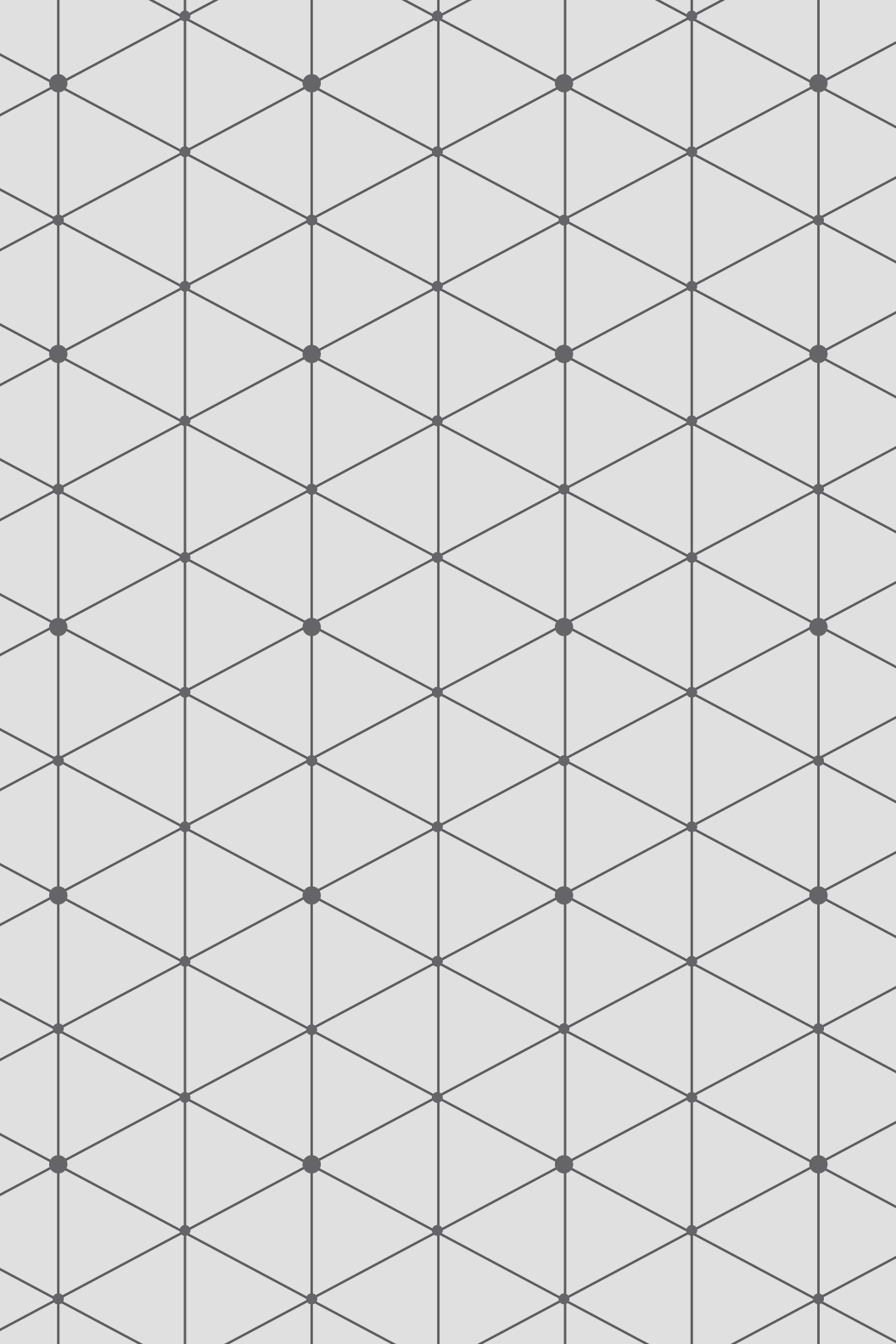


*Chapter 3*

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G O D *is* L O V E



**Y**ou might be thinking, *Okay, Jarrid, it's great that God loves you. And it's great that you had this life-changing experience. But I haven't had that experience. How do I know that God loves me?* I get that question. I do. I remember asking it many times myself. And in a lot of ways, there's nothing I can tell you that's going to convince you that God loves you. Each of us has to discover that for ourselves. But here's what I can tell you: God's love for you—and for me and for every person ever created—is what the Bible is all about. And when it comes to knowing and understanding the love of God, his Word is a good place to start.

From the very beginning, God has relentlessly loved the humans he made. In fact, even creating humans at all was an act of love—a desire for relationship so profound and passionate it's hard for us to understand. The act of loving is so integral to God's character that the Bible tells us,

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for *love comes from God*. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But *anyone*

*who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. *This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. *We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.*

*God is love*, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.

I JOHN 4:7-17, EMPHASIS ADDED

Do you see what John is saying in this passage? If anyone does not love others, then that person doesn't know God. Why? Because *God is love*. It's that simple. No matter who we are or what we've done, God loves us and wants us to know his love. There's no partiality in his eyes. His love runs rampant and wild. If our lives are without love, then our lives are without God.

