

## HOW HAS GOD LOVED US?

These words come from the pen of a Jewish prophet named Malachi. As the last spokesman of the Old Testament, he raised a troubling question. How can we take comfort in the love of God if we don't feel loved? What if circumstances seem to say that God is ignoring us, that He has abandoned us to our own pain, and that He is deliberately withholding from us what He could so easily grant?

Malachi, a messenger to God's "chosen people," assures us that we are not the first to ask such questions. He gives us a chance to see why the love of God is one of the most misunderstood truths of the Bible.

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## WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ABOUT THE LOVE OF GOD?

- "I think He loves us unconditionally, whether we love Him or not."
- "I believe God loves us. But that doesn't mean I'm religious. The way I see it, if God loves us, what do we have to worry about?"
- "I want to believe God loves us. But that might be reading too much human emotion into Him."
- "I used to believe in a God of love. But some things have happened to me that I really don't want to talk about."
- "I think God loves us, but it's probably a different kind of love than we show for one another. I think He loves us in ways that we might not even recognize as love."
- "I believe God loves me. But I often have a hard time reconciling that with the way I'm feeling about myself."

### **The question has a history.**

Conflicting opinions about the love of God are more than a symptom of our times. Confusion about whether God cares about us can be traced all the way back to the closing days of the Old Testament. Even then, some of the most religious people in the world were wondering how they could believe in a God who said He loved them while acting as though He didn't. In about 450 BC, Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, said to the people of Jerusalem, "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you ask, "How have You loved us?" (Mal. 1:2 NIV).

### **There were other questions as well.**

Malachi has come down to us as a two-way conversation between God and His "chosen nation." Eighteen times Malachi asked questions in behalf of God. Ten times he asked

questions in behalf of his Jewish countrymen. Through the pen of Malachi, Israel answered God's questions with more of their own:

- How have You loved us? (1:2).
- How have we shown contempt for You? (1:6).
- How can You say we've defiled You? (1:7).
- Why don't You answer our prayers? (2:13-14).
- How have we wearied You? (2:17).
- Where is Your sense of fairness? (2:17).
- How do You expect us to return to You? (3:7).
- How have we robbed You? (3:8).
- What have we said against You? (3:13).
- What did we gain by serving You? (3:14).

**Put these questions in another context.**

To see how amazing these questions are, put them in the mouth of a wife who after 50 years of marriage still isn't convinced that her husband loves her. Imagine overhearing one side of a telephone conversation where a 75-year-old woman says to her husband, "How can you say you have loved me? Is this the way a man loves his wife, by saying she has had contempt for him? How have I hurt you? You don't even pay attention to me anymore. I talk, but you don't listen. Then you say I'm the one who wore you down. Where is your sense of decency? How, after all that has gone on between us, could you expect me to have the affection I used to have for you? You say you love me, yet in the very same breath you accuse me of ruining your name and reputation. You call this love? I don't think so. I don't know what I've gained by living for these 50 years locked to the chains of your demands."

Israel, at the end of her Old Testament history, was talking like this woman. She had been married to YAHWEH for 1,000 years. Yet when told of God's love, she acted like she hadn't seen it.

Modern Jewish humor reflects the irony of a chosen people who have often felt unloved by God: "An old Jew prayed fervently in the synagogue, 'Lord, 4,000 years ago, on the slopes of Mount Sinai, You chose the Jews as a people peculiar to You, a holy people, a nation of priests, to bear the yoke of Your holy Law and to serve as witness to all the world. Lord, I am deeply sensible of the honor, but Lord, enough is enough. Surely it is time You chose somebody else' (*Isaac Asimov's Treasury of Humor*).

Gentiles have been known to pray a similar prayer: "Lord, if this is what it means to be loved by You, then please love someone else for a while."

Such prayers reflect our need for a clearer sense of what it means to be loved by God.

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## A SIMPLE WAY OF LOOKING AT A COMPLEX SUBJECT

The Bible says that God is love and that the whole of His law can be reduced to the principle of doing for others as we would want them to do for us (Mt. 22:37-39; Gal. 5:14). The Scriptures make it just as apparent, however, that there is profound complexity behind this simple principle.

