He goes on to say, “This eternal love. . . makes heaven a world of love and joy because each person of the Trinity seeks to bring joy and happiness to the other two.”¹¹

On other point that must be realized in relation to this intrinsic love of God is that God’s deepest and supreme love is for Himself,¹² one reason being that He is more beautiful and worth more than everything else. He is supreme perfection, and He delights in His own perfection within this inter-Trinitarian relationship.¹³ Also, for Him to love anyone else above Himself would be to put someone unworthy in the place of the One who is truly the greatest and the only One who has the power, wisdom, and goodness needed to bring about what is best for the creation. Therefore, to love anyone or anything above Himself would be atrocious and would, in itself, be an act of idolatry.¹⁴

In examining the truth of the intrinsic, eternal, Trinitarian nature of God, what is discovered is that love is not derived from or caused by something external to God. Therefore, it is evident that the source of all love is God Himself.¹⁵ He possesses a relationship of love within His Being. It is a love that Has no beginning and no end, and it is a love that is eternally fulfilled in the perfection of His own goodness. All of this is wrapped up in the statement that “God is love.”

The Nature of God’s Love

Having established that God Himself is the source of His love and all love in the universe, we now move on to determine what the nature of this love is. In other words, in seeking to correctly understand the statement that “God is love,” it is important to grasp the

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 199.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, 206.

¹³ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 42.

¹⁴ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 43.

¹⁵ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, 205.

actual meaning of the word *love*. Interestingly, even in the apostle Paul's detailed discussion about love in I Corinthians 13, there is no simple, dictionary definition given. He presents descriptions *about* love, such as love is patient, or love is kind, but he never explicitly states what love *is*. This is because love is a deep concept that defies a trite definition. Therefore, in keeping with the Biblical precedent, understanding the meaning of love will entail identifying descriptions about love rather than presenting a blanket definition.

One important aspect of God's love is that it is self-giving. Grudem states, "God's love means that God eternally gives of Himself to others."¹⁶ This self-giving, as we have observed, is seen in the relationship within the Trinity in which all members are eternally giving to one another in perfect joy. This self-giving is done for the benefit and happiness of others. Not only is it seen within the Trinity, but it has also been manifested toward humanity. God has given in abundant measure, and in doing so He has exercised His goodness in an incredible display "cosmic generosity."¹⁷ Packer states, "The measure of love is how much it gives, and the measure of the love of God is the gift of his only Son to become human, and to die for sins, and so to become the one mediator who can bring us to God."¹⁸ The idea of God's love being demonstrated by giving His perfect and eternally loved Son on behalf of sinners is an astounding thought, but this is exactly what the Bible teaches about the love of God. As we see how much God is willing to give on behalf of others, we begin to understand how amazing His love truly is.

Another aspect of God's love is that it is emotional. This has sometimes been a subject of debate within Christian circles because of the teaching that God is without passion. What must be clarified here is that this should not be taken to mean God is emotionless. In the following

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 198.

¹⁷ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

statement, Packer does a good job of presenting a balanced, Biblical view concerning God's emotions:

God has no *passions*—this does not mean that he is unfeeling (impassive) or that there is nothing in him that corresponds to emotions and affections in us, but that whereas human passions—especially the painful ones, fear, grief, regret, despair—are in a sense passive and involuntary, being called forth and constrained by circumstances not under our control, the corresponding attitudes in God have the nature of deliberate, voluntary choices, and therefore are not of the same order as human passions at all.¹⁹

What this shows is that though God truly is different than us, He, nevertheless, does possess sincere emotions. Carson also chimes in on this issue by pointing out that God's love should not be viewed as something completely different from the human emotion of love. To go to this extreme would make the term "love" a mere anthropathism that has no real correlation to our own concept and experience of what love is. He humorously chides, "Give me a break. Paul did not pray that His readers might be able to grasp the height and depth and length and breadth of an anthropathism and to know this anthropathism that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:14–21)."²⁰ These insights help us to understand that God's love truly can be thought of as having a certain correlation to human love, which surely has an emotional aspect to it. It is important, therefore, to accept that God does have feelings for people.

The emotional aspect of God's love can be seen in James Orr's definition of love, which states: "Love generally. . . is that principle which leads one moral being to desire and delight in another, and reaches its highest form in that personal fellowship in which each lives in the life of the other, and finds his joy in imparting himself to the other, and in receiving back the outflow of that other's affection unto himself."²¹ This definition is laden with concepts that define love in emotional terms, such as "desire," "delight," "joy," and "affection." These terms most certainly

¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

²⁰ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 59.

²¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 123.

characterize a true relationship of love, and they most definitely apply to the love of God. Within the trinity, for example, we see that the Father is “well-pleased” with His beloved Son.²² God is also seen in the Scriptures as delighting and finding pleasure in His people.²³

Another very interesting aspect of God’s love is that it is pure, and therefore delights in goodness. This is an important distinction, for it could be said that Satan loves certain things, but his “love” is not ultimately rooted in what is good, whereas, God’s love truly does delight in goodness because it is perfectly pure. Louis Berkhof states, “Since God is absolutely good in Himself, His love cannot find complete satisfaction in any object that falls short of absolute perfection.”²⁴ This is brought out, for example, in Paul’s descriptions of love in which he states that love “does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.”²⁵ As has been said, God’s supreme love is manifested toward His own perfection. He loves goodness because His love is perfectly pure.

But the question then becomes, why and how can He love sinners, who are most certainly not good? The Biblical evidence seems to indicate that God’s love is most fully expressed and perfectly fulfilled within Himself, but amazingly, the inherent love within His nature also allows Him and leads Him to have concern for others. Hence, He truly does love His creation. However, it appears that His love for creation is ultimately an overflow of His inherent nature of love, not a love that is necessitated by the nature of creation itself. Carson emphasizes that His love for sinners, specifically, is not a love conjured up by who they are but is actually a desire to bring goodness to them in spite of who they are.²⁶ Millard Erickson, however, would clarify this point by adding, “God loves us on the basis of that likeness of himself which he has

²² Matthew 3:17.

²³ Isaiah 62:5; Zephaniah 3:17–18.

²⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 71.

²⁵ I Corinthians 13:6.

²⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 63.

placed within us, in creating us (Gen. 1:27). He, therefore in effect loves himself in us. This likeness to him, however, is not our own doing, but is present because of his unselfish, giving nature.”²⁷ And Berkhof says similarly, “[God] loves His rational creatures for His own sake, or, to express it otherwise, He loves in them Himself, His virtues, His work, and His gifts . . . He recognizes even in the sinner His image-bearer.”²⁸ The important thing to understand in all of this is that God’s love is rooted in His own nature, it is completely free, not necessitated by His creatures.²⁹

A point related here is this: If God did not find His joy in His own perfection and self-satisfaction, He would then love people out of need and His love would no longer be completely self-giving. Instead, He would be trying to get something He needs from people, but this most certainly is not Biblical, and it does not correctly characterize the nature God’s love. God’s love toward creation is not a love rooted in a need to get what He does not have but of giving what He has already. His love is rooted in the joy of His own perfection within the relationship of the Trinity, and it overflows into a desire for the good and joy of others outside of Himself.

One other very important idea must be recognized concerning the nature of God’s love. God’s love should be thought of as being in perfect harmony with all of His other attributes. As Packer succinctly points out, “‘God is love’ is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned.”³⁰ Keeping all that the Bible teaches about God in mind helps guard against the mistake of making God’s love the sole attribute that guides all of His motives and actions. This is the exact error that Thomas Talbott, author of *The Inescapable Love of God*, falls into when dealing with the subject of the love of God. Talbott holds to a Universalist position which

²⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 320.

²⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 71.

²⁹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 124.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

is unbiblical because He takes “God is love” as an exclusive statement about everything that God does. His belief is summed up when he writes: “God has but one moral attribute and that is loving kindness.”³¹ The fallacy of this view is seen clearly through considering that the Bible also says that “God is Spirit” and “God is light,” statements, by the way, which were written by the same author who said that “God is love.”³² Therefore, it would be a misrepresentation to say that love defines everything there is to know about God. This will be an important concept as we proceed to the final section concerning the love of God in which we will examine the scope of God’s love.

