

GARRY J. WILLIAMS

REFLECTIONS ON THE IMMEASURABLE LOVE OF GOD

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“The title says it all: fickle human love is not the measure of God’s love. Williams roots our understanding of the biblical claim that ‘God is love’ in the biblical descriptions of the triune God’s being perfect in love (in himself) and acting out of love (for us). In contrast to the many contemporary theologians who associate God’s love with his vulnerability, Williams rightly emphasizes the sovereignty of God’s love, even when that love involves something as apparently ‘weak’ as Jesus’s death on a cross. For anyone wanting to learn to ‘speak Christian,’ this book will help because it rightly parses the grammar of ‘God is love.’”

**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Another book on love? Decidedly not. This book is unique in its depth and clarity. If you thought you knew most of what there is to know about God’s love, then read this study and be astonished at what more there is to learn. What particularly moved me was how humanly impossible even the slightest knowledge of God’s love really is, yet how this very love of God for us in Christ overcomes all the obstacles we construct. When we begin to glimpse the depths of this love, then we can respond. And what should that response be? To love him back!”

**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological  
Seminary

“God is love. This book takes you into the depths of this profound and delightful truth with clarity and care. Here you will learn of God’s peerless, perfect, proportioned, ever-present, self-sufficient, sovereign, eternal, unchanging, passionate, all-knowing, just, and beautifying love. After reading this book, I found myself more moved to pray, more filled with love for the triune God, and more challenged to love others as God has loved me.”

**Jonathan Gibson**, Assistant Professor of Old Testament, Westminster  
Theological Seminary

“In this timely reflection on God as love, Garry Williams draws upon theology and Scripture, history and literature, current events and age-old questions to illuminate a truly tremendous subject. He intersperses this reflection with incisive questions for meditation and clothes the whole in plain, nontechnical language. And the result? *A truly profound* study of what has to be regarded as the heart of the biblical perspective about God.”

**Michael A. G. Haykin**, Professor of Church History and Biblical  
Spirituality, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is a clear and accessible exposition of the classic Reformed doctrine of God’s love. Garry Williams unpacks some tricky doctrinal issues related to aseity, impassibility, omniscience, and justice—but without dumbing down or blinding us with theological science. This book is a lovely way to encounter the gigantic, stupendous, beautiful God, with the aid of a reliable and warm-hearted communicator.”

**Lee Gatiss**, Director, Church Society; Lecturer in Church History,  
Union School of Theology

HIS LOVE ENDURES FOREVER



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REFLECTIONS ON THE  
IMMEASURABLE LOVE OF GOD

GARRY J. WILLIAMS

*His Love Endures Forever: Reflections on the Immeasurable Love of God*

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jeff Miller, Faceout Studio

First published in 2015 by Inter-Varsity Press, Norton Street, Nottingham  
NG7 3HR, England

First US printing 2016

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5082-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5085-0

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5083-6

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5084-3

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Williams, Garry J., author.

Title: His love endures forever : reflections on the immeasurable love of God / Garry J. Williams.

Description: Wheaton : Crossway, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015046434 (print) | LCCN 2016008579 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433550829 (tp) | ISBN 9781433550850 (epub) | ISBN 9781433550836 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433550843 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: God (Christianity)—Love.

Classification: LCC BT140 .W555 2016 (print) | LCC BT140 (ebook) | DDC 231/.6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015046434>

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Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

In memory of my mother,  
Dorothy Anne Williams, who knew this love.  
And for her grandchildren, Emily, Ben, Alice, and  
Jonathan, with the prayer that they will abide in it.





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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book originated in November 2010, when I spoke at a conference in Sheffield for Christ Church, Fulwood. It was the enthusiasm and thoughtful response of the people there that encouraged me to think that the approach taken in the talks might usefully be applied to writing a doctrinal and devotional book on the love of God.

