

Experiencing God's Love, Part 1

Ephesians 3:14-21

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, June 30th 2024

I. Introduction - What does it mean to experience God's love?

Os Guinness told the story of Pyotr Petrovich, a Russian Union worker in the Leningrad timberworks. The story occurs when Krushchev was the dictator of the Soviet Union. The government had placed guards at the entrances to the factory to try to slow down the enormous amount of petty thievery that employees engaged in. One of those guards spotted Pyotr Petrovich leaving the yard with a wheelbarrow filled with sawdust. He was dutifully suspicious and checked him out. Let me read this part of the story.

"Come on, Petrovich," said the guard. "What have you got there?">

"Just sawdust and shavings," Petrovich replied.>

"Come on," the guard said, "I wasn't born yesterday. Tip it out." Out it came - nothing but sawdust and shavings. So he was allowed to put it all back again and go home.>

The same thing happened every night all week, and the guard was getting extremely frustrated. Finally, his curiosity overcame his frustration.>

"Petrovich," he said, "I know you. Tell me what you're smuggling out of here, and I'll let you go.">

"Wheelbarrows," said Petrovich.

As Reformed people, we are pretty good at making sure that no false doctrines are smuggled past us, and that includes erroneous views of love. We make Christians empty out their wheelbarrow to make sure they don't have an unprincipled love of situation ethics, or a non-graced based love of the universalists, or the on-again-off-again love of five point Arminians, or other doctrinal errors. But the biggest error of all slips by totally unnoticed in the form of a wheelbarrow - the error of thinking that God's love is only a good doctrine, but not something that we *experience* in any kind of powerful way. And it is *experiencing* God and being *transformed* by His doctrines that is the main focus of this mini-series.

Now I will admit, it may not have been a good idea to use sawdust to illustrate my point about dead doctrine. Doctrine is important, but listen to what Paul says about doctrine that is divorced from love in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul says, "though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." Verse 3 describes what some people would *interpret* as love: "though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor." Isn't that love? But he says, "though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing." The agape love of 1 Corinthians 13 has

one source only - God. It is not something we can do on our own. It is a supernatural love that must be known experientially. It's not enough to have a sound *doctrine* of love - as good as that is. The Scripture insists that we must *experience* God's love. What on earth does that mean?

Turn with me again to the passage we read in Ephesians 3. In verse 17 Paul wants us to be rooted and grounded in God's love. That's a very interesting thought - what does it mean to be rooted and grounded in God's love? Obviously it at *least* involves a *doctrine* of love. The doctrine of God's love gives us security. But in verse 18 he says that he doesn't want us to stop in our knowledge of God's love in salvation. He wants us to keep studying (and we are dealing now with the doctrine - with the intellectual). He says "that we may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height" - that would take some study to comprehend that, and we are *supposed* to be studying the Scriptures. And we will be making a feeble attempt this morning at intellectually comprehending God's love. It is really like taking a bucket of water out of the ocean, but there is still so much more to know. In fact, there is so much on this subject that I plan to take two Sundays to deal with the attribute of love, and this will likely be the end of the series. So there *is* study involved.

But in verse 19 he prays that we may have an experiential knowledge that transcends what our rational minds can take in. He says, "to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." To know the experience of God's love you must first be filled with God Himself. The doctrine of God without God is empty.

Some of us have allowed wheelbarrows to be smuggled past us - the error of dividing doctrine from experience. Today we will be focusing primarily on the *doctrine* of Roman numeral I. And next week we will be primarily dealing with applications in Roman numerals II and III.

II. There are many dimensions to God's love, but consider the following: God's love is:

A. A Declared Love (Is. 43:1-4a; Jer. 31:3; Mal. 1:2; Mark 1:11 and verses below)

But you can tell from this first portion of the outline that there are so many dimensions to the doctrine of God's love. And we will be dealing with some applications even today.

