

SESSION EIGHT

God Is Love

1 John 4:7-21

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants open the second seal at the letter's summit: God is love. They discover that the sentence runs one direction only, that love is defined by God's initiative at the cross (the *hilasmos* of Session Two returning in its full light), that the invisible God becomes visible in the Church's love, and that perfect love casts out fear.

Catholic Touchstone: The inmost life of God. "God is love" (4:8, 16) is the Church's deepest sentence about the Trinity: God's very being is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Spirit, and he has destined us to share in it (CCC 221).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Tonight the sealed guess from Session One completes. The choreography matters: read 4:7 aloud, walk into verse 8 live, and only when "God is love" lands from the text do the sheets come out and the second fold open. Celebrate every correct guess (there will be several; that is fine, the game was never about difficulty), enjoy the wrong ones, and then retire the sheets with ceremony: both folds open, the letter's two great sentences complete: God is light (1:5), God is love (4:8, 16). Someone should notice they are the study's whole palette.

Guard the direction of the sentence, because everything doctrinal hangs on it: "God is love," not "love is God." The predicate does not convert. Our culture runs the sentence backward, deifying whatever it currently calls love and then demanding God endorse it. John's grammar goes one way: God defines love; love does not define God, and the very next verse tells us where to look for the definition: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world" (4:9). Love is not an idea illustrated by the cross; the cross is the definition, and everything else is commentary.

Verse 10 is the theological center of the letter and one of the great sentences of Scripture: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." Two things happen here. First, the direction of love: God's initiative precedes and creates ours, stated again at 4:19, "We love, because he first loved us." Nobody loves God first; grace is always previous. Second, Session Two's word returns: *hilasmos*, *expiation*, the *atoning-sacrifice word from the Day of Atonement family*, cognate with *hilastērion*, the "mercy seat" (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:5). In chapter two it answered the

fear of unpaid debt; here it is unveiled as love's own definition: the mercy seat was what love looks like when it meets sin. The Father is not the reluctant party placated by the Son; the Father is the sender, and the sending is the love.

Verse 12 makes a move your group should catch echoing the Gospel: "No man has ever seen God," an unmistakable echo of the opening of John 1:18, but where the Gospel resolves it in the Son who makes him known, the letter resolves it in the Church: "if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." The invisible God's ongoing visibility strategy is the mutual love of his people. This is simultaneously the Church's glory and her most falsifiable claim: every loveless parish is a veil over the face of God; every genuinely loving community is an apologetic no argument can match.

Verses 13-16 gather the letter's assurance vocabulary (Spirit given, Son confessed, love abided-in) and restate the summit: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (4:16). Note for your own formation what the Church built on this: God's very being is love, an eternal exchange between Father, Son, and Spirit into which we are destined (CCC 221); the sentence is the seed of the whole doctrine of the Trinity as communion. Aquinas defined charity from here as nothing less than friendship with God. Handle the depth lightly at table level, but know it is under your feet.

Verses 17-18 address fear, and precision protects the pastoral gold: "perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love." The fear expelled is punishment-fear before the Judge, not reverence (filial fear of the Lord remains a gift of the Spirit), and the expulsion is progressive: perfected love displaces servile fear the way light displaces dark, which means remaining fear is not condemnation but a growth chart. Confidence for the day of judgment (4:17) belongs to those abiding in love now; John's assurance is, as always, present-tense abiding, never a laminated card.

Verse 20 closes the loop with the letter's bluntest sentence: "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." The vertical and horizontal loves are one commandment (4:21), welded exactly as Session Six found at 3:23. The visible brother is the daily exam on the invisible God.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Exodus 34:6-7. When Moses asks to see God's glory, God proclaims his name: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." God's self-description at Sinai is the Old Covenant's "God is love," *hesed* abounding, and it is tonight's live discovery: the sentence John completes was first spoken in a cleft of rock.

Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9. God as the parent teaching Ephraim to walk, cords of compassion, and the astonishing divine soliloquy: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim... my heart recoils within me... for I am God and not man." The prophets already knew that God's holiness and God's tenderness are not rivals; his God-ness is precisely why mercy wins.