The Scope of God’s Love

In speaking of the scope of God’s love, we are seeking to determine how God’s love relates to different members of His creation. There are important questions related to this, such as: Does God love everyone, and does He love everyone in the same way? Again, we are dealing with some highly debated issues, especially because of the misunderstanding of the statement that “God is love,” a problem that is exacerbated by a society much more favorable to ideas of God that relate to acceptance and tolerance. People in modern American culture are much more inclined to think of God as loving than God as righteous and judging. This is even seen in a 1980’s poll in which three quarters of the respondents “reported that they preferred to think of God as ‘friend’ than as ‘king.’”³³

To begin with, there is a preliminary concept that must lay the foundation for this entire discussion on the scope of God’s love. In order to fully embrace all that the Bible has to say about God’s love, one must be willing to accept that though God is inherently loving, He relates differently toward different objects of His creation. This would be hard to miss as one reads

³¹ Michael Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Salem: Universal Publishers, 1999) 146.

³² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 120–121.

³³ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 12.

through the Scriptures, and yet many do miss it for lack of Biblical literacy or because of a refusal to agree with ideas that would challenge the belief in God's acceptance of all people. But perhaps a startling truth of the Bible is that God's love, though perfect and infinite, does indeed have a discriminatory aspect to it. This should not be perturbing, however, because there are concepts, even within Scripture, that show that drawing distinctions does not infringe upon the concept of true, sincere love.

One example of love's discriminatory aspect is how a man can choose to love and marry a specific woman. In this act, he has set his love on a particular person and manifests his love in a unique way toward that person. It is true that he is treating his wife differently than other people, but this does not mean he does not have a truly loving nature. We would not complain against a married man, for example, and say, "You're not a very loving person. How come you only show love and affectionate intimacy with that one woman? If you were really a loving person, then you would show love in the same way toward all women." Obviously, this would be a ludicrous (and immoral) expectation and would actually run contrary to something we know about true love. True love can make distinctions among different people, and this in no way calls into question the sincerity or depth of a person's love. And this is exactly the picture given of God, in the Bible. He is an infinitely loving person who has chosen a bride for Himself.³⁴

An even more striking example of discrimination is found in the two great commandments given by Christ, in which He says, "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*" This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second is like it: '*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*'³⁵ Throughout Scripture, God makes it clear that we are to love Him above all else. Clearly, this means that we must draw

³⁴ Ephesians 5:25.

³⁵ Matthew 22:37-39.

a distinction between the way we relate to Him and the way that we relate to others. True, Christ teaches that we are to love our neighbor, but obviously the love we show toward our neighbor is distinct from the love that we show to God. Even God, as has been demonstrated, loves Himself supremely. Therefore, it should not be difficult to embrace the idea that God, though inherently loving, relates differently toward different objects of His creation.

Carson masterfully draws out five different ways the love of God is described in the Bible that help us to understand how God relates differently toward different objects. The first, which has already been discussed, is the love between the Father and the Son.³⁶ The second deals with how He relates to His creation as a whole. This can be termed His “providential love.”³⁷ One of the more well-known passages related to God’s love for creation is where Jesus is showing why we can trust God to meet our needs. He says:

“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

“So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, *will He* not much more *clothe* you, O you of little faith?”³⁸

In this passage, it is evident that God has shown His love for His creation by providing for animals and adorning plant life with great beauty.

The third way God’s love is seen is in the way He relates toward fallen humanity.³⁹ First, He has demonstrated His love by sending His Son to be the Savior of the world. There are several Biblical statements that spell this out poignantly. Jesus Himself said, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but

³⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁸ Matthew 6:26–30.

³⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 17.

have everlasting life.”⁴⁰ Paul stated, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”⁴¹ The apostle John also brings out that Jesus “is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”⁴²

Though some have tried to limit the scope of these verses to mean that God really only sent His Son for the elect, the overwhelming evidence is that God truly loves the entire world. In order to deal with this issue, we will specifically look at John 3:16. Benjamin Warfield, who most definitely adhered to the doctrine of election, states emphatically, “It is the precise purpose of the passage to teach us this, to raise our hearts to some apprehension of the inconceivable greatness of the love of God, set as it is upon saving the wicked world.”⁴³ He goes on to say, “The declaration is, not that God has loved some out of the world, but that He has loved the world. And we must rise to the height of this divine universalism.”⁴⁴ And MacArthur’s conclusion is, “Those who approach this passage determined to suggest that it *limits* God’s love miss the entire point.”⁴⁵ What is being brought out by these writers (who both, interestingly, hold to Calvinistic theology) is the fact that the Bible unabashedly declares that God loves the entire world—that is, the whole race of humanity with all of its sin and depravity. It is because of this sin that God sent His Son to suffer and die.

