

## **“We Know Love By This”**

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<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup>How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? <sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him <sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

<sup>21</sup>Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup>and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. <sup>23</sup>And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. <sup>24</sup>All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (1 John 3:16-24)

The first wedding I ever officiated was for my cousin, and it was a destination wedding. He and his fiancé booked a beautiful little lawn space at Humphrey’s Half Moon Inn, right on the bay in San Diego. It was late summer, sunny and beautiful, and we all stayed in the resort, and it was an amazing time. As a bonus, it just so happened that, on the Friday night before the wedding, the concert venue in that same resort was hosting a special concert. It was 2009, so I knew that “Air Supply” was a bit past their prime. But they were standing right at sea level, and there was plenty of oxygen in the air, and those guys showed the world that night that they could still rock a ballad. So, even though we didn’t have tickets, we were all serenaded to sleep that night to the soothing sounds of 70’s soft rock.

I had never really spent that much time thinking about it, but I realized that night that Air Supply songs were all the same. At least they all talked about the same thing: love. Those guys were always struggling with love. They were either “All Out of Love,” or “Lost in Love.” Or they just had to say to their girl, “Here I Am, the One that You Love,” or “I’ve Got Your Love.” At some point, they were just “Keeping the Love Alive,” and eventually they were “Making Love Out of Nothing at All.” Any way you sliced it, Air Supply seemed to have love all figured out.

Most singers, however, are at least a little puzzled by love. Whitney Houston, for example, may be known for hits like “The Greatest Love of All” and “I Will Always Love You,” but she also asked “How will I know if he really loves me?” *“How will I know? Don’t trust your feelings. How will I know? Love can be deceiving.”* Sure, she says a prayer with every heartbeat, she falls in love whenever we meet, but she’s asking you, radio listener from the 80’s, what you know about these things. *“How will I know if he really loves me?”*

It’s the age-old question. How do we know if love is real? When I was growing up, one place people often went to for answers was *Cosmopolitan*, or some similar magazine that offered quizzes. Today, all that stuff is online, but the quizzes are still there. “Not sure if your new crush is right for you? Want to know if he loves you back? Take this fun love and relationship quiz to help decode your life!” I did a little research, and one of them actually led with this insightful question: “Describe your feelings with a single color: Deep red /



Fuchsia / Bubblegum pink / Coral." I'm guessing coral is bad? Seems like we would be better off plucking petals off of a daisy to let fate decide whether she loves me or she loves me not.

Interestingly, some of the best wisdom on the subject comes from an unlikely source: David Lee Roth and Eddie Van Halen. "*How do I know when it's love? I can't tell you but it lasts forever. How does it feel when it's love? It's just something you feel together.*" At the end of the day, objective tests don't get us very far. Knowing whether love is true or not ultimately comes down to a feeling, an innate sense that tells us that we are truly loved.

In Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, super-sleuth Sherlock Holmes comes to stately Baskerville Hall to investigate a strange series of deaths. As he takes his initial tour of the manor, Holmes' attention is drawn upward to an impressive collection of paintings in a grand hallway. "These are a really very fine series of portraits," the detective says.

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say so," his host replies. "I don't pretend to know much about these things, and I'd be a better judge of a horse or a steer than of a picture. I didn't know that you found time for such things."

"I know what is good when I see it," Holmes replied, "and I see it now."<sup>1</sup> A key clue is later found in one of the portraits, but the statement itself became one of the most enduring lines in the entire book. Even the US Supreme Court has resorted to this truth from time to time – that some things in life may be difficult to test objectively, but on some things we can just sense, we just know, that we have found what we are looking for.

This idea is clearly at work in the book of 1<sup>st</sup> John, which is often called "the epistle of love." Relying heavily on the statement Jesus made in the gospel of John ("*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*"), the writer of the epistles of John was convinced that the best test of love is that we will know it when we see it. "*This is how we know who the children of God are,*" the letter explains. "*Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God, nor is anyone who does not love his brother.*" The idea became one of the most familiar hymns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "*And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*"

But the epistle also goes one step further. There is one objective test of love – one way we can be sure that what we are seeing and feeling is love – really, truly, and undeniably love. How can we be sure of God's love for us? "*We know love by this,*" the scripture says, "*that he laid down his life for us.*"

There is a Persian king by the name of Cyrus who played a large role in the Old Testament. He was a pagan king, but he was still considered to be a leader who did the will of God, because he defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jewish people living in exile to return to the Promised Land. Part of the legend of Cyrus involves another great warrior by the name of Cagular, a little-known chieftain on Persia's southern border who somehow had Cyrus' number and was always a thorn in his side. Finally, Cyrus decided to be done with Cagular once and for all. He sent a huge Persian force to the southern border that surrounded Cagular, captured him, and brought him back to Cyrus' palace for trial.

On the day of the trial, Cagular and his entire family were brought into the judgment chamber. As the impressive family stood before the throne, Cyrus was instantly impressed

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/hound/full-text/chapter-13/>

by all of them. It moved him to an odd level of generosity. "What would you do if I decided to spare your life?" the emperor asked.

"Your majesty," Cagular replied, "if you spared my life, I would return home and remain your obedient servant as long as I live."

"What would you do if I spared the lives of your children?"

"If you spared the lives of my children," Cagular answered, "I would gather my scattered army, place your banner above them, and lead them to victory in your name."

Then Cyrus asked, "What would you do if I spared the life of your wife?"

"Your majesty," the answer came, "if you spared the life of my wife, I would die for you."

Cyrus was so moved by the answers that he spared all four lives and designated Cagular as provincial governor of his home country.

On the trip home, an overjoyed Cagular gushed to his wife, "Did you notice the marble entrance of the emperor's palace? The colors that matched so beautifully and the elegant statues everywhere?"

"I did not notice those things," the wife admitted.

"Did you see the tapestries on the wall as we entered the throne room? The figures were so natural I thought they were alive, and the colors shone like an evening sunset!"

"I'm sorry, but I did not notice the tapestries," she replied.

"Surely you noticed the exquisite golden throne on which the emperor sat?" Cagular said.

"I did not notice," she replied.

Exasperated and a little confused, Cagular asked, "Well, what did you see as we were led to the emperor on our day of judgment?"

"All I beheld," his wife answered, "was the face of the man who said he would die for me."

How do we know the love of God? We know that love because, in Christ, we are given a complete and final portrait of love -- an image not only of what love looks like and feels like, but what love *does*. Real love – God's love -- is willing to give everything for us. As Paul says in Romans, it is rare that someone is willing to die even for a righteous person, or a good person. But God takes it so much higher: "*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*"<sup>2</sup> We may have trouble defining love, but we know love when we see it, and we see it in this way – we see it in the face of the One who would die for us.

How do we know when it's love? "*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.*"  
**Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 5:6-8.