I could write this entire book on how we see the reality of God's love in and through all of Scripture. Just look at the book of Exodus. God's people, the Israelites, were slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh feared their numbers—there were so many of them that they could overthrow him! So Pharaoh made slavery a living hell for all the Hebrews.

The Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves. They appointed brutal slave drivers over them, hoping to wear them down with crushing labor. They forced them to build the cities of Pithom and Rameses as supply centers for the king. But the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more the Israelites multiplied and spread, and the more alarmed the Egyptians became. So the Egyptians worked the people of Israel without mercy. They made their lives bitter, forcing them to mix mortar and make bricks and do all the work in the fields. They were ruthless in all their demands.

EXODUS 1:11-14

Moses, our not-so-fearless leader in the story, was protected from death as a child, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, raised as an Egyptian, and then given a crazy revelation from God through a burning bush: God saw the Israelites. He loved them deeply. And he wanted them to be free.

Moses audaciously confronted Pharaoh with God's command to let God's people go. And Pharaoh, who wanted to keep his slaves, ignored all the warnings.

Moses and Aaron went and spoke to Pharaoh. They told him, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Let my people go so they may hold a festival in my honor in the wilderness."

"Is that so?" retorted Pharaoh. "And who is the LORD? Why should I listen to him and let Israel go? I don't know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go."

But Aaron and Moses persisted. "The God of the Hebrews has met with us," they declared. "So let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness so we can offer sacrifices to the LORD our God. If we don't, he will kill us with a plague or with the sword."

Pharaoh replied, "Moses and Aaron, why are you distracting the people from their tasks? Get back to work! Look, there are many of your people in the land, and you are stopping them from their work."

EXODUS 5:1-5

God's love doesn't give up in the face of resistance. He doesn't let the words of man get in the way of his rescue. Real love persists. Real love pursues. And that's exactly what we see God doing in this story.

Freeing the Israelites—and doing it through Moses, who had run away from Egypt and had tried to talk God out of using him—would seem to be a daunting task, an impossible mission. But that's what God does. His wisdom, power, and love take impossible out of the equation. *Nothing* can stand between God and his love for those he calls his own. No man, no power, no army, no sword, no hardship, no enemy.

I'm sure the Israelites had often prayed that God would free them from their bondage. But I wonder how many of them had started to give up. How many of them believed the lie that God didn't love them anymore, that he had abandoned them?

But he didn't abandon them. And he doesn't abandon us either.

God used Moses to continue to speak to Pharaoh after he refused to listen to their request. And as Pharaoh still refused to listen, God acted. Blood, frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn (see Exodus 7–11). All of these were part of God's punishment against Pharaoh for not releasing his people. These are the great lengths God will go to show love to his people. These are the lengths he will go to set them free.

After the tenth plague, Pharaoh seemed to have had

enough. In Exodus 12:31 we find him calling for Moses and Aaron during the night:

“Get out!” he ordered. “Leave my people—and take the rest of the Israelites with you! Go and worship the LORD as you have requested.”

Pharaoh had had enough and was willing to let God’s people go. And God didn’t leave his people there, even at the point of freedom. His love doesn’t extend only to the point of our obvious need, because we always need it. God gave the Israelites safe passage through the waters, parting the Red Sea and swallowing up Pharaoh’s army within it. Then God gave Moses the law, the way to point people toward God, the way for them to follow him and remain in his ever-present love. Because nothing—not outer forces or inner turmoil, not even our own rebellion—stops God’s love.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?  
Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine  
or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than  
conquerors through him who loved us. For I am



convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ROMANS 8:35-39, NIV

God's against-all-odds love for us is just as powerful and pursuing as his love for the Israelites. We are his people. His love never changes. It has no bounds, no fear, and no prerequisites. We will always find ourselves face-to-face with God's love no matter where we find ourselves. He meets us right where we are.

God freeing the Israelites from the hands of Pharaoh is an incredible example of his love for his people. God is in the business of protecting his family and going to extreme lengths to make sure they know they are loved. He is a loving Father constantly loving and pursuing his children. And his ultimate act of love was yet another rescue.

### *A Crown Full of Thorns*

Jesus is God's love embodied. Jesus is God's rescue made flesh. Jesus—his life, his death, his resurrection—is the greatest example of God's love. Just as in Exodus, God sent someone to free his people from bondage. Except this freedom isn't from physical slavery: God sent his one and only Son,

Jesus, to liberate his children from the bondage of sin and brokenness—to free you and me, if we choose to follow him out of the slavery we're in.

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

JOHN 3:16

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, was hung on a cross in our place to pay a penalty that he didn't owe. He became one of us, wore a crown of thorns, took our judgment, bore our sins, took nails in his hands, and gave up his life so that we might have the opportunity to find life in him.

You can tell the depth of someone's love by what it costs. Christ's great love cost him his life. This act of love is the definition of love itself: giving up your life for the sake of another.

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

JOHN 15:13

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, with the freedom from sin, we see God's character of vibrant love made fully known.

