PERFECT LOVE

1 John 4:17-21

Key Verse: 4:18

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

Thank God for repeatedly speaking to us that God is love. Thank God for his love that we did not love God but he loved us and sent his one and only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. So he is our Saviour and the Saviour of the world. Also, thank God for his love that sanctifies us so that we may be like his Son Jesus Christ and live like him in this world. Also, we cannot forget his divine commands, “Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” In this last part of the love section in 4:7-21, John talks about perfect love and the first love, ‘he first loved us.’ May we probe into the love of God through this passage.

**First, perfect love (17-18).** Verse 17 says, “In this way love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.” In ESV, the translation of this verse is “By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.” Here, the words “is made complete” or “is perfected” is in Greek, “*teteleiōta*.” Apostle used this expression “is made complete” or “is perfected” three times in this epistle, two other times are in 2:5, “But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him” and in 4:12, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” In these three verses, “(his) love is made complete with/among/in us”, its result is that we become like Jesus our Saviour. Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:29, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” This is also as the author of Hebrews wrote in 2:11, “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.” When we become like Jesus, then what a confidence we will have on the day of judgment!

Nowadays many people live without any awareness of the day of judgment, even so-called Christians. Yet, in fact the day of judgment is coming. Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge noting before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.” And Paul also said in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” These are concerning the judgment of believers. Then John wrote in Revelation 20:11-15, “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it…And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books…each person was judged according to what he has done…If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was throne into the lake of fire.” This is the white throne judgment for all the unbelievers. How important it is to live with a sense of judgment while living in this world! May we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phi 2:12) becoming like Jesus in this world so that we can have confidence on the day of judgment!

Then verse 18 says, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” We should really understand this verse. In this one verse the word “fear” is written 4 times and love, 3 times. We know that the opposite of love is hatred. However, we also should know that love is contrasted with fear. This is what John described here, “there is no fear in love”, “perfect love drives out fear”, and “the one who fears is not made perfect in love.” Here the word “perfect” in perfect love is in Greek, “*teleia*” in translation “*teleios*” as we thought of in 2:5 and 4:17. When Jesus died on the cross, he said, “It is finished” and then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (Jn 19:30). “It is finished” is in Greek, “*tetelestai*.” Certainly, perfect love is God’s love that was revealed when Jesus died on the cross, saying, “It is finished.”

In the Garden, of Eden Adam and Eve had a perfect love relationship with God. But when their love relationship with God was broken through their disobedience to God’s command, fear came into their hearts. So they tried to escape from God’s presence out of fear when they heard the voice of God in the Garden. When the LORD called to Adam, “Where are you?”, he answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Ge 3:10). He expressed his fear. Fear began to rule him instead of God’s love. Also, in Genesis chapter 4 Cain killed his brother Abel, and he looked bold. When God asked him, “Where is your brother Abe” he replied, “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” He defied God and seemed to fear no one. However, when God’s punishment was pronounced, he said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me” (Ge 4:13-14). At that time no one would kill me. The matter was only between God and him. But he unwittingly expressed his deep fear to be murdered by anyone, because of his sin of homicide. Cain’s sixth descendant, seventh from Adam, said to his wives, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me” (Ge 4:23). Probably he was too sensitive and afraid to be killed, if he did not kill the person who wounded and injured him. And he said, “If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven time”, seemingly recognizing that he was 7 times worse than Cain. In the Garden of Eden there was the order of love, meaning that the order was maintained by love. But after the flood, the order of fear replaced the order of love and fear became the operating factor for the order in any and every society without God. The world ran on the survival of the fittest with the order of fear.

