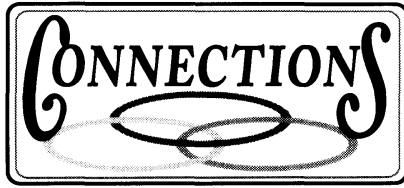




# LOVE

**“God, how much  
do You love me?”**

**SMALL GROUP OR  
INDIVIDUAL STUDIES**



## **Love**

**"God, how much do you love me?"**

**By Roger Sonnenberg**  
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## **By mutual agreement . . .**

### **and in the Holy Spirit's power**

We will rely on the Holy Scriptures as our final authority,  
knowing that human ideas and opinions,  
even the ideas and opinions of God's people, will  
likely stray from God's truth from time to time.

We will attend each session unless an  
emergency prevents our attendance.

We will listen to each other and show one another  
Christ-like love and concern.

We will contribute to the discussion in positive ways  
as we are able to do that.

We will keep everything we hear in this group  
confidential, sharing it with no one unless doing so  
is a matter (literally) of life and death.

We will use what we learn in this group to contribute  
even more fully to the overall ministry of

---

*(Put your congregation's name here.)*

We will respect one another's schedules by  
beginning and ending on time.

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# How to Use This Course

Three ingredients will make it possible for you to maximize the usefulness of this course.

## ❖ 1—Prayer

Only as God invades our lives and touches our hearts can we grow up in Him. Ask and keep on asking for the Holy Spirit's direction and help as you approach His Word. Even if you work through the questions in this study on your own (and perhaps especially then), you must rely on God to do His work in you, His holy work of drawing you to Himself. He's the only one who can connect us to Himself and keep that connection strong. He's the only one who can connect us to our brothers and sisters in the faith and keep those connections strong. We need to ask Him to do that.

## ❖ 2—Care

That is, care for one another in your group. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ . . . we belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ."

Only God can create the kind of care, the kind of community, the kind of connectedness that we see modeled by the early Christian church. It's His gift to His people. We can't make it happen, no matter how slick our techniques, no matter how smooth our approach.

But we can, by God's grace, encourage the kind of atmosphere, the kind of love and acceptance, in which His people



come to know one another as brothers and sisters in the faith and not as third or fourth cousins.

### ❖ **3—As We Share**

How does that kind of love happen? We cannot drum it up by our own effort, no matter how up-to-date our methodology. Neither can we force any believer or group of believers to talk about their faith with one another, to share their needs and hurts with each other, or to admonish and console one another. We can, however, use what we know about human relationships to create a safe haven, an island of time and place, in which God's people can relax, get to know one another, and, eventually, feel free to let down their guard.

In this kind of setting, participants can experience the freedom to talk about their hurts and their faith with each other, if they choose to do that. They can encourage one another in the one true faith, just as the early Christians did and as the holy apostles also urge us to do as God's chosen people today (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11).

### ❖ **On to the Practical**

As you develop small-group ministry in your congregation, you need to keep an overarching vision in mind. But to get small-group Bible study off the ground, and to keep it functioning effectively, you also need to think through some practical considerations.

## **Leadership**

Talk with your pastor about this. He has both the right and the duty to oversee any Bible-study program in your congregation. He himself may lead some groups. And he may decide to delegate some leadership tasks, approving those



who will teach and taking care to see that they receive adequate training.

In general, all those who lead small-group Bible studies will be people who

- demonstrate an understanding of Law and Gospel, sin and grace, not just intellectually, but in their relationships with God and with other people ;
- demonstrate an ability to communicate the truths of the Scriptures clearly;
- express a desire to be used by God to disciple others;
- show a commitment to the entire congregation and submission to the authority of the pastor, not competing with other leaders or programs;
- know or be willing to learn techniques that enable adults to examine and apply their faith to their daily lives;
- pray for the group and the congregation regularly;
- have time to plan, prepare, and lead a small-group Bible study on an ongoing, consistent basis;
- demonstrate the emotional and spiritual maturity to accept responsibilities of leadership, to receive direction and sometimes criticism with wisdom and grace, to share personal strengths and weaknesses with appropriate vulnerability, and to respond to others with Christ-like humility and love.

