

**Title: God is love - 1 John 4 verse 16**

**Purpose:** To grasp the depth of meaning in this simple phrase that "God is love" - and to see how this can transform us, bring us through to salvation in Christ.

**INTRODUCTION**

I don't know if you saw it in the news this week that Pakistan is very much up in arms about Valentine's Day saying that it is not a part of their culture - and it is not too hard to see where they are coming from. Like so many other special days or seasons they are becoming so heavily commercialised and thoroughly secular in outlook.

Valentine's Day

When our children were somewhat smaller, to help them not get to hung up about the whole romantic thing that went on in primary and secondary school with this - we renamed it from Valentine's Day and simply called it "I love you" Day - and in this way we made the day more inclusive and we would cook nice meals as a way to celebrate love shown and shared within the members of the family.

Love one another

It is of course a strongly biblical theme - if you look up the words "**Love one another**" - then you will not be surprised that they appear just short of a dozen times there in the NT.

Let me ask you:

Q. Who do you think might come across as the most "**love-focussed**" **writer** in the NT?

Well probably the answer is a bit subjective - but that said, **the Apostle John, historically**, has come to be known as "**the Apostle of love**" - tradition has it that when he was old he would be carried to the assembly of believers there at Ephesus and would simply say those gathered "**Little children - love one another!**".

And it is perhaps no surprise that it is this apostle's writings that have 9 out of the 11 times where we meet this command to "love one another".

3 x Love one another - 1 John 4

And there is one very special place where this "**love one another**" command does just get quoted but it actually becomes **THE WHOLE "3 TIME REPEATED" REFRAIN OF THE CHAPTER**.

Q. So what chapter is that?

Well, that chapter is the one that was read for us earlier on: **1 John and chapter 4 from verse 7 onwards to verse 16**.

**William Tyndale** - (Who was the one who translated the Bible into English from the Hebrew and the Greek in the 1500's) had this to say about this chapter: "**John singeth his old song again!**" and he says that not simply because the "**love one another**" song comes three times BUT BECAUSE this is now the THIRD TIME he has spoken about it in the letter of **1 John**.

You could be forgiven for thinking that the apostle of John, this apostle of love, is rather like a "**single-issue preacher**",

one who will always manage to slip in his favourite hobby-horse subject into things regardless of whether it has any natural connection or not.

But, as you probably know, all Scripture is God-breathed out and is not subject to the strange whims of any "single-issue type", Scripture is not subject to any apostle or prophet running a bit low on things to say!

So let's briefly answer this question of why the apostle John brings up 3 times:

- first time around love is shown as a **proof of fellowship with God** - here it's a **matter of darkness and light**
- then second time love is a **proof of our sonship** - and so here it is a **matter literally of life and death**
- so what we finally get to this passage is the true FOUNDATION OF THINGS which is that love is God's very nature.

**Warren Wiersbe** gives a **helpful illustration of a compass**, he says:

"Why does a **compass** point north? Because it is so constituted that it responds to the magnetic field that is part of the earth's makeup. The **compass** is **responsive to the nature of the earth.**"

He adds:

"Love is part of the very being and nature of God. If we are united to God through faith in Christ, we share His nature. And since His nature is love, love is the test of the reality of our spiritual life."

Commenting on 3x"Love one another"

It is a very challenging theme to "love one another" - For every single day - 365 days a year to be an "I love you day". That said, matching each of these repeat commands is a different basis for us doing it - so let me unwrap it briefly:

- **THE FIRST TIME** - it comes in **Verse 7** "Dear friends, let us LOVE ONE ANOTHER, for love comes from God."

This is **AN IMPERATIVE**, a command: "Let us - love one another" - **the basis** provided here for this command is that **God is the ultimate source of this love.**

As **Verse 8** tells us (repeated in Verse 16) "God is love".

This is certainly not a hard verse to memorize and, as we shall see later, this has been a very transforming verse in people's lives across history.

Q. What does it really mean when we say that "God is love"?

Well it certainly means that God can be seen as the true source of love when you trace it right back.

But it is really telling us a lot more - because this His eternal nature - and what that means is that LOVE is not merely one quality, one single characteristic of God - rather it is something that governs everything - his every activity is a loving activity. So, for example, if He judges, He judges in love.

We should recognize that God does not reveal Himself ONLY as love - in chapter one we learn that "God is light" and in Hebrews we are told that "God is a consuming fire".

All of these aspects combine - **John Stott** puts it like this:

"...if His judging is in love, His loving is also in justice. He who is love is light and fire as well. Far from condoning sin, His love has found a way to expose it (because He is light) and to consume it (because He is fire) without destroying the sinner, but rather saving him."