I am very grateful to the Board of London Theological Seminary for the period of study leave in the summer of 2012 during which most of the book was written, and for a further period in 2014 during which it was finished. It is a delight to work in an institution that is sufficiently committed to the ongoing theological growth of its faculty to set them free for study and writing that is not related to preparing the next lecture. In particular, I am grateful to David Green, Nigel Redford, and Robert Strivens for taking on the extra burdens involved in looking after the work of the John Owen Centre during my absences.

I first closely studied the doctrine of God's love for a course I team taught in 2001 with David Field and Mike Ovey. I esteem them both as teachers, and their lectures have left their mark on this book. The Lord has taken us to different places, but I look forward to the day when we stand together to praise his love.

The bulk of the writing was done in the United States, where we were able to live as a family for three months in 2012 due to the generosity of friends old and new. Thank you, Luca and Jennie

## *Acknowledgments*

Grillo, for lending us your sylvan Amherst home that proved such a conducive environment for work and rest. While in the States we were touched by the kindnesses of many others, some of whom we had not even met before. Thank you, Mike and Sue Renihan, for the capacious car; Tom and Suzie Oates, for the island holiday; and Paul and Christy Wolfe, for the Virginian hospitality. During our stay in Massachusetts we greatly appreciated the warm welcome and fellowship at West Springfield Covenant Community Church in Springfield. It was an apt blessing that while writing about the love of God, we were experiencing it in the generosity of his people to us.

*Garry J. Williams, Epiphany 2016*

# INTRODUCTION

God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 JOHN 4:8-10

God is love. There can be few more famous statements in the Bible, and few more wonderful. Here is a truth that is simple enough for a small child to grasp and yet deep enough to occupy us for eternity. Here is the same good news of the gospel of the death of Christ that is believed by a toddler and yet has kept busy some of the greatest minds in human history with its unfathomable profundity. Here is the revelation of the heart of God that grips us when we first come to know Jesus Christ and holds us to him throughout our Christian lives. Here is the grace that amazes us because it gives us what we do not deserve and keeps giving it.

But here too is a statement like a wax nose that can be bent in innumerable directions. As Trevor Hart comments, “Simply to repeat the biblical assertion that ‘God is love’ is certainly not to answer any significant theological questions.”<sup>1</sup> The idea that God

is love is too readily isolated from its wider biblical context and is twisted. The temptation is to refashion it “after our likeness,” since we all too easily make our own human love the definition of God’s love. In the creation God made man in his likeness, but in our rebellion we attempt to make him in ours. Rather than remembering that it is *God* who is love, we presume that the love of God is the *same as* human love, and love—our love—becomes God.

Whole theologies have been built on misunderstandings of this statement, many of them simply reflecting common cultural assumptions about love, as David Wells argues:

John’s sentence defining love would have been completed quite differently in the West today. In this is love, many would say, that God is there for us when we need him. He is there for what we need from him. He is love in that he gives inward comfort and makes us feel better about ourselves. He is love in that he makes us happy, that he gives us a sense of fulfilment, that he gives us stuff, that he heals us, that he does everything to encourage us each and every day.<sup>2</sup>

Given the prominence of such conceptions of love in our culture it is all the more urgent that we discern the true, biblical definition of God’s love. Wrong definitions press upon us. I hope that this book will serve as a form of inoculation that will protect you against mistaken accounts of God’s love, accounts that flatten out the difference between divine and human love. Nevertheless, because my desire is to leave you filled with wonder at the love of God rather than feeling you have just witnessed a bloody theological bout, I will only occasionally explicitly engage such mistaken theologies along the way. I am convinced that if we attend to it properly, the biblical doctrine of God’s love will itself suffice to expose the false paths we should not follow.