First, God's love is always a declared love. In Isaiah 43:1-4 God gives the following phrases, "You are Mine.... You are precious and honored in my sight... I love you." He tells us, "I love you." And even before there was a creation, that was true. From eternity past God *communicated* His love to His Son. And you can see some of those Scriptures. On earth He audibly said, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Over and over again in the Scriptures God tells us, "I love you." And lest we forget, He tells us again. His love is a love which cannot tire of communicating that to us.

And yet how often is our love hidden? You've probably all heard the story of the Yiddish farmer who for years never declared his love for his wife until one day she confronted him and said, "Why don't you ever tell me that you love me?" He stoically responded, "When we were married I told you that I loved you, and if I ever change my mind, I'll let you know." No. That's not enough!!! Real love is always *declared*.

And we ought to be creative in expressing our love for each other. God was. He writes it in prose; He gives us poetry, He protects His people from attack and then says, "I love you," He provides food and says, "I did this because I love you." And we need to be creative in our declarations of love to both God and man. Don't get stuck in a rut. Say it in many different ways. Say it with expression and meaning. Agape love is hamstrung if it is not communicated. If our love is agape love or love that *God Himself* has produced in us, it *will* be expressed.

B. A Personal Love (Luke 15:10; Zeph. 3:17; 1 Thes. 2:7; Ps. 103:13; Gal. 2:20)

But second, God's love is a personal love. If your idea of God's love is that it is a general love for the church, but that you as an individual might fall through the cracks, then be encouraged with the Scriptures in your outline. They are just samples of the graphic descriptions of God's *emotional* expressions of *personal* love. In Luke 15:10 we are told that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents; not just over the millions, but over the one. That's personal. Listen to Zephaniah 3:17. It's the fourth to last book of the Old Testament. This verse is called the John 3:16 of the Old Testament, but instead of 3:16 it's Zephaniah 3:17. But it's a wonderful verse. It says, "The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you in His love, He will rejoice over you with singing." This is not a general love. This is personal. In Galatians 2:20 Paul could personalize John 3:16 with a "me." He says, "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." You can say that. By faith, you can say "God loves me."

C. An Intimate Love (John 14:21; Job 29:4; Zeph. 3:17; Ps. 25:14)

But I want to go further and say that God's love is *intimate*. This goes a little bit beyond being personal. Turn to John 14:21. I want you to see this for yourself because it is so mind-blowing. At least it was mind-blowing for me when I first experienced God's intimacy with me in twelfth grade. I was always convinced of God's love for me as an individual, but I never dared to think that God had time for me. I wonder how much of that arose from spending so many years in a boarding school. I was loved and provided for by my parents and I never doubted that, but I missed terribly the intimacy of parental love.

Perhaps some of you miss this dimension with God. You know God loves you, but you long to get out of boarding school and into God's arms. This passage says that this can be your experience always. Look at it. John 14:21: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him".

That is what I longed for for years: to know God in an intimate way; to have Him manifest Himself to me. But I wasn't willing to pay the price. God gently had been convicting me of sin which disturbed Him and turned Him off, and I refused to keep His commandments. What happens when you do that? Just as bad relations can destroy intimacy in marriage, when we deliberately grieve God by ignoring His wishes; by ignoring His law, we break the intimacy. Yes, we are still metaphorically married to God, but He doesn't force Himself on us. He wants a reciprocal relationship. And when you love Him and avoid things that irritate Him and pursue His wishes in the law, God says His love will be moved from a doctrine to an experience in your hearts. "I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

When I gave up in twelfth grade and gave myself to God without reservation, God manifested Himself to me powerfully. It was like I was wrapped in His arms, with wave after wave of the delight of His presence rolling over me. I remember not being able to sleep because my love for God pounded so heavily. And that was the beginning of my Song of Solomon experience. Once you have experienced the reality of a Song of Solomon experience with God, you will never again be content to merely read about it.

