

## **The Complexity of Divine Love**

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Over the next few weeks I'm going to be talking to you on some subjects that are on my heart. Kind of a...a little bit of chain of things that the Lord has laid on my heart that basically come out of some of our most recent studies. It was a few weeks ago at a Sunday morning communion service that I gave a message on the atonement. It had a very good reaction, I think, at least so far all has been positive. But more than that, it had a very wide reaction. I had an awful lot of feedback to that message about the fact that Jesus Christ died a real death, an actual atonement was provided for all who would believe. Not a potential atonement, but an actual atonement that Jesus didn't die for everybody potentially, He died for His own specifically, and actuality. That is a view of the atonement that is historic, that is the New Testament view of the atonement, first of all, and has been held through the ages by those who rightly understood the New Testament.

Jesus died an actual death, paid an actual penalty for all who would believe. He died for His own people. He laid down His life, He said, for His sheep. He knows His sheep, He said in John 10, and His sheep know Him eventually. It is for them that He died.

Now this death that Jesus died is prompted by the love of God. "God so loved the world...that is humanity... that He gave His only Son." Obviously that love for humanity has a specific and particular application to those who believe. God loves all men in some ways, but He loves His own savingly.

You hear a lot of talk about the love of God, God loving the world, you'll sometimes hear people say God loves everyone unconditionally. People can get a little bit carried away with this notion that the Lord loves everyone on the planet the same way. Typically it is people who do not understand the limits of the atonement, the particularity of the atonement, specificity of the atonement, the actuality of the atonement who also don't understand the nature of how God loves. One way to understand it would be in a simple illustration. We basically are instructed in Matthew 5 by our Lord to love everybody, to love even our enemies. And this is an evidence that we are the sons of our Father, for even He loves His enemies. And, of course, all men born into this world are born His enemies.

And so, as believers we endeavor to be obedient to that command and to demonstrate that we are sons of our Father, that we bear some of the characteristics of our Father who is God, and we endeavor to love our enemies. That carries with it certain responses and certain obligations. But there is another kind of love all together that we have for believers. There is a kind of love within the family of God that takes on very different proportions and very different features. I suppose you could liken it

to the human realm where you are to love your neighbor and you endeavor to do that because its second commandment. But it's pretty hard to love your neighbor the same way you love your own family. I think we understand that. I think we understand that there's a kind of love that we give to strangers and neighbors and there's another kind of love with different proportions and different dimensions and different responses that we give to our family.

And then moving back through our little trio of thinking, we also have a love for the enemies of the cross and the enemies of the gospel in the world, but it's a very different kind of love in demonstration and in proportion to the love that we have for those who are in the family of God and the body of Christ. And this is all a manifestation, in a sense, of how God loves.

Does He love all men? Yes. He loves them in the way that it is described for us. For example, turn to Matthew chapter 5 and that's a good place to begin our thinking. In Matthew chapter 5 I have just made reference to it a moment ago, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy is what you've heard, but I say to you, love your enemies as well as your neighbor and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

So you're to love your enemies the way that God loves His enemies. How does God love His enemies? He loves His enemies in a way that He pours on them certain temporal blessings. He lets them enjoy a sunrise. He lets them enjoy life in the world, if you will. That's what that sunrise sort of indicates, the day and the joys of the day, and the joys of life. And He lets the rain fall on them so that their crops will grow and they can be fed. Their animals will flourish.

In other words, this is the love that theologians have always called common grace. God loves all men in this very broad-based way of being benevolent to them in their temporal lives. In this sense, Timothy 4:10 says, "He's the Savior of all men." We all understand that the wages of sin is death, right? Or to use the Old Testament language, "The soul that sins, it shall die." And death is the penalty for every sin and yet we sin and we go on living. All men sin and they go on living. And this is to demonstrate that God loves man in a temporal way by withholding from them the judgment that they deserve. He does not give it when sinners deserve it, as a general rule. He in Romans 2:4 reveals to us through the Apostle Paul that He is demonstrating forbearance. He is demonstrating patience to sinners in order that it might lead them to repentance from their sin. God is patient. God is characterized by goodness and kindness. God withholds judgment. God lets sinners enjoy life, the sunshine, the rain and all that life produces of beauty and delight. This is the way He loves everyone.

And this is similar to the way we are called upon to demonstrate as Christians that we are sons of our Father by loving people in a temporal sense, in the sense that we demonstrate compassion to them,

in the sense that we do good to them. We do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith but we do good to all men. We are called upon to demonstrate that kind of love that alleviates their suffering, that demonstrates kindness, that shows mercy, compassion and sympathy to them, that makes provision for them, that gives space in our world for them, that shows kindness to them.

