I John 4: 19 WE LOVE HIM, BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

J O H N

Friends, have you ever stopped to consider how really much God loves us? Have you ever seriously thought about the great price God had to pay in order to save us from our sins? Since God is just He could not wink an eye at transgressions of His holy Law. Sin could not go unpunished, could not be overlooked. And so it was that God, because He loved us so dearly, sent His only Son into the world to redeem the world. Here in the person of Jesus Christ was God making satisfaction to God for the sins of men. What tremendous LOVE for God laid on His shoulders the iniquity of us all. God punished His Son for everything that is evil and wrong in the world. Jesus Christ endured the wrath of God for every crime, every theft, every murder, every profane word, every dirty story, every unclean thought, every impure deed, all hatred, all envy, all strife, all greed, all malice, all lovelessness, all disharmony, all prejudice. Jesus Christ endured the curse of His Father in our stead, for our every sin, for anything and everything about us which is against the Will of Holy God and which is deserving of everlasting punishment in the agony of hell. Oh, what TREMENDOUS love God has bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Savior.

May God grant that as you and I once again contemplate the bitter sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ we may come to regognize God's great love more clearly and hold on to that cross of grace more tightly. The story of the Passion tells of the height of God's love and of the depth of man's depravity. It places each side by side in a contrast which is terrifying. What makes the story all the more tragic is the fact that practically every character in it, save only our Lord, demonstrates how terrible are the thoughts that proceed out of the heart of man and become the pattern of his behavior. There is Judas with his greed and betrayal; there is Peter with his overconfidence, boasting, and denial; the other disciples with their disloyalty and cowardice; Pilate with his fear and untruthfulness; Herod with his unbelief and intrigue; the Jews with their hatred and falsehood; the soldiers

with their brutality and slander. Then, like a breath of fresh air comes the chapter on the loving and faithful John. He does not play his part blamelessly; he does, however, play it more nobly than the others. In paintings of Christ and the Apostles John looks like his Lord. That is not a coincidence. If that faithful and courageous follower of our Lord were here tonight, this might be his story:

I, John, have a sermon to preach to you of the twentieth century. Before I do so, let me tell you about myself.

I was born on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, made famous by Christ. My first home was at Bethsaida, just east of where the Jordan rushed into the Sea of Galilee. My father's name was Zebedee and my mother's Salome.

From an early age my parents instructed me in the religion of the Old Testament. They did not wait for the Church to teach their child about God, as some of you do. We had a proverb in our day which said, "Only the vilest of men does not teach his child religion." Yours is a vile age, is it not?

My father was a master fisherman and taught my older brother James and me the way of the fish and the way of the sea. Fishing was to become my life's occupation. Many a night my brother and I rowed around the sea, tugging and pulling at the nets. My hands and my muscles became rugged and rough and hard. Many of the people of your age think of me as a sissy and effeminate. I was not! My brother and I later became known as the "sons of thunder." Hardened by our life at the sea, we could hold our own against anyone.

One day I met a man who impressed me greatly. You know him as John the Baptist. In all your world no man is like him. His character was like granite and when he thundered at you, "REPENT YE!" it was as though the book of your life had fallen open before God. ~~James and~~ I ~~were~~ was so taken up with this man that ~~we~~ I became his disciple. Yet always ~~we~~ I feared him and the more ~~we~~ I heard him preach in his rough, camel-hair mantle, the more ~~we~~ I felt the need for something to cover the ugly sins of ~~our~~ my life.

We were listening to John one time when some messengers of the Pharisees came and asked if he was the promised Messiah. He answered emphatically, "I am not

the Christ!" And then he added, "There standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." You could feel that no one understood exactly what he meant. The next day John suddenly pointed to a man and said as though it was the greatest moment in his life, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!"

He was pointing to Jesus of Nazareth. Andrew and I were so impressed by the soul-stirring words of John that we followed after the retreating figure of Christ. He waited for us and then asked kindly, "What seek ye?" Hesitantly we responded with another question, "Master, where dwellest thou?" He invited us to come along.

We spent several hours with Him that afternoon and evening and when we went to bed that night we felt in our inmost hearts that the long-cherished hope of our fathers had been fulfilled. This was truly the Christ, the Messiah!

How happy I was when later He came to me, as I was mending my nets, and asked me to follow Him. He meant far more to me than my business. And so, I left everything and followed Him. For more than two years I lived at His side. I saw Him heal the sick, calm the storm, raise the dead; I was with Him in the glory of the morning on the mountain and in the devotional quiet of the temple. Wherever we went, great multitudes crowded around Him. When you go to church today, you usually fill the back pews first until gradually you are forced to sit near the front. It was different in Christ's day. He could not keep the listeners back far enough. He even got into a boat once and taught the people from the sea, where they could not crowd about Him. When He preached, you could not help listening.

But Jesus and His message of salvation were not accepted by everyone. We had our scoffers, doubters, and self-righteous fools in our day the same as you have in yours. I wish you could have been there when Jesus shook His big, carpenter's hands at the scribes and pharisees and shouted: "Woe unto you, Scribes, Pharisees, Hypocrites!" I wish you could have seen Him single-handedly throw the money changers out of the temple. It was as though the wrath of God descended upon them.