It is particularly easy to define God’s love in terms of our own experiences, as distinct from his other attributes. Wells makes this point:

We assume we know what God's love is because it connects with our experience in a way that many of his other attributes do not. And why is this? The answer, obviously, is that there is no parallel in our experience to many of God's other attributes such as his eternality, omnipresence, omniscience, or omnipotence. But there is to his love.<sup>3</sup>

We use the term *love* in an incredibly wide range of ways, for everything from parental love to love for jam sandwiches. Most often we take romantic or marital love as our defining model for the love of God. There is strong biblical support for this comparison. Most Christian interpreters have read the relationship in the Song of Solomon as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. God told the prophet Hosea to take an unfaithful wife in order to illustrate vividly his own relationship to his wayward people (chaps. 1–3). Jeremiah depicts Israel as the Lord's unfaithful bride (chaps. 2–3) and Ezekiel tells the story of Jerusalem as an abandoned baby nurtured by the Lord and taken as his bride before falling into prostitution (chap. 16). In Ephesians 5:22–33 the apostle Paul points to the love of Christ for the church as a model for the love of a husband for his wife. At the end of the Bible the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). In these and other texts the Bible itself points us to the marriage relationship as a way of grasping something of God's love for the church.

When it speaks like this about God's love, the Bible answers many of our questions about what God is like, but it also raises further questions, and it is in answering these questions that we often go wrong. For example, we more than previous generations know painfully well that human marital love can be fickle and often ends tragically in divorce. So when we read that God loves us as his bride, are we to conclude that he might stop loving us, as a husband might stop loving his wife? Should we fear that like human marital love, God's love might come and go and even die? Within the happiest human marriage, feelings of love fluctuate,



ebbing one day but flowing strongly the next. We can feel full of love, brimming with it, or we can feel cool and detached. Is God like that? Does his love vary in its intensity, perhaps in response to how much we love him? Human love is sometimes more an act of resolve than a passionate feeling. It can rest more on the memory of a past vow than on a present sensation. What does love mean for God? Is it a decision he has made, or is it a feeling that always burns within him?

Does God even have feelings as we do? What have Christian theologians meant by asserting that he is “without body, parts or passions”?<sup>4</sup> The idea of an emotionless God might sound unattractive. We might want God to be emotional, to *feel* for us. But perhaps it is not so simple, since not all emotion is good emotion. Imagine a friend tells you about some situation he faced and says, “I’m afraid I got very emotional about it”; or someone describes a mutual acquaintance as “always very emotional.” These are not positive statements. “Being emotional” can be a negative thing. We sometimes find ourselves being irritable and impatient and have no idea why. We find it hard to speak kindly to our children or our colleagues. For some inexplicable reason we feel low. Yesterday we were full of life and energy, but today we have a hollow feeling inside. These are all emotional states. Does God share them? Is his love emotional love? These questions show us that the idea “God is love” is very unclear if it is considered in artificial isolation, and it needs thoughtful consideration.

The chapters in this book all consist of a doctrinal explanation followed by a meditation on its spiritual significance. The first two chapters are “method” chapters looking at the problems and possibility of knowing God. Chapter 1 examines the difficulty we have in knowing God as small and sinful creatures. Chapter 2 explores how God has made himself known in his Son, by his Spirit, and through the words of the Bible.

Having described the way in which God reveals himself, I turn in the remaining ten chapters to look specifically at what God has

revealed of his love. This does mean that the discussion of the love of God itself is delayed until late in chapter 3, but the material in the first two chapters is crucial for shaping the rest. Our understanding of *how* God reveals himself will have a decisive effect on *what* we think he has revealed. For example, if the councils of the church give us authoritative revelation, then its content will be *this*, but if only the Bible is the final authority, then it will be *that*. And even if we agree that only the Bible is the authoritative revelation of God, we still need to know how to read it. How we think the Bible works as revelation will affect how we read it. This is why the first two chapters matter even if they seem off the subject, so bear with them!