Before taking a closer look at the questions and answers of Malachi, let's use a visual image to illustrate the simplicity and complexity of our subject. As a prism separates a simple shaft of light into a spectrum of colors, so the Scriptures separate the love of God into different shades of meaning.

### **God Loves In Different Ways.**

While the Bible says that God is love, it also shows us that He loves in different ways, in different degrees, and with different results. Until we carefully work through the principles and specific examples of His love, it can seem very confusing. For example, the Bible tells us that God loves impartially and without prejudice, but He also chose the nation of Israel to be the special object of His love. He loves in time, and He loves in eternity. Sometimes His love is tough, and sometimes it is tender. He loves some as they choose their way to heaven and others as they choose their way to hell.

To sort out such seemingly conflicting evidence, it is important for us to see some of the different ways God loves us.

***God Loves Unconditionally.*** The Bible makes it clear that in so many ways, God loves us because of who He is rather than because of who we are. He offers to be our God not because we are lovable but because He is loving. He offers to care for us not because of our performance, our goodness, or even because of our effort or good intentions. He loves us because that's the kind of God He is.

This is the kind of unconditional love God showed the nation of Israel when He made them His "chosen people." He did not choose Abraham's family because they were deserving (Dt. 7:7; 9:4-6). He didn't choose them because of their numbers or because of their goodness. He chose them because it was within His right and power to use Abraham's descendants to tell the story of His love.

Many years later, a son of Israel taught His disciples to show one another the kind of unconditional love that God had shown them. This Teacher said:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for

He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (Mt. 5:43-46).

We'll see more evidence of God's unilateral willingness to love us in pages 23-32 of this booklet. There we will see how God makes it possible for us to say that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39). But for now it's important to understand that there is both an unconditional side to God's love as well as a conditional side.

***God Loves Conditionally.*** Jesus reflected this side of God's love when He said to His disciples, "The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God" (Jn. 16:27). While caring for everyone, God has a special "family love" for those who believe in His Son. This love is a special love that goes beyond His affection for the whole world.

Years later, the apostle Paul wrote, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Again, while God cares about the well-being of self-centered people, we must conclude that in some affectional ways He loves (or values) a generous person more than a tightfisted one.

If the different ways God loves are not considered, we might make the mistake of thinking that because He has been kind to us, He has unconditionally accepted us as His children. Or we might forget that His children can still act in ways that deepen His affections or arouse His anger.

God is a Person whose love must be understood in the richness and fullness of His whole personality. He is love. But He is not only love. He loves according to the counsel of His wisdom, His goodness, and His eternity. His love is not blind, or indulgent, or shortsighted. His love is tough, it's tender, it's on His terms rather than ours, and it's for the sake of His glory rather than our desires.

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## HOW HAS GOD LOVED US?

Keeping in mind that God loves us in a spectrum of ways, let's take a closer look at Malachi's answer to the question, "How has God loved us?"

[In Obvious Ways We Tend To Overlook](#) (Mal. 1:2-4).

[Enough To Expose Our Contempt For Him](#) (Mal. 1:6-8).

[Enough To Give Us Our Freedom](#) (Mal. 3:16-4:2).

[God Has Shown Special Love To Some For The Sake Of All](#) (Mal. 1:11; Rom. 11:11-14).

[Enough To Care About How We Treat One Another](#) (Mal. 2:14-17; 4:5-6).

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**GOD HAS LOVED US IN OBVIOUS WAYS  
WE TEND TO OVERLOOK (MAL. 1:2-4).**

"I have loved you," says the LORD. "Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?' Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" says the LORD. "Yet Jacob I have loved; but Esau I have hated, and laid waste his mountains and his heritage for the jackals of the wilderness." Even though Edom has said, "We have been impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places." Thus says the LORD of hosts: "They may build, but I will throw down; they shall be called the Territory of Wickedness, and the people against whom the LORD will have indignation forever" (Mal. 1:2-4).

God reminded the people of Jerusalem of something as obvious as their own national existence. After 70 years of exile in Babylon, they were back in their mother city. Even though they were not satisfied with the conditions of their life, God had not forgotten them. He had given them favor with the Persian conquerors of Babylon. He had brought them back to the homeland they loved.

