

1 John 3:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Analysis

John defines authentic love by pointing to its ultimate demonstration. 'Hereby perceive we the love of God' (ἐν τούτῳ ἐγνώκαμεν τὴν ἀγάπην, en toutō egnōkamen tēn agapēn) uses perfect tense—we have come to know and continue to know love's nature. The defining moment follows: 'because he laid down his life for us' (ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἔθηκεν, hoti ekeinos hyper hēmōn tēn psychēn autou ethēken). 'Ἐκεῖνος (ekeinos, that one) refers emphatically to Christ. The verb τίθημι (tithēmi, lay down) indicates voluntary, deliberate action—Christ wasn't murdered; He gave His life. 'Υπέρ (hyper, for/on behalf of) indicates substitution—He died in our place. The application follows: 'and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren' (καὶ ἡμεῖς ὀφείλομεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν τὰς ψυχὰς θεῖναι, kai hēmeis opheilomen hyper tōn adelphōn tas psychas theinai). ὀφείλομεν (opheilomen, we ought) expresses moral obligation, debt—because Christ died for us, we owe sacrificial love to others. This doesn't mean atoning death (Christ's was unique) but willingness to sacrifice everything, even life itself, for fellow believers. Christian love isn't sentiment but costly self-sacrifice.

Historical Context

John writes to churches where persecution made martyrdom real possibility. Some believers had already died for their faith; others faced that prospect. The command to 'lay down lives' wasn't theoretical but practical: will you protect your brother at risk of your own life? Will you share scarce resources though it means

personal deprivation? Will you maintain fellowship with persecuted believers though association brings danger? Early Christian communities modeled this sacrificial love: caring for widows and orphans, ransoming imprisoned believers, refusing to apostatize even under torture. Roman authorities and pagan observers noted this peculiar Christian love with both puzzlement and grudging admiration. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan noting Christians' commitment to mutual aid. Tertullian quoted pagans saying, 'See how these Christians love one another.' This love wasn't natural human affection but supernatural agapē enabled by the indwelling Spirit.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. What does 'laying down your life' for fellow believers look like in your context (likely not literal martyrdom but real sacrifice)?
2. How does meditating on Christ laying down His life for you motivate and enable sacrificial love for others?
3. Are there fellow believers whose needs require sacrificial response from you right now?

Interlinear Text

ἐν	τούτῳ	ἐγνώκαμεν	τὴν	ἀγάπην	ὅτι	ἐκεῖνος
Hereby	G5129	perceive we	G3588	the love	of God because	he
	G1722			G26		G1565
ὑπὲρ	ἡμῶν	τὴν	ψυχὰς	αὐτοῦ	τιθέναι	καὶ
for	us	G3588	life	G846	laid down	and
G5228	G2257		G5590		G5087	G2249
καὶ	ἡμεῖς					
όφείλομεν	ὑπὲρ	τῶν	ἀδελφῶν	τὰς	ψυχὰς	τιθέναι
ought	for	G3588	the brethren	G3588	life	laid down
G3784	G5228		G80		G5590	G5087

Additional Cross-References

Ephesians 5:2 (Love): And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.

John 13:34 (Love): A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

John 3:16 (Love): For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Romans 5:8 (Love): But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Revelation 1:5 (Love): And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,

1 Peter 3:18 (References God): For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

Matthew 20:28 (Parallel theme): Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Acts 20:28 (References God): Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Ephesians 5:25 (Love): Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

Titus 2:13 (References God): Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;

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