

God Loves Freely



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 33:15–22; Hosea 14:1–4; Rev. 4:11; John 17:24; Matt. 22:1–14; John 10:17, 18.*

Memory Text: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him” (*Hosea 14:4, NKJV*).

Though Peter had denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus had predicted (*Matt. 26:34*), these denials were not the end of the story. After the Resurrection, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me more than these?” And Peter replied, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” And Jesus said, “Tend My lambs.” Then, Jesus again asked Peter, “Do you love Me?” And Peter replied, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” And Jesus said, “Shepherd My sheep.” Then, yet again, a third time Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me?” And Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And Peter replied, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” And Jesus said, “Tend My sheep” (*John 21:15–17, NASB 1995*). Just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus—by way of the crucial question, “Do you love Me?”—restored Peter three times.

However different our circumstances may be from Peter's, in many ways the principle is the same. That is, the question that Jesus had asked Peter is really the ultimate question that God poses to each of us in our time and place: *Do you love Me?*

Everything depends on our answer to that question.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 4.*

Beyond Reasonable Expectations

God not only asks us, “Do you love Me,” but God Himself loves each person, and does so freely. Indeed, He *freely* loves you and me and every other person more than we could possibly imagine. And we know this love by the way He has acted in the history of His people.

Read Exodus 33:15–22 and consider the context of these verses and the narrative in which they appear. What does this passage, especially verse 19, reveal about God’s will and love?

All seemed lost. Not long after God’s amazing deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt, the people of Israel had rebelled against God and worshiped a golden calf. When Moses came down from the mountain, he saw what they had done, and he threw down the tablets containing the Ten Commandments and shattered them. Though the people had forfeited any right to the covenant privileges and blessings that God had freely bestowed on them, God freely chose to continue with them in covenant relationship anyway—despite their unworthiness for the covenant blessings.

The words of Exodus 33:19, “ ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’ ” (*NKJV*), are often misunderstood to mean that God arbitrarily chooses to be compassionate and gracious to some, but not others. However, in context, God is not stating here that He will arbitrarily be gracious and compassionate to some and not to others. That is not how God works, contrary to some popular theology in which God predestines some to be lost and to face eternal condemnation.

What, then, is God proclaiming here? Essentially, God is proclaiming that, as the Creator of all, He has the right and authority to grant grace and compassion freely to even the most undeserving of people. And He is doing so in this situation, even after the golden calf rebellion, by granting mercy to His people, Israel, even if they didn’t deserve it.

This is one of many instances in which God manifests His love and does so beyond any reasonable expectations. Good news for us all, is it not?

In what ways has God continued to reveal and manifest His love to you—even beyond any reasonable expectations?

Unrequited Love

God's striking instance of His love for fallen humanity is found in the story of Hosea. God commanded the prophet Hosea, " 'Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the LORD' " (*Hos. 1:2, NKJV*). Hosea and his unfaithful wife were to be a living object lesson of God's love for His people, even despite Israel's unfaithfulness and spiritual harlotry. That is, it is a story of God's freely bestowed love on those who do not deserve it.

Indeed, despite God's faithfulness and love, the people rebelled against Him, again and again, too. Accordingly, Scripture repeatedly describes God as the unrequited lover of an unfaithful spouse. He had loved His people perfectly and faithfully, but they had scorned Him and served and worshiped other gods, deeply grieving Him and breaking the relationship, seemingly beyond repair.

Read Hosea 14:1–4. What do these verses reveal about God's steadfast love for His people?

In the aftermath of repeated rebellion by His people, God declares: " 'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely' " (*NKJV*). The term "freely" in the phrase " 'I will love them freely' " translated a Hebrew word (*nedabah*), which connotes that which is offered voluntarily. It is the same term used of the freewill offerings in the sanctuary system.

Throughout Hosea, and throughout the narratives of Scripture, God shows amazing commitment and compassion to His people. Even though they repeatedly went after other lovers, breaking the covenant relationship, seemingly beyond repair, God of His own free will continued to bestow His love on them. The people did not deserve God's love; they had rejected and forfeited any rightful claim to it. Yet, God continued to bestow love on them without any compulsion, moral or otherwise. Here and elsewhere, Scripture consistently displays God's love as free and voluntary.

