

# God is Love

Tim Conway | [illbehonest.com](http://illbehonest.com)

I have simply wanted to take a little season here, to look at some of the most pronounced attributes of God, or descriptions of God, that it feels like we get in God's Word. And I dealt with God is Creator, just simply because of the weight of the volume of text that we get throughout our Bibles, where God is declaring Himself to be the Creator of the heavens and the earth. That is a very prominent reality in Scripture. So we looked at that, God is Creator. We looked at God being holy. God is holy, holy, holy. That is the only attribute of God that is raised to the third power. So we looked at that, that's very pronounced in Scripture. Also, we have the various portions of Scripture where God is not identified with an adjective – like He's merciful, or He's faithful – but rather God is identified with a noun. He is equated to something, or something is described as what God is, what His essence is. And we looked at God is Spirit, God is light. And today, I want to look at God is love.

1st John. John hits us with these three words twice; once in 1st John 4:8, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." And then again down in verse 16, "So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." So that's where I want to go today: God is Love.

Let's seek the Lord one more time. Father, I'm most certain that no man has ever been sufficient to even scratch the surface of this. And if no other man has, I'm certainly not. Father, the apostle Paul prayed long ago that the Ephesians, along with all the other saints, would have the power, the strength, to comprehend with all the saints, something about the love of Christ. When we look at this we recognize it takes divine power to expand our minds; it takes the power of the Spirit of God in our inner beings to even be able to unleash the realities of the kinds of things that we're going to look at. And Lord, this will all be dry, and dead, and no good, unless you attend to it. Lord, we can speak, and words can just be words - they don't resonate, they don't strike deeply, they don't affect us. So often, that's the case. But Lord, we know what it is, some of us know; Lord we've tasted, we know what it is when suddenly the truth of God's Word speaks to us, You speak to us. And it's full, it's rich, it's electric. Father, we pray for that kind of help. If Paul found himself feeling weak and bending his knee before the Father, then Lord we would, if not in reality, bend them and bend our knees in heart right now. Lord, calling on You for the help that only You can give, the strength that only You can give, to comprehend the love of Christ and what it is, and the fullness and the vastness and the dimensions of it, the height and the depth. Lord, to know what it is; for us to perceive, even in a little bit, that God is love. Father, I pray that You would help us to perceive it, so that as we walk away from this place today, as we go about our lives, something about this would resonate with us in our minds, our thoughts, our ideas, our hearts, our worldview of things. Lord, move upon us please, in Christ's name I pray. Amen.

So, God is Love. That is the task at hand, to try to just tap this in some way. What do I say? I mean, where do I go with this? The truth is, I do feel helpless, so I'm going to simply attempt to make some observations about this, and to bring you along with me in these

observations, concerning the fact that God is love. And I trust that the Lord might in some way, to some degree, help make these things real to us. So what do I have? I think I have five observations.

The first one is this. It's very simple, but I want you to think about it. John says God is love. He doesn't say merely, or only, that God is loving. And there's a difference, and I think we feel the difference to that. We feel a weight, we feel a depth, when you speak that way. Scripture says God is merciful, but it never says God is mercy. And Scripture says God is holy - even holy, holy, holy - but it never says God is holiness. That doesn't mean, necessarily, that statements couldn't be made like that, but that God never revealed Himself like that. That's all that means. And God has specifically chosen, not to just come and say, "Behold, I am this God who is loving." He says, "I am love." In other words, I define that. I define the essence of what love is. John is taking "love", you know what he's doing? He is making it the defining moral quality of God's very being and nature. "God is" - that has to do with essence, who He is, what He is, how He is. He's saying, "God is love." This is God's representative virtue: God is, Himself, love. And listen, this isn't just simply saying, this is how God responds to man; that because God is love, God loves man. Now that may be true. He is this fountain of love, and He overflows. But you know what you find? What you find is, Jesus is giving us glimpses, doesn't He? He's talking about, to His disciples there in the Upper Room discourse in John's gospel as Jesus is preparing to go away, He's talking about the love that the Father has for Him, and He's desiring that that same trinitarian love would sweep us in. The fact is, God is love; and God is love if man never existed. God is love.

I mean, when you consider angels, God is love. But when you consider the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, what you find, what you look: Scripture, you go back before man ever existed, and you see that God Himself is a fountain of love. And the inner-trinitarian relationship is one that just overflows with love: the Father loving the Son, and the Son the Father; and both, the Spirit. That is the nature of God - it is to love. And wherever you find Him there is love, whether man is there or not. He is hitting at the very essence of who and what God is: God is love. Love is what God is. God is not God if He is not love. I mean, if you remove love from God, you might as well try to remove God from God, because God is love. That's what He is, you cannot separate the two. To strip God of love is to strip God of God.

