

God So Loved

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God loves us!

There is a sinking feeling of total inadequacy as I come to this verse of Scripture. I am not able to communicate to you the vastness of the love of God, the intensity of that love, the overwhelming goodness of our God. Yet as you and I move into this new age in which a crisis looms as a cyclonic cloud in every direction, we need to know that God loves us. I pray that the Spirit of God will make this real to you; I am dependent upon Him.

In the original language, the Greek text, it reads like this:

For so loved God the world that He gave the Son, the only begotten one, in order that anyone believing into Him might not perish but have life everlasting.

The words are simple. In fact, as you read through the entire Gospel of John you will find that most of the words are monosyllabic. The words are so simple that a child can read them but so profound that I question if any one of us knows what they mean.

The emphasis is upon love. Notice in the Greek rendering that it reads, “loved God the world.” In Greek sentence structure the important part of the sentence is placed first. In this verse actually *God* is not the important word, and *world* is not the important word; the important word is *loved*. The emphasis is upon the love of God.

The Imperative of Love

These words are a part of an interview that Nicodemus had with our Lord one night. They sum up all that previously had been covered in the conversation. Before we come to the words of our text, let us look at the two verses that immediately precede it, as they are very important to the understanding of it.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:14, 15)

Notice that the Lord Jesus is calling Nicodemus’s attention to something with which he is very familiar—the account in the Old Testament of the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. He said, “Even so *must* the Son of Man be lifted up.” The *must* corresponds to the *must* that our Lord gave to Nicodemus at the very beginning of their conversation. He said, “You must be born again,” and since you *must* be born again, then the Son of Man *must* be lifted up. The necessity of being born again makes imperative the lifting up of the Christ on the Cross. It is a divine compulsion.

Our Lord threw open the doors of heaven that night for Nicodemus (and for us), and we behold the King of Glory—not enthroned and crowned, but on a cross. It is an arresting fact that Christ revealed His death on the cross to Nicodemus on His first trip to Jerusalem, at the very beginning of His ministry. He did not reveal this to His own disciples until three years later, six months before He went to the Cross.

And, by the way, this is the answer to those who say that the Lord Jesus was caught in Jerusalem between the upper millstone of Roman power and the nether millstone of religious cupidity and died as a helpless victim. This obviously is not true since three years before, here in Jerusalem, He had told Nicodemus of His approaching death on the cross. If He had wanted to

escape it, He could have stepped over into the East, into the Orient—where there were teeming millions in that day—and could have disappeared so that Rome and the religious rulers could never have touched Him. But that was not His thought, for He says here that He would be lifted up because *God loved the world*.

“Love” Is an Interesting Word

Love, on which the emphasis is placed, is an interesting word. In the Greek language there are three words that are translated into the English by the one word *love*. This reveals how barren the English language is. Hollywood would give a million dollars if it had another word for *love*. But the Greeks had three words for it. One was *eros*, from which we get our word *erotic*, that is, sensual love. This is never used in the New Testament. Then there is the word *phileo*, which does appear in the New Testament, and its highest meaning is “friendship.” It means, “I like you,” and it means no more. Obviously this is not the word used here, because you cannot say that God so *liked* the world! The other word, the word used in John 3:16, is *agapao*, which is love in the highest degree. *Agapao* is an attribute of God; it is divine love, not human love. It is love lifted to a high, noble, supernatural plane. God loved!

The “world” means the ordered world in which we live. It means the world of mankind, and it means all men—it is not limited to the elect only; it is not limited to the good, it is not limited to any particular race—it encompasses the totality of the human race, from Adam right down to the present generation. Those who maintain that God loved only certain ones, only the elect, are not giving us the language of the Bible. God says that He loves all of the human family. No one is excluded.

Another great statement in this verse is “He gave.” His love was revealed in the fact that He gave. Again there is the thought of totality; it was a total gift. It does not say that God gave His Son to die, although this is included, but it means more than that. It means that Christ’s coming into the world about two thousand years ago—beginning with His virgin birth and ending with His death, His resurrection and ascension into heaven, even His present ministry today and His coming again in the future— is God’s gift.

A great deal has been made of the words “only begotten Son.” In the original language it does not say that God gave *His* only begotten Son—He did not beget Him. Rather, it is *the Son the only begotten one*, which is His title.

John begins his Gospel by presenting Jesus Christ as the eternal Word. Of Him he writes:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. (John 1:1–3)

In the beginning *was* the Word, not *is* the Word. It was not in the beginning that the Word started out or was begotten. “Was” is a durative imperfect, meaning continued action. It means that the Word *was* in the beginning. You see, we are dealing with the God of eternity. At the time of Creation “all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” No matter how far back you want to go, billions of years *before* Creation, the Son comes out of eternity to meet you. He was already there when the beginning was. The eternal Son, the Creator of all things, took upon Himself human flesh.