The same could not be said for their cousins, the Edomites. While the descendants of Jacob had been given a land with cities they hadn't built, homes they hadn't filled, wells they hadn't dug, and vineyards and olive groves they hadn't planted (Dt. 6:10-12), the descendants of Jacob's twin brother Esau had the opposite experience. God put the Edomites under a national curse. He called attention to their pride and said that even if they built their homes in mountain fortresses, He would make their homes a wasteland (Mal. 1:4). Esau's descendants would try to get up, but God would knock them down.

To this day, the obvious physical contrast between the "mountain of Jacob" and the "mountain of Esau" is apparent. Even though the descendants of Esau built strongholds high in the cliffs of Sela (in Petra, which is 50 miles south of the Dead Sea), God made their cliff dwellings desolate--a striking evidence of His judgment (see Obad. 8-18).

The Lord's choice of Jacob over his twin brother Esau was not an expression of favoritism. God didn't indulge Israel like a spoiled child or give His people immunity from the consequences of their sins. With Israel's increased privilege came increased responsibility. No other nation would end up being known as the "people of the Holocaust."

God chose Israel not only to show the world the enviable condition of those who trust Him but also to show the desolation that comes to those who refuse His offer of love.

God's chosen people ended up asking, "How have You loved us?" Their question is a reminder that sometimes our need is not to have more knowledge but to pray that we don't miss the obvious.

Isaac Asimov tells a tongue-in-cheek account of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the famous Sherlock Holmes stories. He says that Doyle once hailed a cab in Paris, threw his

handbag inside, and climbed in after it. But before he could say a word, the driver said, "Where to, Mr. Conan Doyle?" "You recognize me?" said the author in surprise. "Not really. I've never seen a picture of you." "Then how do you know I am Conan Doyle?" "Well," said the driver, "I had read in the newspapers that you were on vacation in the south of France. I noticed you getting off a train that came from Marseille. I see you have the kind of tan that bespeaks a week or more in the sun. From the inkspot on your right middle finger, I deduce that you are a writer. You have the keen look of a medical man, and the cut of clothes of an Englishman. Putting it all together, I felt you must surely be Conan Doyle, the creator of the great detective, Sherlock Holmes." Conan Doyle burst out, "But you are yourself the equal of Sherlock Holmes since you recognized me from all these small observations." "There is," said the driver, "one additional fact. Your name is lettered on your handbag."

In the details of life, we can miss the obvious signature of love. In time, Israel forgot how loving God had been in making them His chosen people and the apple of His eye. So we too can forget that our very existence reflects the many obvious ways God has loved us.

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**GOD HAS LOVED US ENOUGH TO EXPOSE  
OUR CONTEMPT FOR HIM (MAL. 1:6-8).**

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence? says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?' You offer defiled food on My altar, but say, 'In what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'The table of the LORD is contemptible.' And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 1:6-8).

In the days of Malachi, the quality of life was declining in Jerusalem. Marriages were in trouble (2:14-16). Crime was a problem (3:5). Parent-child relationships were deteriorating (4:6). Spiritual leaders lacked integrity (2:7-9). People needed encouragement and words of comfort.

Malachi did comfort them. But he also showed them that while the love of God is wonderful, it is not necessarily safe. God loves us enough to make an issue of our sin. He loves us enough to show us that many of our personal and social problems are the result of our own contempt for God.

Malachi was direct. He seemed willing to make cases of bad self-esteem worse. Rather than choosing the words that would help troubled people feel better about themselves, he seemed intent on creating feelings of guilt and regret.

Shouldn't an understanding of Israel's troubled times have prompted a man of God to offer words of encouragement and hope? The people of Israel must have longed for a soothing voice from heaven to calm their fearful hearts and to inspire courage in the face of profound spiritual disappointment.

But Malachi's love was a tough love. He cared enough to warn those who were arousing the patient anger of God. He exposed the hearts of those who thought they could fulfill their obligations to God by offering that which cost them nothing. He confronted the priests who were willing to accept offerings of the crippled and blind animals of Israel's flocks (Mal. 1:8).

That such sacrifices were not acceptable to God appears to have been a surprise to Malachi's countrymen. Sacrificing defective animals seemed to meet the needs of both religion and business. It cleansed the flocks of bad stock while still providing something to burn on the altar. They could give something to God without depriving their families or businesses in the process.