Many people think of God as a distant and harsh ruler and judge. How does the imagery of God's being scorned and grieved as the unrequited lover of an unfaithful spouse help you see God differently? How does it change the way you view your own relationship with God?

Love Freely Given

God not only continued to bestow His love freely on Israel, despite repeated rebellions, but God also continues to bestow love freely upon us, even while we are sinners. We do not deserve God's love, and we could never earn it. Conversely, God does not need us. The God of the Bible does not need anything (*Acts 17:25*). God's love for you and for me and for all persons is entirely of His own volition.

Compare Revelation 4:11 and Psalm 33:6. What do these verses tell us about God's freedom relative to Creation?

God freely created this world. And, because of this, God is worthy of all glory, honor, and power. God did not need to create any world. Before the foundation of the world, God already enjoyed the love relationship that existed within the Godhead.

Read John 17:24. What does it tell us about God's love before the world existed?

God did not need creatures as an object of His love. But, in accordance with His character of love, God chose to create the world and enter into a love relationship with creatures.

Not only did God freely create this world as a bestowal of His generous love, but God also continues freely to love humans, even after humans fell into sin in Eden, and even after we personally sin.

After the Fall in Eden, Adam and Eve had no right to continue to live and receive God's love. But God, who upholds "all things by the word of His power" (*Heb. 1:3, NKJV*), in His great love, mercy, and grace sustained their lives and has made a way to reconcile humanity back to Himself in love. And that reconciliation includes us, as well.

What does the fact that God continues to bestow love on this world, despite its fallenness and evil, tell us about His love and character? How should this truth cause us to love Him in return?

Many Are Called, but Few Are Chosen

God not only loves people of His own free will, but He also invites them to love Him in return. That God grants them the ability to freely choose whether they will accept or reject His love is apparent in (among other places) Christ's parable of the wedding banquet.

Read Matthew 22:1–14. What is the meaning of this parable?

In Christ's parable of the wedding banquet, a king arranges a marriage for his son and sends out his servants to "call those who were invited to the wedding," but "they were not willing to come" (*Matt. 22:2, 3, NKJV*). More than once the king sent out his servants to call them, but they ignored his call and, even worse, seized his servants and killed them (*Matt. 22:4–6*).

Later, after dealing with those who had murdered some of his servants, the king told his servants, "The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding" (*Matt. 22:8, 9, NKJV*). After another episode of a man without a wedding garment being cast out, signifying the need to receive a wedding garment from the king to attend the wedding banquet, Jesus closes the parable with the cryptic but highly meaningful phrase, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (*Matt. 22:14, NKJV*).

What does this mean? Those who are finally "chosen," the "elect," are those who have accepted the Lord's invitation to the wedding. The term translated "call" and "invite" throughout the parable is the Greek term *kaleo* (to call, invite), and what determines who is finally "elect" (*eklektos*) is whether one has freely accepted the invitation.

In fact, God calls (that is, invites) *everyone* to the wedding feast. However, any one of us can refuse God's love. Freedom is essential to love. God will never force His love on anyone. Sad to say, we can reject having a love relationship with God.

The "elect" are those who accept the invitation. For those who love God, God has prepared things more wonderful than anything that we could possibly imagine. Once again, it all comes down to the question of love and the freedom inherent in love.

What about your life reveals that you have accepted the wedding invitation and have come appropriately clothed?

Crucified for Us

God invites everyone into a love relationship with Him, but only those who freely accept the invitation enjoy the eternal results. As seen in the parable of the wedding banquet, many whom the king called “ ‘were not willing to come’ ” (*Matt. 22:3, NKJV*).

Accordingly, shortly before His crucifixion, Christ lamented: “ ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!’ ” (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*). Christ wanted to gather them, but they were not willing. The same common Greek verb that means “to will” (*thelo*) is used both of Christ’s wanting to save them and of their not being willing to be saved (and the same term is in Matthew 22:3 above, as well).

Yet, Christ went to the cross for these people and for us. Amazing love! While human sin merits death, God Himself (in Christ) paid the price and has made a way to repair the ruptured relationship between heaven and earth. Meanwhile, He continues to bestow His love on us, though He is under no obligation beyond His own free commitment to do so.

