

## THE ANTIPHONAL SONG

*(God's agape received, reciprocated, and reflected)*

*If anyone obeys his Word, **God's love is truly made complete in him.** This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. **1 John 2:5***

*If we love one another, God lives in us and **his love is made complete in us.** **1 John 4:12***

*We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. 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... the one who fears is not **made perfect in love.** **1 John 4:16-18***

John was nicknamed “the Apostle of Love,” and for good reason. He was so sure that Jesus loved him that in his Gospel, he spoke of himself in the third person as, “*the disciple whom Jesus loved.*” He was the one who had the nerve to lean over and rest his head on Jesus’ chest at the Last Supper, and the love theme tends to dominate his writings, especially 1 John. He was a man who knew he was outrageously loved by God, returned his love with a vengeance, and demanded that true disciples love one another as they’ve been loved.

John claimed in the verses above that God’s agape can be “*made complete*” in us. Was he implying that sometimes there’s something incomplete or unfinished about God’s love? Is his not a perfect love, a love without flaws? I know that *my love* contains gaping gaps, but *God’s agape*?

*“But if we love one another, God abides (lives and remains) in us and His love (that love which is essentially His) is brought to completion (to its full maturity, runs its full course, is perfected) in us.” **1 John 4:12 The Amplified Bible***

I like this translation. It implies that, though perfect in itself, God’s love isn’t complete – hasn’t run its full course – until it’s **received, reciprocated, and reflected** by his beloved. Until then it hasn’t come full circle. Until we accept his love, return it back to him, and share it with others, like any good melody line should, it doesn’t resolve itself. Speaking of melody, did you know that God sings? If he sings, what’s he sing about?

*The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing. **Zephaniah 3:17***

He sings about those with whom he is delighted. His “*great delight*” in his beloved reaches way beyond mere forgiveness from sin or pardon from penalty. These could be misconstrued as mere legal transactions. A pardoned criminal is allowed back in the community, more tolerated than welcomed or respected – certainly not cherished. But the Father’s lavish love for us goes much further, it brings him “*great delight.*” He’s delighted when he thinks of us, and his delight makes him sing.

He sings his eternally beautiful anthem, a love song that he relentlessly croons to all his humans. His song brings pleasure to all who stop and listen, is intended to elicit an antiphonal response, wherein singers find other singers and sing in harmony with them in such a way that non-singers are enticed to join the song.

**Agape received:**

So, he sings with delight over us. The Old Testament poet told us that we are to “delight ourselves in the Lord,” but unless our delight is rooted in his delight in us it’s just another jaw-clenching spiritual duty instead of a reciprocation of romance. Life is lifted to a more delightful plain when we enjoy his enjoyment of us. Our songs to him are but a reciprocation of his songs about us.

When we hear the Beloved Singer singing love songs to his beloved, our nervous minds and worried hearts are “*quieted*.” It calms my noisy heart to know that such a Person loves me in such an excessive way. In my busy city there is always a din of sirens, car horns, street screamers, and all manner of other racket. But much more unnerving than the external is the internal noise – the din inside me – of angst and anxieties. My attempts to distract myself are unsuccessful; the only thing that quiets the clamor is when “*I know and rely on the love God has for me*.” My confusing musings slow down and the din diminishes when I attentively listen to his song. He loves me. That’s all that matters at the moment.

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*“He cried out, ‘It is finished!’”* **John 19:30**

Like Handel, emerging from his self-imposed sequestration to compose “The Messiah,” the actual Messiah himself hung from his cross and cried, “The song is finished!” The anthem is complete, the lyrics and the melody are perfect. The final draft of the love song that the Father had been composing for thousands of years was finished and being sung by the Son.

*“May you have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge...”* **Ephesians 3:18-19**

God’s love is not always well received. Maybe it’s because we don’t understand it or we can’t believe it or because we’re so full of substitutes that we don’t have room for it. Even those of us who believe in his song don’t seem to hear it very well. We have too many other noises vying for our attention, any number of other tunes blaring through our surgically implanted ear buds. To listen to God’s song and receive it as a melody sung about us and to us we’ll have to turn down all other competing din.

But when I stop to listen, really heed without distraction, the Beloved Singer’s serenade resonates in the deepest part of me and purges out abandonment and self-doubt. God’s therapeutic agape incites elation and inspires me to sing along.

### **Agape reciprocated**

God’s love has always been mutually enjoyed – it looks for a resting place and yearns for reciprocation. His love is only “complete” when those he’s reaching out to reach back. Let’s review what John said about the Singer’s song sung to us and sung by us back to him.

