

THE ONE LOVE THAT ENDURES

A series of four studies on the matter of covenant.

Other titles are:

God's covenant, the inner dynamic of creation
Blood enough for the peace of the world
A future as sure as God

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available at

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It is hard to live, and certainly impossible to make progress, without love. Everything worthwhile in life needs the certainty, the hope, the resilience, the joy, the sacrifice, the forgiveness and the indifference to pettiness which are part of an enduring love.

All that is best in life still has to do with love—whether it is the kindness of a friend, the affection of a child or the many years of a faithful partnership. More particularly, the best things in life are what we have given to others, our putting others before ourselves, forgetting for a time that we had needs of our own because of finding our life in the life of another—living outside of ourselves.

We may have stepped back from love by saying that we don't hate. But the coolness of this, the indifference, is sometimes harder to bear than outright hostility. Love is what it is—and no number of surrogates will persuade us that there is no such thing as love.

One locale for love

It may be provocative to say that there is one love that endures. Each of us likes to think that we have within us reliable affections for others. But, as we say, 'there has to be a limit'. We are saying that human loves have reasonable 'cut off' points.

The disciple of Jesus—Peter—earnestly protested to his Lord that he would be faithful, even to death, but Jesus seemed strangely unimpressed by his devotion. 'Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.'

Jesus could see the limits of Peter's love and provided him with a larger frame of reference. He added: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me'. Our attentions need to be diverted from the confidence we have in our own affections, or from the doubts we have about loving, to the amazing faithful love of God and his Christ.

Love is of God. It is not in that we love God. It is not in that we love each other either. Even Jesus wanted to deny that anyone other than God was good: 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'

Participating in God's love—through covenant

It was to Israel especially that God revealed the mystery of love, and he did this by keeping his covenant with them. His purpose was not merely to demonstrate love to them. That could be alienating because they would be unable to respond in kind. His covenants included them—where they were—so that they were caught up into his purpose for the world.

God is still known today as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because he poured himself out for them and into them—and through them to other nations. These fathers of Israel found their lives so supported by the Lord's favour that they were drawn out to accomplish his ends rather than their own—or, perhaps I should say, their purposes were changed to be one with the God who had befriended them.

But it is through the nation of Israel that grew from this family that God's love was displayed to the world. The people of Israel were the special focus of God's attention. Through Moses and the prophets and their experiences in history, they knew that God had chosen them. He had loved them and was fulfilling a promise made earlier to Abraham. He called this 'keeping his covenant'.

They were rescued from slavery in Egypt. They were sustained on their way to Canaan. They were met by God at Mount Sinai and told how to live as the people of God. They were pardoned by God for gross sin. They were chastened for unfaithfulness. Later, they were given military conquest of the promised land.

In all of this, they were made partners with God—as he was holy, so they were to be holy, and he provided the way for this to occur—especially through atoning sacrifices. They participated with him in his purpose as he participated with them in their life.

The whole Bible could rightly be seen as one long love story. God had promised to bless the family of Abraham—and through him, the world, and now, he was fulfilling his promise. Certainly, his love was eternal. Another way of saying the same thing is that his covenant was eternal.

Israel often talked of God's steadfast love—and often linked this with his keeping of covenant. They also linked it with his choosing them to be his people. Choosing is essential to love. No-one is impressed with a generalist love which never alights on a particular person. God's love is specific and intentional.

Steadfast love conveyed warmth of affection. Behind the choosing and saving of Israel was an unexplainable affection—rooted in God himself and beyond scrutiny. Steadfast love is also closely linked with mercy—God had compassion on his people when they suffered through their sinfulness.

The true people of Israel loved the God of steadfast love. In some way, they became like the God they worshipped. He was their God, and they were his people.

Love is of God

We are inclined to think of our relationships in terms of rights and self-fulfilment—of ‘having’ a relationship. All this assumes that a human being is something in and of themselves. Even the pursuit of intimacy becomes an exercise in self-discovery and further isolates us from others. Community cannot be built out of people who are ‘into themselves’.

