

1 John 4:8-12

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[0 : 00] Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. Now, if you didn't know that, shame on you, I don't know what I can say. But if you didn't, I just take the opportunity to inform you.

And to those of the male species in the congregation, can I just say that if you haven't ordered flowers yet, it's too late.

And don't even think of buying some at the petrol station because I'm assured that that doesn't count. You're better off not buying any than buying there.

You could try sneaking out tomorrow morning to a 24-hour Tesco. It's a long shot, but it might just work. Now, I was planning on taking my beautiful wife out for a romantic candlelit dinner tomorrow night.

But we have a Kirk Session meeting. That's men for you. A useless shower. So that will have to be postponed for another occasion. I really should confess that's not true.

[1 : 06] To lie from the pulpit would be a terrible thing. It's true about the Kirk Session meeting. It's not true about the plans that I had. But I do want to talk about love this morning.

I just want to be loved is the silent, sometimes not so silent cry of many.

And it shouldn't surprise us that this is a common cry. It shouldn't surprise us that this is a longing that is often and always found.

A longing often unfulfilled. And it ought not to surprise us because that longing is born of or gives evidence of two fundamental realities.

The first reality is that we have been created to love and to be loved. To be loved and to desire to be loved and indeed to love is of the very essence of our humanity.

[2 : 13] It's in our DNA as human beings. For that reason, it ought not to surprise us that the cry, I just want to be loved, is a very common one.

Or in any case, the unspoken longing, I just want to be loved. It's a longing for many, an unfulfilled longing often because of a second sad reality that we can observe.

And that is that love is often in very scarce supply. So many long for love and many search for love, but not all find love.

I am assured, I don't know if reliably or not, but I am assured that over five million people in the UK are using online dating sites.

I make no judgment on that. I have no problem with people doing that. I simply make the point to illustrate just what a huge phenomenon it is and how that also backs up, as it were, what I am saying concerning this longing to be loved and to love.

[3 : 29] Now, in that search for love, mistakes are made. We all make mistakes. Some confuse simply being in a relationship with a guarantee that they will be loved, and often are very cruelly disappointed when they discover that being in a relationship in and of itself is no guarantee that your longing for love will be satisfied.

Others confuse sexual encounters with love and are soon disappointed when they discover that that does not satisfy this deep longing in and of itself for love that we all have.

So let's talk about love. Let's discover what it is and where it comes from, and also let's experience this love that we want to talk about, and indeed show this love in our own lives.

Now, we've read in the first letter of John and chapter 4, and if you can turn with me to the passage that we've read there on page 1227 of our Bibles, chapter 4 of 1 John, and we'll be concentrating our attention on a couple of verses there from verse 8 to 10 particularly.

And I'll just read those verses again. We've read them already, but I'll read these three verses again, and then we will think a little a bit about what we find there concerning love and where it comes from and what it is.

[5 : 11] We read there in verse 8, Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us.

He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

In these verses, we have a great deal of information concerning love and what love is. And there is so much here, and indeed in the verse that precedes and follow from these verses that we have read, that it would merit several sermons.

But this morning what we want to do is to take more of a bird's eye view on the matter and on what we discover here in these verses, particularly as we would identify, first of all, the source of love. Where does love come from? But also, what is it? This thing called love. What is it? But also we discover here to whom this love is directed.

[6 : 30] Who are the objects of the love that is described and presented to us here? And finally also, just to briefly consider what God's purpose is in loving us.

So there are some answers that we are looking to find in these verses that we've read. First of all then, the source of love.

Now in verse 8, we have as clear an answer as we could possibly hope for. We read there in verse 8, Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.

Where does love come from? What is its source? Well, here is a very clear affirmation that John makes. He states unequivocally, very clearly, very simply, God is love.

Now as we consider what that means, let's notice carefully what John is not saying. What is not being said.

[7 : 39] So take note, we are beginning in this unusual way, I suppose, of considering what he is not saying. It's important for you to be clear on that. What is John not saying?

Well, one thing that he is not saying when he makes this affirmation, God is love, he is not saying that God is the creator of love. We might think, well, where does love come from?

Well, who has created love? Well, John is not saying that God has created love. And why does he not say that? Well, he doesn't say that because love was not created.

Love knows no beginning. Love is very much of the essence of God. It is essential to the very nature of God.

And as God is eternal, as God has no beginning, so love also is eternal. Now we can only begin to understand this, perhaps in a small measure, when we understand who God is, that God is, we might say, community.

[8 : 47] He is a community of love. The theological term that is used to describe this community of love is the Trinity. And the Trinity, to use that language, is a community of eternal love.

The Father has eternally loved the Son, and the Son has eternally loved the Father. The Spirit has eternally loved and been loved by Father and Son.