I mean, you think about this: you imagine us. I mean, typically among men and women, it is women who are considered the fairer sex of humankind. You imagine a woman, and she's beautiful. She's beautiful in physical appearance, she's beautiful in humility, she's beautiful in godliness, she's beautiful in disposition, she's beautiful in personality. Now look, if somebody recognizes what everybody tends to recognize with these eyes and with our ears, with our perception; if somebody says, "She is beautiful," well, we have an idea about that. But if someone else says, "She isn't just beautiful, she is beauty itself." Now see, suddenly we feel that. That's like saying that she defines what beauty is. Beauty gets its definition from her: she's the sum and fullness of the term. And that's exactly what John wants us to feel. Love gets its very definition from all that God is. You have to understand this: anything in this world that is true love, resonates, it's reflected from, God is responsible for. It comes from Him. He is the defining One of love. He's the defining essence of love. He's the defining character of love. He is the defining attribute of love. All that love is, He defines. It's what He is.

Yes, this is radical terminology, for God's essence to be defined to us. He is the perfection of love. He's the fullness of it. Anything, I mean, you want to know the standard? There He is. Many have understood God is love. They picture it like this: it is His very essence. Every other thing that's true about God, swims in the ocean of this love. Every other thing. If you take His holiness, you're going to find love there. If you take His omnipotence, you're going to find love there. Now listen to this, two men (these are two of my favorites, and of course they would write on this): Edward Payson and Octavius Winslow. Edward Payson, who I have grown to appreciate immensely in the last year, listen to what he says: "As the light which proceeds from the sun may easily be separated into many different colors," – and if you have a prism you can do that, that's what the rainbow is. Light that comes from the sun to us actually comes in many different colors, and it can be separated. And what Payson is saying is: "Just as that light from the sun may be easily separated into many different colors, so the holy love of God..." He sees it to be like that light, that if you bring out the proper prism, it may diffuse itself into a multiplicity of colors. In other words, God's faithfulness, God's compassion, God's mercy, God's justice, all these different hues of this light of God. He says "which is the light and glory of His nature, may be separated into a variety of moral attributes and perfections. But though separated, they're still love. His whole nature and essence is love. His will, His works, His words, are love. He is nothing, and can do nothing, but love."

Octavius Winslow says this: "Love is so completely the essence of God that it shines out in every perfection of His nature, and is exhibited in every act of His administration. He is nothing, and can do nothing, foreign to Himself. Consequently, He is nothing, and can do nothing, in which His love is not an essential quality. All the streams of a fountain must partake essentially of the source from where they rise. All the rays of light, whatever their prismatic hues, must partake essentially of the sun from where they flow. And were not God's perfections thus modified and softened by love, were they not led on by this commanding perfection of His nature, each one and all combined would be terribly against us. His wisdom would baffle us. His power would crush us. His holiness would terrify us. His justice would condemn us."

John Wesley says this: " 'God is love' intimates that this is His darling, His reigning attribute – the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all His other perfections." I mean, what those men believe, is that love resonates from God in everything He does. It must, because God is love. Listen, when you think about the other places where a noun is set forth to describe the essence of God – God is spirit – is there anything God does where He isn't spirit? Is there anything He is, that doesn't come back to the fact that He is spirit? God is light – everything He does is light; everything about Him reveals light, it sheds light, it gives light. He is the Father of lights. And in the same way, John says, "God is love." Not just that He's loving, He is love. That's my first observation: He is love. That is the God we have to deal with – a God who is love. And it isn't just that He is, He has revealed that to us. He said, "Mankind, I reveal Myself to you this way: God is love. Whatever else you may think about Me, I am love." That is the kind of God we want, folks. There are many things about God that are true, and they're mysteries because God has never revealed them to us. But look how He reveals Himself, this is how He wants to be known by us.

Second observation: What do we make of this love? Well, I want us to see how John describes this love, because he certainly does. John says that God is love, and John also gives

us some idea. He's not bashful as to what he means by love. And look, this is important, because in our day and age we need love to be described to us. We live, do we not, we live in a world where a guy sleeps with a girl, he defiles the girl, and he says, "I love you." And so, in our world today love is pretty much set equal to sexual attraction. Or a woman comes along, and she says to a man, "I love you." And he says, "Okay, marry me." They get married. And then before long, she runs off with her boss. Why? Because what she really meant by that was, "I love you as long as I like what I get from you, as long as you fulfill me; but when you no longer fulfill me, then I no longer love you." Or somebody says, "I love the San Antonio Spurs," and it's nothing else but another word for idolatry. Or somebody says, "Oh, I love that kind of food," and all it is, is a trivializing of a very weighty expression – we bring it down to basically mundane likes and dislikes. And so we need some idea. We need a God-given definition.

What does love look like? What is John's description of this? Look, why is it that our world around us seems to be so blind to what love is? Well, bottom line this: What does Scripture say about man in his natural state? It says that he's alienated from God. Well, here's the thing: God is love, man is alienated from God; man is alienated from what love really is. If you want to know love, you have to know God. And man in his natural state is alienated from God, so he's alienated from any right perception of what love truly is. But here comes John. I mean, this is very telling, very simple. 1st John 3:16. Not John 3:16, but 1st John 3:16: "By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us." Now this is the love of God to us, the love of Christ: He laid down His life - a willingness to give even if the cost is high. It's sacrificial. Giving, benevolence, kindness. That's the idea in his mind.

