

# God Is Love

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Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:7–19

Text: 1 John 4:7

One of the Bible’s most wonderful phrases is “the love of God.” We find these words often in the Bible, such as in Romans 8:38–39, where Paul declares, “I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life,...nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Here Paul speaks of the love that lives in and proceeds from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible also speaks about the “God of love.” See 2 Corinthians 13:11: “Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.” Here Paul reminds his readers that they must love one another and “live in peace” if they would enjoy the presence of Him who is “the God of love and peace.”

*Love of God, God of love:* these are three simple words of one syllable each. They are not an empty formula or mere cliché but are deep and profound.

By God’s grace, I would like to bring you a message, on the declaration of the apostle John that “God is love” (1 John 4:17) in a series of three groups of three points. First, we will discuss three things this text does *not*

mean; secondly, three things it *does* mean; and lastly, three points of application for our hearts.

But first, we must define what the word “love” means, especially when the reference is to our God and Father. The core idea is “to cherish” or “to value greatly.” In a world where men hate God and hate each other, it is astonishing to hear that God loves this world, that He has expressed His love by sending His Son to die for sinners, promising life and salvation to all who put their trust in Him. Such is the extent to which God cherishes and values us!

### **I. What “God Is Love” Does Not Mean**

The first thing “God is love” does not mean is that “love is God.” The phrases “love is God” and “God is love” are not reversible or convertible statements. There are ways of saying something that is the same back and forth in logic and grammar. For example, “a sphere is a round object” or “a round object is a sphere.” Unfortunately, some people use flawed logic with “God is love.” They say, “Well, if God is love, then love is God.” No, that would be like saying, “An orange is round, and a baseball is round; therefore, a baseball is an orange.” God is love, but not everything that goes by the name of love is God. This popular error of saying that love is God deifies the feelings of the idea of love and depersonalizes God. We find this in humanism and in the many romantic ideas of God, which approve of nearly anything that goes by the name of love. There are spurious and deceitful kinds of love, known in Scripture as “the love of the world,” “the love of the flesh,” “the love of pleasure,” or “the love of money.” These are not love but covetousness and concupiscence, an inordinate desire to possess whatever we see and use it as we will. The end of all such false love is death and destruction.

Even sinful movements like homosexuality frequently use false reasoning about love, as if all forms of love are God. Homosexuals who claim to be Christians sometimes say things like, “Well, this relationship I’m in is love, and I like it, therefore, this must be God.” When we formulate our ideas of love from the world rather than from the Word, we will always end with a faulty or shallow view of God.

The Word of God teaches us the true idea of love. Too often, a Christian thinks of love as warm feelings oozing with sentimentality. There is a correct word for that—a Yiddish word, *schmaltz*. We say something is “schmaltzy” when it is gushing with feelings of nostalgia and sentimentality. Now, there is a place for that—most of us, no doubt, are rather sentimental—but let’s not confuse sentimentality with spirituality. The Bible says, “God is love” (*theos estin agape*). The love of God is something far other and far better than schmaltz.

The popular idea that love is God makes love ethereal and non-substantial. You can’t get a hold of it. But the love of God is different. It is real because it is rooted in God. This love that God is affects the feelings, but it is more than a feeling. It affects the heart, the mind, the soul—our whole being—because God is love in His whole being. So, to say that love is God is the first mistake.

The second error is to say that God is *only* love. People who think this way say, “Well, if God is love, then that is all God is.” We reduce all God’s attributes to just one. We find that idea in liberal theology, and it usually eliminates holiness, justice, wrath, and other uncomfortable attributes of God. It also does away with the whole idea of hell and eternal punishment. This idea that God is only love is behind phrases you may have heard, such as “My God wouldn’t send anybody to hell,” or “God loves everyone unconditionally.” But those statements are not anywhere in the Bible. They are contrary to Scripture.

No Christian would say, “God is only love, and therefore, none of these other attributes apply to Him.” But sometimes, well-meaning but misdirected and imbalanced Christians say something close to that: “God is *primarily* love.” For example, they say that, among the wonderful attributes of God, the love of God stands out as the Mount Everest. He is more love than He is all His other attributes combined, they say. They may mean well, but that is immature theology, if not simply mistaken.

An important relationship exists between all the attributes of God. God is love, but He is also many other things. We dare not make any one of them primary at the expense of making others secondary. Those who consider love the main attribute of God usually downplay His holiness or justice, and you can see it in their lives. In fact, I believe that nearly all practical errors can be traced back to a faulty view of God. So if we say that God is primarily love and we minimize His holiness, that manifests itself in a lifestyle of license and self-indulgence. If we move to the opposite extreme and say that God is mainly holiness, legalism will normally be the result. Imbalance in our view of God will result in imbalanced lives.

The truth is that God is infinite in all that He is. He is infinite in love and infinite in holiness. It is impossible for one infinity to be greater than another infinity! God is infinite love and infinite holiness. He is infinite power and wisdom. He is infinite in all that He is.

The third error is a strange one. It says that *God is not love*. This notion is easy to disprove with the following logic: if it is true to say, “God is love,” it is not true to say, “God is not love.” Very few people would explicitly deny that God is love, but some views come close to saying that. I am no expert on Islam, but it seems from reading about

their religion that Allah is not love.<sup>1</sup> They minimize his love. The idea of love is for humans perhaps, but it is not in Allah.

What about those who do believe in the God of the Bible? They sometimes overemphasize other attributes of God at the expense of God's love. As some overdo God's love, others minimize God's love. They say things like, "The essence of God is holiness; love is *merely* one of His attributes." Others will say, "Yes, God is love"; however, the way they understand it is that God is just describing Himself anthropomorphically; hence, God is not really love, for love is only a human thing. God is not a man, and therefore, it is just an illusion or figure of speech.

There is also a figure of speech called *anthropopathy*, or *anthropopathism*, which means that we attribute to God human emotions to draw some sort of analogy. Some overdo it in this area and say, "We love, so in some sense, yes, I guess you could say God loves, but not really." No, that's wrong, and it leads to an explicit denial of our text, "God is love." The fact that God is love and we have a kind of love doesn't mean that God is less than love. It means that He is more than love as we know it. He has perfect love in a greater way than we have love.

Then there are those who greatly minimize the love of God, even by appealing to other great biblical truths. Among those who are Calvinists, there can be a kind of "hyper-Calvinism" that says, "God loves only His elect; He does not love the non-elect or the reprobate in any way. He has no love of any kind, no goodness, no mercy, to all universally. Everything positive is reserved for His elect.

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1. Though Islam affirms that Allah is merciful, indeed, more merciful than all others, his mercy is strangely and largely devoid of love. Allah reserves his love and favor for those who deserve or win it by their godly conduct. The Koran calls them "winners" and describes those who forfeit His love as "losers."

