

John Bunyan’s classic, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, tells the allegory of a man clothed in rags and living in the City of Destruction. This man begins to read the Bible and is awakened to the sinful state of his soul and his worthiness of eternal damnation. But he also learns of the good news of forgiveness and eternal life and eventually has his burden of guilt released at the cross of Jesus Christ. It was there, at the cross, where three “Shining Ones”—a reference to the three persons of the Godhead—appeared to the man:

The first said to him, “Your sins are forgiven!” The second stripped him of his rags and clothed him with fine new clothes. The third Shining One put a mark on Christian’s forehead, gave him a scroll with a seal upon it—and encouraged him to read it on his journey. He told Christian that he should turn it in at the Celestial Gate.

This newly forgiven man, Christian, then begins his trek through this world to the next—the Celestial City. The main part of Bunyan’s work describes this pilgrimage.

At one point along the way, the path Christian must take leads him to “Hill Difficulty.” This hill represents the trials and tribulations of life, and Christian must traverse it if he is to continue his way to his final destination. Two of Christian’s traveling companions see the hill and decide to veer off the path to find a way around it—a decision which proves devastating. Christian, however, rightly decides to press forward. Bunyan records his progress, in part, as follows:

Christian now went to the spring, and drank to refresh himself, and then began to go up the hill, saying, “The hill, though high, I choose to ascend, the difficulty will not me offend; for I perceive the way to life lies here. Come, take heart, let’s neither faint nor fear; better, though difficult, the right way to go, than wrong, though easy—where the end is woe.” I then looked at Christian going up the hill, where, because of the steepness of the hill, I saw he went from running to walking, and from walking to crawling on his hands and knees.

Now, about midway to the top of the hill was a pleasant arbor, made by the Lord of the hill for the refreshment of weary travelers. When Christian arrived there, he sat down to rest. He then pulled his scroll out of his bosom and read to his comfort. He also began to examine the garment that was given him while at the Cross. Thus, refreshing himself for a while, he at last fell into a slumber, and thence into a sound sleep, which delayed him there until it was almost night. While asleep, his scroll fell out of his hand. Now, as he was sleeping, one came and awakened him, saying, “Go to the ant, you sluggard—consider her ways, and be wise!” With that, Christian suddenly jumped up and hurried on his way until he came to the top of the hill.

Now, when he reached the top of the hill, two men came running to meet him—the name of one was Timorous, and the other Mistrust. Christian inquired of them, “Sirs, what is the matter? You are running the wrong way!” Timorous answered, “We were going to the Celestial City, but the further we go, the more dangers we meet with! Therefore, we have turned around and are going back.” . . . So Mistrust and Timorous ran down the hill, and Christian continued on the difficult way. Thinking of what he heard from the men, he felt in his bosom for his scroll, that he might read from it and be comforted; but he could not find it. Christian was then in great distress and did not know what to do—for the scroll was his pass into the Celestial City.

Therefore, he was fearful and bewildered, not knowing what to do. At last, he remembered that he had slept at the arbor on the side of the steep hill. Falling down upon his knees, he asked God’s forgiveness for his foolish act and then went back to look for his scroll. Who can sufficiently set forth the sorrow of Christian’s heart as he went back! Sometimes he sighed, sometimes he wept, and often he rebuked himself for being so foolish as to fall asleep in that arbor which was only erected for a little refreshment for weary Pilgrims.

So, he went on until he again came within sight of the arbor where he had rested and slept. But that sight only increased his sorrow, by bringing his folly of sleeping once again into his mind. Thus, he bemoaned, “O what a wretched man I am—that I should sleep in the day time and in the midst of difficulty—that I should so indulge my flesh! For the Lord of the hill has built this arbor only for the refreshment of Pilgrims! How many steps have I taken in vain!”

Reaching the arbor, he sat down and wept. Then, looking around sorrowfully under the bench, he spotted his scroll! With trembling and haste, he snatched it up and put it into his bosom. None can tell how joyful he then was—for this scroll was the assurance of his salvation and his pass to the Celestial City. Therefore, he secured it in his bosom, gave thanks to God for directing his eye to the place where it had fallen—and with joy and tears resumed his journey.

The focus of this period in Christian’s life was *the scroll* that had been given to him at his salvation. It was a gift from the Holy Spirit, given to Christian to carry on his journey and to review whenever he encountered dangers and difficulties. **This scroll was the assurance of his salvation.** But in a moment of spiritual laziness (lingering too long at the arbor on Hill Difficulty), Christian loses this scroll without knowing. Later as he continued his trek, he reaches for it and learns he no longer possesses it. He quickly descends into fear and sorrow and sets off in desperation to find it. He retraces his steps back to the sin that caused it all, and there, after confessing his transgression to God, he sees the scroll. He takes hold of it once again with tears of inexpressible joy.