Now look, he goes on here to say this: "By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." In other words, if you come to know this God who is love, then you will likewise love. And in fact, John says, if we say we know God, but we hate our brother, we are liars, we don't really know Him. Here's what this ought to produce: it ought to produce a laying down of our lives for our brothers. But listen to this, verse 17, "If anyone has the world's goods." Now you have to understand what's going on here. He's saying, look, you claim to be a child of God, you'll lay down your life for the brothers. Why? Because that's what love does. That's what God's love did, so that's what it ought to produce in you. God is the standard. God is love. If you say you know Him, this is what it ought to produce in people that know Him. And so, He's always the standard. And so, if God is calling for us to lay down our lives for others, it's because He first did it. It's because He is love, and He has done what is the greatest expression of love.

And so in verse 17 when he calls us to this: "If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" You see what he's saying? How does God's love abide in him? Why would he say that? Because God's love does open His heart. That is the nature of God, to open His heart where there is need. Have you... it's mind-boggling; it really is. You go to Scripture, and you look at anyone who sincerely calls on the Lord for help, whatever state they're in. I mean, they can be as wicked as Manasseh himself, wicked as Ahab, but when they call unto the Lord, He came. I mean, you watch Israel. They turned their back on God, again and again and again. They went after their idols, again and again and again. They went after the broken cisterns. Again, God

sent judgments one after another because of their idolatries, because of their sin, over and over and over and over again.

But you show me any place in Scripture, where they said, "Lord, we've sinned," and they cry out to Him. What does He do? I mean, what did Jonah know was going to happen if he went to the Ninevites? He knew his God. He knew his God better than some of us do. That's what caused his reluctance: he was so certain God was going to have mercy on those miserable Ninevites. And if you ever study, historically, what the Ninevites were like, they were brutal. They ripped pregnant women open, and many of them Jews. They were just brutal people. And they repent, and God just showers them. That's it. He says, "If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth." We have a God who loves in deed and truth. We have a God who doesn't close His heart. His heart is not closed to your need.

And the beauty of this is, "God is love" trumps whatever wickedness we have. I mean, you can ever be so wicked, or so foul and filthy with sin, that if you will but cry to Him, He will love you. He will love you, not just in word and talk, but in deed and truth. It's God's nature to give. It's God's nature to be kind. He's good. He's not merely benevolent, He is benevolence itself. That's what John is telling us. God is infinite with His love, it's like an ocean. God invites all of us to dive in. That's what He is doing in Scripture – constantly calling on us. Constantly. I am certain God is a thousandfold more willing to pour His love and kindness upon sinners, than many of us think He is. I mean, listen to Scripture, Isaiah 30:18, "The LORD waits to be gracious to you." What kind of words are those? Do you think it might portray a picture of a God who extends His arms in love, just like a father to his children? You know how when they're learning to walk, you put out your hands and you say, "Come to me"? This is the picture – God waiting to just wrap us up in His arms.

You say, "Is that really what God does?" I mean, listen to this, Romans 10:21, "All day long I have held out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people." I mean, look at Him in your mind, His hands of love are extended. This is the God who is love. He comes to sinners. He really does, with sincerity. There's no falseness in this. He bids men to come and dive into His love. He calls to men to come. I mean, look at Him there: arms open wide to receive sin-stained, broken, rebellious people. If you will fall into those hands I guarantee you this, you'll find them to be hands of love, you'll find them to be hands that are gentle. God will lavish on you the greatest gifts that love can devise. Do you see John here? He's looking at other Christians, and he's saying, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God." Kevin in the first hour mentioned John 14:21, 23 – Jesus is promising to manifest Himself to His people; the Father promises to come and make His dwelling place. God promises to give Himself to us. I am His, and He is mine.

You talk about the Song of Solomon, you ever go read there, you see that the love there is a picture of the love that God has for His people. And, look, to sinners He holds out those hands, and He bids men – come. Something you and I would not do to an enemy. Something you and I would not do to one that hated us as we have hated Him. And He beckons us. You think about what He promises to give us. We've sang a song, How Beautiful, that's about Christ given to the church as a husband; us being given to Christ as a bride. We get God, we get his

manifestations, we get Him in marriage. We get the love of God. We get the fullness of these things. God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son. Here's this Object of His greatest pleasure and delight. He had glory with the Father before this world began in eternity past. He was the delight of the Father's heart, the most beloved. He looks at Him, "This is My Son, in whom I am well pleased." God's heart is moved by the Son; and yet [He gave] the Son for His enemies.

He so loved. The argument of Scripture is, if He did that, how will He not...? (Kevin also talked about God withholding no good thing from those that walk uprightly). God says, if He gave up His son, if He didn't hold Him back, if He was willing to go that far in His demonstrations of love, how will He not also give us all things? All things, whatever it is that love requires, He says He's going to give. I mean, literally we don't even understand; we do not yet get it, what God has in store for us. And John, he's getting a glimpse of it - it's like breathless, you got to behold this. I mean, we're getting invited, we're getting adopted, into the very family of God Himself – sons and daughters. He's saying this is huge, what God's love does. God is love.

