

As Paul gave thanks for the believers in Thessalonica, he thought of them as people whom God loved. That appears in the phrase *brethren beloved by the Lord* in v.13, and again when he says that *our God and Father ... has loved us* (v.16). We shouldn't skip over these little phrases, but take time to let them sink in.

I. Each Person of the Trinity loves us. God loves us. As Christians, when we say this we mean that the Holy Trinity loves us. There is only one God; but there are three who are God, because the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Now whatever is said of God generally is true of all three Persons. Thus if we say that God is infinite we mean that the Father is infinite, the Son is infinite, and the Holy Spirit is infinite – yet there are not three infinities, but only one. Therefore we can trust that if God loves us that means that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love us. And Scripture confirms this particularly in various places.

A. The Father loves us. Paul refers to the Father in v.16, saying that *our God and Father ... loved us*. We also have the words of Christ: *the Father himself loves you* (John 16:27). This can be hard to accept. We tend to see the Father as an angry judge, and think that if he doesn't crush us with his wrath it's only because Christ stops him. We feel that the Father really wants to punish us, and Christ gets him to calm down. Of course if we suspect that, it's difficult to feel much confidence or affection at the same time. But this is clearly not true. It was because God loved the world that he gave his only son; *God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). If the Father hadn't loved us before Christ came, he wouldn't have sent Christ. The love of God is not the result of Christ's work, but its cause. If we ask why God loves us, there is only one answer, which Moses gave in Deuteronomy 7:7-8: *The Lord did not set his love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which he swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

Why did God love them? The answer is, *he set his love upon you because he loves you*. What kind of an answer is that? Well, it's the best answer that could be given. It doesn't say that there was something attractive about them that made God love them, but that God loves them because he does – because he chose to. If it depended on us to be attractive, or good, or important, God would never have a reason to love us. But it doesn't depend on us: God's love depends only on himself. He loves us for no other cause than his own sovereign will.

Now the love of God the Father also appears in the fact that he adopts us as his children. God the Father is our Father, who has chosen us to be his sons and daughters, and heirs of all his abundance because he loves us. *See what kind of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God* (1 John 3:1). We can completely reject the suspicion that the Father doesn't love us. The fact that he has chosen us to be his children, to live with him and be part of his family, when there was no reason other than his own love to do so, shows us that even the best of human fathers does not have the same kind of love for his children that God has for us, though we were rebellious and disobedient.

Another proof that God's love doesn't depend on us is that he has loved us from eternity. Thus he says (Jeremiah 31:3): *I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.* Eternal love preceded our existence. But if God loved us before we existed, it can't be because we were so lovable; we didn't even exist. That means that we don't have to make God love us by our behavior; our existence is already an effect of God's love. Therefore we should see our lives, with all their disasters and difficulties, as governed by the love of God. We sometimes feel that the curse or bad luck have controlled everything that happens to us, from our birth until today. But for believers in Christ, the force that has shaped and defined our lives is actually God's love. That doesn't mean we haven't had terrible experiences; but it does mean that they haven't been meaningless. The reality of God's eternal and sovereign love also means that we don't have to live in fear of losing his love. He loved me before I existed; he loved me when I was dead in sin. My current shortcomings don't surprise him or diminish his love. He loves us because he loves us, not because of what we are. His love does not come to us because we are holy, but so that we will become holy. God's love depends only on himself, so I can't change it. Today God loves me, not because I'm so great, but because he has loved me from eternity according to his sovereign, inexplicable, and also unchangeable will. The love of God that has shaped my entire life will not be withdrawn. What God is doing, even in our suffering, is preparing us to enjoy that love more deeply and respond more fully.

B. The Holy Spirit loves us. Some believe that James 4:5 speaks of this. In any case, when Paul wants the believers in Rome to pray for him, he appeals to them *through the love of the Spirit* (Romans 15:30). Paul expected that the Romans would know the love of the Spirit, and remembering that would help them pray for him. We also know the love of the Spirit, though perhaps we haven't put it in those words. Let's think about it.

Who dwells in us? *The Spirit of God dwells in you*, according to Romans 8:9. Again Scripture says, *your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you* (1 Corinthians 6:19). What does he find in us? Not holiness, but corruption and sin. And yet the Holy Spirit gives us new life, and patiently works, gradually cleaning, correcting, re-ordering all the chaos and filth of our hearts. That kind of patience in such a close relationship is an amazing proof of love. When we live with someone we necessarily come to be aware of their faults, and at some points be inconvenienced by them. That's why patience is so necessary, why we can't let everyday failings damage our relationships, and why loving someone means being very accepting. Of course, we are not models of holiness, and have our own defects. We know that the other person is also putting up with us, and that fights are sometimes our fault. Since we need patience, we have to be patient. But with the Holy Spirit it's another matter. He has no defects, we don't have to be patient with him. And yet he is more patient with us than we are with our families. He does not give up, he does not get frustrated, and he does not leave us: he continues his work of conforming us to Christ, and that is the proof of superlative love for us.

II. God the Son loves us with a double love. When Paul called the Thessalonians *beloved by the Lord*, the reference is to the Lord Jesus Christ. This also is something the Bible says again and again. Paul tells us that this love is individual when he writes about the *Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me* (Galatians 2:20). Every believer can use those words. Christ gave himself as much for Abraham as for Paul, and as much for you as for either of them. This self-giving love extends to the whole church (Ephesians 5:2).

His love is enduring or permanent. Thus John says that Jesus *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end* (John 13:1). His love doesn't waver or change. He loves his own, no matter what happens or how much it costs him. And that leads us to say that it is also an exceedingly great love. Christ himself said: *Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down his life for his friends* (John 15:13). The proof of his love is that he gave himself for us. The cross of Christ shows his love, and is the key to overcoming our doubts. When we feel tempted to doubt his love, we should remember that he laid down his life for us.

But we can also say that Christ's love for us is twofold. Remember that Christ is both God and man? That is to say, the Son has the divine nature in all its fullness, and at the same time he has a complete human nature. So that in the unity of his person he has the divine will, and also a human will. Now loving is an act of the will: we desire the good of another. Christ loves us according to his divine nature, and also according to his human nature. His divine and human natures agree in willing our good, in loving us fervently and tenderly.

As believers in Christ, as children of God, as the dwelling-place of the Spirit, we should never feel that no loves us or accepts us. We have the love of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have the human love of our older brother, our savior, the Lord Jesus. It seems unbelievable, but Scripture doesn't give us room to doubt. God loves us.

This sets us free to love others, even though the more abundantly we love, the less we are loved (2 Corinthians 12:15). We don't have to live depending on others to return our love, or looking for security and acceptance from others. If I am loved with the triune love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and also the perfect human love of the Incarnate Son, that's enough to comfort and strengthen me.

If God showed his love to us when we were still sinners (Romans 5:8), we should also love the unconverted. We should treat them well, listen to them carefully, and be alert for opportunities to give them the gospel.

Again, if Christ loves his people as we've seen, we should also *walk in love* in the church (Ephesians 5:2). Resentment, envy, and hatred have no place among us. Considering the Thessalonians as *beloved of the Lord* Paul also considered them to be his *brethren*.

And if God loves us in this way, we should also love him. It is the first commandment, that we love our God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37-38). And our love for God is possible because his love came first. If we know and believe *the love God has for us*, it is no wonder that *we love him because he first loved us* (1 John 4:16, 19). May our gracious God direct our hearts *into the love of God* (2 Thessalonians 3:5).