The last ten chapters explore different aspects of the love of God as it has been revealed in Scripture. They do so by setting God's love in the context of other truths about his divine life that he has revealed to us. These truths concern the doctrine of the Trinity and the attributes of God. Chapter 3 looks at how God's love is the first love because he is triune, and chapter 4 at how his love is perfectly ordered because he loves himself first. Chapter 5 contemplates the fact that God loves us as our Father and that he is ever present with us (technically, his omnipresence). Chapter 6 considers the way in which God loves us without in any way needing us (his aseity), chapter 7 his sovereignty as lover, and chapter 8 the eternal and changeless (immutable) nature of his love. Chapter 9 scrutinizes the idea that God's love is without passion (his impassibility), asking why this idea matters and what it does and does not imply about how God loves us. Chapter 10 dwells on the perfect knowledge of God (his omniscience) and the ways in which it makes his love all the more wonderful. Chapter 11 describes how God's love always harmonizes with the requirements of his justice. Chapter 12 looks at the way God's love does not respond to but creates beauty in us.

Along the way I explore a number of important ways in which God's love is different from human love. As you study these

differences, you should find that far from suggesting a deficiency in God's love, they are reasons why his love is immeasurably greater and more wonderful than our own. My argument is that our grasp of the unique manner of God's love deepens our grasp of its peerless magnitude: it is only when we see the similarities of God's love to human love and its differences from it that we see how great it is, how great he is.

This is a small book, and the love of God is a topic that would overflow even the weightiest tome, so please do not think that I will provide a comprehensive treatment of such a glorious subject. I am just going to scratch the surface. The approach is doctrinal, in that the argument largely proceeds by taking truths about God found in the Bible and using them to illuminate other biblical truths. Part of my aim is to show by example how spiritually and practically fruitful doctrinal theology can be, as C. S. Lewis testifies:

For my own part, I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that "nothing happens" when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.<sup>5</sup>

This is not intended as an academic work, which is why I have kept it largely free of academic apparatus and references to the literature on which it depends. If your appetite is whetted for the kind of theology you find here, then you will discover it richly and much better set out in the works of writers such as John Calvin, John Owen, Stephen Charnock, Francis Turretin, and Herman Bavinck.

Lastly, I urge you not to rush past the meditations and the questions in them. We live in an age where we are deluged with information. Bryan Appleyard is not alone when he comments,

“I feel that much of my life is ebbing away in the tide of minute-by-minute distraction.”<sup>6</sup> Wells speaks of how we suffer from “a kind of cultural ADD.”<sup>7</sup> For the Christian the deluge can include Bible information. We may have woeful gaps in our Bible knowledge, but at the same time Christians in church cultures focused on expository preaching receive a lot of Bible teaching. Conscientious Christians might hear two passages preached on a Sunday, another passage at a midweek meeting, and then might study seven more in their own daily readings. They may hear still more texts expounded if they listen online or download sermons and talks. That is a lot of Bible, and it can foster an unreflective approach to Scripture. No sooner have I listened to one passage expounded than my attention is called to another, and all the plates soon fall to the ground because there are too many spinning at once.

While I think it is a good idea for a church to read a lot of Scripture, including passages beyond the single text being preached, I think we would at the same time benefit from a church culture that encourages deeper meditation focused on fewer texts, creating the room for sustained reflection on the refreshing law of God. I have been grateful for those Christian meetings I have attended that have provided structured space for meditation on the way in which the truths of Scripture impact my life, leaving time for reflection and prayer. If you are going to read on in this book, I encourage you to do so with such time set apart. Even just a few minutes of silence will be better than nothing; the difference between no minutes and five is far greater than the difference between five and thirty. The meditations contain questions to guide your thinking.

Each chapter closes with a prayer intended to help you “pray in” its teaching. The prayers are written in the first person not to encourage individualism but because most people read on their own.

It is my prayer that this book will leave you with an expanded vision of the love of God, struck by both the uniqueness of its manner and the immeasurable greatness of its magnitude.



# SMALL CREATURES WITH SIN-DARKENED MINDS

It is amazing that we know anything at all about the love of God. Humanly speaking, it is highly unlikely that we would be able to know anything about God or to speak truthfully about him.