But in the case of God, there's a completely different kind of love that He demonstrates to His own, even as there is a different kind of love that we demonstrate to the body of Christ, those who are fellow believers. This is a love that is unique. This is a love that is specific. This is a love that has not a temporal end in view but a spiritual end in view, an eternal end in view. Common grace, that love of God which allows sinners to enjoy the best of this world, is a temporary and a physical expression of love. But the kind of love that we're talking about that comes to those who belong to Him, who are His chosen, is an eternal love and a spiritual love.

Now all of us are born into the world as sinners, all of us. No one escapes that. We are born in sin. We are born as enemies of God. We are all rejecters of God. We are all rejecters of His love. And yet, in His sovereign purpose He penetrates that rejection which is universal, even though He pours out the goodness of common grace, rejection is universal and left to ourselves, we would all reject God permanently and all perish and all end up in hell.

But God penetrates that universal rejection to give some sinners a special love. They don't earn it. They don't deserve it. He chooses to penetrate and forgive certain sinners set on them special love which is spiritual eternal. And it for those that He is determined to love by His uninfluenced sovereign choice, it is for those that He provided a real atonement.

So He does love the world with a generous sparing compassionate providential love and even offers to them the good news of salvation by faith in Him. This compassionate love, this goodness of God, this gospel offer is meant to awaken the sinner to God's saving nature and lead that sinner to repentance. But because of the utter wickedness of the sinful heart, the sinner stubbornly persists in rejection and that persistence will plunge the sinner into hell itself. But along the way, as all of us are in the category of rejecters by nature of this vast love of God, there is a love that breaks through the impenetrable barrier from the divine side. This love is not for everyone, it is limited to those whom the Lord chooses to love. It is this love that is the most stunning and staggering aspect of God's love in Scripture. And I want you to understand it biblically.

Open your Bible now at this moment to John 13...John 13. And I'm going to show you a number of scriptures that will help us to get a grip on this love. My purpose in doing this is to let you know as a believer what God has by His sovereign will determined to do for you and through you and to you and with you forever, to His everlasting glory and your everlasting joy.

In John 13:1 before the feast of the Passover, “Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” Here we are introduced to this love by which our Lord loves His own who were in the world. And the last phrase is what I want to point you to. “He loves His own who are in the world with a love that is to the end,” *eis telos* in the Greek, to the max, to the uttermost, to the finish, to completion, to perfection, comprehensively. It’s a very, very sweeping statement. In fact, it is a form of the statement that is translated in the New Testament “forever, eternally.” He has a love for all men in a physical, temporal sense by which they experience common grace and certain temporal and physical blessings, but He loves His own eternally...eternally. He does not love everyone eternally, clearly those who continually reject Him will feel not His love but His hate. In Psalm 5:5 it says, “You hate all who do iniquity.”

So on the one hand, we can say that there is a love of God that is temporal and physical, demonstrated to all sinners in the fact that judgment is withheld, the gospel is presented, common grace is dispensed to them, but when rejection is permanent and final, that love will turn into hate. That hate will end up in judgment. But for some whom our Lord has identified from before the foundation of the world, their rejection is penetrated by a love that isn’t simply temporal and physical but a love that is spiritual and everlasting. It is love to the max, to use the language of John 13:1, it is love to the fullest extent, it is love unlimited. It is love that cannot be measured in degrees for it is everlasting love. And we who have come to know Christ have become by the sovereign purposes of God the beneficiaries not because we deserved it, not because we’re less sinful than anybody else, but purely because God has chosen to set His love on us. It is a wonder of all wonders.

Now I want you to look at Deuteronomy chapter 7. We’re going to look at several Old Testament texts. Deuteronomy chapter 7, this is referring to Israel. Probably should go down to verse 6, we commented on this recently, this same passage. “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” If you’re having any trouble with the right doctrine of sovereign election, you need to sort of camp on this verse for a while and ask yourself why Israel was blessed by God. Was it something they had earned? Was it something they had deserved? No, it is simply because God, the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

And then in verse 7 it says, “The Lord did not set His love on you, nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.” It wasn’t because of the great impact you were having on the world. It wasn’t because of the massive influence you had by the sheer force of numbers, not at all. It was, verse 8, because the Lord loved you. He set His love on you, He chose you simply because He loved you. Why did He love them? Because He determined to love them. God chose Israel not because they were better than other nations, not because they were bigger than other nations, not because they were more worthy than other nations, but purely because

He determined to love them.

And by the way, it wasn't the whole nation. It was not the entire nation. It was not the entire race of Jews from Abraham on through all of human history. It was always going to be a remnant, a small number of Jews within the nation Israel. In Romans chapter 9 we understand how this unfolds. Verse 27, "Isaiah cries out concerning Israel," this is taken from the Old Testament, Isaiah 10:22, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved." Though the numbers themselves are like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved. Paul says in Romans 2, "Not all Israel is Israel." Paul says in Galatians 3:7, "Those who are of faith are the true sons of Abraham."