*“If anyone obeys his Word, **God’s love is truly made complete in him...**”*

*“If we love one another, God lives in us and **his love is made complete in us...**”*

*“In this way **love is made complete among us...**”*

*“Love, in its very essence is reciprocal. It’s perfect ideal requires two parties. It is not enough to tell us, as a bare abstract truth, that God is love. The truth must be rounded and filled out for us by the divine love upon as an object, and by the response of the object. The love of God is perfected or completed by the establishment of the relation between God and people.” **Marvin R. Vincent***

Our songs to him are but a  
reciprocation of his songs  
about us.

*“We love him because he first loved us.” **1 John 4:19***

Though we love to sing about God, our songs don’t begin with us – they’re antiphonal. We sing in response to his song about us. He bursts out in his song of love and we return it in kind – ours is an echo of him who sang it first. When we dance in joy, we dance with him who leads. Our enjoyment of him began, and will always begin, with his enjoyment of us.

Undoubtedly you’ve noticed that when we begin to worship him his presence seeps into our consciousness. He was there all along, of course, rejoicing over us with his own song. When we started to sing, our voices harmonized with his, our eyes were opened to him dancing and rejoicing over us, inviting us to join the celebration. His song and its accompanying revelry is then, as John said, being “made complete!”

**He keeps singing even when we don’t...**

Of course it’s true that God keeps on loving even when his agape isn’t reciprocated, but only when one of his beloveds returns his advances is the joy of mutual love realized. Receiving the benefits of his agape is in the act of returning it back to him. I experience it most in the *reciprocation*. How can I ever feel the warmth of how he feels about me if I don’t respond in some way to show him how I feel about him? When I receive and reciprocate his love; the world is as it should be. It’s what we were put here to do – *love the Lover of our souls!*

Don’t misunderstand. God would not be any less God if no one returned his affection. He wouldn’t implode if the whole world chose not to sing his song back to him. He isn’t dependent on us to love him in order to be secure within himself. His security is *in himself*. He had intimate fellowship among his triune essence before the world began; and though he created us to be loved and to love him in return, his eternal fellowship would remain intact even if he had no takers.

Even if no one returned God’s love, he’d still love, because it’s his nature. *“God is love... God so loved the world...”* He loves a world full of people, many of whom will never love him back. Though his offer stands, those who reject it won’t directly benefit from it. If I love someone, and yet they never choose to counter my affections, then both of us miss the joy of mutual love. If they reject me, neither of us enjoys love’s benefits. We both miss the elation of loving and being loved. Everybody loses.

*“God’s heart was grieved... and his heart was filled with pain.” **Genesis 6:6***

*“And don’t grieve the Holy Spirit of God...”* **Ephesians 4:30**

Until we love him back, his *agape*, though constant and fixed, won’t be savored by us, and his own outstretched heart is in some way unfulfilled (“incomplete”). Those who don’t return his love miss out on its warmth, and because his passion has no place to alight, I have no doubt that God himself feels the heartache. Love unrequited becomes more of an ache in my heart than a joy to it. My love, in that case, hurts me more than heartens me. I can only imagine that with the mass of humanity that rejects him, on some level, God’s heart lives in a sort of unremitting state of restlessness and grief. He offers his love to all his creatures, and so few return it.

Our enjoyment of him began,  
and will always begin,  
with his enjoyment of us.

We’re told to love people who don’t love us in return. I don’t do it very well, but fortunately God does. His *agape* for us remains constant regardless of our response to it. It’s who he is. When we don’t love him back, he grieves and we miss out on the benefits of being “*so loved*.” How would *we* survive if we had so much affection to give, and so few received and returned it?

On the flip side, the ecstasy of reaching out and finding receivers who become reciprocators of love is so great that God was willing to risk the grief.

***The justifiably jealous lover...***

*“I am a jealous God...”* **Exodus 20:5**

*“The Spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely...”* **James 4:5**

The Lord is a “jealous lover.” Don’t you find it odd that jealousy is an *iniquity* for us but a *quality* for God? It’s because he knows that what’s best for us is *him*. It only makes sense that the created would desperately need the Creator, so it’s only right that he should hate it when we prefer another above him. When we fail to reciprocate his love, it’s not as though we love nothing at all; we’ve become enamored with something else. He’s jealous when we find alternatives with which to share our affection and sing our song. His love is only made “complete,” and the song can only resolve itself when it’s received and returned to its Source.

*“Come and share you master’s happiness.”* **Matthew 24:21**

When returned, God’s *agape* is a source of limitless joy to him. He *sings and dances over us* when his beloved mutually shares his passion. The purpose of his free-will experiment is eternal *agape* – in its full width, length, height, and depth – received and reciprocated. Mutually enjoyed divine love is the highest and purest of life now and forever!

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and finding receivers who  
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### **The easiest song to sing...**

We thought our song was fully sung when we sang our songs with other singers in sanctuaries expertly designed for our maximum audio pleasure. There's no doubt that such singing and musical instrumentation is one way his song is returned to him. After all, the longest book in the Bible is a songbook.

