

Love Came Down at Christmas

1 John 4:9-10

December 25, 2022

Do you know about the current high school social media trend called *prom proposals*? Like many of you, when I was in high school, social media didn't exist. If you wanted a date, you had to get up the nerve, pick up your home phone (a corded phone), and ask someone to the prom.

Things are quite different today thanks to the iPhone and Instagram. These days, you better be ready to make a proper *prom proposal*. These proposals typically require the asker to woo his or her date with an invitation written out on a large poster. Often the pursuer will also opt to dress up, maybe in formal wear or perhaps even in costume. The proposal is then made in a public place and then documented on social media so friends can share in the excitement.

What does this have to do with today's sermon? Turn with me to two verses found near the end of the New Testament in 1 John 4:9-10. In 1 John 4:9-10, the Apostle John was writing about the coming of Jesus into the world, the event we refer to as *the incarnation*. What I want us to see from this text today is that **when God sent his Son into the world, the love of God went public**.

Look how John begins this passage. One of John's main focuses in his letter is on love. He writes about loving God, our love for others, and God's love for us. Then in verse 9, John declares, "This is how God showed his love among us," and he follows that with an explanation.

John emphasizes that *God showed us his love*. Let's make a few quick observations about this statement. First, don't overlook that God is a God who loves. In fact, in this chapter, John says that *God is love*, by which he means that love is one of God's essential characteristics.

Second, it's important that we notice that we are the object of this love. We sinful human beings are the object of God's love.

Third, John says that God has acted in such a way that his love could be observed. In other words, God's love went public.

But fourth, notice more specifically that *God showed his love*; it was an action that took place in the past. Surely God continues to show us his love, but John's focus here is on a particular event, a particular example of God's love.

God showed us his love.

But notice also that John says that God showed his love *among us*. This event, this public display didn't take place on some unseen spiritual plane. It happened at a

particular time in history. We're told that God showed his love among humans living in the real world.

The NIV translation says that God *showed* his love among us. However, I don't think that the English verb *to show* fully captures John's emphasis here. I prefer the way the ESV translates this when it says, "the love of God *was made manifest* among us."

To manifest something means that a thing once hidden has now been made public. God disclosed something that was previously not fully known. That same word can be translated into English with the meaning *to appear*.

But in what sense was the love of God not previously known or not yet disclosed? Surely God's people knew of his love and could even point to public displays of his love in the past. In what sense did John mean that the love of God *appeared*?

At a specific moment in history, God manifested his love among us in such a way that he had not done in the past. In the past, God surely *declared* his love. He explicitly spoke of his love for his people on numerous occasions. In the past, God even *demonstrated* his love. He acted in ways that showed his people how much he loved them. But how is that different from what John describes in this passage?

Consider for a moment how John introduces his letter back in chapter 1. There John spoke as one who was able to provide eyewitness testimony regarding God's revealing work. Take note of the similar language found in 1 John 1:1-2 as I read those verses from the ESV translation.

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—" (1 John 1:1-2, ESV).

John was speaking about Jesus, the one whom he had heard, and seen with his own eyes, and even touched with his own hands. As John famously said in the introduction to his Gospel,

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, NIV).

God *declares* his love for us in his word. God *demonstrates* his love for us through action. But **God publicly displayed his love for us in the person of Jesus Christ.**

John says it this way in 1 John 4:9,

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world” (1 John 4:9, ESV).

This same idea is echoed elsewhere in John’s most famous statement where he said,

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NIV).

One of my favorite Christmas songs is a relatively unknown hymn written in 1883 by Christina Rossetti. We’ll put the lyrics up on the screen, but if you’re here in the Sanctuary this morning, you can also find the words in our hymnal as Hymn #153. Rossetti’s lyrics capture the idea John was expressing.

*Love came down at Christmas, / love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas; / star and angels gave the sign.*

*Worship we the Godhead, Love incarnate, Love divine;
worship we our Jesus, but wherewith for sacred sign?*

*Love shall be our token; love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and others, love for plea and gift and sign.*

God publicly displayed his love for us in the person of Jesus. Love came down at Christmas. Love incarnate, Love divine.

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world” (1 John 4:9, ESV).

But that’s not all that John tells us about the coming of God’s Son into the world. His statement concludes in verse 9 with God’s intended purpose.

“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*” (1 John 4:9, ESV).

The Christmas story is more than a public display of God’s affection. John wants us to see that God sent his Son into the world so that we might live through him.

Think about what that means for a moment. If the primary reason for the Son’s coming into the world was to give us life, that implies that apart from him, you, me, and everyone else on planet earth are dead.

But do we really believe that’s the case? Even though we may at times have said we felt *dead* tired, thought that we were *dead* in the water, or complained that we were starving to *death*, in truth we assume we are very much alive. That’s because we don’t see life and death the way that God does.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to believers in Ephesus, he reminded them of their formerly terminal condition.

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath” (Eph. 2:1-3, NIV).

Paul makes it pretty clear that we’re all on the naughty list. Actually, to describe sinful men and women merely as *naughty* is far too soft. We’re dead not merely because of our bad behavior, but because of our bent toward rebellion and disobedience. We’re not just naughty, we are by nature deserving of God’s wrath.

It’s no surprise that in 1 John 4:10 John goes on to say,

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us” (1 John 4:10, NIV).

Let that sink in. Why does God love us? Is it because of how much we love him? Absolutely not! Elsewhere in Scripture, we’re told that in our rebellious and spiritually dead state apart from Christ, we used to consider God to be our enemy (cf. Rom. 5:10).

Then why *does* God love us? Because God *chooses* to love us.

Look at the rest of 1 John 4:10:

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10, NIV).

God doesn’t merely declare his love, nor does he just demonstrate his love. In sending his Son into the world, God *displays* his love for us. Just as the love of God was perfectly displayed in the person of Jesus Christ, so too **the love of God is wonderfully displayed through the work of Jesus Christ.**

Since this sermon is all about God’s love, let’s spend a little more time talking about God’s wrath. I hope that later today when you’re talking with your friends and family about the Christmas sermon you heard today, you tell them we spent the morning talking about God’s wrath. But let me show you why that’s a good thing to consider on Christmas morning.

I really don’t mean to pick on the NIV, but once again I tend to prefer the way the ESV translates this verse. Where the NIV says that God “loved us and sent his Son as an

atoning sacrifice for our sins,” the ESV translates it by saying that God “loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

It is absolutely correct to say that Jesus Christ was the “atoning sacrifice for our sins.” When the angel appeared to Joseph and told him about Mary’s miraculous pregnancy, he was told,

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21, NIV).

But you see, if we are, indeed—as Paul said in Ephesians 2 “by nature deserving of [God’s] wrath,” then for God to be perfectly just, his wrath must be poured out on sin and that which is unholy.

But God is love, and God chooses to love those deserving of his wrath, not by ignoring his justice, but by sending his one and only Son into the world to bear the wrath that we deserve. That’s what John means when he says that God “sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

What we’ve seen from this atypical Christmas text is that **when God sent his Son into the world, the love of God went public.** God’s love for us was made manifest. He publicly displayed his love for us in the person of Christ. But God also manifested his love for us at the cross. We see that the love of God was wonderfully displayed through the work of Jesus on our behalf.

I want to close by reading a verse from another one of my favorite Christmas songs, though you won’t find this one in the Advent section of your hymnal. In the Christ-exalting hymn by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty we declare:

*In Christ alone! – who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe.
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save:
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied –
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.*

Let’s pray.