Later, I had times when I was too tired for the Lord and that experience of love waned and dried up. In the words of Song of Solomon I said, "I have taken off my robe; How can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; How can I defile them?" She said in effect, "I'm too tired. I don't want to get up for you." But the bride soon realized that his absence was painful, and she sought Him and could not find Him. Once you have tasted of God's love, you never want to lose that intimacy. If you pursue God as the bride in Song of Solomon did, that manifestation of love will return. It is guaranteed. God delights in sharing His love in the most intimate manner. And you can read the other Scriptures in your outline on your own.

D. A Generous Love (Rom. 5:5; Ex. 34:6; Numb. 14:18,19; Jude 2; 2 Chron. 6:42; Neh. 9:17; 13:22; Ps. 17:7; 25:6; 57:10; 69:13; 86:5,13,15; 89:1,49; 103:8,11; 106:45; 107:43; 108:4; 117:2; 145:8; Lam. 3:22,23; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Eph. 2:4; cf. the same call for our love in Phil. 1:9)

Point D says that it is a generous love. Now I have just stacked that point with far more verses than I needed to because there are so many people who doubt this. They are always fearful that God will fall out of love with them, or that God's love will run low. But over and over the Scripture describes God's love as a *generous* love, a *great* love, an *abundant* love, a *rich* love, and similar phrases.

Any number of Scriptures could have been given, but I like Romans 5:5. It says, "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." John Murray and many other commentators point out that this is not our love for God, but God's love for us that is poured out into our hearts. It is the tangible experience of God's loving presence. And the Greek word for shed abroad indicates an abundant, free flow of a large quantity of love. One commentator says that it means an inundation. The NEB renders it, "God's love has flooded our inmost heart." Paul is not talking about faint impressions but overwhelming ones. If you have never experienced the flooding of your heart with supernatural love, then I hope these Scriptures stir you up to

seek God with all your heart. And don't call me a pietist. This was standard fare for John Murray, the Puritans, and many other Reformed theologians.

E. An Eternal & Unbreakable Love (Jer. 31:3; 33:11; Ps. 100:5; Eph. 1:4-5; Rom. 8:35-39; 1 Cor. 13:8)

But let's move on. Each of these points that describe God's character melts my heart because it is unlike anything down here below. While human love can be broken and give up, God's love is an eternal and an unbreakable love. Turn to Jeremiah 31:3. If you have ever been tempted to wonder if God loves you any longer, then this can be a Scripture to hang onto. It's a passage that I memorized years ago and it keeps undergirding my thinking. Jeremiah 31:3.

The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you."

Ephesians 1:4-5 says that God's love began toward us in eternity past. It words it this way: "in love having predestined us to adoption." Wow! Before the world was created, God predestined us to be adopted as His children, and He loved us then.

You have no doubt memorized Romans 8:25-39. It is a passage that assures us that absolutely nothing in the universe can separate us from His love. When I was an Arminian I was constantly fearful that my actions would make me lose my salvation, or perhaps in heaven I might sin and lose my salvation even after I got to heaven. But these verses say that nothing in creation, (and that includes you - you are a part of creation - nothing in creation), can separate you from God's love. Does that mean there won't be rough spots in your marriage with God? No. There can be rough spots. If you look at the Scriptures in point F, you will see that there is pain in God's love, and you will experience pain as well. It is an unconditional love which means that He will stick with you through thick and through thin - even if it brings Him pain. But because Christ paid the price and you are perfect in Him, Romans 8 says that nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

F. An Unconditional Love

- 1. It is conditional in the sense that it was made possible through Christ's obedience (see "a holy love")**
- 2. However, it is not conditioned upon our obedience (Rom. 5:8)**
- 3. This makes it a painful love at times (Hos. 11:8-9)**

Turn with me to Hosea 11:8-9. I want to spend some time on the pain it causes God when we spurn Him; when we ignore His Sabbaths and disobey His laws. We saw last week that though God doesn't need creation, He endures with much longsuffering (that's pain - with much long suffering) the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. So that verse indicates that unbelievers pain God. But Hosea 11 indicates that believers can bring pain to God as well. I'm reading Hosea 11:8-9.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboim. [I should mention that Admah and Zeboim were cities in the plain destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah. God's people deserved to be destroyed like those cities, but God says, "How can I do that? Continuing in the last clause in verse 8] My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst; and I will not come with terror.