So Deuteronomy 7 is simply saying God chose this nation and out of this nation He chose to love a people eternally, a remnant out of that nation. There was a remnant early in their history as the nation went apostate and stayed that way with a few recoveries along the way, it was always a group within the nation who were the true Israelites on whom God had set His love and it is so even today, there is a remnant it will be so in the future when at the end of the age the Lord saves all Israel, a greater revival of Jews coming to salvation than any time in history after the rebels are purged out, it's still a remnant. And this is by divine design.

I don't think there's any better way to show you the reality of this, certainly there's no more dramatic way to show it to you than to have you look at Ezekiel 16...Ezekiel 16. This is the most interesting chapter in Ezekiel's prophecy and there are many, many interesting chapters in Ezekiel. When I did the Study Bible which came out back in 1996, the first set of notes that I wrote on any book in the Bible was on the book of Ezekiel. I went away for two or three weeks and isolated myself with the book of Ezekiel to work out all the notes in Ezekiel and to cull them all down to explain all of the very challenging aspects of Ezekiel.

I remember that period of time very well, long days, long hours, little sleep, wrestling with this tremendous book. I also remember that after three weeks, I was finished with Ezekiel and I said to myself, "One down and sixty-five to go, this will never happen...this will never happen." But by the goodness of the Lord, it did. And it was during that time of going through Ezekiel that the sixteenth chapter became a powerful, powerful chapter that had an impact, a lasting impact on my mind and on my heart. This is a vivid chapter. It's the most vivid chapter in Ezekiel's prophecy, maybe the most forceful and there are a lot of very vivid chapters. It demonstrates God's forgiving eternal love that penetrates rejection and seeks out its object.

The story of Israel is presented in the sixteenth chapter. It really is a chapter on history in a kind of a...kind of a symbolic way. It is ugly, almost loathsome, sorted imagery. Some of the rabbis said it should never be read in public, so they skipped it. It focuses on the gracious electing, saving, forgiving, eternal love of God for His own inside Israel. It was a nation Israel who received the

common grace, the blessings of God, as we said this morning, and prophets the covenants, the adoption, the promises, the Messiah. Within that nation, the remnant received that special love, that eternal saving love and you see it in this chapter. Let's move through it rapidly because there's 63 verses here.

"The Word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of Man,'...that's what Ezekiel is called, son of man, 'Son of Man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations.'" All right, you're going to bring a prophecy to Jerusalem, it's going to be another one of these warning prophecies about the judgment to come, which, of course, is the Babylonian captivity, which comes in 586 B.C. to start with...to end with, rather, after two earlier deportations into Babylon, culminating in 586 B.C. with a final deportation. This is the judgment of God as they're hauled off for 70 years to live in Babylon. So this is in Ezekiel revelation from God that is going to explain this history that has led to this coming judgment.

"Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem, 'Your origin and your birth are from the land of the Canaanite, your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.'" Amorites and Hittites, by the way, were general names for the dwellers in Canaan. And what this is saying is referring us to the pagan origins of Jerusalem. In its original form, Jerusalem was a pagan place, occupied by the Jebusites. It was idolatrous and, of course, it reverted back to being very idolatrous. It had gone back to its Canaanite origins, if you will, by Ezekiel's day and that's why Ezekiel was in the early deportations of the people of Israel into Babylon in the captivity.

So he says, "Your origins were from Canaanites, Amorites and Hittites. You remember when they came into the land, those were the people who were there. "As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing. You were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths. When the nation was first formed and first brought together and first called by God, the nation was frail and defenseless and poor and liable to perish, like a baby thrown in a field was Israel in Egypt...in Egypt." It received no pity from the Egyptian powers, like a baby thrown away. This was a common practice in the pagan world. If you didn't want your baby, you didn't take care of it. Once it was born, you just left it with the cord hanging out of its navel and threw it in a field. Verse 5, "No eye looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you." Babies were rubbed in salt, wrapped in cloths, washed with water, salt being a disinfectant. "Nobody had compassion on you," verse 5. "You were thrown out into the open field, you were hated on the day you were born." This is a picture of Israel in Egypt. They barely had been formed as a nation in the patriarchal period, and there they are in the field.

"When I passed by you...verse 6...and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live.' Yes I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live.'" This is God coming along and rescuing Israel. Israel is described as ugly and bloody and dirty. God sees them squirming, as it were, in the dirt, comes along to give them life. "I made you numerous like plants of the field." Remember how they grew in the land of Goshen and became a threat to Egypt? "You grew up, you

became tall and reached the age for fine ornaments, your breasts were formed, your hair had grown, yet you were naked and bare.” This speaks of the fact that Israel began to grow and multiply and flourish. “And yet, still was not properly cared for, properly honored.”

