

“Interacts satisfyingly with how God’s love is expressed throughout Scripture—even on the most difficult subjects.”

—JOHN M. FRAME

Tracing the Love of God
Throughout the Biblical Story

This is
Love

Includes Study Questions

Neil Tolsma

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throughout the Biblical Story

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R&R
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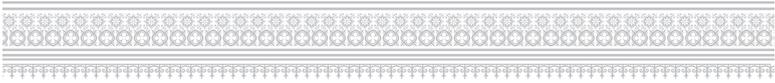
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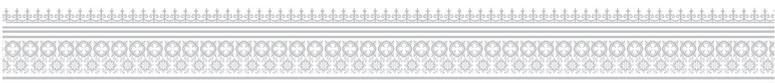
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To Lenore,
my beloved wife



*This is love:
not that we loved God,
but that he loved us and sent his Son
as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.
(1 John 4:10)*



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Preface

PEOPLE DON'T KNOW what love is, I thought to myself at the end of a counseling session. *I'll have to find a book I can hand out to help them understand.* As a pastor, I have found myself speaking to many people about love, only to find how few really know what love is. Their definitions of love are weak and incomplete. I discovered this in various circumstances: when speaking words of comfort to a dear woman recently widowed, assuring her of the love of God, or when counseling a young man on how to love the wife he was soon to take, or when instructing teens in catechism class about the love and anger of God.

I looked for a book to put into their hands to help bring them to a true understanding of love, but I never found one. I asked other pastors and seminary professors if they knew of a book I could recommend without reservation. They either knew of none or suggested books that were too narrow in scope: books on how to love your mate or on tough love. A book that grappled with the biblical idea of love in a comprehensive way seemed to be missing.

When I was a student at Westminster Seminary, Professor John Murray challenged us to get a subject in mind and during our pastorates research it, and in time perhaps write a book. I soon hit on the idea of the miracles of Jesus, only to discover that there were all sorts of books on the topic. I lost interest and forgot about writing a book.

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However, not only in counseling but also as I prepared sermons, I again and again found myself dealing with the idea of love. It pervades the Holy Scriptures. The study of one verse would send me to another, and that passage would lead to yet another. I would go from the New Testament to the Old and back to the New. On these exegetical journeys, I found myself repeatedly having to understand the implications of love, but with no current study to bring the concept together. This became a prod, moving me to author a book on love. Was this to be the book Professor Murray was encouraging me to write? I pray that this will prove to be the missing book. My hope is that I will be able to share something of the Bible's vision of love with you.

I am deeply grateful to all who helped to make this book possible. My parents, John and Jessie Tolsma (now with the Lord), taught me my first lessons of love. My dear daughters and their husbands, Christine and Doug Cain, Carolyn and Greg Tews, and Elaine and Rick Harlow, along with my grandchildren (Brian, Alyssa, and Jonalyn Cain; Sarah, Rebecca, and Hannah Tews; Olivia and Daniel Harlow), continue to teach me many precious lessons of love. I am also sincerely thankful to Christine, who performed the vital task of proofreading, and to Doug, my cameraman; to my pastors, Jim Hoekstra and Ben Snodgrass; to Lamar and Dorothy Modert, and Russ and Lori Harland, for their generosity that helped to introduce me to the world of word processing; to Doug Hein and John Kassel, for sharing their computer expertise; to the folks at Bethel Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, at Falls Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, at Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in New Berlin, Wisconsin, and at Apple Valley Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Neenah, Wisconsin, where in preaching and teaching over the years the material for this book took shape in my heart and mind; to recreational therapist Brenda Krentz and my "flock" (since 1980)

PREFACE

at Alexian Village Health Center; to David VanDrunen, who early on encouraged me to write this book; to my many prayer partners; to seminary professors John Murray, Edmund Clowney, and Meredith G. Kline, who planted in me a love for the Word that I pray is reflected in this book to their honor; to those who read portions of my manuscript and gave valuable suggestions and encouragement; to Grace Mullin at Westminster Theological Seminary library; and to the staff at P&R Publishing for their kindness and patience.

Introduction

DO YOU KNOW WHAT LOVE IS? We all know what love is—or so we think. I thought I did too. After all, our world has much to say about love. The biologist might suggest that it is a chemical reaction. A love spot in the brain needs to be satisfied—like the hunger spot. Feed me, feed me. Love me, love me.

Then there is the psychologist, who sees love as a form of manipulation, a self-centered thing: “You need to earn my love.” The divorcing spouse complains, “I don’t love him anymore. He doesn’t do anything for me.”