And that is the whole theme of the book of Hosea - that we have committed spiritual adultery against God and it has pained Him greatly, but He still wants us. He wants us back.

To me, this is the most mystifying aspect of God's love: that He would allow Himself to be in the position where His heart churns within Him and He is in pain because of our behavior.

And by way of application, I would say that agape love deliberately makes itself vulnerable to those whom we love. Why would the Holy Spirit allow Himself to be grieved? He's made Himself vulnerable in a sense. Paul says, "Grieve not the Spirit of God by whom you were sealed till the day of redemption." We are secure in God; we are sealed till the day of redemption. But if we want to enter into the joy of knowing God, of experiencing His love, we must not grieve Him or pain Him with our behavior.

And of course, we ought to imitate God in our relations with others. You have perhaps been hurt by certain people and may not be able to have close fellowship, but your love should cause you to not give up. Continue to give, to talk to, to minister to, to work with, and to love. Don't let your love be a conditional love. And why is it that God is willing to put up with pain? Point G says that it is of His very nature to have a sacrificial love - which is the next point.

G. A Sacrificial Love (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 3:16; 4:9; John 10:14,15)

Central to the definition of agape love is its self-giving nature. "God so loved the world that He gave." And we saw on the attribute of aseity, that since it is impossible for God to be selfish, God's giving is always sacrificial. 1 John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." Christ said that there is no greater love than this. That means that if you have fooled yourself into thinking that you have the kind of love that would lay down your life for your wife, but you won't take out the trash, or treat her to something because you are too tired, then you are deceiving yourself. If you don't have sacrificial love in the lesser areas, it is doubtful you will have sacrificial love in the greater areas. Ask God to give you His supernatural, agape love so that you could enter into your relationships with each other and with Him in a sacrificial way.

H. A Holy Love (John 14:15,21; 15:10; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; 1 John 5:3; 1 Tim. 2:15; Deut. 5:10; etc.)

And of course, God's love is a holy love. There is no way God could love us without His holiness being satisfied. So much of what goes for love in the modern church can be

exposed as counterfeit by this point alone. Let me read you some of the Scriptures in your outline. John 14:15,21.

John 14:15 "If you love Me, keep My commandments. John 14:21 He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

Notice that Jesus denies you have true God-give love if you refuse to keep His commandments. You might have your excuses on why you don't tithe, why you break the Sabbath, don't attend church, or why you watch pornography, or disobey other commandments, but it just exposes the shallowness or perhaps even the non-existence of true God-given love in your heart. True love is a holy love. And don't get discouraged if you don't have it. It is there for the asking. Agape love is God-given love. It's a product of grace. Anyway, back to our point, let me read a few more of those Scriptures.

John 15:10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. Rom. 13:9 For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Gal. 5:14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 1John 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. 1Tim. 2:15 Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control. Deut. 5:10 but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Ask God to shed abroad His holy love in your hearts so that your love becomes a holy love.

I. A Sovereign Love (Eph. 1:4-5; 2 Thes. 2:13; Deut. 4:37; 10:15; Ps. 78:68; Matt. 12:18; Col. 3:12; 1 Thes. 1:4)

But moving on, point I says that God's love is also a sovereign love. Ephesians 1:4 says, "In love having chosen us." Over and over in Scripture God's love is tied to His choice. And love *is* a choice and not just a feeling. When people say that they want a divorce because they no longer have feelings for each other, they are forgetting that love is not dependent upon their feelings. It is a choice.

Jay Adams once had a couple try to get him to agree that their marriage was so hopeless that they should get a divorce. He disagreed with them and pointed out that God *commanded* them to love each other even when they didn't feel like. He pointed out that feelings follow obedience. Well, they insisted that they just couldn't do it. He said, "Well, let's go a step backwards. You may not be able to love each other as husband and wife at this point, but Scripture says that you are to love your neighbor as yourself. He's the closest neighbor you have." She said she didn't want to be his neighbor. He said, "Well, Scripture says you must love your enemies. Let's at least start there."