That is not what the Bible says, and that is not historic Calvinism. But you see, behind that error is a distorted view of God that would basically say that God is not really love but is only love in a relational way to some people.

So, the Bible says that God is love. He is not *just* love, and He is not *barely* love. God is love—infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love. And now that we have set aside three things that the phrase “God is love” does not mean, let us move on to what “God is love” does mean.

## II. What “God Is Love” Does Mean

What does it mean that God is love? You see that phrase on greeting cards people send. Maybe you have a plaque on your bedroom wall reading, “God is love.” Little children like that. It’s very simple but very deep. So, let’s go into the depths and see what the Bible says. Here are three things the Bible means when it says, “God is love.”

### 1. *God is love in His very essence.*

The first way God is love, according to the Bible, is that God is love in His very essence. This comes from the operative verb in that sentence—God *is* love. That tells us love belongs to His very being or essence.

We find that sense in two parallel passages. The first is John 4:24, when Jesus said that God is a spirit—that is, purely spiritual, uncreated, immortal, and invisible spirit in His very being. He doesn’t have material substance or a physical body like we do. That is in reference to His essence.

Secondly, in 1 John 1:5, we read, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” Here, too, the reference is to His being or essence, for this same God is enrobed or encircled by “clouds and darkness” (Ps. 97:2). When it says that God is love, it is talking about something that concerns God’s essence, what He is within Himself, His

internal nature, not just His external relations with His creation. God is love *in Himself*, not just loving to others. Way back in eternity, before anything else existed, God was love in His very being. We are talking about His eternal substance—not what He becomes and not what He is in relation to other things. That springs from His nature, as we see if we look back far enough into eternity—His eternal substance, His eternal nature. God is unchangeable in all that He is; therefore, it would be legitimate to say, “God is love, God has always been love, and God always shall be love.” So the first point is that God is love *in His essence*.

Now, love is not some thing or some part of God. The Westminster Catechism of Faith (WCF) says that God has neither parts nor passions. We can’t say, “Well, the love of God is like the arm or leg of God.” That is not what it means. God has no parts; all of God is love. The love of God is simply God Himself loving. It is God who is love.

When we say that God is love in His essence, we do not mean God is love because He meets some higher standard of love—that there is a threshold of love somewhere and God meets it; therefore, God is love. No, this runs parallel to other biblical concepts. For example, God is truth. He is not truth because He meets a higher standard of truth; He *is* the standard. It is the same thing with love. He is love by His essence, eternally. There are no other standards. He is the standard. So when God shows love, it comes from His very being, which is eternal and absolute. It comes from within Him.

God doesn’t derive love from anything or anybody else; God’s love is self-generated. We find a fitting illustration in the sun and moon in the sky. The light that reflects from the moon comes from the sun, but the sun doesn’t reflect light. Rather, it radiates light. God is light. He is like

that sun. He is love. He doesn't *reflect* it from some other source. It comes from His very being because God is love.

All the attributes of God harmonize together. God is holy and God is love, and that tells us that His holiness is a loving holiness and His love is a holy love. It is the same thing with God's infinity. Infinite God is love, and therefore, God is infinite in His love. We find this expressed in the Bible. Psalm 86:5 addresses God as "plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee."

Let me give you a practical application at this point. If God is infinite in His love, that means we can never exhaust it. There is more than enough to go around for us in our deepest valleys and, certainly, for all eternity. Charles Spurgeon once said, "We can no more exhaust the infinite love of God than a little fish can drink up the oceans." He said that we are like little thirsty fish. Then he went on to say, "Drink on, little fish, you will never drink the oceans dry." My dear brethren, we need the love of God, and we need never fear that God will have to ration it out and make us wait in line because there is only so much to go around. He lavishes love on us and says, "Drink all you want because there is more in My infinity than you will ever be able to exhaust."

My point is, God is infinite, God is love, and therefore, He is infinite in His love. And since it is a holy love, it is a pure love. When it says "God is love," that means He is absolutely pure love without even one micron of impurity. No wrong motives, wrong desires, or wrong thoughts are to be found in His infinite love. God's love is unlike our best love. Your love on your most sanctified day will still be mixed with indwelling sin, which permeates the best of us in our best thoughts, words, and actions. Only when we get to heaven will we be totally pure. But God has always had an absolutely pure love. We need to get on our hands and knees and fall on our faces and say, "God is pure love!"

Sadly, we do not know what that is like in our human experiences. Some of us have been hurt by very impure love that is really only lust masquerading as something else. Sometimes we have been wounded when someone stops loving. Or when we try to love, we find it hindered by our tainted motives. But this never happens with God. His is an absolutely pure and infinitely absolute love.

This love within God is a kind of magnetism. God is love, and God is lovable. You see, love is a heartfelt, affectionate “going-out” to another. Within God, there is a going-out among the persons of the Godhead, a magnetism that binds God to God. It binds Him to Himself without weakness, for God is *powerful* love. He is infinite in His power and in His love, so it is an omnipotent love.

So there is our first point, that God is love in His very essence.

## *2. Love in God is essential to the Trinity.*

God is love, therefore, He has always been love. Let’s go way back into eternity in our imaginations, long before creation. The Bible says, “before the world began” (Titus 1:2). What was before the world began? Eternity. And back in eternity, there was no earth, no humans, no animals, no angels, nothing except God—from all eternity, God from Himself and within Himself. And back then God was love. How could God be love? Since God is love in His essence, God, in His highest degree of love, loves Himself. There was no one else to love. God loves Himself. If our highest duty is to love the Lord our God—I say this in a holy way—it is God’s highest duty to love God, and He does. The Puritans stressed that if our greatest privilege is to worship God, it is also part of God’s eternal being to worship Himself.

We occasionally have problems with the idea that God loves Himself because we say, “Wait a second, isn’t self-love wrong?” Many people think nothing is wrong with self-love in us, but there is when we, by nature, love ourselves more than we love God. Hence, we become gods to ourselves and usurp God’s place and deny His claims on us. Self-love in us easily becomes selfishness and greed. It results in a man-centered universe in which we forget that we are not God. But God is God, and there is nothing wrong with God loving Himself. That is His ultimate prerogative. God loves Himself. So when the Bible says that God is love, we also understand that God loves Himself.

By its very definition, love requires an object. It is a transitive verb; you love *something* or *someone*. You have your back against the wall and say, “Yet there is only one God in eternity—no angels, people, or animals. So whom did God love?” God loved Himself. You respond, “Yes, but where is the object of God loving Himself?” Here we find that God is both subject and object, God loving Himself. There is only one God, and this therefore tells us that there is something plural within God—the Trinity. God loves Himself. This is a glorious aspect of the Trinity.