## **Setting**

Many people find a home conducive to the relaxed, casual atmosphere you want to foster. In any case, you will need a meeting place where

- from 6–10 people can sit comfortably and see one another as they converse;
- the chairs are comfortable;
- the room is suitably lighted, ventilated, and at a comfortable temperature;
- coffee, tea, or soft drinks and an occasional snack can be served without danger of damaging carpets or upholstery;





- children can be adequately supervised while they play away from the Bible-study group.

## **Supplies**

Everyone who attends should bring his or her own Bible. In addition you will need

- copies of this Study Guide for everyone (note the leaders materials in the back of this guide);
- pens or pencils, one for everyone;
- songbooks, hymnals, and perhaps an instrument to accompany singing during worship times;
- an empty chair or two placed prominently to remind everyone of the opportunity to invite guests—in particular, unchurched friends or relatives.

## **❖ That First Meeting**

The first time you're together, you will want to spend some time getting to know one another and establishing rules for the group.

- Introduce yourselves to one another. Do this even if only one person is unfamiliar to the others. Tell your name. Tell a little about your family. And tell how you've come to be in the group. Use a timer and allow each person to speak for about one minute.
- Agree on ground rules about questions like these:  
Who will bring snacks? How often?  
Will we provide childcare? If so, how? Will we take turns, hire someone and all agree to chip in to pay for it? Or? Will we meet in one location? Take turns hosting the group? Or? When will we begin? End? (Include dates and also times.)
- Read the "By Mutual Agreement" statement located on page 3 of this guide. Talk it over until everyone understands it and you truly have reached mutual agreement.



Promise to reread this agreement as you begin each session, at least the first several times you get together.

- Talk about participation. This study asks group members to work with partners or with three or four other people. Agree to listen to one another with respect. Also agree to allow one another the freedom to “pass” on any question for any reason without having to state that reason.
- Remind one another that everyone is entitled to an opinion. However, in this group all human opinions must take a back seat to the Holy Scriptures. You will share lots of thoughts and feelings with one another during the next few weeks. Even so, we believe that absolute truth exists and that it can be known because the God who created the universe has revealed the truth for us in His Word. We bow to His wisdom. We submit to His truth.

## ❖ Elements of Small-Group Bible Studies

Most groups spend 60–90 minutes together in these four activities:

- Worship
- Bible study
- Prayer
- Fellowship

### **Worship (5–15 minutes)**

As most small-group Bible studies begin, participants spend a few minutes in worship. Often this includes singing, especially if someone in the group can play the guitar or piano. If the group does not include a musician, someone in the group can usually find an alternative that will allow everyone to join in singing two or three hymns or songs. Some groups find that they manage to sing quite well a cappella.



Some use prerecorded accompaniment tracks from cassette tapes or CDs.

Keep in mind, though, that worship involves much more than simply singing a few random songs. Worship should help participants quiet their hearts as the Lord prepares them to hear what He will to say to them in His Word.

Therefore, opening worship will almost always include a prayer for His peace and for hearts ready to receive His truth.

## **Bible Study (40–60 minutes)**

Our relationship with our Lord deepens as we immerse ourselves in His Word. In that Word He confronts us with our sin and then comforts us with His forgiving love in our Savior. Small-group Bible study at its best allows both processes to take place.

Materials appropriate for small-group study avoid a lecture format. Rather, they involve a mix of individual thought and writing, one-on-one discussions, and give-and-take conversations by the whole group. The leader facilitates, asks questions, provides nuggets of insight to push the group's process forward, and prays for participants while they think and talk with one another.

## **Prayer—(5–10 minutes)**

In the small-group Bible-study process, God's Word touches the hearts of His people. It probes pockets of hurt and sometimes of hardness. God's people talk with one another about life's most important issues. We think and laugh together. We question and cry together. It's only natural that we pray together too. It's not only natural, but necessary.

This kind of prayer models itself after that of the early church:





They raised their voices together in prayer to God. . .  
After they prayed, the place where they were meeting  
was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit  
and spoke the word of God boldly. (Acts 4:24, 31)



Committed by God's grace to one another and to the truth  
of His Word, God's people asked their Lord to intervene in  
their lives. Together they asked for His specific help with spe-  
cific challenges and needs. They united their hearts in praise  
to Him for all He had done and for all that He had promised  
yet to do. They received from Him the power they needed to  
live as His witnesses in a world that is, even now for the most  
part, hostile to the claims of Christ. We join them in the same  
kind of prayer.