Love means God won't close His heart to doing the greatest good to those who want His help and His love, if they'll have it by way of Jesus Christ. I mean, that's my second observation: it is, we need some defining element about love. And it's giving, it's benevolence, it's kindness. It's heaping upon the object of love, all the good it can give. And when you have an Almighty God, with whom nothing is impossible, who is absolutely filled with love, and bent on showing the greatest infinite kindness through all the coming ages; to just pour that kindness on a people of His love; I mean, you don't want to miss that. You don't want to be on the outside looking in. This is not just about missing hell, folks. This is about getting the riches of Christ Himself, having Him, and all the fullness of what that is. You do not want to miss that. We are called to a world of love, where we are going to be swallowed up in the trinitarian love, where the same love that the Father has for His Son, He has for all those adopted sons. He pulls us into His family, wraps His arms around us.

In this world, yes, we get manifestations, but there we get the fullness. I mean, you go back, you talk about reading these biographies. Read about some of these people's lives as they were yet breathing the air of this world and they were on the very thresholds of heaven, and their eyes are being opened up to the fullness of what love has for them on the other side. And they can't hardly put it in words. They come back to those on this side, and they say, "You won't believe it if I told you what I am seeing right now." They just gasp in joy, astonishment, and awe. They say, "If only you could see what it is, you would recognize that the things in this world are but a shadow, they're diminishing, they're a trifle; if you could just see what I see right now." So that was the second thing, we need some idea about what love does, and love gives.

The third thing: I would say this, this is an observation: That God is love, that concept, that idea, it does not excite us as it should. And when I say us, I mean all mankind, depending on the category you put them in. But let's start with the lost man, because we've all been there. I mean, what does the lost man think when he hears God is love? They just think, "Well, of course He is." Lost man loves himself, so lost man expects God is going to love him. When we were lost, we love ourselves, we expect other people should treat us well, we expect people should love us, we expect God should love us. They expect it. They yawn. I mean, it's not very impressive. It doesn't thrill them like professional athletes trying to put a ball through a hoop or

something like that. They yawn at it, but they expect it. When they hear God is love, natural man thinks very little about what that means about the perfections of God Himself. They just imagine that it means that God must smile on them no matter what they do. They can be ever so wicked, they can sin, they can do the most grievous things, and yet God is still going to smile on them. He's just this perpetually smiling Santa Claus, that's what they feel when they hear God is love; that God could never hate them, God could never do anything but show them kindness. It sounds good in the natural ear to hear that.

Fallen man, they imagine in their darkened minds that 'God is love' somehow relates to how lovable God finds them. Men don't see themselves as this vile, wretched, defiled thing. That kind of terminology, you know, "God saved a wretch like me," that's how they used to write the old songs. But have you ever seen the modernized versions of some of the songs? They like to take words like that out. Man doesn't like to hear that anymore. Man doesn't like to know about a God that sees him like that anymore. Man likes to think that they're lovable to God: "Well, of course, God should love them." And, you know, 'God is love', that sounds pleasant to the natural ear, because it doesn't sound threatening. And what men like to do is, they like to dull, and distort, and dismiss, everything that makes a God that is threatening. And by the way, the God of Scripture is very threatening to sinful men. So this just sounds good. Men don't like a God that threatens them.

But then what happens where we get saved? Here you are, you're the new Christian. We get saved, and you know, just like me when I... I can remember first being exposed to the Doctrines of Grace, and you know, I was amazed, as many of you were. I can remember reading the Old Testament. I can remember Uzzah, he touches that ark: Bam!!! God kills him on the spot. I'm like, "Whoa. I never knew God was like that." Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, and you see them struck down. And even in the New Testament, you know, people say "Well, that's the Old Testament God." No, you come into the New Testament, you have Ananias and Sapphira, and God does very similar things there. And you know, as a young believer, we can really get taken up with, suddenly we're exposed to the hell of God, and the wrath of God, and the punishment of God, and the fury of God, and the justice of God. And we look at those things and we can be moved by that.

I mean, I can remember as a young Christian not too long... I think it was about three years in the Lord when ruby and I got married... and I can remember the first checks we got after I was married, I had it printed on all my checks - "God is a consuming fire." And I always had this picture of some bank teller somewhere, reading Hebrews 12:29 on our checks. And the truth is, I can remember those early days. And it's almost like, you come along to something like Mark 10:21 - "Jesus looking at the rich young ruler, loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go sell all you have, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me.' That man went away sorrowful." And, you know, I found in those early days all these Calvinists that come along, and they try to distort that, and say that it's not what it says, and that Jesus doesn't really... (that must have been Paul), because for Jesus to say that He loves somebody like that, it obviously had to be one of the elect.

You know, the truth is, I probably should have had "Jesus looked at him and loved him" printed on my checks, rather than Hebrews 12. But the fact is, texts like that, early on, probably didn't excite me. "God is a consuming fire" excited me. And it should excite us, what is true

about God. But the fact is that what we find in God's Word is a Book that is meant to express the love of God towards sinners. And it's everywhere. And that invitation of Christ was absolutely sincere to that rich young ruler. And if he would have sold it all and found Christ more precious, and he would have come to Him, even if he would have just fallen down right there, like another man in Mark's Gospel who said, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief"; if he would have fallen down and said, "Lord, I'm willing to do this, I want to do this, but it has such a grasp on me. Save me from it," he'd be in heaven right now. It was a valid invitation. He did not mock him, it was not empty. You can't say, "Well, he wasn't one of God's elect, because he walked away sorrowful and he walked away to his damnation, and so Jesus' love for him couldn't have been valid and real and legitimate and deep." And it was, and Scripture says it was.