God does not simply exist as one but as one in three persons. He is a God who exists always in relationship. We are given a vision in the opening verses of John’s Gospel about the reality of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,” and so on. There in the beginning was God with God! There was not only God in the glory of His unity and in the glory of His own uniqueness but there was also this marvelous reality of God with God. That means that in God there is always “with-ness.” There is always togetherness. There is never loneliness or isolation with God. There is always love in God because from eternity God the Father loved God the Son. There was never a more loving Father, and there was never a

more loved Son. And that love was reciprocated. That love is impossible for a monad, for one being that exists in undifferentiated isolation. He has nothing to love. I feel pity for Allah. But in God, there is with-ness. In God, there is and was always love, fellowship, and communion.

When God made man, He made him in His own image. God made him for community, for fellowship, for with-ness—for life in communion and community. And man must find that need fulfilled in his fellowship with God at one great level. God walked in the garden, and Adam came and spoke to Him. There was that great familiarity between God and man before the fall. And on that vertical plain, man had fellowship with God: “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God” (John 17:3)—consider the with-ness there! And then God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Gen. 2:18). God provided, for man’s social needs, a wife. He provided a family to meet man’s needs for togetherness with his own kind. It is a glorious thing that when Jesus Christ becomes man, He becomes man in the image of God. He became man in the image of God’s togetherness, in the image of God’s with-ness. Christ had a need for fellowship. He finds marvelous fulfillment in fellowship with God, at the beginning of every day to appropriate His Father and to walk with Him, while nothing makes separation between Him and His Father. Oh, the marvelous conversations they had, the marvelous prayers He offered to His Father as His only begotten Son, through the veil into the holiest place! And He went with boldness. He said, “Abba Father,” and He found fellowship.

Let’s examine this in a bit more detail, starting with the Father. The Bible repeatedly says that the Father loves the Son. John 3:35 reads, “The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.” John 5:20

reads, “For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth.”

So many verses tell us about this love of the Father for the Son. At Christ’s baptism, the Father said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Colossians 1:13 calls Him the Father’s “dear Son”—literally, the Son of His love. Consider John 17:24, where the Son of God is praying to His Father: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.” So the love of the Father for the Son isn’t just something after the incarnation. We are not talking only about incarnation love but ontological, inter-Trinitarian love from eternity past.

Proverbs 8:30 puts these words in the mouth of Jesus: “I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him.” God promised the Messiah in Isaiah 42:1, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth.” So the Bible is replete with verses like this that say that the Father has always loved the Son, within the bounds of the Trinity.

There are different kinds of love, but this love is a perfect, unique love. When the Father beheld the Son, He took a delight in the Son. He looked at Him and saw the essence of all beauty and all goodness. And when He beheld the Son, He had a perfect smile from all eternity due to this wonderful love of the Father for the Son. Now, remember, this love is eternal. There never was a time when the Father did not love the Son, and there never was a break in this love, where the Father said, “I need to take a break for a minute and recoup my resources.” No, God always had more than enough love from all eternity. From eternity, this loving relationship of the Father was going out to the Son in a benevolent way, in a way of delight toward the Son.

This is closely related to the biblical doctrine of *eternal generation*, which means that the Father always had the Son and the Son was ever with the Father. The Father loves the Son within the Trinity. What's more, the Son loves the Father as well. Jesus faithfully delivers the commandments of His Father to His disciples, "that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31). This is true in His dual nature, and Jesus had no sin. He always kept the laws of God. He kept the Great Commandment to love the Lord your God. We are going deeper than that. We are going back into eternity before Jesus became a man. God the Son loved God the Father from all eternity in His deity. As the Father eternally loved the Son, so the Son eternally received and returned that love unbroken, immediately, perfectly, without delay or hindrance or interruption. Infinite love is given to an infinite object and being returned perfectly for all eternity. Christ, being eternal God, has the infinite capacity to receive that infinite love and to return it in an infinite way perfectly acceptable to the Father.

Consider a few short sentences from one of the great Puritans, Robert Traill:

The love of one creature to another is sometimes very great. The love of the believer for Christ is so great, or the love of God to His chosen greatly exceeds both, and so does the love which Christ bears the church. But above all, beyond all these is the love which the Father has to the Son. In the first case, it is a creature loving a creature. In the second it is a creature loving God. In the third it is God loving a creature. Fourth, it is Christ loving His own body. In all, either the subject or the object of the love is a creature, but here is a paternal deity that loves and filials that Son Deity that is beloved. Surely there must be a height and depth, a length and breadth here that passes knowledge. The infinity of the Father to the Son secures all good to those whom the Son loves.

God's love to God is never unrequited. Doubtless, there are people here who have had a heart broken by unrequited love. You have loved somebody, and they don't return it. Or perhaps they loved you for a time but then stopped loving you. That is sad. That is an effect of sin in the world. It was never like that within God, and it never shall be. God's love is never unrequited; it is never too late; it is always returned. And the Father and Son always took this eternal love and delight in each other. Jonathan Edwards put it this way:

The infinite essential love of God is, as it were, an infinite and eternal mutual holy energy between the Father and the Son, a pure holy act whereby the Deity becomes nothing but an infinite and unchangeable act of love which proceeds from both the Father and Son. 'Tis all an holy energy consisting in that infinite flame of pure love and holy delight that there is, from all eternity, between the Father and the Son, immensely loving and delighting and rejoicing in each other.

That is great theology. Who says Calvinism is dry and emotionless? No, this is good theology for the heart—the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, a self-perpetuating dynamo of holy love!

But what about the Holy Spirit? Romans 15:30 speaks of “the love of the Spirit.” Here is where theologians are of one of two minds. Some say that as the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, so the Spirit comes in. The Father loves the Spirit, the Spirit loves the Father, the Son loves the Spirit, the Spirit loves the Son, and so forth. That is granted. Others such as Edwards go deeper and say, “The Spirit Himself is that bond of love between the two going back and forth.”

Someone once asked Cornelius Van Til, “What is the deepest thing you meditate on?” In a flash he said, “Oh, it is the ontological eternal Trinity. You are on holy ground

just to meditate on this love between the members of the Trinity.”

This helps us understand the nature of God’s holiness. In true love, there is always a jealousy that protects it. This jealousy is good and right between husband and wife, a jealousy that you will not share the object of your affection with another. It is between that bond of love. The same thing is true within the Trinity. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit, and they love each other in a jealousy. When anything in creation dares to intrude upon that love within and between each member of the Trinity, a holy jealousy arises within the Deity itself.

For example, when someone comes between the Father and the Son and questions the deity of the Son or questions His perfect humanity and sinlessness, the holy jealousy of the Father rises up and says, “How dare you say that against My Son, in whom I love and delight?” The holiness of God springs like a flame issuing forth from the holy love within the Trinity. Holiness and love within God are not at loggerheads; they work together in a marvelous way.

This love within the Trinity, then, is a self-perpetuating dynamo of living energy and holy glory.