Deuteronomy 7:7-8. Why did the LORD choose Israel? "It was not because you were more in number... but it is because the LORD loves you." Election's explanation is love loving first, the LORD's love for Israel and his fidelity to the oath he swore in love to the fathers: 4:19, spoken at Moab.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Homily 7*

Preaching on this very passage, Augustine dared the summary the Church never forgot: love, and do what you will. He did not mean license; he meant that love, real love, the kind defined at the cross, is the root from which only good can grow: whether you hold your peace or cry out, correct or forbear, let it be from love, for from that root nothing can spring but what is good.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae, II-II, q. 23*

Thomas defines charity with a warmth his reputation conceals: charity is friendship between God and man, founded on God's sharing his own happiness with us. Not admiration from a distance, not employment in a cause: friendship, mutual, conversational, and destined for the vision of the Friend. Tonight's verse is his premise: only if God is love can the creature's final end be friendship with him.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Thérèse of Lisieux *Story of a Soul, Manuscript B*

Searching Scripture for her place in the Church, Thérèse found it in 1 Corinthians 12-13. Since the Church is a body, it must have a heart, and that heart must be burning with love: "in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be love." Tonight's summit says why her answer works: love is not one vocation among the others but the vocation inside all of them, because God himself is love. Her little way is 4:19 lived at kitchen-sink scale: loved first, she spent her life loving back in small things.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 221 states the summit doctrinally: God's very being is love; by sending his Son and Spirit he has revealed his innermost secret, an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Spirit, and he has destined us to share in it.

CCC 733 opens the section on the Spirit with tonight's sentence: God is Love, and love is his first gift, containing all others; God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit.

CCC 1822-1829 defines charity, love's lived form: to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God, the greatest of the virtues, the form of them all, whose fruits are joy, peace, and mercy.

THREAD WATCH

The God Is thread resolves tonight: open the second fold. Do it at Build 2, only after 4:8 has landed from the text. Both folds now open, retire the sheets ceremonially and name the pair: light (1:5) and love (4:8, 16), the letter's two great sentences and this study's two colors. Do not let the moment rush.

The hilasmos thread pays off. Session Two taught the word in the register of guilt answered; tonight it returns as love defined (4:10). Ask who remembers the mercy seat; someone will, and their eyes will go wide.

The Knowing thread: two sessions from its summit. "We know and believe the love God has for us" (4:16) is the thread at its warmest. 5:13 remains absolutely guarded; Sessions Nine and Ten finish the letter's first epistle, and the payoff lands there.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Open the second seal at the summit and retire the sheets with ceremony: light and love, the letter's two sentences complete.

2.

Fix the direction of the sentence: God defines love; love does not define God; the cross is the definition (4:9- 10).

3.

Recover *hilasmos* from Session Two and let it be transfigured: the mercy seat as what love looks like meeting sin, the Father as sender, never the placated party.

4.

Minister 4:18 precisely: punishment-fear expelled progressively by perfected love, reverence retained, remaining fear read as a growth chart, not a verdict.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 6 and cut the Dig Deeper. Protect Build 2, the seal opening, and Build 4, the hilasmos payoff; they are the study's emotional and theological summit. Let the closing prayer breathe tonight; do not rush the end.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Father, before we loved you, you loved us. Before we sought, you sent. Tonight, complete the sentence you have been writing since the first night of this study, and let us not merely learn it, but abide in it. Through Christ our Lord, the love made manifest. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

You counted: how many times does love appear in these fifteen verses? Whose number wins? (Leaders: by most counts, well over twenty-five.) What does sheer repetition like that do to a reader?

2.

What is the most convincing act of love you have ever personally witnessed, the one that made love undeniable? What made it undeniable?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Read 4:7-8 aloud, and stop on the last three words of verse 8. Sealed sheets stay closed one more moment: someone tell us what the letter has been doing since 1:5, and why this sentence is its destination.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Since 1:5 the letter has been completing the sentence "God is ____" in installments: God is light, announced in the first chapter, and now the second and final installment: "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love." Not God is loving, as one attribute among others; God *is* love: the sentence names his being, not merely his behavior.

And notice how John gets there: not by philosophy but by family logic: "love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God." Love is the family trait of Session Five's begotten children because it is the Father's own nature: like Father, like born-ones. Now, the sheets.

2.

Open the second fold. Read your guesses aloud, every one of them, right and wrong. Then together, out loud, complete both sentences from the letter itself: God is ____, and God is ____. What do we do with the pair now that we have both?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Celebrate the hits without apology; many will have guessed love, and rightly, because the letter has been shouting the answer for four chapters. Honor the interesting misses (holy, good, truth, spirit are all noble guesses with biblical cousins). Then retire the sheets with ceremony: the game that began on the study's first night is complete: God is light (1:5), God is love (4:8, 16).

