

What does the Bible have to say about love?

Describing a biblical view of love turns out to be no simple matter; the Bible was written in both Hebrew and Greek, and each of these languages has multiple words that we translate as "love."

We need to distinguish between three Greek words: eros, romantic, passionate love, from which we get our word "erotic"; phileo, the love of great friends and siblings ("brotherly love"); and agape, parental, self-sacrificing love that seeks only the welfare of the other. All three kinds of love are represented in the Bible, which means that all three are considered to be created and blessed by God.

Eros is the emotion we probably think of first when thinking of love. It is a Hebrew word not present in the Greek New Testament, and depicts the passionate desire that unites lover and beloved praised in the Song of Solomon. Its presence in the Bible testifies not only that humans are moved by beauty and desire, but also that passion, romance, and sexual intimacy are an essential element of God's good creation and the human experience.

Phileo, in contrast, is a more stable and constant emotion. Constancy notwithstanding, however, phileo it is also a powerful emotion that captures the love of great friends. Jesus weeps for Lazarus, whom he loved (phileo) (John 11:35), while Jonathan and David share a bond so strong that it induces Jonathan to forsake allegiance to his father in support of his beloved friend. Phileo is ultimately not about passion as much as it is about commitment, the love that binds one to another in enduring friendship.

Agape dominates the New Testament but is more rare in contemporary literature of the Greek-speaking world of the first century. It depicts the self-sacrificing love of a parent for a child and describes both God's love for the world as shown in Christ and the love Christians should show each other and all people. As to the former, think of the verse: "For God so loved - agape - the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16). As to the latter, think of Paul's great hymn to love: "Love - agape - is patient and kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Cor. 13:4-8a).

As nice and neat as these distinctions are, however, as soon as you make them you begin to watch them unravel. Agape and phileo are often used interchangeably in the New Testament. Jesus, as it turns out, loves Lazarus in terms of both phileo (John 11:35) and agape (11:5). And while Paul at points depicts marriage as a remedy for the consuming, burning passions of sexual desire we associate with eros (1 Cor. 7:9), he - or at least his disciples - also expect husbands and wives to exhibit agape for each other by being subject to each other as Christ loved and sacrificed himself for the Church (Ephesians 5).

But maybe this somewhat blurry picture of love suits the complicated nature of the subject at hand. Valentine's Day itself has a peculiar and complex history. Originally named for a saint (or saints, depending on the tradition) that were martyred for their commitment to their faith, over the centuries Valentine's Day came to epitomize the romantic ardour of lovers represented by the Roman god of desire, Cupid (the Romanized version of the Greek god Eros). And today one might be forgiven for thinking that V-Day is mainly about love for chocolate and lingerie.

Perhaps, then, the Bible's convoluted treatment is fitting. After all, isn't this mixture of emotions and motivations pretty representative of our experience? We love our partners and our children and our pets and friend and, if we're lucky, our jobs and hobbies and much more, but not all in the same way. And even our love for a single person varies and changes, not just over the years, but over the span of moments, as passion can turn to tenderness, which can turn to a desire to protect and serve, and then turn back to desire, all between the beats of a simultaneously fickle and courageous heart. In light of this, maybe the best we can say is that love in the Bible, like love in our everyday lives, is important, complicated, and at times a bit squishy. That is, it is too powerful and mysterious to be fully defined or grasped by any of us.

So perhaps for now it's enough to recognize that all the different kinds of love we have explored are part and parcel of our life in this world, that God created and blessed them for our nurture, and that behind and beyond all of our expressions of love is God's love for each of us. That's not everything we could say, of course, but I think that if we get that much straight we've probably gotten the heart of what the Bible has to say about love.

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