### *3. God is love, and therefore, God displays His love.*

Out of love to each other, the members of the Holy Trinity chose to allow that love to overflow Themselves so that it might be displayed outside of God Himself. The internal love of God now becomes externalized to His creation. It began back in eternity in the covenant of redemption, which has been called the covenant of love. God predestined all things and said, “I will display this love in a variety of ways.” There are different words for love as well as different flavors and degrees of love. God is the source of all true love.

First John 4:7 says, "Love is of God." Out of love, God gives good gifts to His creation. James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variable-ness, neither shadow of turning." God is love; therefore God is loving and shows love to His creatures.

He so loves that He gives, and He does it in a variety of ways and degrees. There are those who say, "If God doesn't love everybody and everything equally, that is not right." God loves His creation. He loves the flowers differently than He loves the animals, yet He loves both. God loves the animals in a greater way than He does the dirt and trees. In the same way, God has a higher love for humanity and then, of course, the angels. But within humanity, it is God's sovereign prerogative to show different kinds and degrees of love. Election is His sovereign choice. God has a general love for all, but He reserves a special love for some. It all comes back to God being love; He displays the wide variety of His love. God loves all people with some love, and He loves some with all love.

Now in this display of the special ultimate love of God, God draws His elect into the special love bond within the Trinity. Look again at John 17:26, the last verse of Christ's High Priestly Prayer: "And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." The elect, therefore, were created and chosen to be the love gifts between the members of the Trinity. If you are married, you men give your wife a love gift; and you wives, you love your husband and want to show him your love. It is the same with parents to their children. The Father, Son, and Spirit within themselves in all eternity had this love, but in creating things to display it, the things they create become not only the gifts between one another but the conduits of their love. So the love from the Father to

the Son flows through us, and we get to enjoy some of that love. He brings us into the bonds of the Trinity. Now mind you, we do not become divine, but we do partake of and enjoy the love within God Himself.

The Father gives us to the Son as a gift of His love, and it goes back to the Father. That is to say, the love that is within God and is displayed within you and in His creation finds a focal point in the incarnation, in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Son is between the Father and the Spirit within the Trinity. Consequently, when the Son incarnate becomes the revelation of the love of God, we can say that the Lord Jesus Christ is the love of God in human flesh. It is not just poetry; it is good theology to say, “Jesus is love incarnate.”

Maybe some of you have been looking for love in all the wrong places. Do you want real love? Come to Jesus. He is love in the flesh, perfect love beyond our wildest imaginations. He is better than we could ever dream. He is God’s love manifest in the flesh and offered to all in the gospel.

### **III. Applications**

Let’s consider three applications of these truths:

*1. This truth, God is love, should move us to worship God.* God reveals His essence to us so that it might be reflected back to Him in the appropriate manner of worship. Worship is the act of acknowledging the worth of God and declaring what God means to us. Therefore, God shows His love for us and commends His love to us, and it should move us to worship Him. When we ponder that God is love, we should not just simply feel sentimental or just feel good within ourselves, but this should move us to worship such a God who, within the Trinity, chose to display His love to us. This should move us to worship such a God as this with a holy wonder and delight, with rejoicing and singing.

*2. The fact that God is love should move us to love God.*

When we know how wonderful God is, what a loving God He is, that should move us to love Him in return. And that helps and enables us to keep the greatest of all the commandments, to love the Lord your God with all your soul, mind, heart, and strength.

Edwards wrote, "If holiness in God consists chiefly in love to Himself, holiness in the creature must chiefly consist in love to Him." When we seek for true holiness without love, that is not holiness. Genuine holiness is bathed in the effectual love of God. When coupled with worship, it becomes a loving worship, a worshipful love, what the old theologians called *adoration*. We enjoy a holy, loving intimacy with God. In 1 John 4:19, we read, "We love him, because he first loved us."

*3. We should love one another.*

This is where we came into the text, and this is where we will go out. This is 1 John 4 over and over again. For example, it says, "Let us love one another, for love is of God." God is love. When we are moved by God, saying "God is love" is easier than to immediately love God, but the demands of love don't end there. We need to also let that love He has shown us, which fills our hearts, spill over to others. Remember, God loves them too! It is not always so easy to love our fellow sinners, nor for them to love us. But the love of God makes it possible because that love flows through us. God's loving grace flowing through us even enables us to love our enemies. If we don't, then we really don't know what it means that God is love. We appreciate those three precious words best in a loving relationship with God *and* in a love for the creatures God also loves.

All through his first epistle, John teaches that likeness is the proof of relationship. The great proof that we are truly related to the eternal God and belong to Him

is that we are like Him—especially in exercising love. John says that everyone who loves has been born of God. We are naturally too sinful for such divine love. Martin Luther said that sin turns us in upon ourselves. We do not naturally reach out to others in selfless, self-sacrificing love. But when the Spirit of God breaks into our lives and we are “born of God,” God shows us His love for us in Christ. God plants within us the seed of a new beginning. He stirs within us a love toward those who belong to Christ.

John Owen said, “Christian love is to be as unconfined as the beams of the sun. It doesn’t select on whom it will shine its beams.” Our love should not shine only on those who we think deserve it, for who is deserving of God’s love? Our love is to shine on everyone because God Himself so loved the world that He sent His Son to save it. Love, as much as righteousness, is part of the Christian’s birthmark. God is love, says John, so we too must extend love.

“God is love.” Does that move you to worship God, to love God, and to love each other? Amen.



# The New Birth

*Dr. Maarten Kuivenhoven*

Scripture Reading: Philippians 4

Text: John 3:1–15

*There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up*

*to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.

So begins John Milton's epic poem, "Paradise Lost." In these opening words, he captures what this message is all about: man's sin, man's corruption, man's need for the new birth, man's restoration in Christ.

And so, our theme is "The New Birth": 1) Its dire necessity, 2) its divine origin, and 3) its glorious possibility.

### **Its Dire Necessity**

Why do you and I need the new birth? There are several reasons we need the new birth.

#### *Man's Creation*

Implicit in what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about the need for the new birth is man's creation. In the very beginning, man's nature was created in righteousness and holiness. The very fact Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about the necessity of the new birth or regeneration implies that there was something before from which man had fallen. Therefore, man's original creation is important to consider. We need to consider what was before the fall. Man was created in God's image (LD 3, QA6). Man was created in righteousness, in moral rectitude. He was created in holiness. He was set apart by God from all creation to live for God's glory and commune with God. This is what is implied in Jesus's words as He speaks to

Nicodemus about being a teacher in Israel in verse 10, “Art thou a master/teacher in Israel and knowest not these things?” Nicodemus would have knowledge of man’s original creation in Paradise. He would know that this was God’s original creation.