## **Fellowship (10–20 minutes)**

Christian fellowship means so much more than this  
spring's softball league or last Friday's fish fry. Of course,  
there is nothing wrong with playing softball or sharing a  
meal with other believers. But God intends that Christian  
fellowship (*koinonia*) cut more deeply below life's surface  
than that.

As we said earlier, only God can create genuine fellow-  
ship. It's His gift to His people. We can, however, provide  
unstructured time over coffee or lemonade before and after  
the more formal group time. This will free participants to  
laugh together, to cry together, to ask one another about on-  
going personal and family concerns and simply to enjoy one  
another as members of God's family.

We witness spontaneously to one another about what  
God has done for us in Christ's cross and, then too, about  
what He is doing for us in our day-to-day lives. We have the  
chance to share specific prayer requests one-on-one and to  
become aware of needs God would use us to meet for each



other. In short, we have a chance to be the church, the family of God, for one another.

## ❖ What's This Course About

God, how much do you love me?

A critical question. Until the Holy Spirit convinces a believer of the certainty of God's love in Christ, spiritual growth cannot proceed. In fact, a Christian is by definition one who by God's grace believes what He has told us about His love: **"For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).**

God, how much do you love me?

Much of Scripture speaks directly to this question. In fact, one of the toughest parts of putting this course together involved selecting just four main texts from the thousands of those we could have used. We did have to choose, though. The key thoughts we decided to focus on are the following:

- Loved to Death—Christ's Death
- Loved Unconditionally
- Loved Enough to Discipline
- Loved Forever

Those of us who worked on this course are praying for you as you use it. We could ask nothing better than the request Paul made for His readers in Ephesus:

**"[That you] may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18–19).**



# Loved to Death— Christ's Death

# 1

In this course we will examine in detail the great love God has for us. We begin in this session by exploring the fact that He loved us so much that He sent His Son to die for us. We will see how that kind of love moves us to respond with overflowing thanks and praise.



## Getting Started

1. Someone once asked the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, “Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever passed through your mind?” The theologian thought for a few moments and then answered, “Jesus loves me!”

*a.* Why do you think Dr. Barth said what he did?

*b.* If someone asked you that question, would you answer in the same way? Explain.

2. Take a few minutes to reflect silently on God's love. When has God's love seemed espe-



cially real and personal for you? Tell your partner about a time like that.

## **Digging In**

Though we often hear about God's love, and though we acknowledge and celebrate His love in worship, we may at times find it difficult to believe that God could really love us. That can happen for many reasons.

For example, imagine a clever scientist, who after tremendous effort was finally able to create a race of miniature people. Imagine him preparing his lab sink as a home for them and placing his first batch there. Imagine him carefully controlling the temperature and providing an abundance of food. Imagine him even making miniature doctors and nurses to treat those who got sick. And imagine him posting rules for happy living.

Now suppose that to his surprise, he would discover that his people ignored his rules. Suppose they began to quarrel and fight among themselves. Suppose they often stole from one another. Suppose they did unkind things and spoke mean words to one another. Suppose some even ostracized others because the others happened to live on the "wrong side" of the laboratory sink, the side which got less sunlight during the day. Suppose some of them even committed murder.

Probably few of us have trouble imagining that the clever scientist might someday get



disgusted and “pull the plug” on the experiment. We would probably understand if the scientist turned the water faucet on full blast and washed his people down the drain! We can even probably believe that the scientist might grin as he watched them float away.

**1.** Just for a moment, put yourself in God’s place. Suppose you looked down on the Garden of Eden and discovered that the people you had created had just done the very thing you had commanded them not to do. Tell your partner what you might have said and done had You been God.

**2.** Roleplay the scene. Let your partner play the part of Adam or Eve. Say to that person what you might have said to one of the creatures that just ruined your perfect creation. After a minute or two, switch roles. Let your partner speak for God while you pretend to be Adam or Eve.

**3.** With pen in hand, underline the words or phrases in the verses (on p. 18) that give reasons God could rightly have “pulled the plug” on us.