And the pair matters more than either alone: light without love would be a searchlight, exposing everything, warming nothing; love without light would be sentiment, affirming everything, healing nothing. John gives us both because God is both: the light that shows us truly, and the love that receives what the light shows. Every session of this study, confession, obedience, discernment, mercy, has lived

between those two sentences, which is why they are, quite literally, the colors on the cover.

3.

Now guard the grammar, because our culture reverses it daily. "God is love" and "love is God": are those the same sentence? What happens, concretely, when a person or a culture runs it backward?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

They are opposite theologies. "God is love" starts with God, whose nature then defines what love is, and verse 9 immediately supplies the definition's location: "God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." "Love is God" starts with whatever we are currently calling love, romance, affirmation, desire, and crowns it, demanding God endorse it. The predicate does not convert; John's arrow points one way.

Run backward, the sentence deifies our appetites and then calls dissent from them hatred, which is precisely how the word love became a weapon against the God of love. Run forward, it submits every human love to the cross for definition, and finds most of them not condemned but enlarged: eros, friendship, and family love all deepened when apprenticed to *agape*. The question is never whether to love, but who defines the verb, and John answers: the Sender defines it, by sending.

4.

Read 4:10 slowly, twice; it may be the greatest single sentence in the letter. Two discoveries hide in it. First: which direction does love run, and what does 4:19 add? Second: Session Two students, a word has come back. Which one, what did it mean then, and what has it become now?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

First, the direction: "not that we loved God but that he loved us." Love, in its origin, is entirely God's initiative; ours is always response: "We love, because he first loved us" (4:19). Nobody has ever loved God first; grace is previous to every good motion in us. Deuteronomy said it of Israel (chosen not for size "but because the LORD loves you," 7:7-8), and Sinai proclaimed it in the cleft of the rock. This dissolves the performance treadmill at the root: you cannot earn what has already been given first.

Second, the returning word: *hilasmos*, expiation, from Session Two, the atoning sacrifice whose sister-word, *hilastērion*, names the Day of Atonement mercy seat. There it answered a fear: the unpaid debt has been dealt with, at the place where blood met Presence. Tonight it is unveiled as love's own definition: "In this is love... he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation." The mercy seat is what love looks like when it meets sin: not indulgence that ignores the wound, not wrath that abandons the wounded, but the Lover absorbing the cost himself. And mark the grammar of the sending: the Father is the sender, not the reluctant party placated by a kinder Son. The cross does not change God's mind about us; it reveals God's heart, which Hosea had already overheard: "How can I give you up... for I am God and not man" (Hosea 11:8-9).

5.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Someone find and read Exodus 34:6-7, Moses in the cleft of the rock, God proclaiming his own name. What does God say about himself when given the chance to self-describe, and how is 1 John 4:8 the completion of that proclamation?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Given one sentence to name himself, God leads with mercy and *hesed*, covenant love, abounding. This proclamation becomes Israel's creed, quoted across the Psalms and prophets more than almost any other verse; it is the Old Covenant's God-is-love, spoken to a man hidden in rock because he could not survive the sight.

John completes what Sinai began, and the difference is the manifestation: at Sinai the love was proclaimed to a man who could not see the face; in the Gospel "the love of God was made manifest among us" (4:9), the face shown, the *hesed* enfleshed, the abounding love bleeding on a mercy seat with a name. Same God, same self-description, now heard, seen, and touched, which has been this letter's claim since its first sentence.

6.

Read 4:12 and hear the echo: "No man has ever seen God," very nearly the words that open John 1:18. But watch where the letter goes with it, different from the Gospel. What is God's ongoing visibility strategy, and what does that make of your parish, and of this table?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The Gospel resolves the invisibility in the Son: the only Son "has made him known" (John 1:18). The letter, writing after the Ascension, resolves it in the Church: "if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." The invisible God's current visibility strategy is the mutual love of his people: where the brethren love, God is being seen, in the form the watching world can most directly inspect, alongside his abiding visibility in word and sacrament.

Which makes the claim gloriously falsifiable, and John means it to be. Every cold parish, every vicious comment thread of believers, is a veil pulled over the face of God; every community of real, costly, Session-Six-style love is an apologetic no argument can rival: "by this all men will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:35). This table is not practice for the real thing. For everyone watching your group's life, it is the evidence.

7.

