

GOD IS LOVE

By Dave Hunt from his April 2004 Berean Call newsletter

Note from Pastor Kevin: Dave is coming to our area in two weeks. I pray all of you will make it a point to come to his teachings on Saturday, April 17th and come to the Sunday service with a friend on April 18th.

Today, exactly as the Bible prophesied, man grows ever bolder in his defiance of God. One basic element common to the rejection of Christ in the world and contempt for sound doctrine in the church is the lack of musing, i.e., thinking and reasoning carefully, especially about God, His Word, and His will. Instead, the chief pursuit of the world-and, sadly, of many Christians-is amusement. We are too busy entertaining ourselves to think of God. As atheism rejects theism, so amusement stifles musing.

Let's swim against the tide and muse together. God called to Israel: "Come now, and let us reason together...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword..." (Is 1:18-20). That cry comes repeatedly from God's heart, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth...I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel...doth not consider" (Is 1:2,3).

God's reiterated pleadings for Israel to repent surely indicate that He was not the cause behind their sin. He had not foreordained their rebellion and judgment. They were not doing His will. The God of Israel reasons in vain with His chosen people: "I sent unto you all my servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, saying, Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate. But they hearkened not....Wherefore my fury and mine anger was poured forth..." (Jer 44:4). Obviously, God had not predestined their wicked behavior and doom, or He could not have called their idolatry "this abominable thing that I hate." Nor is the selfishness, jealousy, and hatred; the fornication, adultery, and divorce; the homosexuality, lesbianism and rejection of marriage as God ordained it; abortion and other murders; ethnic and religious wars and other violence so rampant in today's self-centered world any more God's will than was the wickedness in Noah's time. That world was destroyed in the flood. Today's world is ripening for an even worse outpouring of God's wrath against sin. Man was made in God's image (Gn 1:26,27) -not physically but spiritually. "God is a Spirit" (Jn 4:24) with no physical form. Man was to reflect the moral and spiritual character

of God in all that he thought, said, and did. Eden's Garden was not only a paradise of physical beauty and abundance beyond our imagination, but also a spiritual paradise as well—a bit of heaven on earth.

What a glorious relationship Adam and Eve enjoyed! The Garden was a symphony of God's glory expressed in the exhilarating oneness of a man and a woman joined in that first marriage by God Himself: the ecstatic, untainted happiness of selfless love displayed in words and deeds of continual kindness, thoughtfulness, grace, mercy, pure goodness, and compassion, each seeking only the other's joy in the wonder of intimate companionship!

When His creation of the universe, the animals, and man was finished, God pronounced it all to be "very good" (Gn 1:31). Then what went so horribly wrong? How could man, made in the image of God, have such deep hatred against his Creator and such determination to take his own way and flaunt his rebellion before the compassionate and holy God to whom he owes his very existence? The Bible calls this enigma "the mystery of iniquity" (2 Thes 2:7) and declares that its secret source is in the depths of man's heart: "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within..." (Mk 7:21-23). The heart is not only the seat of the emotions but of the will—like a fortified castle to which each person holds the only key: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prv 4:23). I will never forget the interview on TV of a Canadian who had been arrested in Saudi Arabia and falsely accused of terrorism. Under continuous torture, he "confessed his guilt" before he was released. That terrifying experience taught him two things: 1) torture can be so excruciating that the strongest person can be made to "confess" to anything, even that he murdered his mother, or God; and 2) yet no torture, no matter how unbearable, can make the victim believe what he is forced to confess.

There is a place deep inside where the real person guards his secret thoughts and true intentions. Solomon warns his son that what a man says is often a deceit to hide what he really is inside (Prv 23:6-8).

The Bible repeatedly calls this inner stronghold "the heart" or "the will." Without it, one has no individuality—nor could one love another or receive love. God has so made us that even He cannot force us to believe anything. He reasons with us in the gospel to persuade us of the truth; but, sadly, most people do not listen to reason and insist upon pursuing the broad road to destruction though they know where it leads. The world is filled with stubborn, disobedient youths who've grown up in rebellion not only against their parents but against all authority, especially God. The carrot of amusement that is offered even in the church has only led them further from in-depth thinking, i.e., musing. The result is "unreasonable and wicked men

[who] have not faith" (2 Thes 3:2).

The hidden bastion deep within can be either the throne of a selfish tyrant ruling others, or the seat of selflessness poured out for others in genuine love and compassion: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt 16:25); "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit..." (Jn 12:24).

God did not make us robots. In spite of the denial by Luther, Calvin, and many evangelical leaders today, God gave man a will to freely choose to love or to hate Him, to receive Christ as Savior and Lord or to reject Him. God wants man to trust Him so fully and to love Him so deeply as to give Him the keys to this inner fortress of the heart, holding nothing back: "my son, give me thine heart" (Prv 23:26).

God doesn't want to trick us or to superficially persuade us by our emotions. He wants to win our hearts with His truth and love. "Know therefore...in thine heart...the Lord he is God" (Dt 4:39); "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Dt 6:5); "The Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Dt 13:3). God's command for all to love Him with the whole heart proves His love and desire for all mankind to be saved. It would be unreasonable for God to command any to love Him whom He does not love enough to do all He could to save them, but has instead predestined to hell.

