

THE LOVE OF GOD

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 4, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Brother J. P. Sanders, who preached for the Hillsboro church for a period of some eight years, once told of standing near the small bed where his first child was sleeping. As he looked down upon his little boy, he found himself thinking, "I wish he could know just how much I love him." Of course, it was not possible for the child to know. Only when he was old enough to have children of his own would he know how much a parent loves a child.

We wonder just how many parents have felt this same desire. Surely there must have been many who have thought on one occasion or another, "I wish he could know just how much I love him." At this point we stop to wonder if God must not also feel this desire concerning his children. We are his offspring. We are made in his image. As he looks down upon our world, he, too, must sometimes wish that we might know how much he loves us.

We do know, as he often tells us in his inspired word, that he loves every man and every woman on earth. He loves young people, who are battling to survive amidst all the pressures of life. He loves old people, who are struggling with the problems of old age, sometimes in seclusion and alone. He loves the sick, the starving, the broken hearted, and those near death. He loves us when we are happy, or when we are sad. He loves all men, everywhere, and all the time.

God's love is an unconditional love. It does not depend upon the attitude of the recipient. He loves all men, no matter what their background or their circumstances. He loves us even when we do not return his love. While he was on the earth Christ admonished, "Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust ... Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:44-48).

There is a moving passage in Henry Drummond's famous sermon, "The Greatest Thing in the World," which reads, "Edward Irving went to see a dying boy once, and when he entered the room he just put his hand on the sufferer's head, and said, 'My boy, God loves you,' and went away. And the boy started from his bed, and called out to the people in the house, 'God loves me! God loves me!' It changed that boy. The sense that God loved him overpowered him, melted him down, and began the creating of a new heart in him. And that is how the love of God melts down the unlovely heart in man., and begets in him the new creature, who is patient and humble and gentle and unselfish. And there is no other way to get it. There is no mystery about it. We love others, we love everybody, we love our enemies, because He first loved us."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning began one of her greatest sonnets with the lines, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways ... " For our purposes today I would change these words to read, "How does God love us? Let me count the ways ... "

The World About Us

God shows his love for us, first, in the creation of this wonderful world. about us. One of our favorite Psalms is the 19th, which begins with the lines, "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament showeth his handiwork." How true it is that the world of nature shows the glory and greatness of our God. We believe it also shows quite unmistakably that God loves man whom he made as his crowning work of creation.

A. Cressy Morrison, past President of the New York Academy of Science, wrote on pp. 94-95 of his book, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, "We have found that the world is in the right place, that the crust is adjusted to within ten feet, and that if the ocean were a few feet deeper we would have no oxygen or vegetation. We have found that the earth rotates in twenty-four hours and that were this revolution delayed, life would be impossible. If the speed of the earth around the sun were increased or decreased materially, this history of life, if any, would be entirely different.

"We find that the sun is the one among thousands which would make our sort of life possible on earth; its size, density, temperature, and the character of its rays all must be right, and are right. We find that the gases of the atmosphere are adjusted to each other and that a very slight change would be fatal. Considering the bulk of the earth, its place in space and the nicety of the adjustments, the chances of some of these adjustments occurring is in the order of one to a million, and the chances of all of them occurring cannot be calculated even in the billions. The existence of these facts cannot, therefore, be reconciled with any of the laws of chance. It is impossible then to escape the conclusion that the adjustments of nature to man are far more amazing than the adjustments of man to nature. A review of the wonders of nature demonstrates beyond question that there are design and purpose in it all. A program is being carried out in all its infinite detail by the Supreme Being we call God." Surely a world created with such precision is a demonstration of God's concern for the good of his children.

Lighter As It Freezes

Dr. Thomas David Parks, Research Chemist, in a paper entitled, "Plain Water Will Tell You the Story," wrote, "Water shows strong evidence of design. It covers about three-quarters of our planet, and is a wonderful shock absorber to changes in temperature. Water is the only substance which becomes lighter as it freezes. This is tremendously important to life. Because of it, ice floats instead of sinking to the bottom of lakes and rivers and gradually forming a solid mass. On the top of the water it forms a layer of insulation to maintain the water below at a temperature above freezing. Fish and other life are preserved and the ice melts rapidly in the spring.

"Water also has high surface tension which aids in plant growth by transplanting nutrients through the soil. It has a high dielectric constant which makes it the best solvent known and as such plays a vital role in the life processes of our bodies as a principle constituent of our blood. It has a high vapor pressure over a wide range of temperature and still remains liquid throughout the whole range needed for life. Personally, I have found my explanation of these marvels--a satisfying explanation--in relating nature's order to a Supreme Intelligence and its design to a Supreme Designer, and in it all, I see more than cold, rational planning--I see the concern and love of a Creator for His creatures." (From John C. Monsma's *The Evidence of God In An Expanding Universe*).