Read John 10:17, 18. Compare with Galatians 2:20. What’s the message to us here in these texts?

In the ultimate display of God’s love—the Cross—we see that Christ gave Himself for us of His own free will. Christ laid down His life of His “own initiative.” No one took His life from Him; He freely offered it, according to the plan of redemption agreed upon in heaven before the foundation of the world.

“The plan for our redemption was not an afterthought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam. It was a revelation of ‘the mystery which hath been kept in silence through times eternal.’ Romans 16:25, R. V. It was an unfolding of the principles that from eternal ages have been the foundation of God’s throne. From the beginning, God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan, and of the fall of man through the deceptive power of the apostate. God did not ordain that sin should exist, but He foresaw its existence, and made provision to meet the terrible emergency. So great was His love for the world, that He covenanted to give His only-begotten Son, ‘that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ John 3:16.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “‘To Meet the Bridegroom,’” pp. 405–421, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

“It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and truth.

“This is the work outlined by the prophet Isaiah in the words, ‘O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.’ Isa. 40:9, 10.

“Those who wait for the Bridegroom’s coming are to say to the people, ‘Behold your God.’ The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them.

“The light of the Sun of Righteousness is to shine forth in good works—in words of truth and deeds of holiness.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 415, 416.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Worse than the thought of there being no God would be the thought that God hated us. How different a world would we exist in if that were the truth?
- 2 Why do you think there is so much misunderstanding of God’s character in our world today? Think about and discuss ways that you might help people to see God’s character of love more clearly.
- 3 What is the message that is to be proclaimed about God’s character today? How would you explain this message to someone who is not already familiar with the reality of God’s love? What evidence can you point to that shows the reality of His love and His wonderful character?
- 4 Talking about God’s love is one thing. Revealing and reflecting that love in our lives is another. What “deeds of holiness” might reveal God’s love to those around us?

Opening the Bamboo Curtain

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Kneeling before a South Korean student, I asked if he had any prayer requests before I washed his feet during a Communion service at the Moscow International Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia.

“Pray for North Korea,” said the student, who was studying at a Moscow university. “The gospel needs to reach the North for Jesus to return.”

With that prayer request in 2006, I learned about a special burden that Seventh-day Adventists from South Korea carry for their brothers and sisters in the North. Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (*Matthew 24:14, NKJV*). South Korean Adventists see the North as a final frontier in the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel to the world, and today many are prayerfully seeking ways to open the Bamboo Curtain.

The Adventist Church’s work started in the North in 1904 and then spread to the South. Today, the church has 285,000 members living among 52 million in the South. But no Adventists are known to be in the North, which has a population of 26 million. Still, a trickle of information indicates that God has a people in the North, said Beom Seok Oh, a director at the Northern Asia-Pacific Division who oversees the church’s outreach to North Korea. During a trip to South Korea, he told me of a North Korean woman who drank a soy-sauce brew every Sabbath morning to get sick with a fever so she would be excused from mandatory Saturday work. When she was jailed, she smuggled a Bible into prison and buried it in the ground, furtively digging it up to read. Later, she managed to slip over the border to South Korea, where she could worship God freely. Church leaders are preparing for when the northern border will open. When it does, they intend to send missionaries into the country.

In the meantime, South Korean Adventists are caring for North Korean defectors. A deacon and his wife regularly visited a new defector, helping him clean his apartment, prepare meals, and submit government paperwork. After six months, the defector declared belief in God, said Chang-Seop Lee (pictured), pastor of the deacon and his wife’s church.

Another defector couldn’t sleep as he thought about his wife and children in the North. Pastor Lee prayed with him, and afterward, the defector acknowledged that he believed in God and had read the Bible in the North. The incident reenergized the pastor’s resolve to assist defectors. “I believe that we can expand our reach to the North by starting with the people whom we can meet today,” he said.