The prophet pointed out, however, that these worthless sacrifices were not about meat. They were about hearts. A blind ram offered as a sin sacrifice reflected the spiritual blindness of the offerer. A crippled animal indicated an owner's twisted walk. These imperfect sacrifices were about people who, because they didn't fear God, were also more likely to divorce their partners, ignore their children, embezzle money, or neglect a neighbor's need.

Israel didn't see it that way. When confronted with their contempt for God, they acted perplexed. "In what way have we despised Your name? . . . In what way have we defiled You?" (1:6-7).

What Israel had forgotten is that we cannot treat God as One who will take just anything we give Him. He is a jealous God who asks for first place in our hearts. Such loyalty has parallels. A wife who walks into a restaurant and finds her husband showing affection for another woman isn't apt to be satisfied to be just one of his partners. Neither is God satisfied to be just one of our loves.

When any two relationships compete with each other, one must lose. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other" (Mt. 6:24).

Instinctively, we want it to be different. We want to believe that we can serve more than one at a time. We want to believe that we can juggle our way through life keeping all the balls in the air and all the plates spinning. But God loves us enough to show that we cannot have it all. There is a trade-off for every choice. It's impossible to add without subtracting. Everything we add to our lives occupies its own place in space and time.

God loves us enough to confront our lack of respect for Him. He is not threatened by our anger or veiled contempt. He would rather have us confront the truth about ourselves than to go on thinking that we are doing better than we really are.

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**GOD HAS LOVED US ENOUGH TO  
GIVE US OUR FREEDOM (MAL. 3:16-4:2).**

Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. "They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him (Mal. 3:16-18).

Malachi's countrymen responded in a variety of ways. Some feared God. Others didn't. In the process, God loved them enough to let them choose their own way. He cared for them enough to give them freedom to decide their own destiny. Some chose the path of spiritual safety. Some shook off the prophet's message and brought great loss to themselves, their families, and the reputation of their God.

It's often assumed that if God loves us, He is the one person in life we don't have to worry about. In every generation, otherwise intelligent people lose their sense of reason when it comes to thinking about the love of God. They reason that if God loves us, He will be the Good Shepherd who loves us in spite of our actions toward Him. Bad things may happen for other reasons, they admit. But they cannot imagine that a loving God would ever let anything terrible happen as a result of what we believe or don't believe about Him.

But the last prophet of the Old Testament is like the last prophet of the New Testament. Both shake their readers out of romantic notions about the love of God. Both Malachi in the Old Testament and John in the New Testament book of Revelation reveal a God who loves us enough to allow for a freedom that is as dangerous as it is wonderful. Both speak of God's love for those who fear Him and the inevitable fiery

judgment of those who don't.

While we might find it impossible to understand how God could allow anyone to choose the hell described by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:22,29-30; 7:13-14), consider the alternative. The alternative to choice is no choice. To have no choice is to be less than human and to cease to exist in the likeness of God.

Choice is a part of the high calling given to us by God in His love. Accountability for our own decisions is part of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. With that capacity comes freedom unlike anything known either by the animal world below or the angelic world above. It is a freedom for enormous gain or loss.

Malachi reveals that God loves us enough to give us freedom of choice, but also enough to take our decisions seriously. He cares when we make a worthless sacrifice to fulfill ritual obligations (Mal. 1:6-14). He sees us when we break our promises to one another (Mal. 2:11-16). He knows when we try to protect our financial interests by withholding from Him the faith He's asked for (Mal. 3:8-11). He cares when we fear Him, and He cares when we don't (Mal. 3:16-4:3).

Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt. 10:27-28).

**GOD HAS SHOWN SPECIAL LOVE TO SOME FOR THE SAKE OF ALL (MAL. 1:11; ROM. 11:11-14).**

"For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations," says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 1:11).

God's purpose was never to make Israel the sole focus of His love. He had in view those Egyptians who would attach themselves to Hebrew friends when Israel was delivered from the Pharaoh. He had in mind Ruth the Moabite, who would say to a Jewish mother-in-law, "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16). He had in mind the queen of Sheba, who would later travel a long way to see the extent of Solomon's riches and to learn the secret of his wisdom (1 Ki. 1:10-13).

