

Thy Very Heart: My Heart Healed by His

~Exodus 34~

Week seven of series, “His Loving Heart,” March 14, 2021,
Rev. Sam Ferguson

--The purpose of this series--

We are putting our tired, cold, and weary hearts before God’s great heart, asking God for healing and renewal.

Remember that our faith is far more than a set of ideas. It has an **affective center** where our hearts come in contact with God’s glorious heart.

Our approach for the rest of the series will be to put our hearts before the flowing stream of truth and love coming from God’s heart by turning to **Scripture**. Then we plead and **pray** that the **Spirit** would supernaturally make the truths we encounter take root inside of us.

--What we’ve studied over the last few weeks--

In **Matt. 11**, we saw that Jesus’ heart is gentle and lowly, and therefore we can run to him.

In **2 Cor. 11**, we saw that ultimate comfort is found in God’s presence, which we often experience through brothers and sisters in Christ.

In **Matt. 23**, we saw that God’s anger burns hot when that which he loves is threatened, but his anger burns slow and his love flows naturally.

In **Heb. 4-5**, we saw that Jesus shares with us in suffering and stands as a witness to perfect, inexhaustible mercy.

In **Heb. 7**, we saw that Jesus’ steadfast heart moves him to intercede for us always, and that he himself ensures his prayers for us are answered.

--Opening thoughts on God’s love--

Today, we consider the fountain of all God’s affections—love. Jonathan Edwards, when considering the role affections play in true faith, writes,

*The Scriptures do represent true religion, as being summarily comprehended in **love**, the chief of the affections, and **fountain of all other affections**.*

Everything we say about God's heart can be rightly understood as flowing from his love. Like streams from a headwater, God's gentleness, comfort, righteous anger, mercy and steadfastness flow from his love, for "God is love" (1 John 4:16).

When talking about love we immediately run into some difficulties. The word "love" can be used to refer to widely different things. In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis draws some implications from the fact that the English word "love" is translated from four different Greek words:

- *Eros*—romantic love; a love that hungers for the other
- *Philos*—friendship-love, where two persons delight to walk side by side as they tackle life together
- *Storge*—affection; the love you have for something you cherish, such as an old lazy-boy chair you've sat in for a decade
- *Agape*—sacrificial love for another's well-being

We must avoid two pitfalls as we consider the love in God's heart.

- (1) We must avoid overusing the word love to the point where it means almost anything (and therefore nothing). We must study and allow the witness of the Scriptures to form our definition.
- (2) We must avoid a common pitfall for religious people, which one thinker describes as "the triumphal misunderstanding' that unrealistically and exaggeratedly portrays love as pure 'unselfishness' and, in so doing, makes the reality of love evaporate." We will see that while love reaches out to bless others, God's love also involves deep passion and joy.

--The context of Exodus 34--

In Exod. 32, while Moses was atop Mount Sinai receiving God's terms for his relationship with Israel, the people of God rebelled by fashioning a god in the form of a golden calf. When Moses came down the mountain and discovered their rebellion, he smashed the two tables with the commandments on them. It was an utter disaster.

Then, in Exod. 33, Moses pleads with God not to abandon his people. God, in mercy and grace, shows Israel mercy. He invites Moses back up the mountain with a new set of tablets to receive the law again.

Moses, burdened by the task of leading these rebellious people, asks God to reveal himself. God replies with one of the OT's most significant and climactic statements—a declaration of who he is:

34:6-7. *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and **abounding in steadfast love** and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children...*

The phrase “steadfast love” comes from the Hebrew word, *Hesed*. It’s impossible to capture the meaning of this word with a single English term. Last week we focused on its emphasis on commitment and permanence, (i.e., steadfastness). This week we emphasize its meaning of **divine love**.

--God is the author and source of divine love--

The phrase “abounding in steadfast love” (v. 34:6) is only used in the Bible to speak of God. It signals an ever-increasing and inexhaustible abundance. The term comes from a word used to describe pouring rain.

God is the source of this love. It’s who, and it’s the defining substance of all he does. No human is the source of this love; nor does any human possess it in its fullness. But God’s love—divine *hesed*—is different, and fallen humans can only receive it.

1 John 4:7. *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God.*

At times we find ourselves wishing we could love better. But love takes so much energy. In order to be healthy, love must issue from an inner security and peace we simply don’t have. We must go to God, the author and source.

--God’s love seeks your glory--

God showed grace, but not by lowering his standards. If all God wanted to do was make Israel happy, he should have let them keep their golden calf.

Instead, the golden calf is destroyed and Moses is beckoned back up the mountain with “two tablets of stone like the first” (v. 4). God gave Israel a second chance because God is “merciful and gracious” (v. 6), but because Israel was precious to God, he would not let her wallow in idolatry.

Today, many people see love as nothing more than kindness, which seeks to make others happy by affirmation. Kindness does *not* probe more deeply to see that others become good, especially if doing so would require pain.

In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis writes that there is an important difference between kindness and love:

By love...most people mean kindness—the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, ‘What does it matter so long as they are contented?’

There is kindness in Love: but Love and kindness are not coterminous...Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering...It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than to be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness...He has never regarded us with contempt. He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.

God’s love will not lower its standards; rather, God’s love applies grace that ultimately ensures his righteous standards will be written on Israel’s heart. This requires a painful journey of repentance and sanctification. But God’s love is seeking more than our happiness; it is seeking our glory.

