

TAKING IT HOME

You mean everything to Jesus. He knows your hidden sins, your shameful secrets, and still His *agape* love enfolds you. His nail-pierced hands are His pledge of sins forgiven. He invites you to believe that. To know His peace today and to live with Him in His family in His heavenly home tomorrow.

Christians pin crosses on our lapels; we string crosses from chains around our necks; we hang crosses on the walls of our homes. An ancient symbol of terror and torture, the cross has become for us an emblem of victory. Each time you see a cross this Easter season and every time you use this gift, remember that while Christ was on the cross, you were on His mind. Christ on Calvary, arms outstretched—whispering your name, seeing your pain, saying to your hurting heart: *God is love.*

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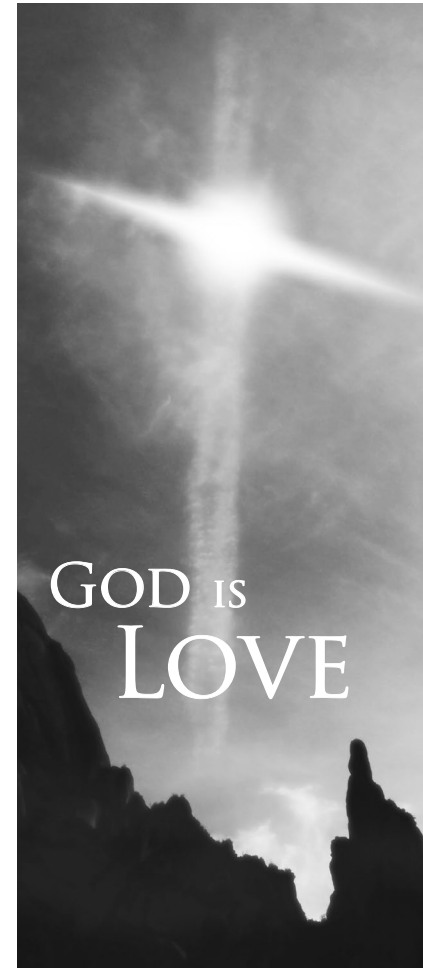
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INTRODUCTION

The slang term *chick flick* became popular in the 1980s. The term refers—sometimes scornfully or derisively—to movies that appeal mainly to women or teenage girls. Chick flicks are often patterned after fairy tales like *Cinderella*. They often revolve around issues of love—love in a romantic sense.

Because that is true, we might argue that movies like these have been around as long as Hollywood. In a way, classics like *Casablanca* and *Gone with the Wind* are really “chick flicks.”

For the next few minutes, I'd like us to focus on love—but not love in the romantic, Cinderella sense. That kind of love, wonderful though it is to dream about, is in the real world a rather flimsy thing. Ask yourself, “Will Prince

Charming visit the cancer ward or the nursing home?” Ask yourself, “What happens to Cinderella’s warm feelings when Prince Charming has to attend to the real work of balancing the budget of the kingdom or dealing with a border dispute?”

Think about it. Would you agree that romantic love, love based on feelings of romance, of physical attraction, of being swept off our feet, . . . love like that most times is an “I’ll love you if . . .” or an “I love you because . . .” or an “I’ll love you until . . .” kind of love.

GETTING TO THE HEART

What other kind of love is there? As many of you already know, the Holy Scriptures depict a kind of sacrificial love almost unknown in our decadent, self-indulgent culture. This love gives of itself without expecting anything in return. It extends itself into acts of compassion at the expense of our own comfort. In extreme circumstances, this kind of love even forfeits its life to rescue another.

This kind of love sobers us. Self-sacrifice? Compassion? Giving up life itself? The price tag on that kind of love gives even the best of us some second thoughts. And we’d probably have third and fourth thoughts about laying down our lives for a hardened criminal—or even for that crotchety neighbor up the street.

Those second and third thoughts come into our minds because most times our love is really not self-sacrificial love, not really God’s kind of love at all. Our love is much more shallow, much more trite than that.

There is, however, one person who practiced true *agape* (sacrificial) love. That person truly poured Himself out fully—all on behalf of others, on our behalf. The God-man Jesus Christ was born over 2,000 years ago to a virgin from the dusty little village of Nazareth. True God, King of kings, Ruler of the Universe, worshiped and served by angels, He laid all that aside to lie as a tiny human baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

The events that make up the birth, life, and death of Jesus shout out one truth: **God is love!** (1 John 4:16). Not “God loves” in a romantic, depending-on-circumstances, chick flick kind of feeling, but “God *is* love”—unconditional, boundless, *agape* love! Though we often act in very unloving ways, His passion for us never wavers. Though we falter and fail, His desire to claim us as His own forever never dims. Christ has committed Himself to us in a pure, all-encompassing, eternal love. That sweet perfume of commitment despite the cost defines His very essence.

Because we can’t save ourselves, God’s unimaginable love moved heaven and earth to rescue us. Romans 5:8 tells us: “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Did you catch that phrase—“While we were still sinners”? Dying for someone worthy of such devotion would prove difficult enough, but who would give up his life for the kind of nasty, rebellious, self-willed individuals we know ourselves to be?

Jesus did. In unwavering commitment He suffered the beatings and thorns, the hatred and spittle, the nails and spear. He endured separation from His heavenly Father, bearing the curse of hell itself on a bloodied cross—all to save a sinner like you, a sinner like me! Perfect love became the perfect sacrifice, the sinless sacrifice God demanded as payment for our sins.

Look at that cross. Perfect love hangs there. Not “love in general,” not some sweet sentimental feeling, but a personal love, a costly love. Jesus knows your name. You were on His mind and your name was on His parched and swollen lips that afternoon so long ago when the sun refused to shine.

John 15:13 tells us: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” That love forged a bond intended to speak volumes to your soul. Jesus loves *you*! He finds *you* lost and wandering. He rescues *you*, and enfolds *you* in arms once held by nails to His cross.