For Christians, this account is no mere allegory. They, too, have traversed this hill of difficulty. They, too, have lacked vigilance and fallen into sin. They can identify with the pilgrim’s fear and sorrow over losing the scroll—the assurance of their salvation. But they, too, can identify with the recovery of that scroll!

Why does John Bunyan liken assurance to a scroll? It is because it contains God’s declarations and promises. Ultimately, assurance is not based on the believer’s experiences, but *on what God has declared and what He has promised.* While Bunyan never discloses which declarations and promises he has in mind when he refers to this scroll, one can be confident that a significant portion of this text pertained to *the love of God.*

Indeed, for Christians who have lost their scroll, the truth to turn to is of **the love of God displayed to them in Christ Jesus.** It is to such a truth that we now turn in 1 John 4.

1 John 4:7–10 – “Assurance and the Primacy of God’s Love”

The apostle John writes,

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.”

The four sentences of this passage provide four insights into God’s love.

I. The Application of Divine Love (4:7)

Having just instructed his readers about the need for discernment (4:1–6), John returns once more to **the topic of love.** He has already discussed it in 2:7–11 and 3:11–24, but owing to its importance to the Christian life, he is led to write about it once more: **“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (4:7).** Love will now be John’s focus until the end of chapter 4.

As part of this exhortation to love, John addresses his readers as **“Beloved.”** It is a term that shows that John’s stance toward his audience is one of *affection* and *affirmation* (see also 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 11). As John Stott notes, this term shows that “The author practices what he preaches. In urging them to love each other, he first assures them of his own love for them” (Stott, *Epistles of John*, 160). But more than John’s own affection, the term indicates John’s confidence that those to whom he writes are the recipients of God’s sovereign, unconditional love (see 3:1). As he sets out to exhort his readers about the importance of love, he indicates at the outset that he is not questioning the authenticity of their faith (see also 5:13) but affirming it and explaining the implications that arise from it.

To these beloved, John issues an exhortation: **“Let us love one another.”** In view here is *a pattern of life.* As John has already taught, love is the chief ethic of Christianity, the sum of Christ’s law for His disciples (see John

13:34–35; 1 John 2;7–11; 3:11–24). Such an emphasis was not unique to John. Paul also taught that a lifestyle of love was Christ’s expectation for His people (Gal 5:14; 6:2), its presence in an individual’s behavior was the chief evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work (Gal 5:22–23), and that without love even the greatest of spiritual achievements was void (1 Cor 13:1–3).

What kind of “love” is in view? First, it is **a love for “one another.”** Although the New Testament does call upon believers to express love and concern to those outside the faith (e.g., Titus 3:1–3), unbelievers are not in view in John’s exhortation. He is speaking of **love for those *in the faith***. How believers love each other is to exceed how believers are to love unbelievers. Second, the expression of this love is not something the world can understand. This love is not based on feelings, gratification, the other’s worthiness, or a *quid pro quo* response. Rather, this love is **“a high, unselfish love which freely seeks the true welfare of the one loved”** (Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 196–97). It is a love that finds its own blessedness in being used for the benefit of another.

John then provides *three reasons* for this exhortation to love: **(1) “For love is from God”** – the love John speaks of is the kind that originates from God Himself. One cannot claim to receive things from God if such things do not include the ability to love others (see also 1 Thess 4:9). **(2) “And everyone who loves is born of God”** – love as a pattern of life demonstrates that spiritual regeneration has taken place in an individual’s life (see 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4). As R. W. Orr states, “love is an activity of the implanted eternal life, and is therefore a proof that the life is present” (“The Letters of John,” 247). **(3) “And knows God”** – love as a pattern of life demonstrates that a person possesses a true knowledge of God, and this kind of *knowing* indicates that a vital relationship with God exists (see John 17:3).

Ultimately, the beloved will love, and this reality buttresses the true believer’s assurance. They themselves have been loved. They have been enabled to love through the new birth. They are motivated to love through their personal knowledge of the God of love. Yet in the same way that Paul exhorted the Thessalonians “to excel still more” in their love (1 Thess 4:9–10), so John exhorts his readers here.

II. The Absence of Divine Love (4:8)

John then turns the coin over to look at the other side: **“The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (4:8)**. John is no longer describing the beloved. He is now describing the reality of the unbeliever. When he refers to **“the one who does not love,”** he again is speaking of *pattern* of life. In this case, it is a pattern that is characterized by the absence of care for others, the absence of an internal compulsion to seek the benefit of others at personal expense. Such a one, John says, **“does not know God”**—that is, he lacks a living relationship with the one true God (John 17:3; see also Eph 4:18).