Many people in our day do not know or willfully suppress this truth—that man was created in God’s image, that man could rightly know God, love Him, and live with Him. This was the original purpose for which God created man, not for the purpose of sin. We need to go back to the very beginning, to God’s purposes for mankind, to understand the effects of the fall and the dire necessity for the new birth. We need to be re-created in order to reflect God’s original purpose in creating us in the first place.

### *Man’s Corruption*

But the dire necessity of the new birth is also seen in man’s corruption. Jesus reveals man’s corruption as He speaks with Nicodemus. He addresses it in verse 3, referencing humanity’s blindness to the realities of the kingdom of God. He says, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” That is, without the new birth, you remain blind to the glorious realities of God’s redemptive work in restoring humanity to its original purpose. And then in verse 5, Jesus speaks of humanity’s deadness: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Jesus is saying, “Unless you are made alive by the power of the Spirit of God, you remain dead and impotent to enter the kingdom of God.” Jesus further addresses the human condition of sin when he says to Nicodemus in verse 12, “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?” In other words, Jesus is referencing the effects of the fall on the mind, the

heart, and the will in their inability to believe the spiritual things of God. This is what Paul writes about as well in 1 Corinthians 2:11, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.”

The new birth is thus a dire necessity to reverse the blindness sin has brought upon our minds and hearts and wills, a dire necessity to bring dead sinners into the life of God that is in Christ Jesus. Without the new birth, we remain in blindness and death. Without the regenerating work of the Spirit, our understanding remains darkened, alienated from God. The catechism speaks of it this way in QA 7: “Our nature is become so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.” If our first birth renders us this way, the new birth is a dire necessity to reverse the effects of what is called original sin. This original sin renders us corrupt and unable to do any good and makes us bent toward wickedness apart from Christ.

### *Man's Contribution*

As Jesus teaches Nicodemus, He points out that man is unable to contribute to his own new birth. Now, we need to understand where Nicodemus is coming from. He is a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were known for their legalism. They were experts in the law. They tithed of the herbs in their gardens. They laid rules and laws for the Sabbath that defied the very spirit and reason for which God made the Sabbath. They argued that the keeping of these rules and laws in addition to God's law could earn salvation. But Jesus is speaking here to Nicodemus. He speaks in stark terms: “Except a man be born again.... Except a man be born of water and the Spirit.... Ye must be born again.” This is exclusive language arguing for the fact that no human being can contribute to his own awakening or spiritual rebirth. Man's contribution is shot through with

sin and is rejected by God. Even Nicodemus's confession of who Jesus was did not pass muster with Jesus. Nicodemus rightly saw something unique about Jesus. He says in verse 2, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." I suppose Nicodemus was closer to the kingdom of heaven than most other Pharisees in his recognition of Jesus as a teacher come from God with divine origins. But he still did not see Jesus as God, as the Son of Man, a designation Jesus gives to Himself concerning His divinity in verse 13. It is in response to Nicodemus's question that Jesus says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nothing that Nicodemus could contribute in terms of religious training could get him closer to the kingdom of God.

Indeed, Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." All that the flesh produces is more flesh. A baby born into the world already possesses this original sin. The corrupt flesh only produces more corrupt flesh. Corrupt desires only bring forth corrupt actions. Humanity contributes only sin to this equation. Paul affirms this principle in Galatians 6:8, "For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption."

The new birth is a dire necessity for humanity. It is a dire necessity for those who are still dead, blind, and unbelieving. As we learn from the history of Nicodemus, religious training and knowledge does not a spiritual person make. *Except a man be born again.* You are confronted with your dire need for rebirth because of the corruption and sin that render you totally depraved and unable to earn or produce new life. It is laid down as certainty by Jesus when He says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

### **Its Divine Origin**

Where does this dire necessity of the new birth leave you? Indeed, where should it bring you?

#### *The Source*

This dire necessity should bring you to the source of this new birth, as in verse 3. It does not arise from humanity in the first place. No, we read there Jesus's words, "Except a man be born again." That word *again* can also be translated "from above." We read it again in Jesus's words in verse 7, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above. The new birth is an out-of-this-world birth. It is not like the conception and birth of children that happens in the natural sphere, in the womb, or on the earth. The new birth proceeds from God Himself, from above. Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus's teaching here. He was puzzled and thought Jesus was referring to being born again the second time in the womb. That would seem impossible. So, Jesus points out that this birth is from above. It is a second birth, as it were, but it comes entirely from above.

That's where we are directed. Our eyes are being taken off ourselves as any possible source of spiritual life. There is nothing there. We are conceived and born in sin, the Scriptures affirm in Psalm 51. We are dead in sins, in trespasses, Paul writes in Ephesians 2:5. We need this birth from above should there be any hope. And so that is where the gospel directs us amid our dire need of this new birth. It points us to the source. It comes entirely outside of us. It comes from above. That should be an encouragement for sinners. Because it comes from above, because it is divine in origin, it will not fail in its purposes. The impossibility of our human condition gives way to the glorious possibility of birth from above. Where are you looking for life? Still

in yourself? You will never find it there. You are directed to God alone.

### *The Spirit*

More specifically, you are directed to the Holy Spirit as the author of spiritual life in the hearts and minds of sinners. He comes from above and quickens and renews sinners. Verse 5 points out the power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, or the new birth: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” In verse 6, Jesus points out that the Spirit is the author of this new birth, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Holy Spirit produces spiritual life in those who are dead. The Holy Spirit is like the wind, coming sovereignly and powerfully. Children, you can’t see the wind, can you? You can’t see where it starts. You can’t see where it goes. All you can go by with the wind is the sound it makes and the effects it leaves behind. That is true of the Holy Spirit as well, as He does His enlivening work in the hearts of dead sinners. He makes them alive by His power. He makes them alive in His sovereign power. He blows where He wills. He blows upon dead bones and not only brings the bones together but breathes new life into these corpses, as the imagery from Ezekiel 36–37 shows us.

And what exactly does the Holy Spirit do in regeneration? Head III/IV of the Canons of Dort, Articles 11–13, is especially helpful so that we might understand what the Holy Spirit does as He comes with His power to effect the new birth. Listen to Article 11: “But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them and powerfully illuminates their mind by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God.” The Holy Spirit illumines the mind for a right understanding and discerning the things of the Spirit of God. The emphasis

is on the mind of man. "But by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions." He opens, softens, quickens, actuates (makes active), and strengthens the heart and will to show the effects of spiritual life.

And Article 12 says:

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation; a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation, that after God has performed His part, it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or continue unconverted. But it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the author of this work declares. It is not inferior to creation which called all things out of nothing, or the resurrection that brings life out of death. so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe.

When the Holy Spirit works through the Word, there are no stillborn children, but His work is always effective. It does not leave man neutral but brings him into the life that is in Christ. "Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence, becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue

of that grace received.” This points out the link between regeneration, faith, and repentance. Regeneration comes first, is invisible, and actuates the will so that man who is regenerated is now said to do the actual believing.