- **THE SECOND TIME** - Verse 11 says "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to **love one another.**"

This comes, this time, in the form of a **STATEMENT OF DUTY** or **OBLIGATION** - and this time it is connected not with His eternal nature but His historical gift of His Son Jesus as Saviour.

Because God is love - He communicates **not only in words but also in deeds.**

Romans 5 verse 8 "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

We are told here Verse 10 "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an **atonement sacrifice** for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

God's just wrath against sin has been met head on and atoned for, propitiated - it means that God's anger is taken away by being satisfied through the work of Jesus

- **THE FINAL TIME** - is in the very next verse, Verse 12 "No one has ever seen God; but **IF we love one another**, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."

This time it is *\*not\** a command, *\*not\** a duty or obligation rather it comes over in the form of a **HYPOTHESIS**, a **PROPOSITION**, a **THESIS**:

- that **IF** we love one another

**THEN** it is an evidence that God's love is in us and is being made complete in us.

See what this is tied to - it's easy to miss it:

- Verse 12 "**God lives in us**"

- Verse 13 "we live in Him **and He in us**"

- Verse 15 "**God lives in him**"

- Verse 16 "Whoever lives in love lives in God, **and God in him.**"

So hopefully you are starting to see that the three-fold call to "love one another" is each time being funded by a greater and greater accumulation of reasons.

In a sense, when we consider:

that ONE - God is love,

that TWO - God operated that love by sending His one and only Son to save us and

that THREE - that God didn't stop there, He went even further to share His own indwelling presence with us

then I think we should start to say to ourselves - well "loving one another" is a bit of a no-brainer.

## Today - God is love

So this morning on this "**I LOVE YOU DAY**" - what better outcome could there be than that we all know real empowering to be able to, from our hearts, to thoroughly **LOVE ONE ANOTHER**.

BUT:

- although the Scripture gives plenty of emphasis on this
- and although the Scripture gives us plenty of basis whereby we might be properly empowered for this

THE TRUTH IS that this world can be a brutal place at times.

And as a result - it can be fairly easy to feel that LOVE is somewhat overrated.

We end up in a place:

- where our hearts are **a little cold**
- maybe **a little damaged**
- perhaps **just altogether a bit cynical about things**

And what we need more than anything is **a good world-beating LIFE VERSE** and for this I want to look at 2 people:

one who was intensely sad

the other who was just simply intense

and for whom the 3 monosyllables of "GOD IS LOVE" served to redeem and transform their lives.

The first person we are going to look at is CHARLES KINGSLEY:

### **1] CHARLES KINGSLEY**

He was a clergyman and was the rector of a parish for 35 years called Eversley, which is a village about 10 miles north of Basingstoke and it is in the graveyard there that he is buried.

What he is most known for is that he was a novelist and in particular he used to like writing stories for children - so perhaps you have heard of **The Water Babies**: a tale about a poor chimney sweep called Tom who is chased out of a rich persons home, drowns and then becomes a water-baby. He goes on to have adventures and become taught various moral lessons by spiritual leaders in that world such as **Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby** and **Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid**.

Well Kingsley was apparently a very intense man and would often be mocked by others for this, one person said:

"Kingsley never speaks - he screams!"

A historian brought this recollection about him:

"After dinner Kingsley paced up and down the room like a caged tiger, uttering his convictions on all sorts of subjects with extraordinary excitement and animation."

Now towards the end of his life Kingsley was asked:

Q. What was the most notable date in his career?

To which he unhesitatingly replied - **July 6, 1839** - it was the day he first met **FRANCES GRENFELL** who would later

become his wife.

"That," he said "was my real wedding day" - but in reality it was a lot more than even that because it precipitated for him a profound spiritual crisis.

From his own biography we learn that his mind was something of a hurricane of doubt at that time. He says:

"An atheist I never was, but in my early life I wandered through a labyrinth of doubt and made many vain attempts to explain to myself the insoluble riddle of life."

He complains: "I have no spiritual guide," he goes on "I am told that before I can avail myself of the benevolence of Him in whom you trust I must believe in His Godhead and Omnipotence. I do not so believe. And, what is more, I cannot even pray."

Q. So what happened to change all of this spiritual doubt and turmoil?

Q. How was his heart awakened from its sleep?

Well the seed was sown on that glorious summer's day of July 6, 1839 - this was when LOVE, TRUE LOVE entered his life in the shape of his wife to be and this was when:

- LOVE was discovered as something truly **DELIGHTFUL**, something truly **DELICIOUS**
- BUT EVEN MORE THAN THAT this was equally when he begun to realise that **LOVE WAS ALSO DIVINE**

Having made that wonderful and amazing romantic discovery he found that everywhere he looked, and he was quite a naturalist, loving and appreciating nature around about him.