But not only does God show His love to the world by sending His Son, He also shows His love in His sincere compassion and desire for people to come and be forgiven and restored. Jesus extended God’s invitation to sinners by saying, “Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am

⁴⁰ John 3:16.

⁴¹ Romans 5:8.

⁴² I John 2:2.

⁴³ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), 517.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 517–518.

⁴⁵ John F. MacArthur, *The God Who Loves*, 104.

gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”⁴⁶ He even wept for those who did not come to Him: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing!”⁴⁷ The apostle Peter makes the unambiguous statement that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”⁴⁸ God, without question, truly loves all people and desires all people to receive the forgiveness and salvation which He offers.

The fourth manifestation of love identified by Carson is God’s love toward His elect.⁴⁹ We have been dealing throughout this paper with the statement that “God is love,” and according to Packer, it is God’s elect who uniquely and fully experience God as love.⁵⁰ This means that to the believer, every aspect of God’s nature is manifested in terms of His love. Packer quotes Brooks on the relationship of God toward the believer, where in effect God says:

You shall have as true interest in all my attributes for your good, as they are mine for my glory. . . . My grace, saith God, shall be yours to pardon you, my power shall be yours to protect you, and my wisdom shall be yours to direct you, and my goodness shall be yours to relieve you, and my mercy shall be yours to supply you, and my glory shall be yours to crown you. This is a comprehensive promise, for God to be our God: it includes all. . . [God is mine and, everything is mine], said Luther.⁵¹

So to believers, the elect of God, God’s love is manifested in a profound and glorious manner, encompassing all of His attributes and His purposes for their good and their eternal happiness.

According to the Bible, the love God has for His people did not begin at some point within creation. In reality, His love toward them existed before creation. The indication of

⁴⁶ Matthew 11:28.

⁴⁷ Matthew 23:37.

⁴⁸ II Peter 3:9b.

⁴⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 18.

⁵⁰ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 126.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

Scripture is that He knew these people in a loving way before He ever created them,⁵² and He predestined them to salvation in this love for them.⁵³ All of this is brought out in what Paul says in Romans 8:29–30, “For whom [God] foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” It is ultimately, therefore, God’s saving love that brings His people into this special relationship to Him.

It is a firm belief in this kind of love that gives the believer a sense of security in His relationship with God. Chafer highlights the effect that the Scripture’s teaching on God’s saving love ought to have on the believer: “If this truth respecting the immeasurable and immutable love of God for believers is recognized, it will be seen that, because of this unalterable motive, God will conclude perfectly what He has begun—that which He predestinated with infinite certainty.”⁵⁴ In essence, believers can have full assurance that they are completely safe because God is the One who determined to bring them to salvation by His freely given, undefeatable love. Contrary to what some teach, there is no sense in Scripture that those whom God loves as His elect could ever be lost. God’s love is complete security for the believer.

The concept of God’s electing love always brings up a very difficult question: Why has God chosen some people but not others? There is no simple answer to this question, but two things must be realized at the outset. One is that the teaching is Biblical regardless of whether one can make complete sense out of it or not. The second is that there are several truths of Scripture which must always be kept in mind when thinking about this issue.

⁵² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 676.

⁵³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, 321–322.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

The first truth is that though God is love, this does not mean He is obligated to save all people. Based on what has been shown previously, it should be evident that God is inherently a Being of love within the relationship of the Trinity. An interesting conclusion of this is that He is love regardless of whether there is anyone else to love, and also, He is perfectly happy and fulfilled within Himself in the love He has for Himself. Scripture refers to Him as the blessed God,⁵⁵ and as Steven Waterhouse states, “In references to God’s inner character, *blessed* means that God is completely and eternally satisfied with Himself.”⁵⁶ What this implies is that He would have been perfectly happy even if He had not chosen to save anyone.⁵⁷ This is a blow to how many people think, but it seems clear that God did not have to love any of us unto salvation, but chose to love some unto salvation as an overflow of His inherent love.

Another important truth is that God’s love is under the direction of His divine purpose to bring glory to His name. It is at this point that God’s unique prerogative as God must be recognized and accepted humbly. Dealing with the question of God’s electing choices, Paul states:

Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? *What* if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory.⁵⁸

There are aspects of being human that present us with certain responsibilities, choices, and level of authority. God’s responsibilities, choices, and level of authority are on a completely different

⁵⁵ I Timothy 1:11; 6:15

⁵⁶ Steven W. Waterhouse, *Not By Bread Alone: An Outlined Guide to Bible Doctrine* (Amarillo: Westcliff Press, 2003), 30.

