

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-07-02—AGAPE LOVE OF GOD

Baptism is a spiritual miracle. Simply put, a person must be immersed in water to symbolize being baptized into the death of Jesus Christ, hands are laid on his or her head, and an elder prays for God to give the person the Holy Spirit. When I was baptized years ago, it just seemed to be something that was perfectly right and normal. But if you think about it, water baptism could be a rather odd ceremony when someone hears about it for the first time.

Why water baptism? Because we are physical beings and there are certain physical acts that God requires of physical people that are an outward sign of our love, faith, and commitment to Him. It also establishes that moment forever in *our* memories. If that physical act was not required, would that day be as unforgettable for us or others who witness it?

Have you ever thought about how you felt prior to your baptism? While you probably recall the excitement of anticipation, I reckon (I have always liked that word) the vast majority of us felt an urgent longing to be baptized once we understood it. There comes a time when we realize the absolute need to have God's Holy Spirit for a deeper understanding of His word and to more fully obey Him. All who will be—or are already—baptized have felt that kind of burning desire. It is also a sign someone is ready.

It all begins with God calling us. As Christ said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father, Who sent Me, draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:44). When a person's mind is opened by God, a yearning is awakened to obey His Law and commandments. This is *beginning* of God's agape love working in a person:

2 JOHN 1:6 And **this is the love of God: that we walk according to His commandments.** This is the commandment, exactly as you heard from *the* beginning, that you might walk in it.

A growing desire to obey God is a sign that a person is developing agape love. Why did John say this was something we heard from the “beginning?” Because that is exactly what God told the ancient Israelites:

DEUTERONOMY 11:1 “Therefore **you shall love the LORD your God, and keep His charge and His statutes and His judgments and His commandments** always.

A relationship with God begins in our minds—a desire to obey Him and know His truth. Keeping God's laws, statutes, precepts, judgments, and testimonies can, however, be a daunting task, which is why we must understand the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, repentance of sins, and God's forgiveness before baptism. Without understanding these (and without the Holy Spirit working with or being in a person), no one can truly obey God.

However, is agape love nothing more than obedience to God's Law? No! There is much more to it but it is the BEGINNINGS of it. Keeping His Law shows we commit to His way of life. It starts in our minds when we realize we have committed crimes—or sins—against the Most High Creator God. At that point, our conscience is convicting us and we seek repentance to God. God is then faithful to forgive us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ¹. Coming to realize that we had a part in the death of Jesus Christ because of our sins is humbling, to say the least, especially since He died for us **while** we were still sinners². That is how much God agape-loves US!

As we continue growing in obedience and faithfulness to God, His agape love is growing as well. Even though the seed of agape love is manifested in our minds as obedience to God's Law, it continues to grow into something greater—something MUCH greater. Notice the first, great commandment:

MATTHEW 22:37 And Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall **love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul**, and with all your mind.’

All begotten children of God are growing in agape love. Agape love begins in our minds but will eventually take root in our hearts. What does it mean to agape-love God with our hearts?

LUKE 14:26 “If anyone comes to Me and **does not hate [love less by comparison] his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers and sisters, and, in addition, his own life** also, he cannot be My disciple.

Love for family or a friend is a heartfelt one. While all relationships begin in our minds, love must reside in our hearts to be true love. The heart is the core of our feelings and longings for the company of others. As the seed of agape love in us grows, we will begin to do things that *please* Him—not just keep the letter of the law. We spend more time with God and Jesus Christ in prayer. Real joy comes when we pray and study the Bible. Our lives become centered around the weekly Sabbaths, Passover, and the holydays. We also seek opportunities to be in the company of other saints who agape-love God where and when possible. At some point, agape love for God and Jesus Christ becomes greater than our love for family and friends. It does not mean we love them less. It just means we are agape-loving God more. Why? Because agape love is **God's perfect love in us**. His agape love is much greater than any human love for family and friends. How much greater?

1 JOHN 3:16 By this *very act [the sacrifice of Christ]* **we have known the love of God because He laid down His life for us: ...**

¹ 1 John 1:9.