In this 21st century, as human civilization with amazing technological development seems to be sky-high, so is man’s sin against God. A voice from heaven says in Revelation 18:4-5, “Come out of her (Babylon), my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.” Ever since Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, all mankind who left God had fear in their hearts, as babies are most fearful when they lose sight of their moms. For they were made in the image of God, still with its remaining although the image was impaired due to their sins. They sense the fear of God’s punishment, especially the fear of suffering eternally in the fiery lake of burning sulfur, though the degree of their fear can differ. Out of fear they do various kinds of things, even commit heavier and more serious crimes. Still the fear never goes away. Nothing or no human love can drive out this fear, but God’s perfect love, which sacrificed his one and only Son at the altar of the cross, where the Son cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Only this love of God that made his Son the atoning sacrifice for our sins can drive out the greatest fear of God’s eternal punishment. The atoning sacrifice offered in God’s perfect love appeased God’s wrath and is enough for our salvation from the eternal punishment of God. The Son is the propitiation. Paying the price of God’s own Son, the precious blood of the Son, is more than enough and sufficient. We need to hold fast this perfect sufficient love God at any life circumstance. This love of God assures our life and future and eternal salvation. The author of Hebrews expressed it this way in Hebrews 2:14-15, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Here the fear of death includes the fear of what will happen after death. To repent of one’s sins and accept this love of God is the way of life and salvation. To those who accept and dwell in this love of God is true this song: “And then one day I’ll cross the river; I’ll fight life’s final war with pain. And then as death gives way to victory. I’ll see the lights of glory…” Again the assurance of our life and salvation is in this love of God. Praise God for his perfect love through his perfect sacrifice.

As we thought of, it is true that there is no fear in love and perfect love drives out fear. Yet, we can think of it further. We are to know that there is reverent fear in love. For example, when Abraham obeyed God’s command of sacrificing his only son Isaac as a burnt offering, God said, “Now I know that your fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son your only son” (Ge 22:12). That fear proved that Abraham loved God more than his son Isaac. Psalm 19:9 says, “The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever” and Psalm 111:10, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” And in Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom.” The fear of the LORD is absolutely necessary in our love relationship with God.

There is craven fear. Jesus said in Luke 12:4-5, “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” We believe that loving God includes fearing him most. When we love God and fear him most, there is no fear in us. For the greater fear drives out the lesser fear. So it is also true that there is no fear in love and the one who fears is not made perfect in love. This is also the reason Jesus said in Matthew 10:37, “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” When we love God most in response to his love, there is no fear in us and we are made perfect in love.

It is also notable that after saying, “I tell you, fear him” in Luke 12:5, Jesus continued, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Perfect love certainly includes perfect care.

**Second, the first love (19-21).** Verse 19 says, “We love, because he first loved us.” What a truthful and simple statement! God first loved us. When Adam sinned, he hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to him, “Where are you?” God came to him first, because God loved him, although he betrayed God by disobeying God and obeying Satan. God loving first is his initiative. God’s initiating love is shown throughout the Bible. God came to Abraham first when he was in a totally hopeless situation with his barren wife, saying, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great…and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Ge 12:1-3). Abraham began his life of faith by obeying this command and holding to God’s promise to him. This initiating love God was with him at each difficult time in his life. When his nephew Lot left him after choosing good land for himself, Abram was disheartened and looked down on the ground. At that time, God came to him and said, “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west” and renewed God’s promise to him to give all the land he could see. At another time Abram was in great fear with a sense of love after defeating the neighbouring countries to rescue Lot and yet refusing all the human compensation. Then God came to him and said, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield and, your very great reward.” When he was still in despair because of his childlessness, God took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them, So shall your offspring be.” At this Abram could believe the LORD and was restored in heart. The greatest crisis in Abraham’s life was when he became complacent with the birth of his son, Ishmael, by Hagar. That complacent and spiritually deadened life lasted 13 years. He was ninety-nine years old. No one cared if he lived such a complacent life, but the LORD God did. The LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.” At this, Abraham repented and God changed his name from Abram to Abraham, the father of many nations. In God’s initiating love, Abraham indeed became the father of many nations according to his promise initially given to him.

As for Jacob, in his youth he left his parents’ home due to his Esau’s aforethought of killing him. One night he was very lonely in the field. He slept with a stone under his head. That night LORD God appeared to him in a dream with a vision of a stairway resting on the earth with its tops reaching to heaven, where the angels of God ascending and descending. God gave Jacob Abrahamic promise and assured Jacob of his provision for the life ahead. Jacob accepted God’s help and responded God with his decision to offer God a tenth of all God would give him. That happened at Bethel and the God of Bethel led Jacob’s life.

