LOVE STORY

John 3:16-17

The 1970 Academy-Award winning movie *Love Story* traces the relationship of wealthy heir Oliver Barrett and working-class Jennifer Calleveri. Oliver, against his father's wishes, married Jennifer, a decision that motivated his father to disown him and withhold the family's wealth and privilege from him. Happy but struggling, the movie follows the young couple as they begin their life together until a tragic illness takes Jennifer's life early in their marriage. The movie ends with Jennifer's death bringing reconciliation between Oliver and his father, marked by Oliver telling his sorrowful father, "Love means never having to say you're sorry."

We respond to stories like the one told in *Love Story* not merely because they narrate universal human experiences of love and loss, but because we sense a certain nobility them. I suspect we respond to those stories because they reflect aspects of God who "is love"[1] (*1 John 4:8*). God's identity as love shapes the Bible's narrative, which tells a great love story. We will therefore consider the Bible's love story in this lesson and what it means for our lives.

"In this is love…"[2]

- The Bible's story does not begin with an explanation of God's motivations for the creation nor does it give insight into why He gave humanity a unique and special role (*Genesis 1:1-31*).
- With God's motivations left unspecified, the Bible quickly moves into a description of the crisis driving its story – humanity rebelled against God (*Genesis 3*).
- The Bible then dedicates a number of chapters to tracing the spreading, destructive character of humanity's rebellion before revealing God's surprising response – He covenanted with rebellious people and issued a promise to bless all of humanity (*Genesis 8:20-9:17; 12:1-3*).
- As with the creation, the Bible does not reveal the motivations driving God's choice to enter into a relationship with humanity until much later in its narrative. In Exodus 34:5-7, God announced His identity and revealed His motivations – He is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (*Exodus 34:6*).
- Even though that passage comes well into the Bible's narrative, it offers a description of God's behavior that covers all of His activities throughout the Bible – God's activity in the Bible is characterized by a love that expresses itself through abundant faithfulness, mercy, grace, and patience.
- The love that defines God drives the Bible's story.
    - God's love motivated His creation of humanity (*1 John 4:7-8*).

[1] All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.
[2] 1 John 4:10.

- God's love motivated the special, exalted place He gave humanity in the creation (*Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:3-8*).
- God's love expresses itself through His desire for a relationship with humanity (*cf. Exodus 25:8; John 1:1, 14; Revelation 21:3*).
- God's love motivates His plan to restore His relationship with humanity following their rebellion against Him (*John 3:16-17; Romans 5:6-11; cf. Genesis 1-2; Revelation 21-22*).
- God's love motivates His patient, understanding behavior towards humanity (*Psalm 103:6-14*).
- God's love finds its fullest, clearest expression in Jesus (*1 John 4:9-10; Ephesians 2:1-5*).

Applications

- Do not misrepresent the story God tells in the Bible.
  - It is *not* a story about the church, although the church is an important part of it.
  - It is *not* a story about going to heaven, although heaven is real and hold an important place in it.
  - It *is* a story about God's Jesus-revealed love for humanity that seeks to solicit a response of love from its readers (*1 John 4:7-10; 5:3*).
- Understand the love that characterizes God's story must characterize our relationships with one another (*1 John 4:7-11*).
  - Our love towards one another should be as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" as God's love is towards us (*Exodus 34:6; 1 John 4:11*).
  - Our love must extend even to our enemies (*Matthew 5:43-48*); we must especially extend it to those who are culturally, ideologically, politically, or racially different from us without compromise and without hesitation (*cf. Luke 10:25-34*).
  - God's love knows no limits (*cf. John 3:16*); neither should our love be limited.
- God does not call us to enforce justice; He calls us to practice faithful, merciful, gracious, and patient love and to entrust justice to His care (*Romans 12:14-21*).

The Bible narrates God's love for humanity. His Jesus-revealed love for us ought to result in our love for Him and our love for one another. What do your relationships with the people around you reveal about your love for God?