He called the outdoors: "God's great green book". He felt that everything around him corroborated that **GOD IS SURELY LOVE**.

Kingsley wrote, concerning a young friend:

"Teach her **to love God**; teach her **to love Nature**.  
**God is love**, and, the more we love Him, the more we love everything about us."

### His death

When Charles Kingsley came to his dying day - as he laid in his death-bed and at the time his wife was ill as well in another room - he wrote a final note to her in Latin - "**AMAVIMUS - AMAMUS - AMABIMUS**" which means:

"**We have loved - We love - We shall love**" - a testimony to his undying love towards his wife - one great love of his life.

And as he was drawing his final breaths he drew his daughter close and said:

- How beautiful love is!
- How beautiful God is!

And this really summed up that amazing connection that was made for him back on that glorious summer's day when he first met his wife and when the beauty of romantic love was awakened, awakening at the same time a realisation that love comes from God and that **GOD IS LOVE**.

## His tombstone

The family of Charles Kingsley, when he died in 1875 at the age of just 56, was given the offer for him to be buried in Westminster Abbey but they knew his own wish to be placed there in the graveyard of St Mary's where he was a rector for 35 years. So instead they made a memorial for him in the Abbey - but what is common to both places is that they placed the text of 1 John 4v16 - those 3 monosyllables "GOD IS LOVE".

## 2] Rodney Steele (The Wall of Partition)

For the time remaining I want to go:

- from **Charles Kingsley**, one who was a writer of greatly loved fiction,
- to **Rodney Steele**, someone who is the hero an early 20<sup>th</sup> century novel

Now let me say - although this character is **made-up**, the person being described is very much - **TRUE TO REAL LIFE**.

Q. How do we know the person is **true to life**?

Well partly because the writer, **Florence Louisa Barclay**, wrote other books and one of these became the **No. 1 New York Times bestseller for 1910** (a book called The Rosary) and in addition to this - the book that this character is from is still now being republished - there is an edition produced in 2010 - and the publisher's comment reads:

"We believe this work is **culturally important**, and ... have elected to bring it back into print as part of our continuing commitment to the **preservation of printed works worldwide**."

## Setting the scene

So let me set the scene:

- As I said Rodney Steele is the hero of the story - he is a great traveller and a brilliant author.

He wandered through India, Africa, Australia, Egypt, China and Japan and had written very successful novels about his travels in these lands.

- He was tall, strong, handsome and bronzed from all these travels

And after 10 years he returns to Britain. He is a literary success, his books are widely read and loved and because of this he is immensely rich.

- Well that alone does not make enough for a good story:

Years ago he had loved a beautiful girl - BUT an unscrupulous and designing woman had gained his sweetheart's confidence and had poisoned her heart by pouring into her ear the most abominable scandals concerning him.

This led to her returning his letters; and he, in the vain hope of being able to forget abandoned himself to travel and to literature.

- **BUT** - where ever he sailed and on whatever shores he wandered, he nursed in his heart a dreadful hate - a hate of the woman who had so cruelly intervened.

Cherishing that hate, his heart became hard and bitter and sour.

He lost faith in love, in God, in everything - and his books seemed to reflect something of the cynicism of his soul.

## Bookmarks

**One of the threads that follows through the story is that of BOOKMARKS:**

- from an early age his mother would prick out Bible texts for him on card and get him to paint in the outline of the words - and this memory is brought back to him one day when he borrows a Bible from his housekeeper's wife - Mrs Jake's.

Inside the Bible, in pink silk, is a bookmark with the simple words "GOD IS LOVE" and remembers back to an occasion when he pleads with his mother to give him something to colour and she had pricked out those very words:

God! Love!

Love! God!

God is Love!

And he reflects on those words - LOVE had failed him AND of GOD - he had no knowledge.

Well after a few weeks of living in his brother's flat - we becomes acquainted with a Bishop's widow who lives in a flat downstairs and she invites him to tea and in the course of conversation Rodney says to her that:

"Life tends to make a man lose faith in love."

But the widow will not hear of it and tells him how her late husband, the Bishop, used to face all difficulties, sorrows and perplexities: he would use the 3 simple words GOD - IS - LOVE.

And then she tells him of an occasion in their lives when there had been an outbreak of Scarlet Fever and Diphtheria which had broken out in the village and when they thought that outbreak had run it's course - it arrived in their house.

They had three children and one by one they succumbed.

The widow says to Rodney:

"Mr Steele, we lost all three in a fortnight! My little Lancy was the last to go. When he died in my arms I felt I could bear no more. My husband led me out into the garden. It was a soft, sweet, summer night. He took me in his arms and stood long in silence, looking up to the quiet stars...I sobbed on his chest and at last he said to me: 'My wife, there is one rope to which we must cling steadfastly, in order to keep our heads above water amid these overwhelming waves of sorrow. It has three golden strands. It will not fail us: GOD IS LOVE.