The TV sitcoms have reduced the idea of love to sexual passion: “Let’s make love.” Has Freud triumphed? When I mentioned that I was writing a book about love in the Bible, there were those who automatically assumed that I was writing about sex.

Are we left with the plaintive cry, “It’s love’s illusions I recall. I really don’t know love at all”?¹

It is not in some dictionary definition of love that we will learn what true love is all about. Rather, true love is found in the unfolding history of God’s ways with mankind. Our lives have to be understood against the background of the history of redemption. That history has been characterized by significant expressions of divine love that define true love. God is love, and the best definition of love is found in him. This book develops an understanding of love as it has come alive in what our Lord has said and done.

1. Joni Mitchell, “Both Sides Now” (Siquomb Publishing, 1967).

INTRODUCTION

Are you looking for true love? We will begin our journey of discovery in the eternal house of God. There the three persons of the Trinity dwell in complete harmony. Within the Godhead, the shape and scope of perfect love can be found, and from this fountainhead it coursed through human history, from creation, through the fall into sin, to the triumph of salvation in the person of the Son of God. It will climax in eternity, when the redeemed will swim in an ocean of God's love (as Jonathan Edwards put it).

We will study the great epochs of salvation history that lead us forward in our knowledge and understanding of this glorious concept. And not only lead us forward but also reveal with growing insight how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God in finally taking us to Christ, who loves to the ultimate. To open the Bible is to enter a world of love: Adam communes with the Creator, who loves him; Noah finds grace in the eyes of the Lord; Abraham meets with his divine Friend; Moses proclaims the law of the love of God; Israel is the beloved bride of the heavenly King; Christians are brought to eternal life through the love of the One who laid down his life for them; and believers are enabled to love others with the same sacred love. Having explored these manifestations of love, we ought to be able to say, "This is love."

While I emphasize certain aspects of God's love in each chapter, this does not mean the specific characteristic of God's love I selected for each chapter is isolated to one time or event. Each aspect was there from the beginning. For instance, the Lord's condescending love did not begin with his covenant with Abraham; God stooped to engage with his creation from day one. Further, his mercy and grace shaped his relationship with man from earliest times, and his love is marked by faithfulness throughout all generations.

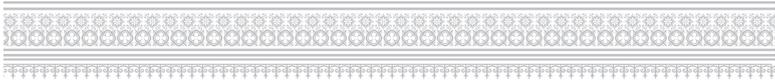
Each chapter ends with questions to help prompt discussion and personal reflection. Use them as they are helpful to you.

INTRODUCTION

I trust you will come up with some of your own. While I find myself in hearty agreement with most of the authors I quote, there are some I refer to, especially in the discussion questions, with whom I do not agree.

In his day, Paul repeatedly prayed that the churches of Christ might abound in love more and more. May the Lord be gracious and use this book to cause love to grow in the hearts of many Christians and their churches in our day.

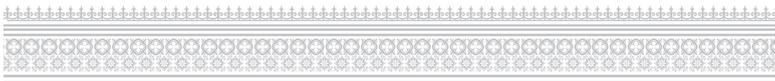
I pray that this book will enrich your understanding of the love of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I pray that you will be fired up to read your Bible and read it with a new appreciation. After all, there you will find the best account of what true love is all about. And I pray that the love of Christ will be reproduced in your own life. Jesus loved us to the uttermost and calls on us to love one another as he has loved us. If you are a stranger to the grace and glory of the love of God, I pray that, by means of this book, God will open your heart to receive that love, so that you too may come to love him, and your neighbor, as Jesus loves you.



*The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying:
“I have loved you with an everlasting love.” (Jer. 31:3)*

*Could we with ink the oceans fill
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were ev’ry stalk on earth a quill
And ev’ry man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the oceans dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.**

* Frederick Lehman, “The Love of God” (1917).



CHAPTER 1

God's Eternal Love

DEFINING LOVE

The love of God is incredible. This old hymn confesses how impossible is the task to write it down. Yet the Lord in a wonderful way gives us breathtaking insight into his love. From God's own revelation of his great love, we begin to get to know what true love is all about—God helping us.

Love Is Eternal

We could begin our search for love with Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Is that when love began? Is love part of creation? “Son, let me tell you about the birds and the bees.” That’s it! Love must have come into being with the creation of the birds and bees. Or did it?

We long for a love untouched by time. Pop songs sing of a love that will be there even after the stars burn out. Is there such a thing? Can an eternal love be experienced—a love that has always been and will always be? Such a love would have to be part of the eternal God. Is love part of the essence of God, which he had before creating the world?