And so we could explore all the relationships within the Trinity, within this community of love that has always been. Love has not been created by God, for love has always been.

God is love. Love requires an object. To quote the song, you've got to love somebody. And God eternally has been able to love another within himself.

Now there is great depth in this, that we don't consider ourselves able to explore adequately. But certainly we would very clearly, and with confidence, make this affirmation, that God did not create love, for love has always been.

[10 : 06] For God is love, as John affirms. So that's the first thing that is not being said. John is not saying that God created love, for God is love.

Neither is he saying, and this I introduce carefully, he is not saying that God loves. Of course, God does love. But in the first instance, that is not what John is saying when he affirms, when he makes this statement, God is love.

John is saying something much more radical than simply that God loves. What he is saying is that God is love, and so he loves.

Hence, he is loving. That God loves, as he most assuredly does, is a necessary expression of who he is. And I don't think it's too bold to use that language.

A necessary expression of who he is. God is love. And so, because he is love, he must show love. He must be loving. For that is who he is.

[11 : 12] God is love. Love is essential to God. And this is not simply a theological curiosity for us to play about with or to explore.

This truth concerning God is of huge practical value to us. It grants to the believer great security for us to know that God is love, that God cannot stop loving.

If he were to stop loving, he would stop being God. And that is simply not conceivable or possible. God is love.

I wonder if you sometimes have feared or worried or been concerned that God no longer loves you, that God doesn't love you.

How could he love me, the kind of person I am? Or the evidence doesn't seem to point in that direction. Look at the life that I'm living and the problems that I have.

[12 : 19] I'm not sure if God can love me or if God continues to love me. God is love. He cannot stop loving you.

Or perhaps you are, as those of whom I made reference as I began, you're of those who are longing for love. All I want is to be loved.

You're thirsty for love. Well, if you are thirsty for love, then I invite you. I invite you to come and to drink at a fountain that will never run dry.

God is love. And so when you come to him, you will find love that is sufficient for your deepest longings. That fountain of love will never run dry, and indeed we can say can never run dry, for God is love.

God does not have a supply of love that he must share out, and that somehow as he shares it out, so some will be left out.

[13 : 29] It won't be enough for everybody. No, he is love, and so there is enough love for everybody.

Now that is a great contrast, is it not, with human relationships. Now let us by all means celebrate love within human relationships. It is God's purpose that we love one another.

It is God's purpose that as husband and wife we love one another. It is God's purpose that as parents we love our children, as we were thinking about this morning as Jonathan was sharing. His love for his daughter, that is as it should be.

It is God's purpose that children should love their parents, and in the measure that there is that love, that is to be celebrated, and to be cultivated, and to be enjoyed. But it is also true, and it is a sobering and a sad truth, that sometimes in those relationships, love runs out.

How often you hear of a couple who are struggling, and who are deciding that they can go no longer, they want to separate, and the claim that is made is that I don't love her anymore.

[14 : 40] Yes, I used to love her, but not anymore. My love has run out. Well, that never happens to God. God never runs out of love.

God is love, and so there is always enough love for those who would come to him and seek that love. Indeed, even when you don't come to him, there is love in God for you.

In the passage that we've read, there is also reference to, if you wish, the direction of this love. In what direction does it flow?

Perhaps it's obvious, given what we have already said, but notice what John says in verse 10. This is love. Again, this affirmation. This is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us.

It is God who is love who takes the initiative in establishing a relationship of love with us. He makes the first move, if we can use the language of relationships and how they begin.

[15 : 52] It is God who makes the first move, and we respond to his loving initiative. In this initiative of God to love, which we will be considering in a moment in what it consists, but in this loving initiative of God that is a perfect harmony in the community of love that is God, in the persons of the Trinity, each person sharing the same purpose and motivated by the same love.

That, then, is what we can say very inadequately concerning the source of love. But there's another question that we posed at the beginning, and that is, what is it?

What is this love that we are speaking of? God is the source of love, but what is it? What is love? Particularly, what is the love that God has for us?

Again, if we turn to the passage and to verse 10 in particular, we have what we could almost describe as a dictionary definition of God's love for us.

We read there in verse 10, this is love. It couldn't be clearer than that. You want to know what love is? Well, this is love. And what does it go on to say?

[17 : 11] What does John go on to say in giving this definition of God's love for us, for His people? This is love. Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

This is love. What is love? This is love. That God sent His one and only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

This is love. So let's think a little bit about this love so described. Before we consider the language used of God sending His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin, notice first of all that this love that we are describing has no beginning.

Now that follows from what we've already said, but notice how that truth is once again reemphasized in this language. God did not begin to love us at some point in time.

Notice what verse 9 says. This is how God showed His love among us. He sent His one and only Son. This is how God showed His love.