That kind of song is by far the easiest song we sing, the one with the lowest cost. All that's required of us is to get out of bed on our drowsiest day, dress in our best looking and least comfortable clothes, find parking and a good seat – one with the least probability of interaction with strangers – and sing along, if not hum along with the staged, meticulously prepared musical performance. Of course, we require the music to be executed with our own cultural preferences in mind, generationally appropriate, and loud enough to inspire yet not too loud for our taste. We convince ourselves that our antiphonal song is simply sung by imitating the talented singers on the stage; or, at the very least, by sitting attentively as the worship team sings. We've been known to settle for this and called it our "sacrifice of praise."

I apologize for the snide hyperbole. We know better than that – yes? We know that while our antiphonal song includes singing God-songs to the words on the screen, according to John, it takes many other forms. We sing his love song back to him when we "obey his Word" and "walk as Jesus did," when we genuinely love the singers who sing next to us, especially the ones most difficult to harmonize with. We sing his song when we're simply at "rest" in our souls, having heard his song we reciprocate it in trust that the Beloved Crooner meant every lyric he sang in his love song to us.

**Mutually enjoyed divine love  
is the highest and purest of life  
now and forever!**

### **Agape reflected:**

I stumbled into the wrong room. It turned out to be the place where the school choir was practicing. They invited me to sing with them and I said, "Are you kidding? I don't sing and I especially don't sing in choirs!" Before I backed out the door, they went on with their rehearsal, and what I heard from the back of the room intrigued me, enticed me. Their exquisite harmony lured me to stay and listen to their entire repertoire. I found myself humming along and before I escaped I signed up for the choir.

*"No one has ever seen God but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." 1 John 4:12*

No one has ever seen God but if we love one another we can see him in one another. When we harmonize in song with one another our audiences see him too and hear him in our song. Put theologically, those who **receive** his love are internally compelled to **reciprocate** it back to him along with others similarly compelled, and together they instinctively **reflect** it to others listening in the "back of the room."

His is a healing melody. His love makes us well so we can love others, even some of the most unlovable others. His forgiveness frees us to forgive. When I'm unburdened of my guilt I have nothing to shift on to others. When I can accept my place with God I'm enabled to accept the way they sing

their song and we can sing together to the Composer and to an audience unaware that there existed a song so sweet.

*“If we love one another... his love is made complete...”* **1 John 4:12**

Even before he created us to be an audience for his recital, the Heavenly Trio harmonized with each other and to each other. The song that we sing back to him isn't "complete" until we sing it with other people to other people listening. He never meant his song to be sung solo in the shower.

*“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* **John 13:34-35**

Our harmony provokes a hearing from those who haven't heard his beautiful song before. They've heard the lonesome lyrics many times, but they didn't know that the words – oh, that din of religious words – were originally put to music and performed in such heavenly harmonies. People take notice when we sing the anthem *together*; the beauty of it entices them to stay and listen to the rest of our repertoire; and to even consider joining the choir.

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in the “back of the room.”

Until we hear his song, sing it back to him, sing it with other singers, and sing it to other people who haven't heard it, the song is unfinished. We were meant to sing with him, sing in harmony with our friends, and by our singing, entice our other friends to join us in the song.

**When the audience turns its back...**

*“But I tell you, love your enemies...”* **Matthew 5:44**

We're supposed to love the way he loves and love everyone he loves, even those we don't want to love. The love song we repeat back to him has to be sung even to those who don't want to be sung to. It's always more difficult to sing when the audience has turned its back. But most with their backs turned haven't heard the song as it's supposed to be sung. And that's a shame on us who have failed to sing it right, in appropriate harmony with one another. Until we do that, we haven't properly represented the Song Giver or his song.

Singing to skeptics and music haters isn't nearly as easy as our Sunday-songfest-singing with our fellow choir members. Thankfully the Song Giver camouflages evocative stanzas of his song in his created world and in the consciences of all persons at birth. But the form of his ballad most difficult to reject is when enamored songsters croon it in unison to hostile audiences.

When we were his enemies his love broke us down and the appeal of his choir reduced our resistance to powder. Our song does the same with our enemies.

*“Love comes from God...”* **1 John 4:7**

*“God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him.”* **1 John 4:16**

*“O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.”* **Psalm 51:15**

While there is discipline and practice involved in singing a song in patent harmony, and even this song of God – because of our spoiled nature – is difficult to learn, the Beloved Singer himself lives in us, singing through us. Even the song back to him he inspires and empowers. Sometimes it seems that I’m singing in a cooperative lip sync. That’s how much help I need.

We’ll never sing the song as well as he does, but we’re improving.