² Romans 5:8.

God's agape love toward us is so great that He asked—and then watched—His Son suffer and die at the very hands of those He is bringing into His Family. The fullness of God's agape love is more than we can ever completely know in this physical life. This kind of agape love is why we many times relate to brethren more than those we are close to who are not yet converted:

JOHN 13:34 A **new commandment** I give to you: that **you love one another in the same way that I have loved you**, that *is how* you are to love one another.

How much did Jesus Christ agape-love us? He willingly endured torments and tortures unto death to save our lives even though He is God and we are weak, sinful, mortal humans. Notice that agape-loving the brethren is actually a *commandment*. In fact, both of the great commandments to agape-love God and our brethren are just that—commandments. But can anyone truly agape love God or the brethren simply by being obedient? No! That is why obedience to God's commandments is the *beginning* of agape love. In our hearts, agape love is something deeper than human love. Jesus Christ was the example of perfect agape love and we are commanded to agape-love each other in the same manner. Can we really have this kind of agape love? Yes!

1 JOHN 3:16 By this *very act [the sacrifice of Christ]* we have known the love of God because He laid down His life for us: and **we ourselves are to lay down our lives for the brethren.**

Notice the last part of 1 John 3:16 that I omitted before. Being willing to lay down our lives is proof of agape love being fulfilled in us. There have been many saints who laid down their lives for God's people **and** the world. Obviously not for the remission of sins, but out of agape love for God and the people who He will call to be a part of His kingdom.

There have been many martyrs for God. I think John often reflected upon this. He saw that kind of agape love in the other apostles who willingly sacrificed their lives for God, the gospel, His people, and this world. Read Hebrews 11, especially verses 32-37, and think about all the martyrs (the Greek word means *witness*) since the creation of Adam and Eve. John not only knew the ancient stories, but personally knew many who were murdered because they agape-loved God more than their lives. Of this, Jesus Christ said:

JOHN 15:13 **No one has greater love than this: that one lay down his life for his friends.**

That kind of heart—one that goes beyond just obeying the commandments—is truly someone who not only obeys God but is willing to give his or her life for Him and others. This is the *fullness* of agape love. It is the heart of someone who loves “God with all [their] heart, and with all [their] soul, and with all [their] mind, and with all [their]

strength.” (Mark 12:30). It begins in our minds, is our strength for living, and eventually takes root in our hearts. At that point, agape love is truly of the **soul**—our being.

And this is exactly what God is doing with His children. He is filling our human vessel with His agape love. But this is not something of this earth, so having agape love literally makes us into a new creation:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 Therefore, if anyone *be* in Christ, **he is a new creation**; the old things have passed away; behold, **all things have become new**.

How are we a NEW creation even though we are in the flesh? Our perspective toward God and the world is seen through the eyes of God. This is why all things are “new.” We see everything through the agape love of God and we are forever changed. This is how we can even obey God’s command to love our enemies:

MATTHEW 5:44 But I say to you, **love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,**

Few have ever lived who agape-loved their enemies, blessed their enemies, done good for their enemies, and prayed for their enemies with all sincerity. But God’s people do so because it is the perfection that God is working in us. He wants His children to have agape love in their very **souls**!

All of us are at different stages of growth as we continue life in this womb called the Earth, but God will bring all to the perfection of agape love. Some who are perfected are waiting in that temporary state of sleep called the grave while others will witness the return of Jesus Christ. However, we must ask God continually to us help grow in agape love—it is a prayer that He WILL answer. Ultimately, there is nothing more important in this physical life than having agape-love for God, Jesus Christ, the brethren, the world, and even our enemies. Why? Because we seek to be a part of the **Family of God** who are joined together through the fullness of agape love for each other. Our earthly family is but a shadow of the coming spiritual Family of God. God IS agape love³ and we also will BE agape love when we are born again! Not just in our mind, strength, and heart but in the very soul of our being.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

³ 1 John 4:8, 16.