
o n e

HOW STRANGE AND WONDERFUL IS THE LOVE OF CHRIST!

FOR MANY YEARS I HAVE SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND HOW the God-centeredness of God relates to His love for sinners like us. Most people do not immediately see God's passion for the glory of God as an act of love. One reason for this is that we have absorbed the world's definition of love. It says: You are loved when you are made much of.

The main problem with this definition of love is that when you try to apply it to God's love for us, it distorts reality. God's love for us is *not* mainly His making much of us, but His giving us the ability to enjoy making much of Him forever. In other words, God's love for us keeps God at the center. God's love for us exalts His value and our satisfaction in it. If God's love made us central and focused on our value, it would distract us from what is most precious; namely, Himself. Love labors and suffers to enthrall us with what is infinitely and eternally satisfying: God. Therefore God's love labors and suffers to break our bondage to the idol of self and focus our affections on the treasure of God.

In a surprising way we can see this in the story of Lazarus's sickness and death.

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. (John 11:1-6)

Notice three amazing things:

1. Jesus chose to let Lazarus die. Verse 6: "So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." There was no hurry. His intention was not to spare the family grief, but to raise Lazarus from the dead. This is true even if Lazarus was already dead when the messengers reached Jesus. Jesus either let him die or remained longer to make plain that He was in no hurry to immediately relieve the grief. Something more was driving Him.
2. He was motivated by a passion for the glory of God displayed in His own glorious power. In verse 4 He says, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

3. Nevertheless both the decision to let Lazarus die and the motivation to magnify God were expressions of love for Mary and Martha and Lazarus. John shows this by the way he connected verses 5 and 6: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. *So* [not “yet,” which the NIV wrongly inserts]...he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

Oh, how many people today—even Christians—would murmur at Jesus for callously letting Lazarus die and putting him and Mary and Martha and others through the pain and misery of those days. And if people today saw that this was motivated by Jesus’ desire to magnify the glory of God, how many would call this harsh or unloving! What this shows is how far above the glory of God most people value pain-free lives. For most people, love is whatever puts human value and human well-being at the center. So Jesus’ behavior is unintelligible to them.

But let us not tell Jesus what love is. Let us not instruct Him how He should love us and make us central. Let us learn from Jesus what love is and what our true well-being is. *Love is doing whatever you need to do to help people see and savor the glory of God in Christ forever and ever.* Love keeps God central. Because the soul was made for God.

Jesus confirms that we are on the right track here by praying for us in John 17:24, “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.” I assume that this prayer is a loving act of Jesus. But what does He ask? He asks that, in the end, we might see His glory. His love for us makes Himself central. Jesus is the

one being for whom self-exaltation is the most loving act. This is because the most satisfying reality we could ever know is Jesus. So to give us this reality, He must give us Himself. The love of Jesus drives Him to pray for us, and then die for us, not that *our* value may be central, but that *His glory* may be central, and we may see it and savor it for all eternity. “Father, I desire that they...be with me...*to see my glory.*” That is what it means for Jesus to love us. Divine love labors and suffers to enthrall us with what is infinitely and eternally satisfying: God in Christ. That we might see His glory—for that He let Lazarus die, and for that He went to the cross.



*O Father, take us captive with this love.
Open the eyes of our hearts to see
and savor the glory of Christ.
And when we are enthralled with
being loved this way, make us lovers like Jesus.
Let us labor and suffer to lead as many
as we can into this all-satisfying love.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

t w o

GOD *IS* THE GOSPEL

HAVE YOU EVER ASKED WHY GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS OF any value? Or what about eternal life? Have you ever asked why a person would want to have eternal life? Why should we want to live forever? These questions matter because it is possible to want forgiveness and eternal life for reasons that prove you don't have them.

Take forgiveness, for example. You might want God's forgiveness because you are so miserable with guilt feelings. You just want relief. If you can believe that He forgives you, then you will have some relief, but not necessarily salvation. If you only want forgiveness because of emotional relief, you won't have *God's* forgiveness. He does not give it to those who use it only to get His gifts and not Himself.

Or you might want to be healed from a disease or get a good job or find a spouse. Then you hear that God can help you get these things, but that first your sins would have to be forgiven. Someone tells you to believe that Christ died for your sins, and that if you believe this, your sins will be forgiven. So you believe it in order to remove the obstacle to health and job

and spouse. Is that gospel salvation? I don't think so.

In other words, it matters what you are hoping for through forgiveness. It matters why you want it. If you want forgiveness only for the sake of savoring the creation, then the Creator is not honored and you are not saved. Forgiveness is precious for one final reason: It enables you to enjoy fellowship with God. If you don't want forgiveness for that reason, you won't have it at all. God will not be used as currency for the purchase of idols.

Similarly, we ask: Why do we want eternal life? One might say: Because hell is the alternative and that's painful. Another might say: Because there will be no sadness there. Another might say: My loved ones have gone there and I want to be with them. Others might dream of endless sex or food. Or more noble fortunes. In all these aims one thing is missing: God.

The saving motive for wanting eternal life is given in John 17:3: "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." If we do not want eternal life because it means joy in God, then we won't have eternal life. We simply kid ourselves that we are Christians if we use the glorious gospel of Christ to get what we love more than Christ. The "good news" will not prove good to any for whom God is not the chief good.