These Gentiles were a partial fulfillment of the Lord's original intent to bless all the nations of the earth through the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:3). By choosing to make an example of Israel, the Lord gave everyone else reason to want what Israel had and to ask questions about her God.

At the end of Old Testament history the Lord used this same tactic on Israel. When Malachi wrote to Jerusalem in 450 BC, he called attention to the fact that God could be more pleased with the Gentiles than with Israel (1:11).

It's not too difficult to see how God could appeal to our envy. Many of us can see ourselves in the little child who discards his toys and treats them roughly until he sees another child pick them up and play with them. Many of us who are husbands know what it is to take our wife for granted until we see another man flirt with her.

God knows the feelings of envy that can be stirred up when we see someone else pick up the treasure of opportunity we have thrown away. Yet, the Lord isn't just playing mind games with us. He is serious when He warns us that if we don't respond to His love, He will find someone else who will wholeheartedly embrace Him.

By electing some to be the special objects of His grace, God is giving everyone reason to be envious of His love. Sometimes He uses Jews to make Gentiles envious. Sometimes he uses Gentiles to make Jews jealous. He loves us enough to appeal to our own nature to turn our hearts toward Him.

I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them (Rom. 11:11-14).

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**GOD HAS LOVED US ENOUGH TO CARE ABOUT HOW WE TREAT ONE ANOTHER (MAL. 2:14-17; 4:5-6).**

**"For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence," says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously" (Mal. 2:16).**

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:5-6).

People who reject the love of God are likely to reject one another. Those who fail to find their inner security and significance in the Lord are apt to be driven by the kind of fears that cause them to be dangerous to others. Spiritually empty people tend to develop short-sighted strategies of self-protection. In a blind rush to protect their own interests, husbands reject their wives, parents ignore their children, and children despise their parents.

These are the social conditions reflected in the prophecy of Malachi. As the last prophet of the Old Testament, he reminded Israel that God hated the willful ways men were divorcing their wives. And in the last verse of that last prophecy, Malachi referred to broken parent-child relationships that had also resulted from Israel's spiritual failure.

Family conflict has been around for a long time. Most of it occurs when one or more members of a family lose a healthy sense of the fear and love of God. The husband and father who leaves his family to pursue another woman is often indulging a weak fear that he is not man enough to deal with the wife who

knows his faults. Children who go silent or who lash out angrily also feel caught between contrary forces. Because they have not yet learned to find their security in God, they struggle with fears of being rejected by parents or friends.

Outwardly, we point our finger at one another. Instinctively, we raise issues of fairness and justice. We even turn against God Himself in our anger (Mal. 2:17). But behind the tough exterior are frightened people trying to scramble to protect their own interests. Behind the anger is usually wounded pride and a fearful heart.

Recognizing the fear behind the anger helps us to see what happens when individuals of any age or circumstance refuse to accept the security of the God who loves them.

Rejecting or resisting the love of God puts all of us in a position to reject others, to protect ourselves from further pain. We may become emotionally detached, irritable, angry, demanding, or morally unprincipled. There are many self-destructive strategies for

trying to protect ourselves from the painful rejection of others. But the underlying principle is always the same. Damaged people who are not rescued and controlled by the love of God try to avoid further pain and rejection by taking their safety into their own hands. The results are never good. Our efforts to protect ourselves from further rejection turn into more thoughts and feelings that take on a tormented life of their own.

These are the problems addressed by both secular and spiritual counselors. They plague religious as well as secular victims. When analyzed by themselves, they seem to be understandable results of understandable human dynamics.

As M. Scott Peck points out in *The Road Less Traveled*, hurt people tend to be marked by:

- avoidance of pain (indulgence),
- avoidance of responsibility (projection of blame),
- avoidance of reality/truth (flight from reality),
- avoidance of change (failure to balance).

Peck goes on to show how secular insight helps hurt people learn to (1) defer gratification, (2) accept responsibility for their own choices, (3) commit themselves to reality (rather than running from it, and (4) learn to balance their expectations of everchanging circumstances.

Secular insight, however, leaves some important questions unanswered. As helpful as it is, it offers no real answers to the questions: Who am I? What is my real problem? How should I live? Who says I've got the ability to be what I should be?

It is in answering these questions that the Bible offers so much help in coming to terms with the problems of rejection and lost love. It is in answering these questions that the Bible goes on to show us how to rediscover the security and grace that we have rejected but now so desperately need.