Once again, John provides the explanation: **“for God is love.”** It is important to note what John is *not* saying by this oft-applied phrase. John is *not* saying that God is *nothing more than love*, for John has already stated that “God is Light” (1 John 1:6) and that “He is faithful and just” (1:9). In his Gospel, John also states that “God is Spirit” (John 4:24), and Hebrews 12:29 states that “God is a consuming fire.” **That God is love is absolutely true, but it is not the exhaustive truth.** Second, John is not saying that “love is God.” In other words, the phrase cannot be reversed, for to say that “love is God” is to reduce “God” to whatever definition one has about love. It makes God an impersonal force defined by whatever makes a person feel good.

The absence of a lifestyle of love provides proof that one has no living relationship with the one true God. This God is known specifically for and through His love, and knowledge of Him has an irresistible influence.

III. The Appearance of Divine Love (4:9)

That “God is love” may sound abstract, but John is not finished. Having made this assertion, he quickly turns to explain how this love had been made known *tangibly*, for true love always results *in action*: **“By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him” (4:9)**. The verb “manifested” means “to make visible, clear; to bring into the open.” John uses this verb often in 1 John (9x), beginning in 1:2 to describe the *manifestation* of the Son of God in the

incarnation. It is the same idea that John has in mind here. Authentic love does not remain abstract but reveals itself *in action*. Our love is not to be “in word only” (1 John 3:18) because God’s love was not “in word only.”

The action taken on God’s part is *the incarnation of the Son*: “**God sent His only begotten Son.**” John’s language emphasizes the Father’s once-for-all dispatch of His only begotten Son for a mission. As such, John affirms the Son’s eternal begottenness and preexistence. Since love doesn’t remain in word only, God took action. He didn’t send an angel, but He sent Himself—His Son. The purpose of this mission is stated simply but beautifully: “**so that we might live through Him.**” John acknowledges that apart from the life that only the Son could provide, we could expect nothing but death. The language takes us back to **John 3:16** – “**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.**”

IV. The Apex of Divine Love (4:10)

But the incarnation itself was not enough for our salvation. Something more was needed that only the Incarnate One could provide: “**In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins**” (4:10).

John here underscores the primacy of God’s love. In describing the love of God, John emphasizes that **we did not love God**. In our sinful state, we could not even define—much less exercise—love. Therefore, the Father’s sending of His Son for our benefit was in no way *a response* to something we did to deserve it! To the contrary, as the ultimate expression of love, God sent Himself for the benefit of those who deserved the exact opposite.

This contrast is expressed strongly in the positive affirmation: “**but that He loved us and sent His Son.**” The cost of this sending is found in *what* the Father sent His Son *to be*: “**the propitiation for our sins.**” “To propitiate” means “to appease or satisfy an offended party.” The noun is found in the NT only here and in 1 John 2:2. Why was *appeasement* necessary?

The problem: sin not only estranges the sinner from God, but God from the sinner. **The need:** sin must be justly punished; God’s righteous wrath in response to those who commit it must be satisfied. **The solution:** a sacrifice is offered—Jesus Christ, the righteous One—to pay the penalty for sins and bear the wrath of God to His satisfaction.

Ultimately, it is this truth that is the Christian’s scroll—the declaration that serves as the ultimate basis for his assurance of salvation.

For Discussion

1. Why is it noteworthy that John prefaces his command to “love one another” with the title, “Beloved”?
2. Define biblical love. How is it different from the world’s concept of love?
3. John anchors his exhortation to love one another in the incarnation (v. 9) and atonement (v. 10) of Jesus Christ. John emphasizes these facts, done by God for our benefit, as foundational. It is from this finished work on our behalf that John then draws his implications. Why is it important to understand the order of this logic?
4. According to John, can a person who has been born again and who has entered a living relationship with the God of love *not* begin to imitate this kind of love in his own relationships?
5. Discuss how the love of God is “the scroll” that the Christian needs to keep near him for times of difficulty.

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 4:10 and Romans 5:8
2. **Sing** “The Love of God” (#91 in *Hymns of Grace*) and “Here is Love” (#185 in *Hymns of Grace*).
3. **Listen to** the sermon by R. C. Sproul, “God Is Love,” available here: [God Is Love: Loved by God with R.C. Sproul](#).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: March 18 – 7pm – “Assurance and the Manifestation of God’s Love, 1 John 4:11–14” (Brad Klassen)