## **The Difficulty for Finite Creatures in Knowing God**

Think first about the difference between created humans and the creator God. We are small, finite creatures. Even measured against the rest of the created universe we are inconceivably tiny. Astronomers estimate that there are hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe. Our Milky Way is just one of them. They judge that within the Milky Way alone there are between 200 and 400 billion stars. Our sun is just one of them. But even the sun is vast compared to Earth: it would take more than a million planets like ours to fill the space of the sun. Earth is populated by seven billion people, and you and I are just two of them. All but the most minuscule portion of the universe lies beyond our reach. How could we possibly think that we tiny creatures might know the

mind of the God who created it? How could we speak truthfully of him? As God says to Job:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone,

when the morning stars sang together

and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4–7)

Yet there is still more to God's unknowability than the fact that he made a vast universe that dwarfs us: he himself dwarfs us. God has something akin to physical immensity because he fills the entire creation:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence? (Ps. 139:7)

Yet God does not fill the creation as the air fills a room. When my young son asks me if by clapping he is hitting God, the answer is that he is not. God is not some kind of pervasive physical particle; his immensity is the immensity of spirit. Not only that, but his immensity also transcends all size. It is not just that he is bigger than everything he has made, as if he were on the same scale as creation but higher up it. He is immeasurable not because he is so big but because he is beyond measurement itself.

God is beyond comparison with creation because he is the Creator, existing outside space and time in a way we cannot begin to imagine. His life and way of existing are different from ours and from everything else we know. All the things we are familiar with are made of matter, or, if they are like numbers or souls, are known to us through matter. There is nothing wrong with our being physical and embodied; it is as it should be, as God made it. When souls do exist apart from their bodies (after death and

prior to the return of Christ), it is an anomaly that occurs only because of the presence of sin and death in the world. The natural created state of human beings is embodied, and so bodily knowing is our normal way of knowing. Yet God is not, in his divine nature, embodied. He is not spatial, but spirit (John 4:24). How then can we know him?

The Bible repeatedly testifies to the vital difference between humanity and God. Take Isaiah 40 for example. Isaiah comforts his people by proving that God is more than able to bring them home from their future exile in Babylon. God has said it, and it will happen, because his word stands for ever. He will come in might to gather up his lambs to bring them home. The obstacles to bringing the Israelites back are nothing for God. He is the creator God who needed no advice when he made the world. To him the nations are like a mere drop of water in a bucket, like mere specks of dust on weighing scales. All the beasts of Lebanon would not be enough as a sacrifice for him. The nations are nothing. God cannot be likened to any created thing:

To whom then will you liken God,  
or what likeness compare with him? (v. 18)

No motionless idol made by a craftsman can match him. God is the uncreated Creator who sits above the circle of the earth. To him we look like grasshoppers. Even our great rulers pass in an instant, like stubble blown in a storm. When Israel is faint and weary, she can look to the creator God who will give her strength, the God who renews young men and makes them soar like eagles. Isaiah teaches us that God is powerful and lifts up his people and triumphs over their enemies because he is different from them, because of the vast distance between God and everything else. He is the uncreated Creator, beyond all creatures. But here is the problem: we may rightly wonder, given God's transcendence, how we could ever even begin to know him, let alone speak to others about him and his love.



## **The Difficulty for Sinful Creatures in Knowing the Holy God**

The immeasurable greatness of God is not the only obstacle to our knowledge of him. A greater problem is the fact that as fallen creatures in a ruined world, we are conceived in a state of spiritual blindness. The entrance of sin into the world through the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, creates a twofold problem for us. It spoils the revelation of God, and it ruins our spiritual sight, so we cannot see even what remains of that revelation in the created world. What is more, even if we could see the revelation of God in nature perfectly, that is not itself the revelation we need to be saved from our fallen condition.

### **Ruined Revelation**

Consider first the way that the revelation of God has been spoiled by sin. God walked in the garden and could be known by Adam and Eve, but also the properly ordered natural world spoke of God's glory to Adam. The first couple would have known God by knowing themselves and each other, since they were themselves the clearest image of God: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). The image of God would have been evident in the unique features of humanity that fitted them for their task of exercising dominion over the rest of creation as God's vice-regents. The knowledge of God through the things he has created is what theologians call "natural" or "general" revelation for Adam.