Article 13 summarizes this last truth: “The manner of this operation cannot be fully comprehended by believers in this life. Notwithstanding which, they rest satisfied with knowing and experiencing that by this grace of God they are enabled to believe with the heart, and love their Savior.” We cannot understand it fully, but we can trust the Holy Spirit in His work of regeneration and can look at the fruits of this regeneration or the birthmarks of grace—namely, faith and love toward Christ. This is where Jesus also brings Nicodemus in his consideration of the new birth—faith and love toward Christ for His saving work on the cross.

### **Its Glorious Possibility**

Indeed, that is where the Holy Spirit brings sinners in awakening them. What is the first sight of a newborn Christian? Is it not a sight of Christ brought home by the Holy Spirit? His senses dulled to Christ before but now alive to Christ and his need of Christ. Listen to how Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in verse 14: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.”

### *A Historical Lesson*

Jesus takes Nicodemus back in history. “You know the history, Nicodemus.” There were the Israelites in the wilderness. They were snake-bit and full of venom. Fiery serpents with their fiery venom infected the children of Israel. That fiery venom is a picture of sin and how it shoots through the entirety of man’s nature. But there was hope for those who were infected with this deadly poison

back in the wilderness. What was that hope? It was tied to the brass serpent on a pole. They were instructed to look. Some were just bitten and still strong. All they had to do was look and be spared. Some were so weak that all they could do was take a glimpse of the serpent. And what do we read of those who saw the serpent and looked? In Numbers 21:9, "And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." He lived. It doesn't say how they looked. It doesn't say how long they looked. It simply says, "When he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." There is life for a look to the serpent in the wilderness.

But then Jesus moves from that lesson of history to the present possibility of salvation for Nicodemus.

### *A Present Possibility*

Here he is, this Pharisee, coming to Jesus by night. He makes a confession of Jesus as a teacher sent from God. He misunderstands what Jesus is teaching about the new birth, and yet, the necessity of it is impressed on his heart. Jesus takes him back in history and then applies that historical lesson in verses 14-15 and beyond, "Even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Do you want this life from the Spirit? This new birth? It comes from God. And when you have it from God, there is a look to Christ, and this eternal life is yours. It's as easy as that. Don't complicate it further. God's work is regeneration. Your responsibility is to look. And it is in the looking that it is confirmed that you are indeed born again. A dead man can't look and won't look. But through the Word, the Spirit comes and bids you look, and even as He bids you look to Christ, He blows upon dead men and women and children and makes them alive in Christ, and they have eternal life. They look. They have the life. Amen.

# Christ and the Curse

*Dr. Brian DeVries*

Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:1–21 and Matthew 27:26–31

Text: Matthew 27:29

*Cursed*—what an awful word! And yet, that is the word spoken for the first time by the Lord when the first Adam—and we with him—fell into sin. Cursed—just as Galatians 3:10 puts it: “Cursed [is] every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” You and I all are by nature cursed, condemned, and despicable in God’s eyes. That is who we are by nature, the way we are born, with original sin, with active sins, and sins of neglect. God is pure, holy, and righteous, and every sin, even the smallest in our thoughts or deeds, is hateful to Him.

That is why Christ needed to deal with the curse, why He was put on trial. That is especially why, after His unjust trial, He was deeply humiliated. Let’s look at why Christ was mocked and ridiculed by the Roman soldiers and what happened before our blessed Savior was led away to be crucified.

Perhaps you wonder, Why did the Lord Jesus suffer so deeply? I think we all know the answer, which we must learn to give in faith and deep humility: *our sin*. Christ came to take away the curse each one of His children deserves. He came to bear, to shoulder the load, of our

curse. Everything the soldiers did to Jesus reminds us of the tragic curse of our deep fall in Adam.

That, then, leads us to our theme: Christ and the curse. Let's begin with Matthew 27:26–31:

Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers. And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head. And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him.

### **Reminding Us of the Curse**

Christ's trial before the Jewish leaders and the Roman rulers was riddled with injustice—after that devastating verdict in which Pilate succumbed to the pressure from the bloodthirsty Jews, after he washed his hands, after the Jews have called the curse of God upon their own heads. We see in verse 26 that Barabbas is released and Jesus is surrendered into the hands of the Jews to be crucified. A governor pronouncing sentence would typically say something like “You will mount the cross.”

### *Scourging*

But before our Savior walks that humiliating way to the cross, He is to undergo the violence and ridicule of the soldiers. Verse 26 shows that something terrible happens to our Savior. Jesus had to undergo scourging, something that long ago the prophets prophesied about, as if they stood there themselves. Isaiah prophecies about the

Servant of the Lord, in Isaiah 50:6, as He says, “I gave my back to the smiters.” And Psalm 129:3 puts it like this: “The plowers plowed upon my back: they made long their furrows.”

Beloved, how the Savior suffered! This was one of the cruelest things that happened after someone was condemned to die on the cross. They uncovered Jesus’s back, and with a whip—most likely made of leather straps and metal spikes at the end—they would slice open the flesh of the back of our innocent Savior. According to Jewish custom, the maximum Jesus would receive was thirty-nine lashes, but we do not know if the Romans followed Jewish law here. If they didn’t, the Savior received as many lashes until the flogger grew tired. The wonder is that the Savior innocently and willingly endured this. He *gave* His back to the smiters, Isaiah said. And just before that in Isaiah, He says, “I was not rebellious” (Isa. 50:5). Who will not weep at the sight of such cruelty?

Yet we are to remember the words of our Savior, who said, “Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children” (Luke 23:28). This was needed to save a fallen world that has plunged itself into horrible cruelty. Who of us does not remember what the Bible shows us in Genesis 4, right after Adam fell into sin? The curse was working itself out into a lack of loving concern and envy, selfishness, and hatred in Cain’s life. Sin’s curse entered our world, along with hatred, cruelty, and violence. And we all know the result: Cain murdered Abel. And when God calls Cain to account, Cain says, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 4).

Who will not weep when we see the cruelty of our own day? Babies murdered in the womb, the elderly injected with poison to die, healthy body parts of boys and girls being cut off because they want to be the other gender. Doesn’t that remind us of the words God spoke just before

the flood? The violence was so devastating that it says in Genesis 6:11–12, “The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.” Doesn’t God hear the cries of babies being killed in the womb today? And must He not answer with judgment?

But let’s turn our eyes back to the Savior, whose back was violently ripped open. Why? Because here we have the second Adam, who, in order to bring redemption, had to suffer the ugly consequences of the sins of His people. That’s why His back was torn open, plowed with deep furrows. Because God said, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal 3:10). And Galatians 3:13 explains that for Christ to redeem us from the curse of the law, He had to be made a curse for us—not only by crucifixion but also by this violent scourging. Because of our fall in Adam, cruel violence entered our world. Therefore, Christ, the second Adam, to undo the curse, had to first bear the curse. Not only was the blessed Savior scourged but He was also humiliated by being undressed, so that He was exposed and naked.

