

June 20, 2010

THE DEPTH OF GOD'S LOVE

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

There are some scriptures that have become so familiar, so significant, so etched into our memories that the mere mention of their place in Scripture brings them to our mind and fills us with their power and meaning.

For example, all I have to say is “The 23rd Psalm,” and immediately, we think of God as our shepherd, who leads us into green pastures and beside still waters, and sees us through the valley of the shadow of death. Or when we hear 1 Corinthians 13, we think of the love chapter and the characteristics of love and those powerful closing words: “Faith, hope, and love abide.....and the greatest of these is love.”

But perhaps the most memorable of all for us is John 3:16, which many people have called the gospel in summary, the gospel in a nutshell: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

And you know, sometimes with something that is so familiar to us, if we are not careful we can miss the power and the meaning. So it is with John 3:16.

This morning we are going to take a look at the depth of God's love. God's love is unconditional and incomprehensible. Let me suggest a description that may help us understand the depth of this love and put it into perspective. God's love is the kind of love that will not let us go, that will not let us down, and that will not let us off. Let's take a look at each of these.

FIRST OF ALL, GOD'S LOVE WILL NOT LET US GO. One of the major themes of the Bible is what we call the divine initiative. Life and salvation begin with God, not us. This means that God reaches out to us and seeks us out in love and grace.

The concept of the seeking God is unique to the Judeo-Christian faith. It is not found in any other religion or faith. From the beginning to the end, the Bible is the story of the God who seeks his people and despite their unresponsiveness and unfaithfulness, does not give up on them. God will not let them go. God pursued Israel and pursues us with the indestructible love of a parent. In the closing of the 23rd Psalm, the phrase “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of

my life” can also be correctly translated, “Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life.” God with his goodness and mercy does not trail behind us, but rather he pursues us and chases us down.

The psalmist also wrote: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Psalm 139:7-8). The hymn writer describes God as the “love that will not let me go.”

In Luke 15, Jesus described God as a seeking shepherd, a searching woman, and a waiting father. Francis Thompson, in his poem describing his experience with God, called God “The Hound of Heaven.” God does not give up on us even if everyone else does and even if we give up on ourselves. God’s love will not let us go!

SECOND, GOD’S LOVE WILL NOT LET US DOWN. The second great theme in the Bible is the dependability of God’s love. You can count on it. You can bet your very life on it. This great characteristic of God is described in the Old Testament by the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is one of the primary words in the Old Testament used to describe God, and this fascinating word is a forerunner of the New Testament’s *agape* and *grace*. *Hesed* is translated primarily as “steadfast love.” It also has connotations of mercy and kindness, but it essentially means God’s amazing faithfulness and love. It means that God keeps his promises. It means that we can trust and depend on God and his love. God’s love will not let us down. Even in a world of mistrust and broken trust, even when we are unfaithful and undependable, God is dependable and trustworthy. Paul says in Romans that nothing “in all creation.....will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39).

In 1989 an earthquake hit Armenia and killed over 30,000 people. One of the areas that was hit especially hard by the earthquake contained an elementary school. After the tremors had ceased, a father of one of the students raced to the school to see about his son. When he arrived on the scene, he was stunned to find that the building had been leveled. Looking up at the mass of stones and rubble, he remembered a promise he had made to his little boy. He had told him, “No matter what happens, I’ll always be there for you.”

Remembering his promise, he found the area closest to his son’s room and began to pull back the rocks. Others had also come and said to him, “It’s too late! You know they are dead; you can’t help.” Even a policeman urged him to give up.

But he refused. For eight hours, then sixteen, then thirty-two, then thirty-six he continued to dig through the rubble. His hands were raw and his energy was gone, but he refused to quit.

Finally, after thirty-eight wrenching hours, he pulled back a boulder and heard voices and recognized his son's among them. He called his boy's name, "Arman! Arman!" A voice answered him, "Dad, it's me!" Then the boy said, "I told the other kids not to worry. I told them if you were alive, you'd save me, and when you saved me they'd be saved too. Because you promised, 'No matter what, I'll always be there for you.' I knew you would never give up or let me down."

We never know when life is going to blindside us. Sometimes circumstances in life make us feel as if we have been hit by an emotional earthquake and have been buried beneath a rubble of distress, hurt, and disappointment. We feel helpless, hopeless, and alone, but we are not. For God will not let us down. God has not forgotten his greatest promise: "I will be with you." And his presence is power and hope. God's love will not let us down.

Perhaps Jesus put it best in John 16:33: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." And, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). God's love will not let us down. We can count on it.

THIRD AND FINALLY, GOD WILL NOT LET US OFF. God's love holds us accountable for the gifts, talents, and grace we have received. The Bible always holds grace and accountability in balance. We often do not. We are like the woman who wanted her husband's two favorite songs played at his funeral. They were "Amazing Grace" and "I Did It My Way." Often we are like that man. We want God's amazing grace, but we want to be in control and do it our way. But we can't have it that way. God's love won't let us go and won't let us down, but it also will not let us off.

We are saved to serve. We are loved to love. We are blessed to be a blessing. Love calls for commitment, for self-sacrifice, for the giving of ourselves. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we must not forget that the father lets the prodigal in again, but does not let him off; he is given the family ring and is responsible to live as a son of the father, with duties and responsibilities. God accepts us as we are but seeks to make us what we can be.

You know God must be hurt and disappointed as he looks down on our world and our lives and sees how competitive we are with one another. God sees our world fighting and at war, and that is not what pleases him. He wants us to live in harmony, peace, and love.

Like that of a good father, God's love is unconditional, but it calls for our best. We are to love God with all that we are, but we also are to love our neighbors as ourselves and minister to the least of our brothers and sisters. God's love will not let us off.

E. V. Hill was a longtime pastor of a large African American congregation in the Watts area of Los Angeles and a friend of Billy Graham. During the burnings, lootings, and community riots that rocked the Watts area in the 1960s, Dr. Hill spoke out against this kind of violence and protest. He chastised those in his community who destroyed property and stole from the area's merchants.

Hill's stance and outspoken sermons brought threats to him and his church. As the tension and threats grew in the community, one evening he received a phone call at his home. His wife noticed how serious and solemn he became during and after the call. She asked him about it, but he said, "It was nothing." She knew better and pressed him to tell her what it was all about. "It was a threat, wasn't it?" she asked. Finally, he told her. He said, "They have threatened to blow up our car with me in it." They held each other and cried. They knew that there was no way that they could guard their car and protect it 24 hours a day. That night they went to bed and held each other until finally they fell asleep.

The next morning, when Dr. Hill awoke, he noticed that his wife was not in bed, she was already up. That was not unusual, but when he went into the kitchen, she was not there, nor anywhere else in the house. He began to become alarmed, and even more so when he noticed that the car was gone from the carport. But before he could call the police, his wife came walking in the back door.

"Where have you been?" he asked. She said, "I drove the car around the block to make sure it would be safe for you to drive to work this morning." When Dr. Hill tells this story, he says, "I never have to wonder or ask if my wife loves me." He had seen her love in action.

Friends, we need not wonder about God's love for us. We have seen it in action. We need only to look to Jesus, we need only look at the cross and know that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. That's God's love: a love

-5-

that will not let us go, a love that will not let us down, and a love that will not let us off. Thanks be to God for his steadfast love!!

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