

The Saving Love Of God

by Edward Fudge

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Such a simple sentence cries out for elaboration, which Jesus provides three chapters later in John 6. There, as God fed Israel with manna in the wilderness, so Jesus feeds more than 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch. He follows this sign with a sermon, the discourse explaining the deed. Presenting himself as the true bread from heaven, Jesus elaborates on God's love and its results.

"Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst"

"All that the Father gives me shall come to me; and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me, and this is the will of Him who sent me, that of all that He has given me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in him, may have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day"

"No one can come to me, unless the father who sent me, draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught of God.' Every one who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to me"

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believe has eternal life"

As we reflect on these words, turning them over in our minds, God's love sparkles like a many-faceted jewel. Look with me at six aspects which Jesus mentions here.

God's love is passionate.

God so loved that he gave his only begotten Son. Even more, God loved us first. Our love to him can never be more than a response (1 John 4:9-10). God is the Great Initiator - we can never get "one up" on him. The most we can ever do is to love God in return. "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us!" John later writes, challenging our imagination even as he fills our hearts (1 John 3:1).

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God's love is personal.

God so loved the world. Not merely Jews - or males - or freemen. Not just the wealthy, or pious, or wise. He loved individual women and men of every tribe and dialect, across every ethnic group and political boundary. Yet Scripture does not teach universalism. Not all sinners will be saved. Nevertheless, we may be quite sure that "the world" will be thoroughly represented in glory.

The marvel is that a love so far-reaching is not diluted in the process. Indeed, God's love is intensely personal toward all whom it saves. "All that the Father gives me shall come to me," Jesus promises (John 6:37). "This is the Father's will," he continues, "that of all that he has given me I lose nothing" (6:39; see John 10:14, 26-28; 17:2, 24). We view the larger, corporate picture and proclaim with Paul, "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25).

But we freely join the same apostle in making that truth our own: "Christ loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Jesus did not come to save a faceless mass of sinners. He died to redeem specific human beings, who were already his by divine inheritance (Psalms 2:8; Ephesians 1:18).

There is no reason for controversy here, since the "whosoever wills" and the "elect" are really one and the same. Christians who stress human responsibility view God's grace in time, while those who emphasize divine sovereignty see it flowing out from eternity. The first group wants to be sure that God is not blamed for the lost. The second group wishes to ensure that God alone is credited for the saved. We may happily rejoice in the both/and on this point, for Scripture certainly makes both points clear. We, too, must make it plain that sinners are truly responsible for the "No" to God's grace, while their "Yes" is itself evidence that divine grace is at work (Psalms 110:3; Romans 9:16; Philippians 2:13).

God's love is powerful.

Christ's work will have its intended effect. Because God so loved and gave, whoever believes will have eternal life. "He shall see his offspring," the messianic prophet foretold; "the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hands" (Isaiah 53:10). And the Father wills that not one of those whom he gave to Jesus will perish (John 6:39).

When he talked about God's powerful love, Jesus chose superlatives, Unequivocal language. Unqualified words that left no room for exceptions. "All that the Father gives me shall come to me," Jesus boldly declared (John 6:37). And little wonder as we keep listening, for God himself will be their teacher, just as Jeremiah had foretold (John 6:44-45; Jeremiah 31:34). Jesus fearlessly states what no mere man could dare say, making two statements from opposite perspectives, neither allowing room for any exception. "No one can come to me," the Lord exclaims, "unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). But "every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" (John 6:45).

Here is no room for error, for miscalculation, for loss. Jesus drives a peg from both sides, anchoring our hope firmly in the infallible sovereignty of God himself. How we should praise the Father, who loves us so powerfully and effectively!

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God's love is perpetual.

The God who gave his only Son will not forsake us halfway to heaven. His plan has always been

that the believer "should not perish," and God always accomplishes what he sets out to do. On this we have Jesus' own promise: "This is the will of him who sent me, that of all that he has given me, I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day" (John 6:39). The same God who calls us will confirm us to the end (1 Corinthians 1:8-9). He began a good work in us and he will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6). Because God is faithful, we can be confident. Indeed, God's faithfulness is the only basis we ever have to be confident of our salvation. The cross shows us God's deepest heart toward us sinners. And the resurrection shows us God's final verdict on the saving work Jesus accomplishes there. These gospel facts shine like eternal beacons through the darkness of human weakness and doubt. They remind us, every day, that God will never change his mind about what Jesus has accomplished, and that he will never change his love toward those whom Jesus there purchased for himself.

God's love is profuse.

As the overwhelming flood of divine love breaks over us, it washes away every pebble of human ability, sufficiency, or merit. Jesus does not save the deserving, but sinners. He gave himself for the helpless, not the adequate. He died for his enemies, not his associates (Romans 5:6-10). On the cross Jesus removed our sin, made our propitiation, and accomplished our redemption.

Because Jesus fully completed the saving work, in his own perfect doing and dying, nothing we ever perform, experience, or accomplish is any part of the work which sets us right with God. That work was finished almost 2,000 years ago - outside of us, but for us - by the eternal God who, for some 12,000 days, came to dwell among us as one of us. All we can ever do regarding the saving work is to believe it or reject it. By God's grace we can accept it, trust in it, rely on it, and commit ourselves to it - for the rest of our time here and for all eternity.

"Whoever believes" can have eternal life. We might not have any power and we might not have any answers. But the weakest and most unlearned sinner can have salvation and eternal life through trusting the Son of God, as Jesus tells us repeatedly and underscores with this double "Amen" (John 3:16; 6:40, 47). "Surely we must contribute something," our flesh cries out. But no - "this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:28-29). We can bring nothing to God's feast. The table is spread already and the banquet is free for all who will come!

God's love is perilous.

Let us make no mistake here. Jesus came to save, not to condemn (John 3:17). Yet, as someone has observed, the purpose of the sun is not to cast shadows - but it does! The wrath of God is the shadow cast by his love. The person who knowingly and persistently rejects God's boundless love in Jesus Christ does not simply miss an opportunity or turn down a good deal. That one despises and insults the supreme sacrifice of infinite love. "This is the condemnation," John records, "that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light" (John 3:19).

This truth flows from the very nature of things. Indeed, "all things came into being" through the Word who became flesh (John 1:2). "In him was life" (John 1:3). "You have no life in yourselves" (John 6:53). It must follow, therefore, as John later reminds his believing community, that "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:11-12).

What love the Father has shown us sinners! Passionate, yet personal. Powerful and perpetual. But also perilous. At such saying, many of Jesus' original hearers turned and walked away. May we

instead, like Peter, have grace to say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? you have the words of eternal life" (John 6:66).

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