For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge. (Psalm 51:3–4)

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

[The apostle Paul writes,] "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do . . . . For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . . What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:15, 19, 24)



**4.** Despite our sin and the punishment we deserved—eternal death—God would not stop loving us, His people. His very nature is love (1 John 4:8). Instead, He presented the world with a Savior—His only-begotten Son. The Son was born to die! To die so that we might never die eternally.

**a.** Have you ever heard of someone dying for another person? Tell about it.

**b.** Why would God's own Son die for the people who had flagrantly disobeyed Him?



**5.** God loved His people. There is simply no other explanation. He loved His people enough to die for them! Read Romans 5:6–8 and John 15:13 aloud in unison (below).

**a.** Genuine love always costs. How much did such love cost Jesus according to these verses?

**b.** Maybe you've known and believed this truth for many years. If so, do you sometimes catch yourself taking it for granted? How might that damage your relationship with your Savior?



You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6–8)

[Jesus said,] "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)



## Hitting Home

1. As a reminder of God's love for you, write your name in the blank spaces:

For God so loved \_\_\_\_\_  
that He gave His one and only Son, that  
(because) \_\_\_\_\_ believes in Him,  
\_\_\_\_\_ shall not perish but have eternal  
life (John 3:16).

2. Jesus' life, death and resurrection has made it possible for us to be adopted into God's family. We have fallen heir to all the privileges and benefits of beloved children.

With pen in hand, read the verses in the box on page 21. As you do so, underline some of the privileges and benefits our Lord, in love, gives to you along with His gifts of forgiveness and life eternal.

**a.** How could remembering this magnificent inheritance change the quality of your life?

**b.** How could remembering it affect your worship life?



c. How could remembering it make a difference in your relationships with other people?



I can do everything through Him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)

God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16



**3.** Turn to your partner and take turns telling one another the following truths about God's love for each of you personally:

*You are loved.*

*Loved by God!*

*Loved with a love*

*That treasured you enough to die for you!*

*Praise the Lord our God!*



## Wrapping Up

As you close today's session, pray this prayer together.

**Leader:** O God,

*Participants:* our greatest lover,

**Leader:** who so loved,

*Participants:* to the greatest degree,

**Leader:** who so loved the world,

*Participants:* the greatest company,

**Leader:** that He gave,

*Participants:* truly, the greatest act,

**Leader:** His one and only Son,

*Participants:* His greatest gift,

**Leader:** that whoever,

*Participants:* the greatest opportunity,

**Leader:** that whoever believes,

*Participants:* the greatest invitation,

**Leader:** that whoever believes in Him,

*Participants:* the greatest attraction,

**Leader:** shall not perish,

*Participants:* the greatest promise,

**Leader:** shall not perish but,

*Participants:* the greatest difference,

**Leader:** shall not perish but have

*Participants:* the greatest certainty,

**Leader:** eternal life,

*Participants:* the greatest possession.

**Leader:** Amen.

*Participants:* It shall be so.

(From the LifeLight In-depth Bible Study Series, course 7, *The Gospel According to John, Part 1*. CPH © 1991. All rights reserved.)

## The Extra Mile

Pray and think about these passages during the days ahead. As you study them, bask in



your Savior's love. Pray that the Holy Spirit will create in your heart an ever deeper confidence in God's immense love for you.

**Deuteronomy 7:7–8**

**Romans 5:6–11**

**Romans 8:31–39**

**Ephesians 3:17–19**

**1 John 4:8–10**



SAMPLE



## **Helps for the Leader**

SAMPLE

# 1—Loved to Death—Christ's Death

## ❖ Getting Started

Welcome everyone, inviting the participants to get acquainted with one another if they don't already know each other. If there are more than one or two new faces, you will want to provide name tags that can be worn during each session.

Tell the group that you are glad they've joined you in this new study. Distribute the study guides and have participants leaf through the pages to note the session titles.

If this is the first small-group study for one or more individuals, call attention to the introductory material. Have everyone read the list of commitments on page 3. Make sure everyone in the group accepts these as givens. Discuss any other “house-keeping details” necessary (e.g., who will bring snacks; do you need to hire a group baby-sitter).