### *Naked*

Verse 27 tells us that Christ was taken “into the common hall” of Pilate’s palace, and then “they gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers.” These were strong and impressive Roman soldiers who were not afraid to kill people. The word used here for “the whole band” is *cohort*. That means either that there were about six hundred or perhaps less, just as many as they could find. And this whole group of Roman soldiers, while the crosses are being prepared, take some time to “have fun” watching and enjoying some cruelty. They start by undressing Jesus. We know that the

Romans normally led criminals out naked to the cross. But because the Jews found this offensive, they probably only humbled Him here, at their private “party,” and later, as they hang Him on the cross, there again they strip Him of His clothes so that He hangs naked and exposed at the cross. Jesus was exposed, shamed, dressed, and undressed at the will of these strong soldiers. How humiliating! How shameful this must have been to the holy heart and mind of the blessed Savior!

Again, we ask the question, Why? Well, don’t we hear in these words another echo to the curse of our fall in Adam? Adam and Eve ate from the tree. They wanted to be like God, and they were tempted and fell! What was the result? They immediately felt naked and exposed before the eyes of God and each other. Genesis 3:10–11 says, “And he [Adam] said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And he [God] said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?” The Lord specifically tells us that before the fall, everything was very, very good. Purity and bliss characterized the relationship between Adam and Eve as well as their relationship with God. The Lord shows us in Genesis 2:25, “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” But the curse brought to all of us the sense of shame that comes with nakedness.

Our culture does everything to undo that sense of shame, everything to make sinful nakedness accepted. But that shame will never be annulled on this current earth. God will not take away the results of the curse unless we know Jesus Christ, who bears this curse, because that is what *we* deserve. Let’s not point fingers at the world. Let’s point fingers at ourselves. How much of this mindset has entered our lives? How much have we become desensitized to what is shameful?

Let me ask some questions: What are you watching? What kinds of things are you watching that are actually cursed by God? Have you been watching films that show nakedness and violence? Young men, have you perhaps been playing video games that promote violence? Ladies, does your clothing expose your body or cover it? Have you indulged in these things? Have you enjoyed those things that have entered our world because of the curse? How many Christian couples start their married life in purity?

Christ was not only violently treated and endured cruelty but also was humiliated and exposed, all because of the curse. But the slightest trace of violence, the slightest trace of impurity in our minds, brings us under the curse. Christ was made a curse for sinners like that—otherwise, there would be no redemption possible for any of us. But that is not the only echo of the curse in this passage.

### *Thorns*

Adam, created in the image of God, was crowned with glory and honor: the glory of knowing God intimately and personally and the honor of being an assistant ruler (vice-regent) for God Himself, caring for God's amazing creation. But this glorious and honorable place was not good enough for Adam. He wanted to be like God, and as he (and we) desired to be like God, God responded to his rebellion with a curse. Genesis 3:17–19 says:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Before the fall, the ground was only bringing forth pleasant plants—beautiful, fruitful, delightful. But after the fall, thorns and thistles entered, and work became difficult, laborious, and at times monotonous and frustrating to Adam. Yes, we must all die, return to the dust. And the symbol of this curse was the thorns. Are we then surprised when we read another echo to the cursed fall in Matthew 27:29, “And when they had platted [twisted] a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head”?

What a reminder of the curse! This was a very painful and bloody experience, as the thorns pressed in the Savior’s holy temples, especially when the soldiers also smote the Savior with a stick on His blessed head. How vividly this reminds us of the curse: “Cursed is the ground, thorns and thistles shall it bring forth.” Here Christ is crowned with thorns and thistles. Think back of the honor and glory with which Adam’s head was crowned before the fall. And now look at the Savior again, crowned with the vivid reminders of the ugly curse! Bernard of Clairvaux wrote,

O sacred Head, now wounded,  
With grief and shame weighed down,  
Now scornfully surrounded  
With thorns, Thine only crown;  
O sacred Head, what glory,  
What bliss till now was Thine!  
Yet, though despised and gory,  
I joy to call Thee mine.

Christ, our second Adam, who, even more than the first Adam, was crowned with honor and glory from eternity, was willing to wear a cursed crown, a painful crown, a crown that scorned Him as the Messiah. Why? Because we chose our own pleasure over God. How often we still do that! Jesus is ridiculed as the Messiah; that’s what is happening here: They are scorning, mocking Him as the Messiah, as the King, which brings us to the fourth echo of our miserable fall and curse in Paradise.

*Mocked as King*

It wasn't just the crown the soldiers used to ridicule the Savior. Verse 28 of our text shows that they put a scarlet robe around Him. This was most likely an old soldier's cloak, colored purple or scarlet—symbolizing faded glory. That is all the glory they have for Jesus—a faded scarlet soldier's robe. They mock His victory. Verse 29 shows they put a reed in His right hand, but not just a flimsy reed. No, this is a firm reed stalk. They hit His head with it to fulfill Micah 5:1, "They shall smite the Judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek." This is put into the right hand of the One who from eternity ruled this world with a glorious scepter of righteousness.

Our text also shows that they bowed the knee to Him and said with a mocking voice, "Hail, King of the Jews." They fall on their knees as if they want to honor Jesus as King, but they do it in such a way that all the soldiers laugh about it. They say, "Hail!" or *Ave!* That is how they greeted their Ceasar. How they loved putting Jesus down!

Verse 30 shows they even spit Him in the face—how dishonoring and unloving! Isaiah already prophesied about this in Isaiah 50:6, "I hid not my face from shame and spitting." How the Savior suffered! Psalm 69:20 says, "Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked [for some] to take pity, but [there was] none; and for comforters, but I found none." Adam was given the task to take dominion over this earth (to be a ruler and king), to work and keep the garden, to subdue the earth, to be the ruler of this world.

Genesis 2:15 says that our task was to *dress* (work) *and keep* (guard) the garden of Eden. But in the fall, Adam's kingly crown tumbled off his head—and off ours too. As we lost our relationship with God, we lost our purpose, our identity as rulers. Instead, we began to live for ourselves, wanting to rule our own lives. Wickedness, oppression, disobedience, and self-will are the results.

Since that moment, we have all sought to rule our lives apart from God. Ever since, we've all tried to rebuild our little piece of paradise here on earth. But the Lord says, "I have *cursed* all these things, unless you know Me, through Christ, unless you know and trust My second Adam." Paul in Romans puts it like this: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.... But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many" (Rom. 5:12, 15).

Let this sink in for a moment. The first Adam brought the curse into this world, and the curse came to us all. The crown of glory and righteousness is fallen from our head. Sin and death passed upon all of us. But then the second Adam comes and freely takes the curse and willingly suffers its heavy load.