“The only begotten” is unique; it means that the Lord Jesus is unique. It was the same in the Old Testament. For instance, in Psalm 22:20 “My darling” or “precious” is “My only one.” He was the only one in His birth—only He is virgin born. He was the only one in the life that He lived—only He lived a perfect life. It is only of Christ that the Father has been able to say, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” He never has said that about you, and He never has said that about me— He could not say it—but He did say it of Christ. He is the only one who could die for the sins of the world. He is the only one who is back from the dead in a glorified body. He is today the only hope of the world, the only begotten Son.

Putting the Yardstick on “So”

Let’s come back to our little word *so*. God *so* loved. How much is that? Let me give a little different translation of it to widen out that word: “God loved to such an astounding and astonishing degree.” Now we are faced with a problem. Is there some way to bring this word *so* out of heaven and reduce it to the terminology of earth? Can we bring this little word down here and give it an incarnation so we can look at it? How much did God love the world?

Paul tells the Ephesian Christians that he prays this for them:

[That you] *may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* (Ephesians 3:18, 19)

Can we measure the love of God? Can we put down the yardstick on that little word *so* and determine the breadth of it and the length of it and the depth of it and the height of it? At this point I really feel inadequate. How can mere man measure the love of God?

Wide as “Whosoever”

Let us first try to comprehend the breadth of the love of God. How wide is His love? God’s arms encompass the entire world so that all are included. And when it says that He loves all, it means that He loves each one—He loves *you*. And I frankly feel that John 3:16 is the most personal verse in the Bible; it is personal to you, and it is personal to me. It is more personal than if it said, “God so loved Vernon McGee.” I’ll tell you why.

Several years ago I was conducting meetings in a church in Seattle. One morning at the hotel where I was staying, I received a telephone call from a woman who began speaking as if she knew me very well, “Pastor McGee, how are you?”

“Fine.”

“How is Annie?”

“Annie?” I repeated, “I don’t know Annie.”

“Oh, yes, your wife.”

“No,” I countered, “you are wrong. I do not have a wife named Annie.”

Suspiciously she probed, “Aren’t you Vernon McGee?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you a preacher?”

“Yes.”

“Were you not,” she asked distrustfully, “pastor of a certain Methodist church back in Iowa?” I said, “No ma’am. I never have been off the train in traveling through Iowa.”

Puzzled, she continued, “Well, I knew a Vernon McGee who was a Methodist preacher, and he was my pastor back in Iowa.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know there was another one loose.”

Now you know the reason I am glad that John 3:16 does not read, “God so loved Vernon McGee,” because it might mean that other fellow and not me at all. But when it says, “God so loved the world,” that means me and it means you.

God loves the world. We have heard this so much it is commonplace. But let me ask you: How could He love this reeking world today with all of its sin, its rebellion, its meanness, its ugliness, and its sordidness? Oh, He might love some folk who are lovely and cultured and educated. But can He love those savages in Africa who ate the livers of their captives? Yes, He loves them exactly as much as He loves you. God loves the meanest, lowest man you can think of as much as He loves you—just as much. If you somehow think that you are one of God’s little pets and that He has placed His love on you and your kind and upon no one else, you are wrong. God loves the world. God made a level place at the Cross, which is the only place where you have real integration. None is righteous there; all have sinned. God declares all to be sinners that He might have grace upon all.

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

God has His arms outstretched to a gainsaying, lost, rebellious world. They spat in His face when He was here, and they are still spitting in His face today. Yet He says, “I love them.”

A young fellow in my Southland was asked, when he was being examined for church membership, “How did you get saved?” He answered, “I did my part, and God did His part.” They thought they had found a flaw in his theology and probed, “What was your part, and what was God’s part?” He answered, “My part was the sinnin’ and His part was the savin’. I done run from Him as fast as these sinful legs and this sinful, rebellious heart could carry me, and He done took out after me ’til He done run me down.” And, my friend, that is the only way any of us is saved. God has pursued us because He loves us.

Years ago in England when the Quaker movement was new—and oh, what a warm movement that was at the beginning—Miles Halhead, a young married preacher, went everywhere with the message of Christ. Finally his wife in vexation exclaimed, “Would God I had married a drunkard that I might find him in the alehouse, but now I cannot tell where to find him—he goes everywhere preaching the gospel!” He had the love of Christ in his heart because God loves everybody. There is no exception. Oh, the breadth of the love of God!

Length by Demonstration

What about the length of God’s love? God so loved that He gave. The test of love is to what length it will go. Love is not love which will not die or make sacrifices often more bitter and cruel than death. I always suspected that boy who sent a note over to his girl:

I love you. I would climb the highest mountain for you. I would swim the deepest river for you. I would go through snow and hail for you. P. S. If it does not rain Wednesday night, I’ll be over to see you.