Although our Lord despised all Godlessness and would not tolerate malicious and willful sinning, He held out open arms to all who confessed their sins and sought

forgiveness with humble and penitent hearts. I was to learn the difference between righteous wrath and patient forbearance, between holy indignation and real love. As we were traveling to Jerusalem for the last time before our Master's death, we came into a certain Samaritan village. The people of this village would not welcome us. Oh, how I boiled inside! I wanted to show them that they could not treat my Lord this way. Filled with resentment my brother James and I came to Jesus and asked, "Wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?" I can still hear the Lord's reply ringing in my ears: "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And so, we went on to another village.

All too soon, it seemed, the short years which I spent with the Lord were ended. I wish I could tell you everything that happened during those years. There is no time. I'll never forget the hopeless feeling which I and the other disciples had when He was taken away from us. Almost in a daze I was shuffled along to a little hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. I could not keep away. I had to look into His face once again. When I saw Him hanging there on the cross, it seemed as though the very bottom had fallen out of life. The women were sobbing softly when I joined them at the foot of the cross. It was so different from what we had expected. We could not speak. At last He raised His head and looked first at Mary, His mother, and then at me. To her He said gently, "Woman, behold thy son!" And then to me, "Behold thy mother!" I cannot describe the feelings which I had.

We were almost desperate with grief when Joseph and Nicodemus buried Him in a garden late that afternoon. I can talk about it without tears now. He rose again on Sunday morning. I saw Him again, not in shame but in glory. I saw Him rise majestically to His home in heaven.

I wish you could have stood with me at the foot of the cross. There would have swept over you, as it swept over me and over the malefactor and over the centurian, a glorious realization of God's boundless love for the world of sinful men. I refer to myself in my Gospel as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." That is the foundation of our Christian faith. There can be no faith without it. Here is

a thought which will give you comfort. Has the world forsaken you? God loves you. Does your future seem uncertain? God loves you. Do you understand how severly you have offended God? He still loves you. Write behind your name as I wrote behind mine and see what it does for you. John Smith, the man Jesus loves. Mary Jones, the woman Jesus loves. Jackie Brown, the child Jesus loves.

When you begin to see the great love God has for you, every fiber of your being will become gripped by its forceful significance. Love is contageous. You will respond in "an interlocking chain." If God loves you so infinitely, how can you help loving God? "We love Him because He first loved us."

When one experiences the forgiveness of sins through Christ Jesus, he cannot help but cling to God in love and sincere devotion. Love is courageous and knows no fear. It was my love for Christ which took me into the courtyard and to the foot of the cross. It was my love for Christ that moved me into a dangerous mission field; where in my zeal for telling others of the Savior, I was put into prison and finally exiled to the Island of Patmos. It was my love for Christ which enabled me to stand on trial and, together with Peter, in the face of dire threats speak out: "We cannot but speak of the things which we have seen and heard!" You too can be that loyal, that devoted, if you will love your Savior as I did. Loving Christ makes one forget himself and his own needs; it is fearless and courageous!

I used to think that the culmination of a man's strength lay in his power and might. I thought that the criterion of manliness lay in the power of a man's ~~strength~~ fist. But from the Savior I learned that it takes a much bigger man to love, for real love can only come from almighty God Himself. He taught me that it is more manly to turn the other cheek, to keep control of one's temper, to seek to help even one's enemies. I can still hear His words: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

The Persians were telling a legend in my day that sets forth in striking manner the difference between what the world of men is and what God wants it to be. This was the legend: A man finds himself in a great banquet hall, brilliantly lighted

and splendidly decorated. Many guests are seated at tables laden with a sumptuous and tempting meal. But no one is eating. You see, somebody has tied a stick to every arm so that no one can bend an elbow. The result is that while everyone can touch the food, no one can bring it to his mouth. In exasperation the guests have begun to quarrel and to hit and kill one another. The man leaves the hall, deeply distressed by what he has seen.

He finds himself suddenly in another banquet hall, as brilliantly lighted and as splendidly decorated as the first. There are as many guests and the food is the same. Again the arms of each guest have been tied in such a manner that everyone can touch the food, but no one can bring it to his mouth. Yet all are eating, happily and merrily. There is no strife. They have learned that while no one can feed himself, that they can all feed one another.

There you have the difference between the world as it is and as God wants it to be. Our world is a vast hall; decorated as only God can decorate; supplied with food and resources as only God can supply; guests numbering over three billion and able to live -- if they will but love God and one another -- happily and at peace. Instead they are hitting and killing one another, building up force and strength to conquer. And all because most of them are concerned chiefly with what each can get for himself.

Friends, LOVE is something which overcomes everything and leads you with others to the glory of heaven. I wrote five books of the New Testament. Have you read them? Why not begin tonight by reading the fourth chapter of my first epistle? The overall theme of everything I wrote might be expressed in that simple, four-lettered word LOVE. Paul expressed the meaning of love very well when he wrote: "Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

You have a hymn in your day which expresses this glorious truth of our Christian faith very well:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a tribute far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

That, friends, might be the words of John were he here tonight. May God grant each of you such a faith, such a powerful love, such courageous devotion to your Savior.

Amen.

St Paul's - Aberdeen
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