Even before sin entered the world, however, Adam also needed "special" revelation from God, the spoken word that goes beyond what nature says. Appearing to him in the garden, God gave verbal instructions to Adam, setting before him the covenant in which he should live and know God's blessing. He prescribed his work, his rest, and the single prohibition regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. When the first couple sinned and God came in judgment, he announced the detailed curses for their disobedience. Adam knew God both through the things God had

made, especially through himself and his wife, and through meeting him and hearing him speak.

With the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, both these pathways of revelation were disrupted. While nature still declares the glory of God, it is now marred by sin. In its fallen state it is bound to decay and groans as it waits for its future transformation (Rom. 8:18–25). Humanity itself has been changed by the fall, and the image of God in us has been ruined. The way we image God by ruling has been distorted. Instead of submitting to God as he ruled the creation for him, Adam submitted to Satan in the form of the Serpent, a creature, and disobeyed God. The created order of God to man to creature was inverted to become creature to man to God. The created order of headship within marriage (1 Cor. 11:3) was inverted as Adam followed Eve's lead and pathetically failed to protect her from the Serpent and as strife then arose between them (Gen. 3:16). The capacities implied by being created in the image of God were also spoiled, so they no longer function properly.

That said, it is important to remember that we are still meaningfully in the image of God even after the fall. We read that Adam was created in the image of God and Seth in the image of Adam, implying that one born after the fall is still in God's image (Gen. 5:1–3). God tells Noah that whoever sheds the blood of a man will have his blood shed because "God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6). And James rebukes his readers because they bless God while at the same time dishonoring those made in God's likeness by cursing them (James 3:9).

Nevertheless, we do not show God as clearly as we did. Most significantly, ready access to special revelation was closed to Adam and Eve when they were shut out from the garden of Eden, and the way was blocked by the cherubim and the flaming sword (Gen. 3:24). Eden, like the tabernacle after it, was a dwelling place for God where he met with his people; exclusion from the garden meant exclusion from fellowship with God and the sound of his word.

This does not mean that the fallen creation leaves God wholly unknowable. Indeed, the opposite is true. The remaining revelation of God in the things he has made is plain for all to perceive. Even the fallen, groaning creation sings his praise so that we are surrounded by its voice (Ps. 19:1–6). Paul tells us that from the created things we know enough of God to render us guilty:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:18–20)

There is a continuity here from the creation of the world down to the present: throughout, God is known from creation. The general revelation of God in nature even now makes every unbeliever culpably ignorant. The rejection of natural revelation is more than sufficient to condemn us. Yet the inversion of creation and the corruption of the primary image bearer means that the revelation is not as clear as it would have been in Eden.

What is more, the revelation of God available in the fallen natural world is not a revelation that can bring us to new birth and open our eyes to God. It is not a revelation of God's merciful plan to save. We do see the goodness of God in his providential dealings with the fallen world, as Paul explained to the people of Lystra:

You should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. (Acts 14:15–17)

Nevertheless, the revelation of God in his providence is limited. It shows his kindness, but it does not show his merciful plan to save sinners. Even if we saw God's power as creator and his kindness as sustainer clearly, we would not know his saving covenant. For fallen man, even a return to the knowledge of God that Adam had in creation would not suffice for salvation. A good case can be made that Adam in the garden knew God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but he did not know the Son as savior; he did not need to know him that way. Fallen people need a new revelation of God that goes beyond the revelation of Eden: they need a revelation of the gospel.

### **Spiritual Blindness**

Consider, secondly, the loss of spiritual sight. After Adam we are creatures with sin-darkened minds. Isaiah knew this. When he found himself in the presence of God in the temple, he said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5). The apostle Peter had a similar reaction to the presence of Jesus when he saw the miraculous catch of fish: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). Behind all later shying from the presence of God lies the primal instance of Adam in the garden of Eden: "They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden" (Gen. 3:8).