Pray for North Korea. Thank you for planning a generous Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29 to further the spread of the gospel in the Northern Asia-Pacific Division.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Hosea 14:4*

Study Focus: *John 17:24; Matt. 22:1–14; John 10:17, 18.*

Introduction: God freely loves everyone more than we can possibly imagine. His love is utterly generous and merciful, as He voluntarily chooses to reveal His sacrificial love, even when people are unfaithful.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson emphasizes three main themes:

1. God's love is not defined by necessity. His love is central to our understanding of His relationship with humanity. Divine love is an expression of God's spontaneous and abundant benevolence. His love is not caused or necessitated by any action on our part, nor the result of any human potential. God manifests His love without any expectation of obtaining advantage to Himself. He loves each person and does so freely, as in the case of Hosea, Israel, and us.
2. The scope of God's love is not to be calculated. God's love is not based on causal conditions. He voluntarily gave Himself for us, and His constant and unending love reveals His mercy more fully. His love surpasses all expectation, as He freely grants grace, mercy, and compassion to even the most undeserving of people.
3. God's love can be resisted. God offers to us the fullest revelation of His self-giving love but does not predetermine people's reaction to it. His love is not dominating or coercive but offers us the freedom to accept or resist it.

Life Application: God's love surpasses all human expectation, as He freely grants grace, mercy, and compassion to even the most undeserving of people. How does this notion of God's love change our attitude toward those within our sphere who have done nothing to deserve compassion from us?

Part II: Commentary

1. God's Love Is Not Defined by Necessity.

Freedom is a crucial feature of God's love. His love is not caused by something else. In the relationship of cause and effect, the effect is the necessary outcome of a cause. However, instead of being defined by the cause-effect logic of necessity, God's love is remarkably voluntary. This idea is elaborated upon in the experience of Hosea and his unfaithful wife.

Through the narrative of their experience, as we shall see, the concepts emerge that God's love does not imply the necessity for the existence of creation and that God's love freely gives.

Hosea and the freedom of God's love: Hosea 14:4 connects God's promised healing of Israel's unfaithfulness with His pledge to love His people freely. This promise reiterates the merciful restoration of God's apostate people, envisaged in Hosea 2:14–23, and as illustrated in Hosea's own merciful relationship with his unfaithful wife (*Hos. 3:1–5*). The comparison with Hosea's biographical experience suggests that God's love is utterly generous. “This is a love which will not be earned—what could Israel possibly present to Yahweh as an acceptable payment?” Instead, the Hebrew term *nedabash*, which emphasizes that God will love Israel *freely*, conveys the idea of a “‘voluntary offering’ or ‘offering made out of generosity.’ ”—Douglas Stuart, “Hosea–Jonah,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), vol. 31, p. 215. Hence, God's love is not caused or necessitated by any action performed by Israel. Rather, it is an expression of His freedom and, therefore, completely voluntary. In fact, the language of divine healing in Hosea 14:4 (*see also Hos. 5:13, Hos. 6:1, Hos. 7:1, Hos. 11:3*) seems to underline the voluntary nature of God's love, because Israel is incapable of becoming faithful by means of its own strength. Thus, the voluntary nature of this love implies that those being loved by God are truly undeserving of it.

God's love and creation: The notion that love requires a relationship with the other seems to suggest that God needed to make creatures in order to become a loving God. In other words, creation would be necessary for God's love. However, this idea is not supported by Scripture, which emphasizes the freedom and autonomy of God. He does not need anything from His creatures (*Acts 17:25*). Furthermore, divine love eternally existed before the creation of the universe, as Jesus underscored when He stated that the Father loved Him “before the foundation of the world” (*John 17:24*). Thus, the creation of the world was not a necessity for the existence of God's love. Instead, creation was a divine voluntary activity that resulted from the freedom of His eternal overflowing love.

God's love freely gives: Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross was a voluntary love offering. He was not merely a victim of violent execution. As Jesus Himself highlights: “‘I lay down My life. . . . No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself’ ” (*John 10:17, 18, NKJV*). Likewise, Paul explains that Christ “‘loved me and gave Himself for me’ ” (*Gal. 2:20, NKJV*). Therefore, the crucifixion of Jesus was not a necessity, framed by the evil actions of His executioners. Rather, He voluntarily gave Himself as an extraordinary manifestation of the freedom of divine love.

2. The Scope of God's Love Is Not to Be Calculated.

The notion that God's love does not follow the logic of cause and effect means that it should not be calculated, leading, therefore, to a presumable, reasonable, expectation. Two instances of intercession before God in the Pentateuch exemplify the problem of such a presumption.