The love of God that Malachi talked about didn't end with the last of the Old Testament prophets. With the coming of night, a new dawn would follow.

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## BEYOND MALACHI

Today we see what the Jews of Malachi's day could not see. With the benefit of looking back 2,400 years, we can see how God was getting ready to make His name great among the Gentiles (Mal. 1:11). From a New Testament perspective, we can see how God would use Israel's rejection of His love as an occasion to offer Himself to the whole world. Through Israel's failure to appreciate His love, God would show it to people of all nations.

[A New Understanding.](#)  
[A New Opportunity.](#)  
[A New Identity.](#)  
[A New Example.](#)  
[A New Enablement.](#)  
[A New Sense Of Balance.](#)  
[A New Vision.](#)

## **A NEW UNDERSTANDING**

The New Testament has given us a new way to hear God when He says, "I have loved you." When we are inclined to answer back, "How have You loved us?" we have different information to deal with.

What the Old Testament Jews could not see was how far God would go to show His love for us. What they could not see is how emotionally, spiritually, and physically involved God would become to deal with the heartbreaking problem of our sin.

Today we can read several different New Testament accounts of the sufferings of One known as the Son of God. We can reflect on a Messiah who allowed Himself to be misunderstood, shamed, whipped, and scorned in a public execution outside the walls of Jerusalem. Today we can read about the anger of His Jewish countrymen, the flight of His friends, and the inhumanity of His Roman executioners.

The cross helps us realize that our most serious problems are not disease or bad environment. According to the New Testament, Christ died for our *sins*. It was on the cross that God showed He loved us enough to pay the price for the worst of our problems. It was there that He willingly suffered for our pride, our greed, our impulsiveness, our hatred, our sexual immorality, and our irreverence. On the cross, God offered a payment for our sins. In the words of the One who cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mk. 15:34), we hear the echo of our own eternal despair, as the eternal God tasted and swallowed death in our place.

How much does God love us? So much that the New Testament can say, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Through His suffering, we see the terribleness of our own rebellion. Through His pain, we see the extent of God's love for us.

But if we now have a new way to understand how God has loved us, we are also ready for a new understanding of how to accept His love.

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## A NEW OPPORTUNITY

While Old Testament Jews had many reasons to believe in the love of God, the cross of Christ went far beyond anything they had ever seen. When interpreted by the New Testament, the substitutionary death of Christ makes it clear that no one has to earn God's love. No one has to jump through moral hoops to earn His acceptance. No one has to solve difficult riddles to win His favor. No one has to live up to the legal requirements of the law of God. No one has to crawl on his knees to compensate for past sins. No one has to do such things, because God *already* loves us. He has already loved us enough to sacrifice His own Son on our behalf.

All that remains is for us to trust what He has done on our behalf. All we must do is believe that He has done for us what we could not do for ourselves (Rom. 4:5). The answer is found not by trying harder to please God but by trusting what Christ has done for us. God's love is offered to us in the form of a gift, not a reward (Eph. 2:8-10).

This is the salvation which while coming through a Jewish Messiah, and while being described by the mouths and pens of Hebrew prophets, is now offered freely to the whole world. It is the salvation described by a former rabbi who declared to Jew and Gentile alike, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.' For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom. 10:9-13 NIV). This is how much God loves us.

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## A NEW IDENTITY

The New Testament tells us that those who accept God's love in Christ become new people in the eyes of God. All who admit their sin and believe in Christ as their "sin bearer" are given a whole new way of thinking about themselves. They become children of God.

Having met the condition of accepting Christ as Savior, these people are in a position to enter fully into the love and acceptance of God. This doesn't mean God will never be displeased, angry, or unaccepting of self-destructive and disobedient behavior. It does mean that these behaviors will be handled on the basis of perfect *family* love rather than the legal judgment and condemning rejection that awaits those outside of Christ.

There is much more in this good news that is often seen or felt by those who have been raised in Christian homes or in Western culture. Full, undeserved acceptance in the love of Christ is the most profound and reassuring truth ever written.

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### **A NEW EXAMPLE**

As Christ surrendered to the pain of His cross in order to do the will of God, so we now are to surrender to the pain of whatever it takes to show our appreciation to God for all He has done for us.