It is! The Bible tells us that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35), and that the Son loves the Father (John 14:31) with a love that reaches beyond day one. The Son of God could say to the Father, "You loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24). Eternal love lives, and it lives within the Trinity. Love belongs to the fundamental nature of our God. Since God is eternal, his love is eternal.

"God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Don't turn that around. We cannot say that love is God, as if love stands on its own and is divine in and of itself. "Falling in love with love is falling for make-believe. Falling in love with love is playing the fool."¹ It is not love that is God, but rather the triune God who is love.

Any definition of love that fails to consider love in the setting of the Trinity misses the heart of the matter. If love were not an attribute of God, there would be no true love in our world.

Love as an Attribute of God

What is an attribute? When you call a fellow tall, dark, and handsome, you have listed his physical attributes. The attributes of God are the qualities that describe the very essence of his being. Love is such an attribute.

However, love is not God's only attribute. Think of a diamond. When beautifully cut, it has a number of facets. One stone with a number of facets makes up a sparkling diamond. The Lord we come to know in the Bible is revealed to us as one God with a number of attributes. We may speak of "the infinite complexity and richness of the life of God."² This should not surprise us. He is God, after all.

1. Lorenz Hart, "Falling in Love with Love" (New York: Alfred Publishing, 1938). "Being in love with love often leads to fickle desires and behavior adding confusion to confusion." Theodore Isaac Rubin, *Real Love* (New York: Viking, 1990), 13.

2. Geerhardus Vos, "The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 425.

Where is the brilliance of a single-faceted diamond? When the Lord God revealed himself in Scripture, he made himself known in terms of his various attributes. He is holy; he is good; he is wise; he is all-powerful; he is all-knowing; he is just; he is love; and so on. As we consider our God, one facet may catch our eye: he is love. When we consider him from another angle, another facet flashes: he is wise. We experience the wonder and beauty of our God as we learn of his diverse attributes.

While the emphasis of this book will be on God's love, do not think that everything else we read in the Bible about God is secondary to his love. The eternal attributes of God together—not in isolation, but in combination—make up his essence. This is what God is. No one attribute is to be thought less important than the others. Each is vital to our understanding of God. Remove even one, and God ceases to be God.

God's love does not deny his holiness or his wisdom or his justice. We separate the attributes of God to better understand them, but they are really wrapped up in each other. When God loves, he is being holy and wise and just. His is a holy love and a loving holiness. His love does not excuse our sin. He is not some marshmallow God—soft and sweet, through and through—who ignores our rebellion against him. Such rebellion is a denial of true love and holiness, and God deals with it. In a justice that does not cancel out love, and a love that does not compromise his justice, indeed in a love expressed in justice, God loves the world.

THE TRIUNE GOD IS LOVE

The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one God. When this one God reveals himself in the Bible, he reveals himself to us as three who are in essence one—one God meeting us as Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit.³ We find the Bible loaded with testimony of this fact. And “when we conceive Him as a Trinity, a new fullness, richness, force are given to our conception of Him as a self-conscious, loving Being.”⁴

Since love is of the very essence of the one God, it characterizes all three persons of the Godhead. God the Father is love; God the Son is love; and God the Holy Spirit is love. And this love energizes their relationship with each other. True love is first found in the eternal communion of the three persons of the Godhead.

The Love of the Triune God

How can one begin to describe this brilliant relationship of love? We have three persons who are diverse, yet united in the Godhead, loving each other intensely, perfectly, and eternally. There is no other love like it.

Let us begin by taking the attributes that belong to God and applying them to the relationship enjoyed by the three persons. We may say that they share an enduring love that is wise, all-knowing, and all-powerful. It is a love that is perfectly righteous, just, and good—a holy love that promotes holiness. Whatever attributes belong to God enter into an understanding of this love. And this divine love is everlastingly other-oriented.

Wait a minute. This means that God did not have to create the universe in order to have something to love. There was no need for God to wait until he had created you or Adam or anyone else in order to find someone to love. Outside of time and before

3. The Westminster Confession of Faith explains it this way: “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son” (2.3).

4. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 28.

Adam, there is this true and perfect love. Yet in his wise counsel and according to his great love, God determined to extend his love beyond the three persons. It seems too good to be true, but it is true. The Lord loves his creation with this eternal love that endures forever (cf. Ps. 136; Jer. 31:3).

