



Great Themes of the Bible

SESSION 3

If we view the Bible as one whole document, what is it saying? What are the big messages by which interior messages are to be interpreted?

Goal for the Session

Participants will identify instances in their lives when they have experienced God's love and share stories with one another. They will also learn that the affirmation "Beneath all else, God loves us!" is a fundamental message of the Bible. They will view several different portraits of God's love presented in the Bible.

Preparing for the Session

- You, the leader, need to prepare yourself in two ways. First, identify from your own life one or two major instances when you have seen the love of God at work. Be as specific as you can. Don't settle for generalities like, "through the love of my mother" or "through the prosperity with which God has blessed me and my family." Select an instance, a story. I tried to do this in the last section of the Participant Handout under the heading "Abdul-Amir." Read that story. Get in touch with your own experiences. Be specific!
- Second, by reading the handout and then consulting your own knowledge of the Bible, build in your mind a broad picture of the many different things "God loves us" can mean: "God rescues us from very difficult situations" (Ps. 107); "God's loving care stands beneath all the events of life, past and future" (Ps. 136); "God's love penetrates any and every barrier" (Rom. 8). You will want the group to build this same picture, and you can best prepare by doing it yourself first.
- The room needs to allow for two seating arrangements: (a) in a single group where all can be addressed by you and speak to one another, and (b) in small groups of three or four.

- You will need a writing board.
- All participants will need a Bible, a pen, and paper.

Teaching Tip

Through two activities, you will be joining together what the Bible says about God's love with what members have experienced about God's love. The point is that events now are essentially the same as events then, that God now is the same as God then, that the same love that dwelt in their midst also dwells in ours. Joining then with now is the key to making the time effective. It will best happen if you point out the links, for example, "I can see taking the story Susan just told and creating another section for Psalm 107; the fit is perfect," or "I think your remarks illustrate the statement 'Love . . . is not arrogant or rude' in 1 Corinthians 13:4." These links should not be forced; they need to be genuine.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Introducing the Subject

The Bible as a whole book speaks several messages. We are studying four of them. We began by looking at, "God is with us," as a whole-Bible message. In our last session, we examined, "When God comes to earth, it is not to consult with kings on how to rule but with slaves on how to escape." Today, we move to the affirmation "Beneath all else, God loves us." We will see how this message is spoken all across the Bible. We will learn some of the variety of what it means. And we will compare the Bible's experiences of God's love with our own.

2. Litany

Read responsively Psalm 136, with you reading the first line of each verse and the participants the second.

3. Prayer

Lead the group in this prayer:

Almighty God, open us to the wonders of your amazing love. Lead us to see and feel how your love has undergirded our entire lives, carrying us along through all that happens. Give us hearts of eternal thanksgiving and praise for this gracious gift. **Amen.**

Exploring (30 minutes)

There are two parts in this section. Split the time approximately equally.

4. God's Love in My Life

Instruct the participants to each take a sheet of paper and label it "Experiences I Remember of God's Love." Have them call to mind one or two or three such instances and write down just a few words to identify each. They should pick specific instances, not generalities, and make each a story of something that happened—one event, not a whole sequence. (For example, they should avoid statements like, "I have been blessed with a good family and job.") They should tell of an instance when God's love was particularly apparent to them. Point out the story at the end of the handout, "Abdul-Amir," as an example.

Allow two to three minutes for people to make their notes, and then convene the group. Call on individuals to relate one account each. Suggest taking no more than three minutes per account so that you will hear from a number of people. Call attention after each story to what God's love did on that occasion. Build a catalog. Hopefully, everyone who wants to can speak.

5. God's Love in the Bible

Divide the group into seven work groups. Tell the groups they will be given one or two Scripture passages to read and analyze. They are to ask of the passage this question: What did God's love do on this occasion, or what was it asked to do? Tell the groups they can, if they wish, compare their thinking with the analogous paragraphs in the Participant Handout. Make the following assignments:

Group 1 is to read Psalm 107.

Group 2 is to read Psalm 136.

Group 3 is to read Romans 8:35–40.

Group 4 is to read Hosea 11:1–9.

Group 5 is to read Luke 15:11–24.

Group 6 is to read 1 Corinthians 13.

Group 7 is to read Matthew 1:1–16 and John 15:12–13.

After an appropriate time, call the seven groups back into one group. Have each group report briefly on what they found. Again, build a catalog of their responses.

Close with remarks similar to the following: "One of the Bible's most basic and fundamental messages is 'God loves us.' We see from this exploration some of the length, height, and depth of that love.

"In the Bible a great many things happen to us human beings. Many of those things are good: we are blessed with joy and pleasure. Many more of those things are not good: We get sick. We starve. We are killed in battle. We are killed by accident. We are killed by the cruelty of one to another. We are killed because some law requires it. Good things happen in the Bible; awful things happen in the Bible. But, beyond it all, the Bible affirms a certainty that God loves us, that that love is the strongest, most far-ranging power in the universe, and that nothing can separate us from it. It is a daring affirmation. Bold. Challenging. Either that, or it is naive, simple-minded, ignoring gross reality."

Ask: Shall we believe the Bible's affirmation or not? To believe it makes us one kind of people. Not to believe it makes us an entirely different kind of people. Which kind do we want to be? The choice is ours.

Responding (10 minutes)

6. Believing

Have the group create two lists: "Do Believe" and "Don't Believe." Ask: What kind of people will believing tend to make us? What attributes will we have? What kind of people will not believing tend to make us? What attributes will we have? List both virtues and liabilities under both positions. Be honest! Don't make one list all good and the other all evil.

Finish by saying, "The Bible affirms that in all circumstances, God loves us. Probably you and I can believe

that much of the time but will wonder about it sometimes. Probably we are mixtures of faith and doubt. The Bible is our invitation to believe."

Closing (2 minutes)

7. John 15:12–13

Have the group read this passage in unison.

8. Prayer

End the class with this prayer:

Lord, we believe. Help thou our unbelief. **Amen.**

9. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the fourth Participant Handout, and have members commit to reading it before the next session.

Teaching Alternatives

- Bring to the session a selection of Bible word books, such as Walter Brueggemann's *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) and dictionaries, such as *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Abingdon Press, 1962). Have members read from these resources about God's love in the Bible, and put together what they glean.
- Send the participants on a *hesed* and *agape* search. Use any standard biblical concordance to locate a great variety of uses of these two forms of the English word *love*, and have the class track through the many uses to see what they discern.
- Have the group cite from their own knowledge as many Bible stories as they can that tell of God's love, whether the word is ever used or not. Build a single picture of God's love from the stories mentioned.

- Discuss Mark 9:24: "I believe; help my unbelief!" How is it possible for one person to believe and not believe at the same time? When have members of the group most strongly believed "God loves us," and when have they tended not to believe it? In times of greatest doubt, what are the greatest helpers toward faith? How do members of the group respond to the statement "We should always believe that God loves us, whether things are going well or poorly"?
- Some people choose to affirm the belief that "God loves us" is simply a crutch we human beings create to prop up our own weaknesses, that we should all acknowledge that we are freestanding people in a world of no special favors or rewards. The good that comes to us is either by luck, by the generous gift of someone else, or by our own hard work. We should therefore strive to be strong and to make things as good as possible by our own hands, not leaving it to God to make up for our failures. What are the virtues of this position? What are the possible vices in believing that "God loves us"? How is it possible for us human beings to take that belief and use it for ill?
- Study together Isaiah 53. Though the word *love* is never used, what does this text reveal about God's love? This text was very likely a key in the early church's understanding what God had done through the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

For More Information

Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

W. Eugene March, *The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).