Scourging. Nakedness. A crown of thorns. Being mocked as a King. That's why He is able to give free gifts of grace to miserable sinners as we are, cursed by nature. Jesus underwent all this to redeem sinners like us from the curse. He became a curse so He could give the most unworthy of sinners a blessing. And because He did this, His gracious gift of salvation can abound, overflow—literally, super-abound—to many! And that brings us to our second point.

### **Redeeming Us from the Curse**

What an amazingly liberating truth: Christ bore and endured the curse so that sinners like you and me can be set free, redeemed from the curse. How? By looking in faith to Christ as the One who bears the curse in our place. But you might wonder how the redemption of this curse becomes yours. To answer that question, let us consider

these four objects again, but now in the context of how Christ redeems sinners.

*Punishment: A Scourge*

Christ was scourged, allowing His back to be plowed, because that is how He bears the punishment our sins deserve. Isaiah 53:5–6 puts it like this: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Have you ever come to that point in your life where you were deeply humbled and said, “I accept it; I deserve the punishment”? “Mine, mine, was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.” Have you come to the point where you said, “Oh, Lord, I have gone astray, like a lost sheep, but seek thy servant”? Have you been amazed by the fact that the chastisement, the punishment, that brings us peace was upon Him?

Look at the Savior, beaten and scourged! Then hear Isaiah’s prophecy, and 1 Peter 2:24 repeats these words: “by whose *stripes* we were healed!” Christ’s scourging was needed to heal us from our sin-sick hearts, infected with the deadly virus of the curse. Only His stripes, His punishment, can heal me from my love of sinning.

When you see how deeply He needed to suffer to set us free, oh, how you will hate your sin when you see the self-denying love of Jesus, what He does to save such wretches like us! Only *His* punishment brings us back to the Shepherd and Bishop of our soul—God Himself! That’s how Jesus redeems us from the curse. He takes the scourge. He takes the punishment.

*Shame: A Robe*

Secondly, Jesus bears the shame of our sin. Consider how they take off His clothes. Consider how they shame Him. Consider how He hung naked on the cross. Sin leaves us ashamed, exposed, helpless, wanting to hide, wanting to flee, fearful. By nature, we slavishly fear God. We expect punishment. We expect to be humiliated. But now look at the Savior, how He was shamed—deeply shamed, exposed and uncovered—and realize that you and I need a covering for our sins. Have you and I ever been deeply ashamed of our sin?

Then look to Jesus, for when they take His clothes from Him, this is one of the moments Christ is, as it were, weaving the garment of purity for His people. This is the robe of righteousness you and I need to cover the shame of our sins. His righteousness covers our unrighteousness, and His purity covers our impurity, from head to toe, so that you and I can say with Isaiah 61:10, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.”

Look at Jesus, so deeply shamed, and receive His righteousness, as you realize your own shame. He clothes you with the garments of salvation. Will you not rejoice? He covers with a beautiful robe of righteousness. Will you not be joyful in your God? Paul puts it like this in Romans 3:21–24: “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; [yet sinners through faith are] being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that

is in Christ Jesus.” That is how Christ redeems us from the curse and its shame.

*Pain: A Crown of Thorns*

Third, take another look at this crown of thorns. What pain entered this world because of the curse! What glory we lost in our fall! Oh, as we look to this crown, let us repent of everything that contributes to the curse. Let us repent of everything in our lives that has been weaving this crown for the Savior. Let us realize how the curse has infected our world.

Let us realize that this world is groaning. Creation is groaning because of the curse upon our sin. Romans 8:19–22 puts it like this: “For the earnest expectation of the creature [literally, creation] waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.” What is Paul saying here?

1. Creation itself is expecting the day that every believer, every son or daughter of God, will be presented spotless to the Lord. Creation is waiting eagerly!
2. We are all subjected to vanity, futility (creation is itself experiencing the frustrations of the curse), but still there is hope.
3. The whole creation groans and travails, it suffers agony, because of the curse, ever since the fall until now.
4. Yet we will be delivered from the bondage of this corruption. One day we will be ushered into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Christ was earning that liberty here as He was wearing this crown of thorns. He had to wear it to deliver us from the bondage and frustration, the pain and suffering, so that one glorious day we could be perfectly free—freedom for which the whole creation longs.

Revelation 7 gives us a promising preview of the glory to come: “Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Rev. 7:14–19).

So, Christ needed to bear the cursed crown of thorns to deliver us from a world that groans under the results of the curse. A glorious crown awaits for all those who are redeemed by Christ’s blood! Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:8, “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing”—all because the Savior wore a crown of thorns to redeem us from the curse.

### *Identity: A Throne*

Finally, and fourthly, when Christ was mocked as a ruler, as King, it was because we in Paradise were kings and priests unto our God. Tragically, we lost that secure identity. And how often we still want to find our identity in other things than Christ and the task God has given us to love and care for people around us. Christ is mocked as King here when the soldiers say with ridicule in their voices, “Hail, King of the Jews.”

They limit Christ's dominion, because it is a worldwide dominion, and they mock His capacity to govern, to rule. Yet, as Christ is mocked as ruler, what is He doing? He is buying back the title and acceptance by the Lord for His children, for believers, the title we had in Paradise as kings and priests unto our God. Here, as He is rejected as King, He is making sinners accepted in the Beloved—in Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son in whom He is well-pleased, the King of kings!

It is striking how Revelation puts it. We read twice that God's children are kings and priests unto our God. First, it is from the well-known greeting in Revelation 1:5–6: "And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." We see that Christ gives us this new identity and that all glory is to be given to God because to Him belongs all glory and dominion.

But then in Revelation 5, we read again about the believer's new identity: "And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (vv. 9–10). Here we see that though all dominion belongs to the Lord, in glory He will share this dominion with His people, and we shall reign on the earth. Adam lost dominion in the fall. We still experience the curse, but Christ was mocked as King, killed as Priest, to give back the only secure identity in this world. Do you see how amazing Christ's salvation is?

Let us conclude with this: “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them,” but “blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings...in Christ” (Gal. 3:10; Eph. 1:3).

Christ took the curse to give guilty sinners like us the blessing, salvation, redemption. Let me summarize the four ways in which Christ redeems sinners from the curse:

1. Christ was scourged because by His stripes we can be healed from all our sins.
2. Christ was shamed with nakedness because He was weaving a robe of righteousness for sinners who are unrighteous and naked.
3. Christ wore the crown of thorns because He was redeeming the groaning creation from the results of the curse. The eternal crown that the redeemed will wear is eternal life—through Jesus Christ.
4. Christ was mocked as King so that fallen kings and priests once again could receive a secure identity.

I conclude with these questions: Whom will you trust? Whom will you serve? Whom will you worship? Whom will you bless? The first Adam (self), and be forever cursed, or the second Adam (Christ), and be forever blessed? Amen.