But see, as young believers, we do. Suddenly, things are revealed to us about God that ought to excite us. But it's true, as young believers, sometimes the love of God doesn't excite us near as much as it should. Do you agree with that? I find that to be the case. A lot of times, young believers are more like Boanerges (John and James, right,) who wanted to call down fire from heaven. It's almost like if we tell people 'God is love,' we're Arminian. I mean, that's how young believers feel sometimes. And that's not true at all. That is not true. God is love.

Speaking of God's love, Octavius Winslow observed in his day, over a hundred years ago, that there are but few saints of God who study God's character and God's acts in the light of this wondrous perfection of God's nature. And he's referring to 'God is love.' He observed that many are awed by God's greatness, impressed with His holiness, tremble at His power, but how few are subdued and drawn to Him by His love. God is love.

Now I had this picture. I was thinking about the apostle John, and I was getting this picture in my mind of him. He is writing 1st John. He's being moved along by the Holy Spirit. He's being impressed upon: Divine inspiration is taking place here. Can you imagine, as he's penning this letter, the first moment that idea crossed his mind? There was a first moment when the idea that 'God is love' would have actually fallen upon the thoughts of John the apostle. And I was thinking about the moment, the realization that God wants to reveal Himself that way, and what it must have done to John right at that moment. I mean, you can tell he's already getting worked up in Chapter 3. He's like, "Just behold what manner of love this is! Behold what it is! Listen, this is out of this world, this is beyond. This is such a love that if you can get a hold... I mean, look what God has done! Have we forgotten who we are and what we've done? Have we forgotten how black with sin we were? Look what God has done! Look at the cost it took Him to do it. Look at the blood of His Son flowing."

And look, He not only just saves us and spares us from hell -- He could have just saved us, set us on a deserted Pacific Island somewhere, it would have been mercy forever. You know what He could have done? He could have just said, "You know what? When you die, you're just going to cease to exist." That would have been inexpressible mercies to anybody destined for hell and for eternal punishment. But He doesn't just say, "You won't exist." He doesn't just say, "Well, stay here on in this world forever." He doesn't do that. He says, "I'm going to make you My sons and daughters. I'm going to pull you into My family. And then in the coming ages, I'm going to demonstrate the fullness of My kindness, just immeasurable kindness. I'm going to heap on you, those of you that are in Christ, I'm going to pour that out." And John is just... I can imagine he's carried away. And then, the Spirit would have just given him that impression:



"John, do you know why My salvation is so absolutely a demonstration of love? I am love." And sometimes it's just the simplest thoughts, but they're so profound. Can you imagine the moment that was impressed upon him, how it must have just filled him with joy? What experience must that have been, John just bursting forth.

And if you think about it, think about what God does; if you just stop and you think for a second, God is actually the kind of God, that when a man has his little child dying (that we heard about in the first hour), and he goes and he prays to God, God says, "Even though death is upon the human race altogether, I'm just gonna fill them with joy. I'm gonna save their daughter." I mean, just think: God created us with human eyeballs, and He created sunsets. Once in a while, we need to stand back and say, "Why would He do that?" Sunsets could have all been brown, or gray, or He could have made our eyeballs to never see color. Walk into a garden, like a flower garden or the botanical gardens, why all the colors? Why are crepe myrtle in... these oleanders out here, they're blooming with white, but in my yard they're pink. I've seen dark red. Why? Why did God create flowers? Why did God not only make them beautiful, but give many of them an aroma? Have you ever smelled a rose? or a gardenia? Who invented that? Have you ever wondered why would He make the trees, especially in the North, change color to where they're so beautiful in the fall? Why? Have you ever thought about the intimacy between a man and a woman? Why would God even create that? Why would He create us with tongues to delight in food, and then make food across the spectrum (every color of the rainbow) for us to eat? Why would He make lemon meringue pie? Why would He make lemons? I mean, have you ever just stood back and thought? Why? You think of the rain falling, you think of a gentle breeze: we're sinners, and we get to enjoy a breeze? When the first cool front comes in the fall we get to enjoy that, when we deserve everlasting burnings? Have you ever just stood back and asked, looked at a baby and said, "Why are babies cute?" Or looked up and said, "Why is the blue in the sky beautiful? Why are these thunderhead clouds so glorious? Why? It's because God is a God of love.

I mean, brethren, again this is what we did this last time we had the Lord's supper, but have you ever just stop and say, "He sent His Son into the world, and the first miracle He did was to change water to wine." Why? I mean, here, the signature expression of My Son when I send Him and He's going to do His first public miracle, I'm going to show you what kind of God I am: He's going to turn water to wine - just the joy and the goodness that He means to heap upon mankind. I mean, just go to Scripture, behold God saving Israel for the hundredth time, after they've done what's right in their own eyes. I mean, look at them, start out with them: they come out of Egypt, and they're grumbling; and God smites them and then gives them manna. He smites them, and then He feeds them, and He gives them water. He destroys all the adults, but He shows kindness and brings them into the land of Canaan. The times of the Judges, they're doing what's right in their own eyes, but as soon as they called upon the LORD, what did He do? He did the same thing that Jonah knew He was going to do with the Ninevites. Why? Because God is love. That's how He is.