How can sinful God-fleeing creatures know God and speak truthfully about him? Left to ourselves, we cannot. We cannot by nature speak accurately about God. Since Adam fell we all turn from God, hiding from his presence, for we know that his holiness will destroy us. On our own, despite our pretensions to spirituality, the last thing we want to do is to know God. We are spiritually blind. Surrounded by the natural revelation of God but ever suppressing it, we are like a man on the dance floor of a

nightclub amid the pulsating lights and pounding music, standing with his hands over his eyes and ears shouting, “Not looking! Not listening!”

### **The Impossibility of Liberal Theology**

It is because of our spiritual blindness that the whole project of liberal theology is so deeply flawed, both in the technical sense of nineteenth-century liberal schools of thought and in the looser sense of any theology that sets aside God’s Word in favor of human thoughts. In a liberal theology God becomes little more than a projection of the reigning culture’s values. This means that his love ends up being remarkably like the love of whoever is in vogue at the moment, or at least was in vogue a few years ago (theologians take a while to catch up!).

Liberal theology is not, as it is often described even by its opponents, theology driven by reason. It is instead a form of culture Protestantism. It does not start with unaided reason and construct a theology on purely rational principles. The nearest anyone has come to that kind of approach would be René Descartes in his *Meditations*, but it is not the project of liberal theology. Rather, liberal theology assumes the values of its own times. This was what horrified Karl Barth as the leading German liberal theologians signed up to support the Kaiser’s war in 1914. This is what led J. Gresham Machen to conclude that liberal theology is in the final analysis “pantheizing,” since it identifies God with the world, or at least with the world in the particular form that the liberal theologian finds it.<sup>1</sup> As George Tyrrell put it, the liberal historian stares down the well of history looking for the historical Jesus and sees his own face reflected in the bottom.<sup>2</sup> Considering the difficulty of knowing God warns us against such an approach to theology.

In sum, sin creates a twofold problem, objective and subjective. The objective problem is the ruin of the image in creation, and our exclusion from fellowship with the speaking God. The subjective problem—the problem in individuals—is our spiritual blindness.

Given such obstacles, natural humanity cannot know God. Our only hope is to be found in a fresh and full objective revelation of God and a miraculous restoration of our spiritual sight. But how, given the obstacles, will God make such a revelation of himself? And how will he open blind eyes?

## **Meditation**

Before turning to the Scriptures for answers to our questions, we pause to meditate on the humbling truths we have been exploring. We view the world through our own eyes. For much of the time this biological fact has the effect of limiting our horizons. We live unaware of the billions of other people on our planet and their activity. We do not see the far horizons of our own solar system, let alone our galaxy or universe. In our sinful nature we easily use this limitation of our sight to deceive ourselves into thinking that we occupy a more central place in the creation than we do. We loom large on a small stage. We are like the head boy at school who preens himself amid his acolytes, not realizing his true standing until he arrives at a university where nobody knows him.

Remembering the greatness of God, and how tiny we are as his creatures, humbles us. It makes us realize that God is far beyond us. He need have nothing to do with us unless he so chooses. A great distance separates us from him and makes it impossible for us to gain knowledge of him by ourselves.

*Pause to reflect on the expanse of the created universe, and then on the transcendent greatness of its Creator who sits above the circle of the earth.*

*Meditate on the fact that you look like a grasshopper to God, and on the way in which he brings our greatest princes to nothing.*

We are further humbled by reflecting on the effects of the fall that range far and deep through the creation. There is no hope

of knowing God in our fallen state. We enter the world as covenant breakers who constantly suppress the revelation of God. It is spiritually very important to remember what we are apart from the grace of God. This is particularly true of those privileged to be born within the boundaries of the covenant of grace who cannot remember living apart from the knowledge of God. The story of Adam is every man's story, whether we remember it consciously or not.