Long ago James told us, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning." (James 1:17). However, only the scientist can describe in detail how truly wonderful some of these gifts of nature are. God has given us sunshine, air, water, food, the means of providing clothing and shelter, the seasons, productivity of the earth, and the beauties of nature.

God Is Good

I am impressed by the way that our teachers in this congregation introduce our little folks to the truths of the Bible. After the period when these little ones stay in the nursery, our first organized class is for two year olds. In this class the approach is a very simple but a very wonderful one. A teacher will show a picture of puppies, or some other warm familiar scene to these small children. She will talk with them about the puppies, and then after a while when her children are deeply interested she will ask, "Who made the puppies?" Then she will say, "God made the puppies. Isn't God good?"

On another Sunday, she will show a picture of trees. They will talk together about trees, until they, too are very real to the children. Then she will ask, "Who made the trees?" Perhaps by this time one of the children will say, "God did." Then the teacher will add, "Isn't God good?" On still another Sunday the picture may be of cows grazing in a field. After talking about how cows give milk and how good milk is, the teacher asks, "Who made the cows?" They answer, "God did." Then, the conclusion, "Isn't God good?" And isn't this a wonderful way to introduce tiny children to the goodness of God? We only wish that we could always have in our minds and hearts the reality of how good God has been in his creation of the world about us. It would make such a great difference in the way we live, in the goals for which we strive, and in the final outcome of our lives.

Companionship

In counting the ways in which God has shown his love for us we certainly want to include his wonderful plan which introduces us into the world by bringing us into the warmth of a home. In the relationships of husband and wife, parents and children, children and parents, and in our relationships with friends, we feel the strength and support and security that comes from strong ties of life. Man's deepest craving is not for air, food, water, or any of these other necessities of life, vital though they may be, but rather for love. Fundamental to man's happiness and well-being is the ability to give and to receive love. Man may have all of the physical necessities of life, and yet he woefully unhappy, unless he has someone whom he respects from whom to receive love and to whom he may give his love. God made us so we have this deep yearning, and then provided a means whereby this love can be exercised in the home and family.

Redemption

Though our numbering of the ways in which God reveals his love for us must necessarily be quite limited in this brief discussion, we must not fail to mention his great love for man, as shown in providing a Savior. Even though man had rebelled against God, sinning in all manner of ways, God still loved man and provided a way of salvation from his sins. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16). "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8).

Then, Jesus told us of the wonderful world where he and the Father had prepared to live with us through eternity. Speaking of God the Father, Christ said, "He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain, anymore: the first things are passed away. And he that sitteth on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new ... I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son." (Rev. 21:4-7).

Conclusion

The apostle John in his first epistle wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (I John 4:7-11). One chapter later in I John 5:3, the apostle adds, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous."

One of my happiest memories is of vacations spent in Yosemite National Park in California. Each year that we visited the park we would go at some time during the vacation up to the top of the canyon walls and look down upon the valley below. There we could see the road leading to all parts of the park. We could see the little cars, people on bicycles and on horseback, and even those who were walking. There were the cabins, the tents, and the lodges. The entire valley stretched out below us as we looked down some 3500 feet from Observation Point.

From this vantage point we could see where each of the roads led. Some would wind around behind clumps of beautiful trees only to end at the dump heap, or at a maintenance shed, or at the back of some hotel. Other roads would lead to beautiful spots such as Mirror Lake, or Happy Isles, or one of the beautiful waterfalls. Down in the valley the roads were marked. Some had signs saying, "Dead End Road," others had signs pointing to some spot of scenic beauty. On the Valley floor it was not possible to see the destination, only the sign. From high above we could see why the signs had been placed.

Similarly, we believe God has placed some stop signs in life, warning us not to travel certain roads because they lead to a destination which would be hurtful to us. Other roads of life are marked with go signs because these lead to happiness and well-being. God's laws are not arbitrary, but are designed for our good, both here and hereafter. This is what John meant when he said, "His commandments are not grievous."

More than forty years ago I heard W. D. Campbell, from the city of Detroit, Michigan, in a series of sermons. As a child, I was deeply impressed by his preaching. Now after more than two score years I do not remember a single subject on which he preached during that meeting, nor do I remember what he looked like. I do remember, however, that he ended every sermon in that meeting with the words, "God first loved you. Love him back." Then he would repeat it, "God first loved you. Love him back." This made an indelible impression upon my heart.

If you feel the warmth of God's love, now is the time to let him know by returning his love. As you confess the name of the Lord and obey the Lord's simple commandments, you are letting God know that you do understand at least in part how much he has loved you. Will you come, as we stand and sing his invitation?