Matthew Henry said,

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of love. He that does not love the image of God in his people, has no saving knowledge of God. For it is God's nature to be kind, and to give happiness. The law of God is love; and all would have been perfectly happy, had all obeyed it. The provision of the gospel, for the forgiveness of sin, and the salvation of sinners, consistently with God's glory and justice, shows that God is love.<sup>2</sup>

Let me say it again: God. Is. Love. There is nothing you can do to make God love you any more or any less. He died for you. It is finished. He just loves you.

Does this wreck your mind in the way it does mine? God, the creator of the universe, is the definition of love itself—and he showed this by sacrificing his one and only Son. Mind blowing, if you ask me. Our love for God cannot compare to the love he has for us. We cannot outlove him, outforgive him, or outsmart him. He's just that incredible. God foresaw all the ugly pieces of our lives and still chose to send his Son to die for us. He loved us enough to offer us rescue.

Love is the very reason Jesus' body was brutally broken upon that splintered cross. It's unbeatable, unrestricted, and hands down the greatest attribute of Jesus. God's love will transform the way you see life, and it will radically invade the way you see others. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are the definition of love itself.

*God Isn't a Bully*

Growing up, I didn't understand this about God's love. Instead, I pictured God as a guardian of good who was always looking to strike me down if I messed up or did something that made him mad. Sadly, I got this version of God from countless sermons by pastors who relied on scare tactics to get their points across. And I was brought face-to-face with this mentality when my aunt took me to my first Christian music festival. Although I was still a little skeptical about God and the whole idea of faith, I was excited about this concert I'd heard about. We pulled up to a baseball stadium where almost forty thousand Christians and non-Christians alike would be taking time to worship, listen to a message, and pray together. I was blown away by the idea. But my excitement and curiosity were quickly dampened by the sight of men, women, and children standing on buckets and yelling at people. As we walked by the growing crowd, some called us "disgusting sinners" while others raised a chant of "Repent and be saved!" The hope of Jesus, which I desperately needed, was lost amid hellfire and brimstone. And this happens way too often.

Now that I understand the love of God, which permeates Scripture and has overtaken my life, I wonder why so many people illustrate God in this way. Does the Bible talk about God's wrath? Yes. But does this mean God is nothing but wrathful, seeking to destroy anything and everything in his

way? Nope. Not even close. Never once in my studies have I seen God best represented through shouting and judgment. I can assume this happens because people miss that he's a loving and caring Father. God isn't out to get us, nor is he relentlessly searching for a reason to condemn. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that the last thing he would ever want to do is punish or condemn those he loves. Rather, because he loves us, he doesn't want us to stay in lives that keep us away from him. He has to direct us in the ways of righteousness and truth as according to his Word, the same as any parent has to do with his or her child. His correction is actually a by-product of his love for us. And I believe that just like any child, we can choose to ignore him and walk away from the life and wisdom he has for us—and that choice is what separates us from him. This is not to be confused with walking away from salvation, because that's not what I'm saying here.

But even when we turn our backs, he still offers us his love. He is constantly seeking opportunities to show you and me more love and grace. He's anything but the bully who so many people try to make him out to be. I think many of us need to shift our attention to the love and compassion he has to offer rather than the wrath and punishment that only come to those who are against him.

But while God isn't a bully, some of the people who follow him sure are. For centuries we've seen people use God's name as a tool to bully those who are different from them. Even today, people picket, protest, and yell because they believe it's

their God-given duty. Many Christians believe their calling here on earth is to pick apart the brokenness and failures of others, as if beating people down with their mess is the way to give them hope. But time and time again, I see this tactic fall short by miles. It does no good. In fact, it hurts.

This kind of mentality confuses me. It breaks my heart. And it's something that keeps me up at night. I struggle with the many pointed fingers that are used as weapons to speak shame instead of redemption, and I struggle with the extreme judgment that comes from most self-proclaimed cross bearers when someone in the public eye fails. Why do pastors and religious leaders choose to use the failures of others as sermon illustrations? Why do Christian bloggers spew personalized hatred toward someone for the sake of article shares and page views? Why do some churches bash other churches because "they're just not like us"? These are all questions I find myself pondering daily. God needs more champions of love and fewer religious trolls.

I sometimes wonder why God allows such examples of unlove to represent him. All of us fall short, but consistently living opposite of the way Jesus told us to is just outrageous. God must be shaking his head at the detrimental things being done in his name.

We can have different opinions, but our perspectives should be shared with love and sincerity, not with cruelty and rashness. Even when it's a matter of sin, we shouldn't let our responses become sinful in turn, misrepresenting

the God we say we follow! It doesn't make sense to combat something we see as darkness with more darkness.

Yes, not all Christians have chosen to act this way—but a lot of people have. We can all make decisions out of our own sense of rightness that are actively unloving toward the people Jesus loves. When we do these things, our selfish ambitions cover up our love for God—and that isn't going to impress anyone into giving God a chance in his or her life.

It all comes back to a heart issue. When we act in unloving ways and portray God as the same, we are living out of sin and pride, which fuel us to think that it's our obligation to reprimand and rebuke others who are no better or worse than we are. This type of behavior doesn't help the expansion of God's love, nor does it help bring anyone to know the love of God. Fear isn't the way to convince people to have a relationship with God. The only way to do that is love. And remember, love is who God is.