The nursery was empty. The three little graves in the churchyard bore the names **Griselda, Irene and Launcelot**; and on each we put the text, spelt out by the initials of our darlings' names: GOD IS LOVE."

**\*\*\* Rodney went away deeply touched and impressed - for here was one who had known sorrow and had been sweetened by it - in her was no trace of bitterness. \*\*\***

"God is love" - he'd **painted it himself**

"God is love" - he'd **seen it in pink silk**

"God is love" - he had **seen it engraved on three tombstones**

"God is love" - he'd **seen a life transfigured by it**

**BUT** he was *\*not yet\** in a place where he was able to believe it.

Well unbeknown to him - on the other side of the wall to his brother's flat was living his former sweetheart who he still loved. She had been herself widowed over a year past and had never ceased loving Rodney - she had come to realise her mistake soon after her marriage.

#### Rodney meets Madge

Well they come to meet - she is now this girl ripened into the full glory of womanhood and he opens his heart to her, he says:

"Madge I am furious with fate. Life is chaos. Shall I tell you of what it reminds me? When I was last in Florence and I was invited to the dress rehearsals of 'FIGLI DI RE'. ...The members of the orchestra were all in their places. Pandemonium reigned!...The confused hubbub of sound was indescribable.

Suddenly a slim, alert figure leaped up on the platform struck the desk sharply with a baton. It was the Maestro! There was instant silence. He looked to the right; looked to the left; raised his baton; and **lo!** - full, rich, sweet, melodious, blending in perfect harmony, sounded the opening chords of the overture!"

Rodney likened the jangling discords to the confusion of his own life. There was in his soul a disappointed love, an implacable hate, and a medley of other discords.

"You are waiting for the Maestro, Roddie!" said Madge, "His baton will reduce chaos to order with a measure of three beats."

"Three beats?"

"Yes - three Almighty Beats: GOD - IS - LOVE!"

"I gave up pricking texts when I was 5; and gave up painting when I was 9!"

"It's not what you do to the texts, Rodney; it is what the texts do to you!"

#### The East Coast Graveyard

Well Rodney left London, left his Madge his sweetheart and went away to a fishing village on the East Coast - and while he was there he climb up to a cliff side church and going inside he saw a painting in the porch of an old ruin, an ivy-clad cottage, useless and desolate - and the inscription said:

**"The ruins of my soul repair** (Rodney thought of his own heart)  
**And make my heart a house of prayer** (he thought of the maestro)"

He passed out into the graveyard - he was amused at the quaint epitaphs. Then one tombstone lying flat on the ground had in capital letters an inscription calling on the reader to "**PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD**". Again Rodney thought of the clashing discords of his soul.

The book then tells us:

"Then suddenly, the inspired Word did that which It and It alone can do. It gripped Rodney and brought him face to face with realities, past, present and future - in his own inner life.

At once, the Bishop's motto came into mind...: **GOD IS LOVE!**

"God is love!"

"Prepare to meet thy Maker!"

Q. How could he with his old hate in his heart, stand in the presence of a God of Love?

Standing there with one foot on the tombstone Rodney took his first step of preparation - he says:

"I forgive the woman who came between us - my God, I forgive her - as I hope to be forgiven!"

Charles Spurgeon - sermon notes

In one of **Charles Spurgeon's** Books of Sermon Notes - he ends one sermon saying:

"As **Dr. Chalmers** used to say:

**'As soon as a man comes to understand that 'GOD IS LOVE,' he is infallibly converted.'**"

And so it was with Rodney Steele.

## CONCLUSION

Let me wrap up and let me come full-circle:

Today a day when people send expressions of love

- we have it written down for us those three strokes of the Maestro: **GOD IS LOVE**

And how we are to drink in the fullness and the sweetness of that for ourselves and for others

- "Love one another" - **a command, an obligation, a necessary hypothesis.**

Q. How do we come to this knowledge?

- **Some** have come to the life-giving possession of it **FROM SCRIPTURE**
- **Some** have come to possess **FROM LIFE-EXPERIENCE**  
**CHARLES KINGSLEY** from tasting **delicious love** to beholding **Divine love**
- **Others - RODNEY STEELE** from confusion, discord and bitterness - **from the loss of love** to the discovery of the Maestro's transforming 3 beats - **GOD IS LOVE!**

Q. Are these words known to you? Q. Have these words lodged in your heart and are finding their full outpouring?

Let us pray so - in Jesus' Name - AMEN