Brethren, look, let's just think about your own lives. Look at your lives, God came and saved you. Look at the things that He has done for you. Look at how He has cared for you. I look at the life of this church, we prayed for young people, and He gave us young people. We prayed for African-Americans, He gave us that. We prayed for missionaries, He gave us that.

We've prayed to have a church in Austin, He gave us that. We prayed to have a church in Corpus, in Laredo. We have prayed these various things. I can remember one time we just came together, and for no other reason (we were in a drought season, there was no prediction of rain at all), and we got together on a Wednesday night and said, "Let's just pray to God for rain in this drought time, just because God can, and He's kind." And what did we pray for, rain for the next day or for that Friday, and God brought it! Do you all remember that? I mean, why does He do things? Because He's love. He is a kind of God that says, "I sit on a throne of grace, and I'm sympathetic. I sent My Son in the likeness of your own flesh. He's a sympathetic High Priest. I sent My own Son to become one of you, and then to give Him up. And if you'll come to His throne, you'll receive mercy and you'll find grace to help in time of need. I am the kind of God that is there to give and supply needs. But come to Me, trust Me, fall into My loving hands. Cast all your cares, all your anxieties, all your sin, on Me." That's the kind of God that He is.

Brethren, behold the things He does. Behold Gethsemane! Behold the blood. Behold the anguish. Behold the cross. Behold the Son of God crying out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Why? Because of love. Yes, justice demanded it, but love initiated that. Behold that. Brethren, behold the parable of the prodigal son. Do you think Jesus Christ was exaggerating when He gave this parable, and He showed a picture of this father who was waiting? God waits to be gracious to you: a Father who waits. And when he sees the prodigal on the horizon, he runs; the father runs with open arms - ring, and robe, and sandals, and feast. Now, do you think that when Jesus tells a parable, that it exaggerates the reality, or it falls short of the reality? Brethren, if you think God is unkind and harsh and cruel, you misread that parable, you misread Calvary, you misread Gethsemane, you misread what He did in the life of Israel, you misread, brethren! God is love.

How about fourth observation: What about "God is a consuming fire"? What about the God behind that tornado that ripped through Moore, Oklahoma? I mean, what about that? God is a consuming fire - that kind of sounds at odds with 'God is love'. But listen, if these godly brothers who went before us, like Payson, Winslow, and Wesley, if they were right that 'God is love' means this is an essence that permeates everything, then I have a feeling that if we consider 'God is a consuming fire', we will find His love is there as well. And I would just remind you of this: Why does God even tell us He is a consuming fire? Is it so that we might cower with fear, and despair, and just throw up our arms, "Oh well, we're damned"? Is that why He tells us? We may find that God even telling us that, resonates with more love than we might at first perceive. Isn't God telling us simply this, that today is the day of salvation. While you have life and breath, cast yourselves upon these arms of love. Don't spurn them, don't harden yourself, don't be stiff-necked, don't go on, because God is a consuming fire." He has given it to us because He indeed waits to be gracious. And men resist His gracious advances. And if you keep doing it, if you keep refusing this staggeringly immense love that has been given to provide a substitute to bear our sins, then the consuming fire of God's justice will indeed sweep us away. But it's a warning of love.

And I ask you, even when God must become a consuming fire to His adversaries, with what heart does He do so? I mean, think about what Scripture says. Ezekiel 33:11, you know it well, "As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die,

O house of Israel?" I'll tell you, the feeling you get in Scripture is this: it is easy for God to love, and God does not take pleasure when His justice must take you out. That's the feeling you get from Scripture. God will be just, because He is just. He will do right - the Judge of all this earth will do right. But He is a Judge who reveals Himself as the God who is love, even when He becomes a consuming fire.

Brethren, He sent His Son to this world. And when they rejected Him, and when they mocked Him, and when they hated Him, here's the heart of God, Luke 19:41, "Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem." In another place He says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks." And what does He say? Not "I would not," but, "You would not. You would not! I extend My hands to a disobedient people all the day long; and you would not, you would not." When God comes as a consuming fire and His wrath falls, it falls on those who, with the light of conscience and the light of creation and the light of the gospel, have resisted the light. They've turned. They've exchanged the glory of God for every other thing under the sun. They've hated God, they despised him, they turned their back. See the heart of God. Ladies and gentlemen, no matter how you explain, how you teach, or how you otherwise interpret God's sovereignty, God's predestination, God's election; if you find that you cannot say the things I've been saying, you've gotten the heart of God all wrong. God is love.

Lamentations 3:33, "He does not afflict from His heart to grieve the children of men." He will afflict the sons of men, but it seems like that is the twisting of His arm. I mean, one of the texts that I came across this week, that I just felt I needed to stick in here because I think it's just so telltale of 'God is love'. I mean, here you have Hosea. Hosea apparently was a prophet from the northern kingdom, like Jonah was. Those are the only two we know that were from the northern kingdom. Listen to what he says in Hosea 7:1, "When I would heal Israel," -- did you get that right there? "When I would heal Israel." Will God heal you if you're in your sins? He said so, if you'll come to Him. But He says this, "When I would heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria; for they deal falsely; the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside. But they do not consider that I remember all their evil. Now their deeds surround them; they are before my face." But when you read over a few chapters, listen to this, Hosea 11:8, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim?" I mean, in light of all their sin, He says, "How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within Me; My compassion grows warm and tender." Can you feel the warmth of God in that? God is love.