Here is the way Jonathan Edwards put it in a sermon to his people in 1731. Read this slowly and let it waken you to the true goodness of forgiveness and life.

The redeemed have all their objective good in God. God Himself is the great good which they are brought to the possession and enjoyment of by redemption. He is the highest good, and the sum of all that good which

Christ purchased. God is the inheritance of the saints; he is the portion of their souls. God is their wealth and treasure, their food, their life, their dwelling place, their ornament and diadem, and their everlasting honor and glory. They have none in heaven but God; he is the great good which the redeemed are received to at death, and which they are to rise to at the end of the world. The Lord God, he is the light of the heavenly Jerusalem; and is the “river of the water of life” that runs, and the tree of life that grows, “in the midst of the paradise of God.” The glorious excellencies and beauty of God will be what will forever entertain the minds of the saints, and the love of God will be their everlasting feast. The redeemed will indeed enjoy other things; they will enjoy the angels, and will enjoy one another: but that which they shall enjoy in the angels, or each other, or in anything else whatsoever, that will yield them delight and happiness, will be what will be seen of God in them.¹

1. Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney, ed., *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 74–75.



*All-satisfying God, forgive us for making
Your good gifts a substitute for You.
We are so prone to mistake the portrait for the person.
Satisfy us with Yourself.
You have promised in the New Covenant,
“They shall all know me from the least to the greatest.”
Let this be our portion now—a kind of knowing,
O God, that treasures the One we know.
Let us experience the gospel in its fullness,
which is Christ crucified and risen
for sinners to bring us home to You.
In His name we pray. Amen.*

t h r e e

PIERCED BY THE WORD OF GOD

A Meditation on Hebrews 4:12

*For the word of God is living and active and
sharper than any two-edged sword,
and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit,
of both joints and marrow, and able to
judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

N A S B

OH, HOW WE NEED TO KNOW OURSELVES. ARE WE SAVED?
Are we alive in Christ? There is only one instrument that creates, detects, and confirms eternal life in the soul of man; namely, the Word of God. What Hebrews 4:12 says about this Word is, therefore, all important. Consider it with me phrase by phrase.

“The word of God”

The term “word of God” may mean a word spoken by God without a human mouthpiece. But in the New Testament it regularly means a word or a message that a human speaks on

God's behalf. So, for example, Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." So the "word of God" in Hebrews 4:12 probably refers to the truth of God revealed in Scripture that humans speak to each other with reliance on God's help to understand it and apply it.

"Living and active"

The Word of God is not a dead word or an ineffective word. It has life in it. And because it has life in it, it produces effects. There is something about the Truth, as God has revealed it, that connects it to God as a source of all life and power. God loves His Word. He is partial to His Word. He honors His Word with His presence and power. If we want our teaching or witness to have power and produce effects, let us stay close to the revealed Word of God.

"Sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow"

What does this living and effective Word do? It pierces. For what purpose? To divide. To divide what? Soul and spirit. What does that mean?

The writer gives an analogy: It's like dividing joints and marrow. Joints are the thick, hard outer part of the bone. Marrow is the soft, tender, living inner part of the bone. That is an analogy of "soul and spirit." The Word of God is like a sword that is sharp enough to cut right through the outer, hard, tough part of a bone to the inner, soft living part of the bone. Some

swords, less sharp, may strike a bone and glance off and not penetrate. Some swords may penetrate partway through the tough, thick joint of a bone. But a very sharp, powerful double-edged sword (sharp on each side of the point) will penetrate the joint all the way to the marrow. “Soul and spirit” are like “bone joint and bone marrow.” “Soul” is that invisible dimension of our life that we are by nature. “Spirit” is what we are by supernatural rebirth. Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Without the awakening, creative, regenerating work of the Spirit of God in us we are merely “natural” rather than “spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:14–15). So the “spirit” is that invisible dimension of our life that we are by the regenerating work of the Spirit.

What then is the point in saying that the “word of God” pierces to the “division of soul and spirit”? The point is that it’s the Word of God that reveals to us our true selves. Are we spiritual or are we natural? Are we born of God and spiritually alive, or are we deceiving ourselves and spiritually dead? Are the “thoughts and intentions of our hearts” spiritual thoughts and intentions or only natural thoughts and intentions? Only the “word of God” can “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” as Hebrews 4:12 says.

Practically speaking, when we read or hear “the word of God” we sense ourselves pierced. The effect of this piercing is to reveal whether there is spirit or not. Is there marrow and life in our bones? Or are we only a “skeleton” with no living marrow? Is there “spirit,” or only “soul”? The Word of God pierces deep enough to show us the truth of our thoughts and our motives and our selves.

Give yourselves to this Word of God, the Bible. Use it to know yourself and confirm your own spiritual life. If there is life, there will be love and joy and a heart to obey the Word. Give yourself to this Word so that your words become the Word of God for others and reveal to them their own spiritual condition. Then in the wound of the Word, pour the balm of the Word.



*Oh, how we love Your Word, Father!
It is precious beyond all earthly treasures.
Incline our hearts to this Word,
and break our bondage to other things.
Let us see wonders in it.*

*Pierce through our soul and waken spiritual life.
Confirm the marrow of our faith and make us real,
through and through. Forbid that we would be false to Your
faithfulness, and make us mighty in the Spirit.
Through Christ, we pray. Amen.*