We also see God’s initiating love for Moses. The prince of Egypt Moses became a fugitive in the wilderness being forgotten by all and becoming nobody with no human hope at all. After forty years of his life in the Midian wilderness, God remembered him and all the happenings in his life and called him, saying, “Moses, Moses,…take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:5-6). It was God’s calling for him to deliver his people in Egypt.

David was a mere shepherd boy tending his father’s flock at Bethlehem. But God called him and anointed him to be king of Israel by Samuel (1 Sa 16:13). From that day on, the Spirit of the LORD came upon David and also his life of suffering began. We know that the nation Israel was born as the descendants of Abraham and then the descendants Jacob according to God’s promise given to them and was named Israel after Jacob’s new name, Israel. This was God’s initiating love for the country. The nation was once the glorious kingdom of David. However, when her people abandoned the LORD their God being influenced by the neighbouring countries, the nation was invaded and conquered by powerful nations. At the time of Jesus’ birth, the nation was a small colony of Rome in utter darkness and hopelessness. The birth of the promise Messiah Jesus was again God’s initiating love for the nation and at the same time for the whole world. So the genealogy of Jesus was written in the first book of the New Testament Matthew chapter 1, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham…And Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.” John 3:16 excellent shows God’s initiating love for the whole word: “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.”

God’s initiating love began in Apostle John’s life this way. John 1:36-37 says, “The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God!’ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.” One of them was John. Then at their following Jesus turned around and saw them and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi! Where are you staying.” And according to the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Mark Jesus called him and his brother while they were doing their job in the sea of Galilee, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20). In the upper room dialogue, Jesus expressed God’s initiating love for his disciples this way, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (Jn 15:16). God’s initiating love was with John to the end. When he was exiled to the island of Patmos, the exile itself seemed to be the end of his life (Rev 1:9). Yet, it was not. The end of his life in his exiled situation was glorious when God showed him the risen Christ and his glory with his reigning on the earth and in the eternal kingdom of God.

God’s initiating love has been true in my life, too. In my early 20’s, I escaped to army service with the burden of life. At the time of retiring, I was full of worry and fear for the future. In the very same week of my retirement from my army service, God led me to UBF to begin Bible study. Genesis 12:2 came to me through a Bible Academy and I realized that my life was not a cursed one but blessed one in Jesus Christ. That word was my personal encountering with the word of God as the word of my salvation from above. God’s initiating love was with me in my marriage and in raising my children and serving God’s ministry until now. I cannot forget how we began our Revelation study last April. When I left for Brazil for Paulina’s wedding, we just began Mark’s gospel study, lesson 1. Then while I stayed there and was coming back to Canada after the wedding, God put me the thought of studying Revelation, which was beyond my understanding and our situation. Leaving our study of Mark’s gospel behind, we began our Revelation study into around 60 lessons for the past 1 year during COVID-19. Through this study, my eyes were opened to see the world situation and where world history is going. It also helped me to have more confidence to understand the whole Bible. I really thank God for his initiating love in our study of Revelation.

When we look at the world, it is really the time of great uncertainty and much confusion. Yet, we can have certainty and clarity and true hope in God’s initiating love. Apostle Paul said in Philippians 1:6, “…he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” He also said in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand under it.” His first coming was definitely God’s initiating love, and so will his second coming be. It is written in the last chapter of Bible, “Behold, I am coming soon!” (7), “Behold, I am coming soon!...I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (12) and “Yes, I am coming soon” (20). No one can stop God’s initiation in his love. God’s initiating love will go to the end of the age. Praise God for his initiating love. Certainly God’s initiating love is contained in his perfect love.

Again, verse 19 says, “We love because he first loved us.” God wants us to practice his initiating love. Then John says in verse 20, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” As we studied, loving God comes first and then loving our neighbours, and in fact the two loves cannot be separated. Loving our brothers and sisters is to be expression of loving God and not loving the visible ones is the evidence of not loving the invisible God. Then in verse 21, “And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

May we keep the perfect love of God and his initiating love in our hearts and obey his command, “Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”