Bishop Irenaeus wrote, “the glory of God is man fully alive.” God’s love is more than sentimental affirmation. It is a consuming fire, purging away our impurities until we reach our full stature and glorification.

--God’s love is a union of souls--

Our society often views love as that which works for the basic dignity of all. There is nothing wrong with policies and ideologies that seek to benefit

people. Neither is it wrong to pray that God would use such things to increase common flourishing—we *should* pray this way.

However, divine love is different altogether. **God's divine love...**

- (1) seeks our religious liberty. Consider how God freed Israel from Egypt, that they might worship the one true God.
- (2) frees us from oppression. Consider how God freed Israel from slavery to be a free and flourishing community.
- (3) seeks union with our souls. Consider how God spent decades in the wilderness building a relationship with Israel. He wants our hearts.

Some thoughts on jealousy—In Exod. 34, God makes a stunning statement about his love. As the scene on the mountaintop unfolds, God tells Moses that Israel is to “observe what I command you this day” (v. 11). Israel is commanded not to enter into relationships with surrounding nations, which might lead them astray. His reasoning comes in verse 14:

Exod. 34:14. *For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God.*

Today, we have almost an entirely negative view of “jealousy.” But here God literally says, “my name is Jealous.” What does he mean?

- (a) Consider spousal love—God's love for Israel is not out of a sense of cold duty but burning desire. God's relationship with his people is often likened to a marriage. Thus, God is saying that when Israel begins to love another, he feels as any husband would: jealous.
- (b) Consider familial images—throughout Scripture, God's love is likened to the abiding, and jealous love within families. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the father (God) sees the son (God's people) returning and is “moved with compassion” and runs to him.

People today are dying to be loved perfectly (recall Sam's analogy from *Fresh Prince*). No ideology or policy can fill this need. Only God, who made you before the foundations of the world, can love you perfectly. Not from a mere sense of duty, but with burning delight. Jesus desires that we would be united to him forever; a union of hearts and souls.

John 17:24. *Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am.*

--To taste God's divine love--

Rom. 5:5. *...and hope does not put us to shame, because God's **love has been poured into our hearts** through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

Have we tasted the divine love of God? Consider these ways that God shapes our hearts to receive and taste his divine love:

- (1) The Spirit opens up the eyes of your heart to see the person of Christ in Scripture. To know and delight in Jesus. To experience him palpably. Consider the experience of Jonathan Edwards:

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place...I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension...The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception.

- (2) God saves you from the bondage of a golden calf. He keeps you from giving into those things which tempt your allegiance.
- (3) God meets you with his presence *through* Christian friends who walk with you, listen to you, and love you.
- (4) God forms you to see other people as the burning desire of his heart; you taste God's love as you love the downtrodden and your enemies.

John 17:24-26. *Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*

--Study questions--

Was there anything in this sermon that particularly stood out to you?

Take time to consider the four loves that Lewis talks about and that we see in the Bible. Why is it important to distinguish them from each other? Together, what do they teach us about God's love?

Think about the progression of the story in Exodus, and especially Exod. 32-34. What are the people of Israel like? What are some things that stand out to you about Moses and his faith? And what do we learn about God?

Why do you think the people of Israel were so willing and ready to make themselves a new god? What can we learn from this story about our hearts?

Discuss the distinction Sam made between kindness and love. Have you experienced the weight of the difference between these two before? Have you ever loved someone (or been loved) by being exacting and seeking that the person *becomes good* more than their happiness?

Sam called Exod. 34:6-7 one of the most climactic and important verses in the OT. He called Exod. 34:14 a stunning and surprising statement. Read these verses a few times. How does God describe himself? What should or response be? How might these verses draw us closer to God's heart?

Re-read the four points of application Sam shared about tasting God's divine love (pg. 6). Do any of these strike a chord? How so?

What is one way you desire to see God shape your heart this week? Is there something you can do to help enact the truths you heard?

--When time allows--

As usual, consider reading Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy*. [Here is chapter 20, the "Love of God."](#)

[Go here to read](#) Jonathan Edwards' *Religious Affections*. The portion Sam quoted is on page 11 of the linked pdf. Looking for a quick summary? [Go here for Gospel Coalition's](#) attempt. Want to listen to it in about 16 hours? [Then go here.](#)

[You can read Lewis' *The Four Loves* here.](#) Enjoy.

[Go here to read](#) Lewis' *The Problem of Pain*. Better yet, [invest in a copy](#). It's a profound and tender companion of a book.

A Youtuber named *CSLewisDoodle* makes interesting videos, and he made one for each of the kinds of love Lewis describes in *The Four Loves*. Here are his videos on [Storge](#); [Philia](#); [Eros](#); and [Agape](#).

If you're not familiar with the fantastic videos put out by The Bible Project, you may want to be. [Here's a video they made about agape](#)—sacrificial love.

If you're looking for something really brainy, check out [Faith, Hope, Love](#) by Josef Pieper. [There's a free pdf version here](#).

Sam quoted the early church father Irenaeus. [Christianity Today wrote an interesting piece on him](#).

Jonathan Edwards was surely one of the greatest American minds to ponder and love God. How special to read something of his like a [faith autobiography: find it here](#).