We don't want to make light of God's judgments and His eternal punishment. It's no small thing to fall under the vengeance of the God who is love. I mean, listen to Octavius Winslow on this point, a point well to be taken: "Mercy is fearful when it turns to wrath. Love is consuming when it turns to anger. There is no wrath like the wrath of the Lamb." And have you ever thought about that imagery? The Lamb, the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world; the Lamb who came to take away the sins of the world. But when that Lamb is roused to anger, oh what wrath from the Lamb. I mean, even now the voice of God is this voice: "Why will you die? Why will you have Me come upon you as a consuming fire?" Ladies and gentlemen, if there are those here that know not Christ, is your sin so precious...? I'll tell you this, God is love, and if there's anything that will aggravate Him to a fury... I mean, can you imagine an earthly king if he has been insulted, he has been sinned against, he has been despised, he has been

hated; and for him to come with terms of love, terms that are so kind - to have that enemy just hate it, fight against it. I'll tell you, when his wrath comes, it will come with a severity that it would have never otherwise come with.

Is your sin so precious that you're going to hold on to it and abandon this? Is it so precious to you that you would lay down in the consuming eternal fires of God? I mean, can you imagine being in hell? Can you imagine? Can you imagine anybody in this room ending up in these eternal burnings, and the God who is love offered you an eternal weight of glory? He offered you membership in His family, He offered you marriage to His Son, He offered you full forgiveness and pardon. He offered to make you white as the new fallen snow. He offered to forgive all your crimes against Him. He offered all of that. He offered over and over. He offered to you. He came to you with His outstretched hands. He bid you, "Fall upon My grace, come to Me, know My love, swim in My love. Have it, I'll bestow it on you. Just come to Me. Surrender. Fall into these hands." Can you imagine waking up one day in hell, and realizing all that was offered to me, and I resisted it, and I fought against it, and I hated it." Like these women that were on that boat, these soldiers' wives, to just say: "I'm going to have my sin. I think I like my sin better than that." Are you going to throw away your soul for that? It's an indescribable thing to be lost forever, especially when God held forth His love to you every day of your earthly life.

You even think about God, the God of that tornado. Thirty-six square miles, they said, of Moore were wiped out. You know, people in this world like to say, "Where was God at in that?" But even in that, even in that, what is it we find from Scripture? Well, I mean, one thing to think about is, the United States of America is somewhere around 4 million square miles. What about all the other 4 million square miles of the US where sinners lived, and there weren't tornadoes? And even in the calamity itself, Daniel 9:13, "All this calamity has come upon us, yet we've not entreated the favor of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by Your truth." You see, these things are given to us to gain insight - the day is coming, time is running out, today is the day of salvation.

Isaiah 9:13, "The people did not turn to Him who struck them, nor inquire of the LORD of hosts." That's what He does that for. I mean, even in the judgments of God, He's beckoning to men: Repent. When He sends His plagues, there in Revelation, it says they did not repent and give Him glory. What did they do? They blasphemed His name. How many people blaspheme God because of that? They blaspheme Him in one of two ways, right? They either say, "God wasn't in that. God's impotent. God doesn't control storms, He would never do that." Or they just curse. You can hear them. They just use His name in vain, they just blaspheme it, when they see what happens. They don't turn to God. They dismiss Him altogether, or they find fault with Him. But God is doing this. I mean, have you ever got the weight of Scripture, where it says things like this, Psalm 136:1, "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever." There's His love; God is love; His love endures forever.

"Give thanks to the God of gods, for His steadfast love endures forever (or as the old translations say, His lovingkindness); give thanks to the Lord of lords, for His steadfast love endures forever; to Him who alone does great wonders, for His steadfast love endures forever." But then he says this: "To Him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, for His steadfast love endures forever; to Him who overthrew Pharaoh and his hosts in the Red Sea, for His steadfast love endures forever; to Him who struck down great kings, for His steadfast love endures

forever; and killed mighty kings, for His steadfast love endures forever; Sihon, king of the Amorites, for His steadfast love endures forever; and Og, king of Bashan, for His steadfast love endures forever; give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever."

Let me just tell you this, folks: God's judgments on some are His love to others. Listen, you need to understand this, Psalm 86:5 says this, "For You, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon You." His love is for those who call upon Him. And for those that don't call upon Him, for those who fight, all things work together for good to those who do love Him, for those who are called by Him, even the destruction of the ungodly. And one of the most amazing things God can do for the sake of His people is put Himself on display. Even when He puts Himself on display in tornadoes, it's for our good, and it's with loving purposes towards us. His love is in that. Even when Pharaoh was struck down, even when Og and Sihon were put to death, God's lovingkindness, God's enduring love is there. It's abiding. It's good. It's strong. Seriously, if you will look at everything God does, you will find loving purposes there, even when some of those purposes seem hard.