The first instance is Abraham's intercession (*Gen. 18:23–33*) in the context of the divine judgment announced against Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen. 18:20*). Initially, Abraham appeals to God's justice and asks whether He would actually destroy the city if there were 50 righteous people in it (*Gen. 18:24, 25*). Arguably, 50 sounded like a reasonable number to Abraham in his invocation of divine justice. However, inasmuch as this number progressively decreases in the persistent continuation of Abraham's intercession, from 50 to 45 (*Gen. 18:28*), from 45 to 40 (*Gen. 18:29*), from 40 to 30 (*Gen. 18:30*), from 30 to 20 (*Gen. 18:31*), and from 20 to 10 (*Gen. 18:32*), he does not appeal to divine justice anymore but rather to God's mercy (*Gen. 18:27, 30, 32*). It seems that 50 would be reasonable for justice, but 10 is way beyond a fair expectation. If the beginning of the intercession gives the impression that Abraham was trying to convince God to be just and then merciful, the progression of the intercessory dialogue reveals that such an intention is definitely not the case. Rather, the intercession process actually reveals that God's loving mercy is higher than could be reasonably expected or presumably calculated.

The second instance of intercession is Moses' intervention on behalf of the Israelites at Sinai. To be sure, the initial impression is that he was trying to convince God to be merciful toward them (*Exod. 32:11–14, 31–33*). But again, this is not the case. The climax of the interaction between Moses and the Lord is the revelation of divine glory, which is a remarkable manifestation of God's love (*Exod. 34:6, 7*). Besides the affirmation of the divine freedom to be merciful to those who clearly do not deserve God's love (*Exod. 33:19*), the acute asymmetrical comparison between “‘keeping mercy for thousands’ ” and “‘visiting the iniquity . . . to the third and the fourth generation’ ” (*Exod. 34:7, NKJV*) suggests that, ultimately, the scope of God's love cannot be calculated, which particularly highlights the freedom of His love.

3. God's Love Can Be Resisted.

The freedom of divine love also means that it does not predetermine humanity's reaction to this love. Once again, God's love is essentially voluntary and does not involve a necessary logic of cause and effect. In His lament over Jerusalem, Jesus sadly reveals unfulfilled desires regarding the salvation of its children. He emphasizes “‘how often’ ” He

“ ‘wanted to gather’ ” His “ ‘children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but [they] were not willing’ ” (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*). The Greek verb *thelo* is used twice in this passage, but in different ways. The first occurrence depicts Christ’s will regarding those whom He wanted to save, whereas the second instance indicates that they did not share the same desire. Therefore, what divine love offers does not determine a loving reaction on the part of those who receive this offering. Unfortunately, because this loving desire is not reciprocated, it cannot actually be fulfilled.

Another Bible example of resistance to divine love is found in the parable of the wedding banquet, to which many are called, but they reject the invitation (*Matt. 22:3*). Then the call is extended to others, who indeed come to the wedding (*Matt. 22:9, 10*). However, even among those who do come, there is someone “ ‘who did not have on a wedding garment’ ” (*Matt. 22:11, NKJV*). The conclusion of the parable emphasizes that “ ‘many are called, but few are chosen’ ” (*Matt. 22:14*). In this parable about “ ‘the kingdom of heaven’ ” (*Matt. 22:2*), the language of being chosen does not convey the idea of a deterministic divine choice (predestination) but is related to the people’s acceptance or rejection of God’s invitation. In other words, “Many are invited; but some refuse to come, and others who do come refuse to submit to the norms of the kingdom and are therefore rejected. Those who remain are called ‘chosen.’ ”—D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 457. Thus, our ability to choose is another indication of the freedom of God’s love, which is open to truly free reactions of acceptance or resistance. We are invited to freely accept it.

Part III: Life Application

Based on the aforementioned perspective regarding the freedom of God’s love, discuss the following questions:

- 1. How does the understanding that God’s love is not caused by any action on our part draw us closer to His presence? Give at least one practical example.**

2. What aspects of the fascinating notion that God's love surpasses reasonable expectation, as He freely shows compassion to the most undeserving of people, could be used in dialogues with unbelievers?

3. In what practical ways can we, unfortunately, resist God's love?

4. Considering that God's love does not employ coercion, what should we learn from this love as we think about the ways in which we, as Christians, may love others more authentically?