*Consider your natural spiritual blindness. Where would you be and what would your life be like if God had left you in the dark?*

In the light of our created finitude and sin-darkened minds we must renounce all attempts to fashion our own understanding of God. It is impossible for us to come to an accurate knowledge of God by ourselves. God is infinitely above us as creator. His image around us is not what it was, and it does not reveal his saving plan. His image in us is ruined. We are naturally blind to the revelation that remains, constantly suppressing it.

If we attempt to know God by ourselves, we will end up fashioning an idol, because we are naturally incapable of knowing him. We must be very alert to the danger of creating God in our own image. The apophatic (literally "away from speech") instinct of ancient Christian mysticism can be taken too far. In an interesting turn of events it can even align itself with the postmodern suspicion of all truth claims to produce a theology radically skeptical of all theological statements (except its own!). This is clearly a wrong turn. Nonetheless, we would do well to learn from the ancient mystics the habit of identifying and setting aside our own idolatrous images of God.

We should do this specifically with our understanding of the love of God. What conceptions of God's love have we created from our own thoughts? Given the great difference between the holy creator God and sinful finite humanity, God's love is signifi-

cantly unlike the common-currency definitions of love that we find in our human communities. Have we inferred from the statement “God is love” that he is like *us* in his love? That is the way of liberal theology, but we cannot wag our fingers in judgment since it is a temptation we all face. We must all eschew our own ideas and inferences about what the love of God means or ought to mean for him. We must begin with renunciation, casting aside our idols, the images of God that stem from our own minds rather than from Scripture. This we do in repentance at the start of the Christian life, and we must go on doing it until we die and see God as he is with sinless sight.

*What does the culture you live in tell you it means to be loving?*

*Have you ever found yourself thinking or saying, “God is love, so \_\_\_\_\_”? What followed the “so”? Where did it come from?*

*If you were converted at an age you recall, what false images of God did you have to renounce in your conversion?*

*What are the false ideas of God that most tempt you today? What would you most have him be that he is not?*

*What convictions about God and creation will help you resist these temptations?*

## **Prayer**

Heavenly Father,

I acknowledge how tiny I am as I measure myself against the things you have made. And then I think of you in your infinity and realize I cannot even begin to measure myself against you because you are beyond all scales and comparisons. You are the uncreated creator who exists beyond space and time in a way I cannot imagine. Your divine life is utterly unique. I am a grasshopper before you. The mightiest of men who look so permanent and strong to me for a while are nothing to you.



I confess to you that I am not only small but also sinful. I acknowledge with shame the guilt of my sin-darkened mind. I know that I am by nature spiritually blind. I deserve to be left without the revelation of anything but your wrath.

Show me where I have thought human thoughts about your love. Let me see where I have made an idol in the place of your true love. Forgive me for my pride in thinking I can know you by myself. Grant me deliverance from my idols. In Christ's name. Amen.

## A LOVE UNLIKE ANY OTHER LOVE

*God is love.* There are few more quoted statements in all of Scripture. Although wonderfully simple, this truth is incredibly profound—and therefore often misunderstood, twisted, and taken out of context. Rather than remembering that it is *God* who is love, we too often make human love our standard.

Exploring what the Bible reveals about God's love, this book will lead you to marvel at both its unique nature and its immeasurable greatness.

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"Another book on love? Decidedly not. This book is unique in its depth and clarity. If you thought you knew most of what there is to know about God's love, then read this study and be astonished at what more there is to learn."

**WILLIAM EDGAR**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

"Williams roots our understanding of the biblical claim that 'God is love' in the biblical descriptions of the triune God as being perfect in love (in himself) and acting out of love (for us). In contrast to the many contemporary theologians who associate God's love with his vulnerability, Williams rightly emphasizes the sovereignty of God's love."

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"A truly profound study of what has to be regarded as the heart of the biblical perspective about God."

**MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN**, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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**GARRY J. WILLIAMS** (DPhil, University of Oxford) serves as the director of the John Owen Centre for Theological Study at London Theological Seminary in the United Kingdom, and as visiting professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia). He is the author of *Silent Witnesses: Lessons on Theology, Life, and the Church from Christians of the Past* and has contributed to many books, including *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