May I say to you, we *demonstrate* our love. And God has demonstrated His love by the extent to which He has gone—He gave His Son. Do you want to know how much God loves you? Do you want to know the length to which He has gone? Listen to this:

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6–8)

God commends or proves His own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. What a staggering demonstration of His love!

God is on the giving end. He is not asking one thing from man. I am afraid we preachers give the wrong impression that God is asking this world for something. He asks nothing from this world! He said, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness” (Psalm 50:12). If He wanted gold, would He ask us for the puny amount we have at Fort Knox today? Why, the gold and the silver are His, and the cattle on a thousand hills. God says in effect, “I do not want anything from you, but I would like to *give* you something: eternal life in Christ Jesus.” God so loved the world that He gave, and He gave His only begotten Son. He gave Him not only at Bethlehem, not only in a perfect life, not only to teach, not only to reveal God, but He gave Him to die upon the cross for the sins of the world. My friend, what else can you ask Him to do for you? Can you think of anything more that God could do for you, a sinner, than to give His Son to die for you that He might save you?

*Love ever gives,
Forgives
Outlives,
And ever stands
With open hands.
And while it lives,
It gives.
For this is love’s prerogative:
To give and give and give.*

I was interested in an article that appeared in a metropolitan newspaper some time ago. There was a picture of a mother and son with the caption “Father Gives Life for Son”:

Sidney Lawrence underwent a cross transfusion for his son, Robert ... in which blood of father and son mingled. The father’s kidney worked for both, allowing the son’s diseased kidney to recuperate. But the father was sensitive to proteins in his son’s blood, causing his death. That man did not have to stand up and say, “I love my son.” He proved it when he gave his life for his boy. There is many a father who would do that. But, my friend, God has gone far beyond that. He has given His *Son* to die for *you*. Do you want to ask Him to do something else? He has gone the very length of love.

Deep as Hell

Now let us attempt to ascertain the depth of God's love: "That whoever believes in Him *should not perish.*" I don't want to be unloving and unkind to you, but someone needs to speak plainly. We are hell-doomed and hell-deserving sinners, every one of us. A great many folk think that mankind is on trial, that God wants to see if we will do better or not. This is not so. Notice the verses that follow our text:

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:17, 18)

"He who believes in Him is not condemned." Well, suppose he does not believe in Him? He is already condemned. Why? Because mankind today is not a prisoner at the bar awaiting trial to see whether he is guilty or not. Mankind today is a prisoner inside the prison of this world, in sin, and is asked if he will accept a pardon. Someone says, "You don't mean to tell me that nice, sweet Mrs. So-and-So is lost!" My friend, she is a sinner in rebellion against God; she has no capacity for God; she would wreck heaven if she were permitted there without a new nature. "Well," someone asks, "what about the heathen who have never heard of Christ?" They are lost; *we are all born lost!* You and I are members of a lost race, a doomed race, and what Christ did was to come into this prison and say to men, "Do you want a pardon? I'll pay your penalty. I'll stay here and go through this hell for you."

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:17)

He has done this because He loves you. God asks, "Why will you die?" The Lord Jesus says, "You will not come to Me, that you might have life."

Oh, the lovely thing that is said of the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke's Gospel, "He entered and passed through Jericho." Why? Because in Jericho there lived the chief of the publicans, a base sinner, a crook, and our Lord was going there to save him. He entered and passed through; He did not stay there. He did not even spend the night. He was there only long enough to win Zacchaeus. You can widen that out. Our Lord entered and passed through this world—John's Gospel gives the tremendous movement—Jesus said, "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father" (John 16:28). He entered and passed through this world. Why? Because you were here and He wanted to save you. Don't tell me that He did not die for you; He died for *you*. He did this that you might not perish.

Immeasurable Height

What about the height of the love of God? "They shall have *everlasting life!*" The height is infinite. May I be personal again? I am going to heaven someday. You may think, "Well, you must be very good." On the contrary, I am not very good. I am going to heaven someday because Christ died for me and I have trusted Him.

We have not scaled the heights; we have not plumbed the depths of the love of God; we have not widened this out as it should be. Paul was accurate when he said, “To know the love of Christ that *passes knowledge*.” I am not able to measure the vastness or the intensity or the overwhelming goodness of God. If I could, it would break your heart, and it would break mine if I fully knew. I can only say that God loves you.

These are days in which a great many people are called to go through dark nights and deep waters. When you face problems and face them alone, you need to know that God loves you. Whoever you are, wherever you are, God loves you, and His love is revealed in Christ on the Cross. And, my friend, you will find it only there. It is not on the mountaintops or on the surging sea; it is not in babbling brooks or majestic redwood trees—you will not find it anywhere in nature. The Bible makes this crystal clear. “God so loved the world that He gave redwood trees and babbling brooks”? No, sir! “God *so* loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”