The selfishness and divisiveness of human living appears to be insurmountable—when we are confronted with it. But there is a power more potent than discord. It is the love of God. We may think that we have had the last word about God. But God has had the last word about us—and it is not that we suffer for our foolishness. It is that we be joined again to his loving.

God is love. We cannot say this of any god—or any view of God, but only of the God and Father of Jesus. While it should be plain enough in the creation, it is declared to us in Jesus Christ that God remains as love—love in himself, love for the creation, love for sinners, love stronger than death, love large enough to complete what he has begun.

God’s love is the Father—who is the fountainhead of all things. God’s love is this love focussed on his Beloved Son. God’s love is what we see in the Son who does the will of his Father. God’s love is communion between Father and Son, and, the flowing of the Holy Spirit who knows the depths of God and who can reveal the Son to us.

This God who created the worlds for his Son, and created a people who would be Bride for his Son, cannot be thwarted by our sinning. Rather, he uses this occasion to make himself and his purpose fully known to us.

One of the thrills of life—if you have not yet discovered it—is to read the Gospel of John and observe the Son of God talking about his Father, and to his Father. Love flowed between them freely. Each gave to the other, received from the other, honoured the other and served the other. The Father entrusted all of his creation to the Son, and the Son trusted the will of his Father entirely.

But the amazing thing in this relationship is that we are not left to merely observe it. Observation invites admiration, and perhaps, emulation, or perhaps, competition. But here, we are being invited to participation. Jesus knew that the love of God encompassed us. He knew the love of his Father as no other knew it, but he knew it was for all of us.

He knew also that he was to lay down his life for those the Father loved. What manner of love can call on the one on whom it is focussed to die for the others that it longs to encompass? The Father’s love longs for this: that we should say ‘Father!’ as Jesus said ‘Father!’ Therefore, the Son entered into our life, and into the alienation that we had fostered, and into the death that was its judgement.

Here is love that endures, and nowhere else. We broke communion with our Maker but we did not escape the covenant for which we were born. Love has come to us through God revealing himself, and through his reconciling us to himself. It has come as a love story of incomparable beauty—that we should be prepared as a Bride for

the Son. For this Bride he spared himself nothing—so that she would be completely his own.

It is true, God is bonded to us in faithfulness. His covenant is eternal. His love is enduring. Through all the meandering of our sinfulness and the faintness of our affections, God has been no less our God, and, has called us to participate in his loving.

Covenant love endures

What then is the most potent of all powers? God's covenant love has reached to us, not through spectacular demonstration, or conclusive victory—not yet. But Jesus Christ is the faithful love of God in person. Because he is raised from the dead and ascended to the God's right hand, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. He lives forever for this—to intervene on our behalf.

What then of our awful emptiness? What of our erratic affections? What of our discoveries that everything is tainted with selfishness? What of our unfinished loving and problems still unresolved? These are just so many paths provided by our loving Father for us to find our way back to his love. Our sin was that we wanted to love from within ourselves. Our salvation is that God gives us more than ever we lost—his love, straight from a cross and an empty tomb.

Ahead of us is a wedding in which our beauty will be feted by our true Lover, and we will be ushered into the mysteries of love which only the Father and the Son can know. In anticipation of such delights which covenant love secures for us—remember, we do not generate love—we can trust him for all that is past, and for all that is now, and for all that is to come. Love flows into our hearts now because the Holy Spirit is given to us.

To consider

What are the various ways in which you see love being pursued? Can anyone distance themselves from the matter of love?

Why is it important for the revelation of love to be told as a story—a history?

What does it mean that God's love is directed to us specifically? What does it mean that it encompasses us?

What changes come to us when we know the love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit ?

Why is the death of Christ so significant in our coming to know the love of God?

Will constancy of love ever be a human characteristic? If so, in what sense?

To read

Exod. 34; Deut. 4:37; 7:6–9; 10:14–15;
John 17; Rom. 5:1–5; 8:31–39