Read 4:17-18 with precision, because a wounded conscience will hear it wrongly without help. What kind of fear does perfect love cast out, what kind remains (think of the gift of fear of the Lord), and is remaining fear a verdict or a growth chart?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The fear expelled is defined by its object: "fear has to do with punishment," servile fear, the cringe before an executioner-God who is coming to settle accounts. Perfected love expels it the way light expels dark, because you cannot simultaneously abide in the love that sent the mercy seat and cower before the Sender as executioner. Hence "confidence for the day of judgment" (4:17): the Judge is the Lover; we

have met his verdict already, at the cross.

What remains, and grows, is filial fear, reverence: the awe of a child before a Father too good to grieve, which Scripture calls the beginning of wisdom and the Spirit's gift. And the process is progressive: "perfect love casts out fear" describes a displacement underway, not an entrance exam. So remaining fear is not condemnation; it is a growth chart: it marks where love is still being perfected, and its treatment is not shame but more abiding: return to 4:10, again and again, until the heart believes its own memory verse. For the scrupulous, pair this with Session Six's medicine: God is greater than our hearts. And note for leaders: where fear is knotted with scrupulosity, trauma, or anxiety, the growth chart still holds spiritually, but abiding may need company; gentle pastoral accompaniment, a regular confessor, and where appropriate professional help are part of how perfect love does its expelling.

DIG DEEPER · Love, and do what you will

Augustine's famous summary of this passage, *dilige, et quod vis fac*, love, and do what you will, is history's most misquoted sentence, so recover his meaning: he is not licensing whatever affection approves; he has just spent seven homilies defining love by the cross and the commandments. His point is about the root: once love, real *agape*, is the root of an act, whether the act is silence or rebuke, gentleness or discipline, only good can grow from it, because the root determines the fruit. It is 3:18 and 4:10 fused: love defined by God, then set free to act. The counterfeit version deletes the first half; Augustine would recognize it as the spirit of error wearing his quote.

8.

Read 4:20-21, the letter's bluntest sentence, and let it land: the man who says "I love God" while hating his brother "is a liar." Why is the visible brother the exam on the invisible God, and, honestly, who is your exam right now?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

John's logic is ruthless and kind: the brother you have *seen* is the easier object; if love fails at the easy visible target, its claims about the invisible one are exposed as sentiment. You cannot practice on God directly; the brother is the practice, and the practice is the proof. Hence verse 21 welds the two loves into one commandment, as 3:23 already did: not two loves ranked, one love with two directions.

Then make it a mirror, not a telescope: everyone at this table has a brother-exam right now, the roommate, the parent, the ex-friend, the political other, the person whose name just surfaced unbidden. Tonight's summit doctrine grades out there, this week, with that name. "We love, because he first loved us": the resource always precedes the requirement. Loved first, go love.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

Whose name surfaced at Build 8, the seen brother who is currently your exam on the unseen God? What is one act of 4:10-shaped love (initiative-taking, cost-absorbing) toward them this week?

2.

Where does punishment-fear still run your relationship with God, and what would it look like to treat it as a growth chart this month: not shame, but a signpost pointing back to the mercy seat?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Memorize 1 John 4:10 this week, the letter's greatest sentence, and pray it every morning before your feet hit the floor: loved first, sent-for, expiated. Let the day start from initiative received.

2.

Do one act of first-mover love: toward the brother-exam you named, take the initiative you have been waiting for them to take: the text, the apology, the invitation, the forgiveness. He first loved us; go first.

3.

Read Hosea 11:1-9 once this week, slowly, and let God's own soliloquy over Ephraim be his soliloquy over you. Write down the phrase that undoes you.

Closing Prayer:

Father, you are light, and you are love: the letter's two sentences, and our two colors, complete. You loved us first. You sent your Son to be the mercy seat. You are teaching our fear to leave. Perfect your love in us, make it visible at this table, and send us to the brothers we can see, in the name of the Love we have seen and heard and touched. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Eight, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, read in sections through the Build

1 John 1:5

Build 2: the first sentence of the pair, seal ceremony

Exodus 34:6-7

Live discovery, Build 5: God's self-proclamation in the cleft

Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9

Build 4 and Live It: I am God and not man

Deuteronomy 7:7-8

Build 4: chosen because the LORD loves you

John 1:18; 13:35

Build 6: no one has seen God; by this all men will know

1 John 2:2 (callback)

Build 4: hilasmos, the mercy seat returns

1 John 3:20, 23 (callbacks)

Builds 7-8: greater than our hearts; one welded commandment

CCC 221; 733; 1822-1829

Catechism Connection