The apostle Peter wrote, "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:21-25).

By being obedient to death, and thereby fulfilling the love of God for others, Christ showed us how to walk in the love that is now ours. He gave us His example at Gethsemane, which shows us that when it comes to living in and expressing the love of God, we need to be ready to say:

- "Not my will but Your will."
- "Not my thoughts but Your thoughts."
- "Not my ways but Your ways."
- "Not my feelings but Your feelings."
- "Not my power but Your power."

This doesn't mean that we discount or deny our own thoughts or emotions in the process of pursuing God. It just means that we can't trust our own thoughts or emotions to give us an accurate view of reality. Our own thoughts and emotions only give us a picture of what is happening in us. They help us to see why we must continually measure ourselves, not by ourselves but by the Word of God and the Spirit of His grace. We can trust our own heart only as it helps us to see our need of Christ, our need of His undeserved help, and our need of His undeserved love.

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### **A NEW ENABLEMENT**

The New Testament tells us that once we have been accepted into the love of God by putting ourselves totally at the mercy of Christ, we have a new life and source of strength. God's Spirit now lives within us to make it possible for us to walk in the love of God.

While we cannot feel the Spirit, we can see the evidence of His presence in us as we begin to yield to His control. As we surrender to the teachings of Christ, we begin to discover what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote, "He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11).

When we're controlled by Christ rather than ourselves, the result is a growing evidence of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). This Spirit-filled (Spirit-controlled) life is the alternative to the anger and avoidance that marks those who have not found their security in the love of God.

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### A NEW SENSE OF BALANCE

Those in Christ have a new balance between "who they are in Christ" and "how they are doing as His child." On a scale of 1 to 10, every child of God is a perfect 10 when it comes to his legal position in Christ.

Because the Bible says that the believer in Christ stands accepted by God in Christ, there is nothing that will ever separate this child from the love of God. The most important eternal issues are settled once and for all (Rom. 8:28-39).

Practically speaking, the story may be somewhat different. We may be only a meager "1" or "3" when it comes to our love, or joy, or peace. Yet we can still please God in all of our incompleteness and immaturity if we are growing in the attitudes Jesus described as "blessed" in Matthew 5:1-10. Having found legal and family acceptance through faith in Christ, we grow in that family relationship by letting Christ form a heart in us that is:

- poor in spirit, not arrogant
- sorry for sin, not proud
- meek before God, not stubborn
- hungering for righteousness, not for evil
- merciful, not critical and demanding
- pure in heart, not double-minded
- peacemakers, not dividers

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### A NEW VISION

Once we begin to see how much God has already done for us in Christ, we can begin to get a sense of what is yet ahead. Once we begin to see how much God has sacrificed and suffered for us, we have reason to say with the apostle Paul, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). If God's Son died for us, He will also live for us. Even now, Jesus assures us that while being present with us through His Spirit, He is in heaven preparing a place for us, interceding for us, and acting as our Advocate.

If God has used *time* to bring us to the end of ourselves, to bring us to Himself, to test our faith, and to show that His ability to forgive is greater than our ability to sin, then He will use *eternity* to surprise us continually with the immeasurable and inexpressible extent of His love for us!

For now, we must conclude that it is His love that causes Him to tell us to believe in His Son and to prepare expectantly for His any-moment return. It is because He loves us that He reminds us to love one another, to encourage one another, and to help one another walk a path that leaves no regrets.

It is God's love that encourages us to give up trying to trust Him in our own strength, and instead to believe that when we consciously surrender our bodies and minds to Him, He can live His life through us (Gal. 2:20; 3:2-5).

It is God's love that teaches us to believe that He calls us righteous, not when we successfully learn and obey all of His laws but rather when we believe in His Son (Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8-10; Ti. 3:5). He is our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1), and Savior (1 Jn. 4:14).

It is God's love that teaches us to feel our own weakness and helplessness. It is God's love that leads us to despair of helping ourselves. It is God's love that teaches us to have no confidence in our own flesh before discovering the liberating difference that Christ can be in us (2 Cor. 3:5; 4:7).

It is God's love that calls us to a higher way of living while also assuring us that He Himself can provide the spiritual enablement for us to grow into this new way of life (1 Th. 5:24).