"Only fear the Lord, and serve him...with all your heart...consider how great things he hath done for you. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed" (1 Sm 12:24, 25); "turn ye even to me with all your heart...rend your heart, and not your garments" (Joel 2:12, 13); "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest [be baptized]" (Acts 8:37); "if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and...believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom 10:9). Creation's most powerful witness to its Creator is found in DNA. Digitally organized instructions for building and operating trillions of cells as one body are inscribed upon DNA in encoded language that only certain protein molecules can decode. Everything written has an author! And the author of this amazing pool of intricate information could only be an infinite Intelligence, the One who created and sustains all by "the word of his power" (Heb 1:3). The rebellion of Satan and man brought destruction to the entire order in the universe. The ongoing result has been natural disasters and a growing pool of disease and deformities among men and animals: "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together..." (Rom 8:21, 22). Even some cells no longer follow the instructions encoded in the DNA, resulting in cancer. In spite of overwhelming and indisputable evidence

bombarding him daily, man refuses to obey his Creator. He is thus a spiritual cancer on the earth, doing "that which [is] right in his own eyes" (Jgs 17:6).

God would be justified in wiping man from the earth-which He almost did with the flood. We would not be alive today had Noah not "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Gn 6:8). And why is God gracious and merciful to rebels? Only because of His boundless love revealed in Christ Jesus!

Christ's sacrifice for sin is the great proof of God's love for all mankind: "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). The unspeakable horror of sin is revealed in the creatures' mocking, scourging, and nailing their Creator to the Cross. And as sinful, rebellious man does his worst, God's love shines all the brighter: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34)-and to answer that prayer, the Father punishes Christ in full for the sins of the world, past, present, and future.

In loving response to rebellious man, who desires to tear Him from His throne, God sent His Son to become a man through the virgin birth and to pay the full penalty His own infinite justice required for sin. Indeed, He could do no other. What? Could do no other? Yes, for "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8,16).

There is a vast difference between saying that God is loving, and that God is love. The words, "God is," are coupled with many glorious promises-and warnings: God is, "thy refuge" (Dt 33:27); "my strength and power" (2 Sm 22:33); "gracious and merciful" (2 Chr 30:9); "a very present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1); "my defense" (Ps 59:17); "good to Israel" (Ps 73:1); "faithful" (1 Cor 1:9; 10:13); "true" (Jn 3:33)-"a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29), etc. But these expressions describe how God acts, not what God is. Love is the very essence of God's being. He cannot but love. Though love that is truly selfless is rarely seen on earth, every person knows that such love is of God. That recognition is like a haunting memory deep in man's heart of a paradise long lost.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they suddenly realized that "they were naked" (Gn 3:7). Not that they were without clothes (see TBC, Feb and Oct '02), for that had been true since their creation. Made in the image of God, they must have been clothed in the very light of God: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5). It has been well said that "we are like mirrors whose brightness, if we are bright at all, depends entirely upon the sun [Son] that shines upon us." Sin stripped the first man and woman of all that God had intended for them as creatures made in His glorious image. The reflection of His glory no longer shone out through them. They were spiritually and morally naked. What a tragedy! And today man is still naked before his Creator, missing the glory that once clothed his first parents: "for

all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

The love, which is God's very essence, is missing because we have been separated from Him by sin. There is a bitter aching in the heart that nothing but God himself can satisfy. God is calling us to be reconciled to Him: "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart" (Jer 29:13). Most members of our tragic race turn to everything but God in an attempt to satisfy the longing that only He can fill: "Be astonished, O ye heavens...and be horribly afraid...saith the Lord. For my people have...forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns...that can hold no water" (Jer 2:12,13). Some, however, will not be satisfied with anything less than God himself. With the Psalmist, they cry, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God..." (Ps 42:1, 2). This is not a thirst to have one's "needs" met or to see miracles that excite the flesh. This is a deep thirst to know God himself in such a close relationship as to become all that He desires one to be. Is this the passion of your heart-of mine?

In Christ's prayer to His Father, He expresses the earnest desire that God's perfect love would indwell and be manifest through those who know and love Him: "that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn 17:26). What a prayer from the heart of the One who longs to "bring many sons unto glory" (Heb 2:10) in His likeness (1 Jn 3:2)! Hear David's earnest expectation: "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (Ps 17:15).

This is more than a restoration of the love that Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden. That intimate relationship they had known with their Creator could be, and was, lost. What the new creature in Christ is brought into is infinitely better and can never be lost. Christ told a troubled Martha: "Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:42).

Paul prayed that the Ephesian believers would come to a full understanding of "the hope of his calling" (Eph 1:18). Wonder of wonders, God will eternally restore naked sinners "unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus" (1 Pt 5:10)! The new birth through faith in Christ begins a new and eternal life. Christ lives in us, but we must diligently partner with Him: "work out [not work for] your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12,13); "whereunto I also labor, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily" (Col 1:29). May we each have that same steadfast purpose in our hearts as we eagerly await His return. TBC