[18 : 31] It's not that His love began at that point. It was at that point in history that His love found concrete and visible expression. It's interesting actually that the word that is used there in verse 9 of God showing His love is the same word, the same verb that we have at the very beginning of this letter in chapter 1 and verse 2, where it speaks of the coming of Jesus.

And we read there at the beginning of verse 2, the life appeared. The word of life, Jesus Christ. The life appeared. Now that's the same verb that is used here and translated in verse 9 of our chapter.

This is how God showed His love. What is being talked about here is a public appearance of love. God had loved us from all eternity, but that love makes a public appearance in the coming of Jesus. Is that not a wonderful thing to ponder on, that God's love makes this dramatic entry visibly, publicly, onto the stage of human history in the coming of Jesus.

God shows His love. His love appears, is visible in the coming of Jesus. But it is not there that the love begins. He has loved us from before the creation of the world from all eternity.

[19 : 59] Notice also how John expresses himself there in verse 10. This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son.

He loved us already, but that love found expression in the sending of His Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

This is, if you wish, God's love in action. This is God's love made visible. How then to understand God's love in action as it is expressed in this statement?

And when I say this statement, I'm referring to the words, this is love that God sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God's love in action. What can we say about this statement, this definition of love? If we begin with the reference to our sins, it's not in the order in which we have the words, but it's, I think, perhaps a logical order in which to consider this definition of love.

[21 : 11] God sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Our sins. Our sin and rebellion, your sin, my sin, has distanced us from God.

Our sin, with emphasis on taking responsibility, with emphasis on recognizing that it is our sin, it's my sin, nobody else's fault, I am responsible.

Our sin, not only produces sadness in the heart of God, that we would sin against Him, that we would rebel against Him, that we would do our own thing and live our lives as we best see fit, ignoring what He would have us do.

There's not only, as a result of that sin, sadness in the heart of God, but there is holy and righteous anger. God is angry with sinners, and we are sinners.

Now, this is maybe not a palatable truth, but it is a truth that finds constant and persistent expression throughout the Scriptures, and we cannot simply leave it aside because it may appear to us somewhat unpalatable.

[22 : 24] Our sin, your sin, not only saddens God, but it angers God. You see, this same God who is love, this same God is also holy and just, and His holiness and justice require that sin, your sin, my sin, receive the just punishment that sin deserves.

And the Bible is clear concerning what that punishment is, the wages of sin is death. We are clearly told in Paul's letter to the Romans.

So, there is this problem, and the problem is our sin and what our sin merits. And what is God to do? God who is love, God who loves us, what is He to do in the face of this great problem of our sin?

How can God reconcile His holiness and His justice with His love? Well, we're told in this definition of love, what He does, and what He has done.

He has sent His Son. He has sent His one and only Son. He has sent Jesus. God acts in the face of this great problem.

[23 : 40] God the Father sends His Son on a rescue mission. And what does this rescue involve? And what does this rescue involve? This sending of His Son, what has He been sent to do?

How does it work that Jesus, the Son of God, can rescue us from our sin? Well, the definition of love gives us an answer to that.

He sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Jesus is sent to die as a sacrifice in our place. He is sent to die for us. He is sent to die in our place, or taking our place. I don't know if some of you have seen the Save the Children advertisement on the television.

I saw it for the first time, I think just yesterday. No Child Born to Die. It's a very fetching and gripping slogan.

[24 : 45] No Child Born to Die. Well, let me tell you this. This child, Jesus, was born to die. He came to die. That was His purpose in coming, that He might die for us, that He might die for you who are a sinner.

That is why He came. That is why He was sent. That is why God's love found its most dramatic expression in the sending of His Son, that He might die in my place, that He might die in the place of sinners.

He was sent as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. What kind of sacrifice? The word used here is an atoning sacrifice.

The Greek word that is translated, presented here, an atoning sacrifice, is translated in older translations of the Bible or older versions of the Bible as propitiation, sent as a propitiation for our sins.

What is the basic idea here? Well, the basic idea is of Jesus as a sin offering. And the purpose of the sin offering is to pay the price for sins committed.

[25 : 58] and having paid the price, so remove sin as a barrier to entry to the presence of God. The priests in the Old Testament, if they were to approach God, what they had to do was bring a sacrifice, and that sacrifice served to open the way, to pay the price for sins, that sin would no longer be a barrier.

A sin offering opening the way to the presence of God. And here we are told that God's love finds its ultimate expression and its most powerful expression in the handing over of His Son, Jesus, to be that sin offering.

What this sin offering actually does is maybe better or more fully captured by the older translation or the preferred translation of some versions with the word propitiation.