He was emphasizing the point that love is not something you uncontrollably fall into and uncontrollably fall out of. It is a choice. God sovereignly chose us to salvation, and He calls us to make the choice of love even when we don't feel like it. We imitate God in that. You say, "I can't do that." It's true, you can't. It's God-given grace that is there for the asking and it is God who enables you to do it. But in the same way, we must choose to love one another even when we don't feel like it.

J. A Free Love (Hos. 14:4; see God's attribute of aseity; cf. Gal. 5:13)

Point J says that God's love is a free love - not free love in the hippy sense of promiscuous love (which is an oxymoron), but free love in the sense that it doesn't need to be earned. Have you ever been in relationships where you never felt like you could do enough to be secure in that person's love? That's because it wasn't a free love. God's love is not looking for payment. Listen to Hosea 14:4. It says, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely." Get that phrase, "I will love them freely." That was in the context of Israel having committed spiritual adultery. God forgave and loved Israel just as Hosea forgave his repentant wife, Gomer, and didn't hold her past over her head. Now, don't get me wrong - he did require repentance before he let her back because his love was a holy love just like God's. But Hosea loved her freely by God's grace after she repented. And similarly, God says, "I will love them freely." They don't deserve it. They haven't earned it, but God loves them anyway. Isn't that encouraging? Our relationship with God is not a merit relationship, but a love relationship. But when God gives us agape love, we can love others in the same way.

K. A Powerful Love (Song. 8:6; 2 Tim. 1:7; Zech. 10:6; Eph. 3:16-20)

And by the way, because we are to imitate God, we are to love Him with all our strength. It's not sufficient to love God with our mind and emotions. Scripture says that we must also love with our actions. Point K demonstrates this concept when it says that God's love is a powerful love. Song of Solomon 8:6 says that "love is as strong as death; many waters cannot quench love." If it was a feeble love, the evil in this world might extinguish it, but because God is a unity, an omnipotent God must have an omnipotent love. And this is very encouraging for us, when we feel so unable to love. We need to keep in mind that when God calls us to love our enemies, he is calling us use *His* love, by *His* power and *His* grace.

The passage we started with in Ephesians 3 is not in this part of your outline, but it ties God's power together with our ability to love. Paul prays that we would be "strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that" and then he gives the *results* of this strengthening power in his discussion of our experience of God's love. Love has produced powerful changes in men's lives. God's love shining through individuals has won them to Christ, has melted hardened hearts, has broken enmity.

Kathy and I recently finished Virginia Provan's book, *Saving My Assassin*. And we highly recommend it to you. She was a Christian attorney under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania. She defended Christians in court using archaic laws so successfully that the president of Romania sent an assassin to make her "disappear." And because Ronald Reagan had embassy staff monitoring her, they had to do this secretly. Initially she

was frightened, but asking God for wisdom and courage, she told the assassin that she understood that he needed to do his job, but before he killed her, wasn't he curious to discover *why* she was doing what she was doing. And he was. He couldn't understand why she would risk her life for others. And as she started sharing the Gospel with him, God's love once again enabled her to love and pray for her enemy. And God used that testimony to break his heart and convert him.

Hitler said, "Love is weak, hate is strong." But Hitler fell. Stalin has fallen. Hate did not keep the Soviet Union together. When Krushchev visited the Rouen Cathedral he said this: "There is much in Christ that is in common with us Communists, but I cannot agree with Him when he says when you are hit on the right cheek turn the left cheek. I believe in another principle. If I am hit on the left cheek I hit back on the right cheek so hard that the head might fall off." But James says, "Mercy triumphs over judgment." Even in the midst of persecution, Richard Wurmbrand has reported multitudes of cases where people have been converted because they have been conquered by the love of Christians as they have returned good for evil.