Love in Perfect Harmony

The relationship of love among the three persons is one of perfect harmony. The three persons love each other in a cooperative relationship marked by mutual respect and collaboration (John 5:20–27). “This intra-Trinitarian ‘deference,’ this ‘disposability’ of each to the others, may be called ‘mutual glorification.’ In the gospel of John, the Father glorifies the Son (John 8:50, 54; 12:23; 17:1) and the Son glorifies the Father (7:18; 17:4). The Spirit glorifies the Son (16:14), who in turn glorifies the Father.”⁵

This harmony reflects a thorough understanding of each other. Jesus, the Son of God, “knows” the Father, and the Father “knows” the Son (John 10:15). We are speaking of more than a superficial acknowledgment of each other, more than a passing acquaintance. Instead, we must think of a loving relationship that is marked by the deepest understanding, admiration, and trust.

A complete openness exists among the divine persons in love (1 Cor. 2:10–11). Their knowledge of each other is intimate and mutual. Knowing each other thoroughly, they live out an undying love for each other (cf. John 10:15, 17).

Love and the Glory of the Trinity

When the Bible speaks of the glory of a person, it speaks of that which “makes him impressive and demands recognition.”⁶

5. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 695.

6. Gerhard Kittel, “δόξα,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 238.

The glory of God is that which captures our attention. It characterizes his majesty and wonder and speaks of the honor due him. Repeatedly, the Bible tells us that a significant understanding of the glory of God is to be found in his love.

Love belongs to the glory of the triune God. When Moses asked to see the glory of God, the Lord revealed himself as the Lord who is slow to anger and abounding in love (Ex. 34:6-7). The children of God confessed this truth in their Psalms: "Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness" (Ps. 115:1; see also Pss. 57:3-5, 10-11; 63:2-3; 66:2, 20; 138:2-5). The glory of God was not revealed simply in the brilliant light of the fiery cloud that led Israel and inhabited the holiest place of the temple; it was especially seen in his love for his people. John saw in Jesus the glory of God that Moses longed to see: the Lord full of love and faithfulness came "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE LOVE OF JESUS

Jesus was about to die on the cross. At that significant juncture in his walk with his disciples, he prayed for them. John included that prayer in his gospel (John 17). Jesus wanted his disciples (and us) to hear this prayer.

You can search the Scriptures, but you will not find another passage like it. Here Jesus spoke most directly of the Trinity: "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:5). And he spoke very directly about intra-Trinitarian love: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (17:24). "This saying of Jesus is that which leads us farthest into the divine depths. It shows Christian speculation on what path it must

seek the solution of the relations of the Trinity; love is the key of this mystery.”⁷

Notice the strong tie in the mind of Jesus between glory and love in this prayer. As Jesus prayed, he looked beyond that moment in Jerusalem to the life he had with the Father in eternity and the glory that was generated by their infinite love for each other. Love brings glory.

TRIUNE LOVE REVEALED IN SALVATION

The Lord’s work of salvation provides one of the best ways for us to get to know the divine love of the Trinity. We will review this work, following the biblical pattern. “According to 1 Peter 1:1–2, the Father is the one who foreknows, the Son is the one who sprinkles blood, and the Spirit is the one who sanctifies. This is a useful generalization about the distinctive roles of the divine persons: the Father plans, the Son executes, and the Spirit applies.”⁸

The love of the three persons of the Trinity in their work of redemption is manifested by Paul in his well-known benediction, a blessing of love. It says it all: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14).

THE LOVE OF GOD THE FATHER

The Father plans: love is of the Father (1 John 4:8). The Father dearly loves his Son. Yes, I know, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). But the truth of God’s

7. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 737, quoting F. L. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.).

8. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 694. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 155: “Just as all things are *of* the Father and *through* the Son, they all exist and rest *in* the Holy Spirit.”

love for the world must be understood against the background of God's love for his Son.

Behind the divine love for the world stands the Father's love for the Son. John points to the key role that this relationship plays in the work of salvation:

The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. (John 3:35-36)

In a family business, when the father delegates certain responsibilities in their mutual enterprise to his son, it speaks of a certain confidence in the son. In the divine enterprise of salvation, the special love of the Father for the Son stands out in the responsibility given to the Son and accepted by him.

In love, the Father initiated and implemented the plan of salvation. He sent his beloved Son into the world to save sinners (Rom. 8:32). In the giving of the Son, the love of God for the Son was not cancelled, but beautifully expressed. Because the Father loved his Son so much, he sent him to accomplish the great work of salvation. The Son in turn obeyed the Father. Divine love is marked by mutual cooperation.