When all the preliminary details are out of the way, have someone read the focus statement for this session (“Setting Our Sights”). Help each individual in the group find a partner, preferably not a spouse. The partners should move their chairs so they can sit near one another and talk comfortably without fear of being overheard.

1. (*4 minutes.*) Read this paragraph and ask participants to talk about questions *a* and *b* one-on-one with their partners. Both call for an opinion; there are no right or wrong answers. Encourage individuals to relax as they chat with one another. Ask that they answer the questions honestly. But remind them of the “pass” option you read about as you





skimmed the introductory materials. Participants should share only what they can share comfortably. Anything they say will be kept in confidence by their partner.

**2.** (*2 minutes.*) This question calls for a personal reflection. Let individuals talk with their partners as they answer.

## ❖ Digging In

Read the opening paragraph. Then ask a volunteer to read the story that follows. It tells of a clever scientist who created miniature people and later destroyed them. After the reading, ask for comments. Does the scientist's action seem reasonable or irrational. Why?

**1.** (*2 minutes.*) This discussion sets up the activity that follows. Give partners time to talk together about the question. Then move on to question 2.

**2.** (*2 minutes.*) Ask each pair of participants to take turns saying what they might have said had they been God. The other person should pretend to be Adam or Eve as they listen. After a minute, switch roles and act out the scenario again. As you give these directions, challenge the group to be honest in what they say and think.

**3.** (*3 minutes.*) Invite a volunteer to read the verses printed in the box. As he/she does, ask each individual to underline appropriate words or phrases as directed.

**4.** Read the opening paragraph to the group.

**a.** (*2 minutes.*) Ask volunteers to share with the whole group.

**b.** (*1 minute.*) Again, bring the whole group into discussion. The answer can remain a pat answer (e.g., "He loved us") unless you as leader make a point of the magnitude of this truth. Help participants contrast the actions of the "clever scientist" and their own responses of anger and disappointment in exercises 1 and 2 above with God's love for us in Christ despite the terrible destruction we brought into His creation by our sin.



**5.** (5 minutes.) Follow the directions for reading Romans 5:6–8 and John 15:13 aloud.

**a.** Let the group respond by reading appropriate phrases from the verses (e.g., Christ died for the ungodly; lay down his life).

**b.** Let volunteers talk about this. Help participants compare the damage human relationships undergo when those in them take the other person's love for granted. Relationships have died under conditions like these. And even if we do not lose our faith, we will certainly live in less joy and confidence than our Lord wants for us.

## **Hitting Home**

**1.** Invite each member of the class to write his/her name and/or the appropriate personal pronouns in the spaces provided. Then have volunteers read aloud their personalized verses. Ask whether personalizing God's promise like this makes a difference for them. If so, how would they describe this difference?

**2.** (10 minutes.) Read this paragraph and the instructions that follow to the group. Then give individuals time to work. When everyone seems to be wrapping up, invite them to discuss *a–c* with their partners. Encourage everyone to be honest and to aim at encouraging one another in God's Word. Also, though, remind them that anyone can “pass” at any time. They should share only what they can share comfortably.

The questions have no right or wrong answers. Let volunteers discuss the concepts or ask questions of the whole group as time will allow after partners have had a chance to chat with one another.

Point out that the Scripture verses they have just read are truly dynamite verses—they are God's power for salvation to all who believe (Romans 1:16). They declare God's unconditional love for us in powerful, powerful ways. Take a moment to reread them before you move on. You might invite group



members to relax and close their eyes while you read the words aloud, slowly enough to let them sink into your hearts more deeply still.

**3.** As you draw the session to a close, ask that each person speak to his/her partner the words printed here. Ask that they each look their partner in the eye and say the words slowly enough so that the partner can soak up the love expressed by the statements.

## ❖ **Wrapping Up**

Many participants will probably recognize that the reading here is based on John 3:16. Point this out yourself if no one else does. Then pray the words together.

As the reading ends, remind the group that a love as big as this automatically draws a response from us. Invite individuals to take some time (now or later today) for quiet meditation, responding to Christ's love with thanks and praise.

## ❖ **The Extra Mile**

Explain that the passages in this section may be useful as a foundation for participants' personal devotional reading during the coming week. They may use the verses in many different ways. Encourage them, however, to ask God to work through His Word to deepen their trust in His endless love—for them, personally.