Forgive me if you have heard this illustration. I have probably given it before, but it is such a moving story for me. Corrie Ten Boom recounts the story of meeting one of the cruelest and most heartless of her German guards years after she was released. He was one who had repeatedly humiliated and degraded both her and her sister. Then one day, years later, he stood before her with his hand outstretched and asked her, "Will you forgive me?" Here's what she writes.

I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, Jesus, help me! Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into one stretched out to me [there by the way is the sovereign dimension of love; it is a choice, not a helpless feeling. She said, "I thrust my hand into one stretched out to me] and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did at that moment! To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you."

God's love is powerful. And if you doubt the power of agape love, I would encourage you to read the Virginia Provan's story, *Saving My Assassin*, or Richard Wurmbrand's book, *Tortured for Christ*, or Corrie ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*, or any number of other books that show God's supernatural love enabling Christians to do the impossible. That's what Paul meant when He spoke of the love of God shed abroad in our hearts - flooding our hearts, or when he said in 2 Corinthians 5:14, "the love of Christ compels us." Agape love is *God's* love and has the characteristics we have been going through in your outline.

L. A Rational Love (Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:3-6; 3:18-20; Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27)

But the verses in the next point show that God's love is not just heartfelt; it is also rational. Heartfelt and rational are not in contradiction. Remember that Christ commanded us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. The rational aspect of God's love is that He has plans for our good. Long before the foundation of the world He elected us in love, planned our life, and planned out an eternity with Him. "I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for calamity." And we must have plans as well if we are to love as God loved. If you wait for what comes naturally in your home, your flesh will often dominate, because you are going to be too tired to love. You need to plan fun times, plan educational times, plan fellowship, and yes, sometimes things will just spontaneously happen, but never think that love cannot be planned.

If you are married you need to keep lists of ways to express love and implement them. That is loving others with your mind, just as God loved you with His plans. You need to know what the likes and dislikes of the other person is. But all of us can enter into that, whether children, parents or single adults. Love God and each other with your minds. God's love is rational.

M. A Heartfelt Love (Hos. 11:8-9; Is. 62:5; Zeph. 3:17; Matt. 22:37)

Now we have emphasized that love can be done as an action even when the heart is not in gear. But the Biblical balance is to love God with all that we are. Our emotions are not enemies. They can be in the service of God and of each other. Certainly God's heart goes out to us. In Hosea he says that His heart churns within him when he sees us in sin. On the other hand, Isaiah 62:5 says, "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." Isn't that incredible? That is the kind of heart that God has in His relationship with you. Don't ever think that God has a so-so relationship with you. He is committed from the heart. Zephaniah 3:17 speaks of God's deep rejoicing love over each of us.

N. A Reliable Love (Psalm 100:5; Jer. 33:11; 1 Cor. 13:8; see attribute of immutability & faithfulness)

And then finally, God's love is a *reliable* love. It is not on again, off again. After all, Paul says, "love never fails." True love; agape love can be counted on. Over and over again in the Scriptures we have the refrain, "for His love endures forever." or "His faithful love" or "His steadfast love." And you can look those references up for yourself.

But let's end this service by praising the Lord for the incredible love He has shed on our hearts, and let's ask Him to cause us to enter more and more into the experiencing of His love. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the incredible love you have shown to us. We are unworthy; utterly unworthy. We are awed that you as a holy God could love us so much. And we praise you and thank you. Praise be to your name. Praise be to your name. I pray for this

congregation that they might be strengthened with might through your Spirit in the inner man, that they might be rooted and grounded in love and might be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that we might be filled with all of your fullness. Help us to love you with all of our heart and soul and strength and mind, and help us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

You have been a blessing to us, O God. Make us a blessing to others. By your power enable us to effectively reach out to our communities and lead many to Christ. We desire to see Omaha coming to know the Gospel of Christ. We desire to see America not content with pretend righteousness, but to be clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Shine upon our land and free us from our corruption. Grant us your grace and love. We pray this in Jesus name, Amen.

Charge is from 2 Thessalonians 3:5 - "Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God."