I'll finish very quickly with this, the fifth observation: I know that there are people in this church that struggle with fear. John himself says this, "Love casts out fear." Fear goes hand-in-hand with slavery, right? This is not a spirit of slavery that we've been given; it's a spirit of adoption. And slavery and fear go hand-to-hand in Scripture. Why? Because fear goes hand-in-hand with, John says, punishment. Fear has to do with punishment. Fear has to do with this thought, that if I don't do right, I'm going to be punished. That's how the slave works. If the slave doesn't perform just right, he gets whipped. If the slave doesn't do just what the homeowner wants, he ends up with welts on his back, like we heard. That's the mindset of a slave. And can I tell you this, some of you are gripped by this fear. And fear is always, bank on it, you can trace it back to slavery. You are falling into slavery. What John wants us to feel is this, we have been saved by a God who is altogether love. And we don't have to fear Him. We don't have to fear Him.

Brethren, we need to have this sink in, that God is love, and blow away those dark mists that often shroud our thoughts and our minds with this terror of slavery. It does, as fear comes on us. And when does it come? Usually when we're looking at ourselves: "Well, how good have I been? how well have I performed?" You see, that's all slavery talk. And that lends itself to fear, because as soon as you start measuring yourself up that way with regards to your relationship to God, you look in the mirror and you see some defect. And the slavery mentality is: "I got to suffer for that." And so you walk through life, and it's like you harbor this underlying, or maybe not so underlying, resentment for God. You find His ways hard. You end up not liking Him. You don't like that God, because you see Him as a slave master; you see Him as hard and harsh; you see Him as unkind. And the devil will be right there to breathe that in your ears. Brethren, we have the kind of God that Dan Smith talked about, that when you do something wrong, like enter the army when you shouldn't, God gets you out of it. When you do something and resist His leadings, and go to work with your partner when you shouldn't have, God gets you out of it.

We have the kind of Father that comes along, and He seeks to wean us from this world. And as He does so, He prunes off these idols. And it hurts, it's painful. But don't you realize, He is so deep in His loving purposes He means to wean us from this world, and to grow us more fond, more favourable towards Paradise. He lessens our grip, He weakens our grip on the

things here, so that we might be more heavenly minded, and set our minds on things above. His purposes are good. His providences, when they seem hard, what are they doing? What do they do? They test your faith, they make it stronger; they make you more like Christ; they break your pride; they make you more prepared for heaven. Does that sound like a mean and cruel Father? I mean, does not the writer of Hebrews say there in Hebrews 12, that we have a Father who comes along and disciplines us. Why? To be mean, cruel, harsh? No, to instill righteousness in us.

Fear. We need to put away the fear. We have a Father who really cares. God is love. He's saying to His people, I mean if anything, 1st John - yes, lost people can glean from it - but 1st John is written for God's people, and it's speaking to you. It's saying, don't fear. You believe in Jesus Christ? Don't fear. Fear has to do with punishment. It has to do with slavery. God is love. That's who your Father is. Like Psalm 48:14 says, "This is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever." I mean, you have to think, Christian: God is love - this is my God; this is my God forever and ever. The God who reveals Himself this way, He's my God. You feel like, "Oh, I messed up." Yeah, but you have a Father who is love. What does that mean for you? That means, just like with Dan Smith, He'll work it out. He'll make it right. You say, "I've sinned." Go confess it to Him, He's faithful and just to forgive it. God very much wants you to get the matter right. He very much does. You say, "Man, I blew it this week." What are you gonna do, look in the mirror and be a slave? and be riddled with the slave's fear: "Oh, I didn't measure up"? What? Like any of us have? Any of us had a perfect week? Any of us had a perfect life? That's not what He wants you thinking.

And what you're doing is, as He's telling you, He's wanting to convince you, He's saying, "I'm revealing this to My people now: I am love; not just loving, I am love. I am your God. What kind of Father do you think this makes Me? It makes Me like the father there in the parable of the prodigal son, the kind who will run to you after everything you've done, and heap on you a feast - kill the fattened lamb. "But you don't know what I did." Well, yeah, I know what the prodigal did, he didn't do good things.

Fear comes from trying to be a slave again. Dear Christian, don't be that. Your performance - you will fear; you will fear. Stare at your performance, you'll fear. But that's not what God wants you to do. He wants you to start on "I am love." And if you've been saved any amount of time, all you have to do is look at your life, and you know He is faithful. He is faithful in His love, and He will not let you go. It's like Lloyd-Jones said; you know what, we can talk theoretically about love, we can talk theoretically about God is love, but there's nothing that matters aside from experiencing it. You can try to come up with your dictionary definitions of love, but until you truly experience it (that's what you want, you want to experience it). Look, God is love. That's how He reveals Himself. He's Almighty: that means He's got the power to demonstrate that love. If you don't know anything about that love, He says, "I wait to be gracious; My arms are extended to you." I tell you this, you will find Him a thousand times more inclined to save you than you think. Sinners tend to have this hesitation, that God somehow stands back and is aloof from them. Paul says, "No, He's close. He's close to every one of you, and He saves all who call upon Him." He will shower you in this love. Well, I know this just scratches the surface, and I know it's gone long, so we'll end with that. May God take something from that and make this real. Amen.