⁵⁷ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 125.

⁵⁸ Romans 9:18–23.

plane because He is the Creator.⁵⁹ This seems to be the sense of what Paul is saying. Further, it is apparent that God has chosen to bring things about as they are in order to maximize the glory of His attributes. Only He can know the right and best way to do this, and so as finite, created beings, we must accept this.

A third truth here is that in light of God's purposes and unique prerogative, the Bible nevertheless makes it clear that He truly has a concern and love for the lost. Grudem brings out an important distinction when he says, "[I]n the presentation of Scripture the cause of election lies in God, and the cause of reprobation lies in the sinner."⁶⁰ God must never be thought of as causing people to rebel and sin. This they do on their own, and God desires them to turn to Him. All who end up in hell have done so by their own volition, and it is to God's sorrow. But how can this be if He is sovereign? MacArthur makes a helpful point in stating that even though God decrees all things in His sovereignty, He does not derive pleasure "from every aspect of what He has decreed. . . we must conclude that there is a sense in which His *decrees* do not always reflect His *desires*; His purposes are not always accomplished in accord with His *preferences*."⁶¹ Therefore, though hard to understand, it can truly be accepted that God is saddened by certain things that He has chosen to allow, including the death of the wicked.⁶² His divine purposes lead Him to allow some things that are not according to certain desires of His.

The final presentation of God's love identified by Carson is God's conditional love toward His people.⁶³ This very much correlates with the love of a parent and a child. It is a love that is conditional in the sense that it expects obedience and can only be fully enjoyed in

⁵⁹ Piper, John. "How Does a Sovereign God Love?" (February, 1983); available from http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1983/1582_How_Does_a_Sovereign_God_Love; Internet. (The article is not specifically used in this paper, but its information does pertain to some of the concepts conveyed in this paragraph.)

⁶⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 686.

⁶¹ John F. MacArthur, *The God Who Loves*, 109.

⁶² Ezekiel 18:32.

⁶³ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 19.

connection with obedience. Therefore, God disciplines those He loves,⁶⁴ and He tells His people to abide in His love by doing what He commands.⁶⁵ This distinction is very helpful because sometimes Christians may confuse aspects of God's love and believe that the Scripture is teaching they must do what God wants in order to be accepted for salvation. However, what the Scripture is truly teaching is that though believers are within the saving love of God even when they fail, they will not experience the full blessings of God's paternal love unless they abide in that love through obedience. Carson also points out that in order to become mature Christians, we must seek to come to a deeper and deeper understanding of God's love in this sense.⁶⁶ Understanding and experiencing the love of God more fully should be a primary endeavor of all believers in Christ.

Conclusion

In looking at the source, nature, and scope of God's love, we have seen that the statement "God is love" cannot be taken in a simplistic manner to mean that God relates to all people in the same manner. What has been seen, though, is that God possesses love within His very Being, is completely satisfied within this internal relationship, and this love overflows into love for others. In his divine purposes, He has created a world in which He is able to show forth the various aspects of His glory, including the display of His incredible love. This love is most clearly and most amazingly revealed against the backdrop of a world infested with evil. Though this has brought about situations that are not favorable on one level, it has allowed God to fully and powerfully demonstrate the full scope of His love and mercy to the joy of His people.

Augustine brings all of this into perspective when he writes:

⁶⁴ Hebrews 12:6.

⁶⁵ John 15:10.

⁶⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 81.

A commander triumphs in victory, yet he could not have conquered had he not fought—the greater the danger in battle, the more joyful the triumph. Also, the storm tosses the voyagers, threatens shipwreck, and everyone turns pale in the presence of death. Then the sky and the sea grow calm and they rejoice as much as they had feared. And a loved one is sick and his pulse indicates danger. All who desire his safety are themselves sick at heart, but then he recovers, though still unable to walk with his former strength. However, there is more joy now than there was before when he walked sound and strong.⁶⁷

And so it is with us. Because God has ordained a world in which there would be sin and the great danger of facing God's eternal punishment, we are able to most deeply experience His amazing love and mercy in saving us. This brings about His greatest glory and our greatest joy, and so it will be for all eternity.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *Confessions* (Rewritten and updated by Dr. Tom Gill. Gainseville: Bridge-Logos, 2003), 195.

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