For the word propitiation includes within it the idea of turning away the anger of God from the sinner to the one who takes the sinner's place. In this case, as described to us, Jesus.

Jesus is the one who takes the sinner's place. He knew no sin of His own, and so He stood in the place of sinners and bore the punishment of sinners and indeed bore the very anger of God upon sin.

[27 : 31] His death propitiated the anger of God. Now, it's important to be clear on what is happening as we use this language of propitiation.

The primary purpose of the sacrifice of Jesus is not, and I stress, the primary purpose is not to satisfy divine anger. The primary purpose is to remove sin.

And that sin is removed because the punishment for sin is received by the one who has offered Himself as a sacrifice. And as sin is removed, so anger is also removed.

For sin is the cause of God's anger. And so when Jesus deals with sin, when He deals with our sin, when He deals with your sin, when He dies on Calvary's tree to carry and to bear the punishment of sin, He removes the need for God to be angry with sin, for sin is removed by His death.

This then is love. This is love that God sent His one and only Son, His dearly beloved Son, His eternally loved Son.

[28 : 51] He sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. The death of Jesus, the handing over of Jesus to death, the voluntary handing over of Jesus Himself to death is born of and reflects most eloquently the love of God and at the same time opens the door to us to be able to experience the love of God in the context of a trusting personal relationship with God as we trust in His Son,

Jesus, as our Savior.

And the question for us all to respond to and to come to terms with is this, do you know this love? Have you experienced this love?

This love that has been poured out on your behalf, this love that God has shown in the sending of His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Have you experienced this love? The manner in which you experience it is as you would come to Jesus confessing your sins and asking that He would forgive you your sins, that He would grant you that friendship with God that is only available and only possible as you would put your trust in Him. This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

[30 : 34] Very briefly, to whom is this love directed? A word that repeats itself on several occasions in these verses that we're considering is this small word, us. John speaks about God's love for us, God's love among us.

Clearly, he has in mind a community of people of which he forms a part. And who are these people that John speaks of? These people described in this shorthand by simply saying or speaking of us, who are they?

It's an important question because it's important for us to know if we're within that gathering or that community of people that John speaks of here. This is how God showed his love among us.

Who are they? Well, we have an answer to that question in this same passage. If we limit ourselves just to one reference, just moving a little forward to verse 15, we read, if anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God, and so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

Who are they of whom John speaks? Who are they within whom John includes himself? Well, they are those who acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God. They are those who recognize who this man Jesus is, not just some great prophet, not just some great teacher, not just some great example of a holy life, of a loving life, but the eternal Son of God who was sent by the Father as an atoning sacrifice for sin.

[32 : 18] If you acknowledge Jesus to be the one so described, and if you put your trust in him as your Savior, then you are among this community, this blessed community that God loves in such a manner and in such a fashion and so extravagantly.

Finally, what can we say concerning God's purpose in loving us? Again, we have to be careful with the wording that we are using here. Let it be very clear that God's love for his people is unconditional.

It's eternal. It's not conditioned on us fulfilling some determined purpose. God will not stop loving us if we fail or if we fall short of the purposes that he has for us.

But while we recognize that, it is also true that God does pursue a purpose in loving us. Something of that purpose is described in verse 9.

This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. There's a purpose there. Why did he send his son?

[33 : 30] That we might live through him. That we might live in him, through him. And the idea here goes beyond simply being granted new life, though that is part of what is being suggested.

It also involves the manner of new life that we are loved to live. If I can just repeat that expression, we are loved by God, we are loved to live.

That is his purpose, that we might live in a particular manner. And what is the manner of life that we are loved to live? Well, at the heart of that manner of life is that we too might love.

As we are loved, so we in turn too must love. Dear friends, verse 11, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

This is the purpose that God pursues in loving us, that we might love one another. The principle distinguishing mark of the Christian in the Bible is not doctrinal or confessional.

[34 : 42] The principle mark is not what you believe, important though that is. The principle distinguishing mark is experimental, that we would love one another.

By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, said Jesus, that you love one another. This is the distinguishing mark.

You can tick all the boxes of doctrinal orthodoxy, and that is important. But the distinguishing mark identified by Jesus, that we are Christians, is that we have love one for another.

I just want to be loved. Well, Jesus has an answer to that longing cry. And the answer that He brings to you this morning is this, come to me.

Come to me. Your longing is embraced by my desire. I just want to love you. You just want to be loved. Well, what I want to do is to love you.

[35 : 46] I gave my life as an atoning sacrifice for your sins is the answer that Jesus brings to you this morning. And He says to you, come to me and enjoy that forgiveness and that new life that I am ready and willing to give to you.

And so I would say to you also, yes, come and receive of that love, and as you receive, give. Let us pray. Let us pray.