

True Love!
John 3: 14-21

Reading the Bible can be difficult at times, especially for those who are casually acquainted with it. It is a book like no other. It is the best-selling book of all time, a book of history, a book of poetry, a book of science, and most importantly the autobiography of God. It is a book God wrote more than two thousand years ago to tell humanity who He is, who we are, and how we can have a relationship with Him. The Bible is not a book in the singular sense of the word, but an anthology of 66 books, woven together like a tapestry with a common thread. That thread is not a piece of string or yarn, but the Son of God, the One we know to be Jesus Christ. From Genesis to Revelation, with great diversity and great unity, God's plan for the redemption and restoration of fallen humanity is systematically revealed within its pages, and Jesus is the One who ties each one together. In very basic terms, the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament, Genesis through Malachi, tells of things that happened before Jesus was born. The remainder is the New Testament, the record of things that took place after Jesus came to earth as the Christchild. Both testaments also contain prophetic books, describing events that will take place at a future place and time, including the end of the world as we know it.

If you one of those who are not sure where to turn first, avoid the temptation to begin with prophecies of the Bible. We will not be able to believe the prophecies of the Bible until we believe the Jesus of the Bible. Turn instead to the Gospel of John. With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it was written by the Apostle John, one of Jesus's dearest and closest followers. His two-fold purpose for writing it is found near the end of his letter in chapter 20: 30-31: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." John's gospel is the gospel of faith, belief, and eternal life. It is also the gospel of love.

Writing to the church at Rome, the apostle Paul echoes John's words. Romans 10:17 Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Reading or hearing the words of Jesus, believing and applying the words of Jesus, brings life-saving faith in Jesus. Unless we suffer from loss of sight or sound, reading and hearing the words of Scripture has never been easier. Today, many times without having to spend a penny, we can choose from hundreds of translations and versions that will allow us to see and hear God's word in a relevant and meaningful way. Many are written for those with nothing more than an elementary school education.

By grace, God offers each of us all that we need to come to saving faith in His Son Jesus. He has given us His holy spirit and His holy word, the Bible. Today the challenge is not seeing or hearing His words, but believing, interpreting, and applying those words of Jesus to our lives. Perhaps the most well-known of His words is John 3:16. Literally millions of people have read it, heard it, memorized it and believed it, including your pastor. I first saw a reference to it on a poster while watching a Steelers game on television as a young adult. As a result, I purchased a Bible and looked it up. I didn't know then what it meant, but I did know God was asking me to find out. Forty years later, I still am learning how much it truly means.

If you ever need to describe God's plan for the redemption and restoration of fallen humanity in 25 words or less, just remember John 3:16. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. At first glance, it seems to be a mystery. Why would the God of the universe, the God so powerful that He spoke creation into existence, the God that created the detailed and intricate workings of the human body and breathed it into life; why would that God willingly give up a part of Himself, the best part, the part that was most dear and precious, so that lost people, people who once loved darkness and rebelled against Him, people like you and I, be reconciled to Him? The words of the psalmist sum up that question well. *"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you set in place—what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?"* Why does God love us so?

Like the Lord's Table, it is a holy mystery. Even so, God has given us holy clues to help us understand and believe that He loves us, and the Scriptures are filled with them. Speaking to the ancient Israelites, God plainly says this through the prophet Jeremiah in 31:3. *I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.* Everlasting means without end. I loved you yesterday, I love you today and I'll love you tomorrow and the day after that. And then Lamentations 3:22-23.

Yes, those words were directed to the Israelites, but they also apply to us. As Gentile believers, we have been adopted into God's family, grafted into the tree of life. It is part of the mystery. Ephesians 3:6.

As we learned a few weeks ago, the loving promise God made to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Why does God love us? It is a mystery, but one thing we can know is that God loves us because of who God is. With God, no one is unlovable. God loves the unlovable because God is love. It has nothing to do with who we are, what we say or what we do.

Which brings us back to the most beautiful absolute truth in all the Scriptures. Ironically, it is also one of the best known. John 3:16. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in Him won't perish but will have eternal life. Everyone! It is an exact opposite of "no one". The word of God is for the people of God and the promise of John 3:16 is absolutely true, no if, ands or buts allowed. It is an absolute truth that is only discovered by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures, and it is a clue to solving the mystery of why God loves us so. The Scriptures can help us in our day to day lives to discern the things that are true and faithful and the things that are not. They illuminate the things that bring light and joy into the world while casting a shadow over the things that bring darkness and despair.

God sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world so that the world might be saved rather than condemned. He also sent His Holy Spirit to help us to recognize and believe that truth. If God didn't love us, He would have done neither and none of us would be here right now. To those that believe, Good Friday proves that the God of the Scriptures is true love. Because of His work on the cross, we know that Jesus is true love. What remains a mystery is why some are attracted to the light of the Gospel and reap the many fruits of spending time with Jesus there, while others will choose to remain in the darkness and believe it to be light.

Even so, God is always perfectly just, and God's ways are always perfectly just. Such a God deserves our love and attention. During this Lenten season and beyond, let us spend much time with Him in the Scriptures. It is there that we will discover or rediscover the exclusive, inclusive and absolute truth that Jesus loves us. It's exclusive in that belief in Jesus and Jesus alone, brings new life and an endless view of eternity. It's inclusive in that it doesn't matter where you have been or what you have done Jesus still loves you and offers a chance to start over with a new birth and a new life in Him. That is good news because it is true. Let us share that truth, share our faith and share our love with someone this week! Amen