So we find that the Father was always with the Son, and the Son sought to please the Father in all he said and did: "I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me" (John 8:16). In his love for his Son, the Father expressed more than simple affection. He expressed a complete sharing of divine authority and power. This confidence in the Son is proof of the absolute bond of love that exists between the Father and the Son.⁹ Divine love prompted a solid commitment that found expression in the Father's faithful support of the Son's work.

9. "The main accent falls on the simple basic statement: 'The Father loves the Son.' . . . This is not meant emotionally or mystically. It is always very closely bound up with the commissioned word of the Son. . . . Love, then, is the deepest expression of the relationship between the One who reveals Himself and His instrument."

THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

The Son of God executes the plan: all things are through the Son, including the love of God (John 15:9). The Son's perfect obedience to the will of the Father demonstrated his great love for the Father and his abiding fellowship with the Father (John 15:10). Not for a second was there a break in the loving relationship between the Father and the Son.

According to the plan of salvation, the Son of God "became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:8). We get to know how much the Son loves the Father when we consider his absolute commitment to the will of the Father. The divine mission of salvation demanded the death of Jesus. Our Lord refused to compromise his love for the Father: he laid down his life for sinners (John 10:17–18). "Father, . . . not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). He drank the dregs of the horror-filled cup and died on the cross. He was raised from the dead by the Father and now intercedes for his people in perfect harmony with the Father's will. Within the Trinity, obedience to the will of the Father is not forced labor but joyful cooperation. Love marks the difference. It was in obedience that the Son found his joy in the Father's love (John 15:10–11).

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit of God applies the results of the Son's accomplishment of redemption. The eternal love of God shines in the Holy Spirit's work in creation and salvation. Like the Son, the love of the Spirit within the Trinity is demonstrated in his acting according to the Father's will (Rom. 8:27) and is evidenced by God pouring out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). We are brought into a truly loving relationship with God when

Gottlob Schrenk, "πατήρ," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 999.

the Spirit makes his home in our hearts. Therefore, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is love (Gal. 5:22), and love is “the most excellent way” of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:31; cf. Rom. 15:30; Col. 1:8).

Be aware of the great love of the Trinity, made real to you in your worship of God, when at the end of the service the pastor blesses you with the meaningful words of benediction.

PRAISE BE TO THE GOD OF LOVE

In the world of today, we are often led to believe that at the heart of our universe is nothing more than a cold, faceless, impersonal force. Think again. The truth is that above and around, in and beyond our world, the triune God lives—three persons living in love and pouring that love out upon their creation. Praise him! (Eph. 1:3–6).

THIS IS LOVE

True love originates with God and defines all that is rightly called love. Love is a divine and eternally shared Trinitarian experience shaped by the very nature of God that reaches beyond mere affection to find expression in commitment. It has always been other-oriented. This is the love that comes into the believer’s life through faith in Jesus, the Son of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray that this powerful love will fill our hearts and find expression in our lives (see Eph. 3:16–19).

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Why is it wrong to say, “Love is God,” and right to say, “God is love”?
2. Choose an attribute of God and show how it relates to love. For instance, how does God love wisely?

3. Tell why you agree (or disagree) with the conclusion that love is the key to solving the mystery of the relations among the persons of the Trinity.
4. Explain why the need for commitment is not the death of love.
5. Briefly explain what Paul's benediction tells us about the love of God.
6. Share your reaction to one or both of these quotes:

The love with which [Jesus' followers] learn to love is nothing less than the love amongst the persons of the Godhead.¹⁰

Scripture defines God's love . . . by the relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, not by his relationship with the world.¹¹

7. Working individually or as a group, compose a definition of love based on your study of this chapter. (Example: love is an eternal regard for one another among the members of the Trinity.)

10. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 570.

11. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 417.

Many people search all their lives for true love. But before we can find that real, transforming love we all long for and were created by God to need, we must first understand what true love *is*.

This Is Love directs us to the best authority on the topic, through the example of God himself. Each chapter highlights a significant aspect of God's love as demonstrated in a different period of biblical history and ends with study questions to help us to further our understanding.

After learning the character of divine love, we then see how God's love is revealed in our own lives—especially by the love we show to others.



“Deeply theological as well as pastoral. Neil understands the problem areas in the biblical doctrine, so he writes on difficult subjects like ‘God’s love revealed in his anger.’ Solidly Reformed.”

—**JOHN M. FRAME**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary

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