“Then I passed by you,” in verse 8, “and saw you and you were at the time for love. You had reached mature age. I spread my skirt over you.” That was a symbolic way to demonstrate that you desired to marry a young lady. “And I covered your nakedness. I cloaked you. I swore to you, meaning covering nakedness. I brought a proper garment to cover you and I determined to take you as my bride. And I swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine, declares the Lord God.”

It was in Egypt that God said, “I’m going to take you as My bride. I’m going to wash you, I’m going to anoint you. I’m going to lavish you with gifts. I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you, anointed you with oil.” This is all metaphoric language for the Lord coming to the rescue of the nation, caring for the nation, bringing the nation to the land of promise. “I clothed you with embroidered cloth, put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet.” Take that, you environmentalists. “I wrapped you with fine linen, covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck. I also put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.” This is lavish goodness as God takes this nation that was bare with only the most meager adornment and adorns that nation with immense beauty.

We all understand, don’t we?, the wealth began to flourish, didn’t it?, under Saul and David and Solomon, so much so that the people had more than they needed. When they went to build the temple, they brought some of their jewelry, some of their gold, it was melted down to make articles for that house of God. You were adorned, verse 13, with gold and silver, your dress was of fine linen, silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey and oil, you were so exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty and your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.” And you remember in 1 Kings it says, “The Queen of Sheba came to see the wondrous, wondrous wealth of Solomon and the people of Israel.”

You would then assume that a nation of people who had been so lavishly loved by divine husband would have responded with the right kind of response. Not so.

When Israel comes into the land, when Israel is lavished at the pinnacle of their riches under the reign of Solomon, the end is near, right? Because it was after Solomon the Kingdom was fractured, split in half and one disaster followed another in the north and the south.

Here is why, verse 15, “You trusted in your beauty. You played the harlot. I was your husband, I was the one who made a covenant with you. I was the one who made you My bride. I was the one who lavished you, says God. But you played the harlot because of your fame. You poured out your

harlotries on every passer by who might be willing with shameless abandon. Every gracious gift of the loving, loyal husband was taken and devoted to the insanity of spiritual harlotry.” What’s He talking about? They began to take their lavish gifts and pour them out on the altar of false gods, idols. Children even were offered as sacrifices to Molech, according to 2 Kings 16, 2 Kings 21. “My children,” God says. Israel becomes an impotent harlot without control, without conscience. “You took your embroidered cloth and covered them,” that is idols, “and offered My oil and My incense before them, also My bread which I gave you, fine flour and honey with which I fed you, you would offer before them for a soothing aroma. So it happened, declares the Lord God. Moreover you took your sons and daughters whom you had born to Me and sacrificed them to idols, to be devoured. Where your harlotries so small a matter you slaughtered My children? Offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through fire. Besides all your abominations and harlotries you did not remember the days of your youth when you were naked and bare and squirming in your blood.” This kind of bold and brazen ingratitude is really stunning that they would respond to God in such a fashion.

Verse 23, “It came about after all your wickedness, woe, woe to you, declares the Lord God. You built yourself a shrine, you made yourself a high place in every square.” These high places were for the worship of all the gods of the Canaanites. “You built yourself a high place at the top of every street, made your beauty abominable, you spread your legs to every passerby to multiply your harlotry. You also played the harlot with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, multiplied your harlotry to make me angry. They mad alliances with Egypt. Behold now, I have stretched out my hand against you, diminished your rations. I delivered you up to the desire of those who hate you, the daughters of the Philistines who were ashamed of your lewd conduct. You played the harlot with the Assyrians because you were not satisfied. You played the harlot with them and still were not satisfied. You also multiplied your harlotry with the land of merchants, Chaldea, yet even with this you were not satisfied. How languishing is your heart, declares the Lord God, while you do all these things, the actions of a bold-faced harlot when you built your shrine at the beginning of every street, made your high place in every square in disdain of money. You were not like a harlot.”

In other words, you didn’t do it for money. You didn’t gain anything from it. You gave yourself to false gods and idols freely. “You adulterous wife who takes strangers instead of her husband. Men give gifts to all harlots, but you give your gifts to all your lovers to bribe them to come to you from every direction for your harlotries, unless your different from those women in your harlotries in that no one plays the harlot as you do because you give money and no money is given to you, thus you’re different.” You’re not even like a normal harlot who does what she does for personal gain.

Thus says the Lord, in verse 35, “O, harlot, hear the Word of the Lord, thus says the Lord God because your lewdness was poured out and your nakedness uncovered through your harlotries with your lovers and with all your detestable idols and because of the blood of your sons which you gave to idols, therefore behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, even all those whom you loved and all those whom you hated, I will gather them against you from every direction



and expose your nakedness to them that they may see all your nakedness. I will judge you like women who commit adultery and are judged, I will bring on you the blood of wrath and jealousy. I will also give you into the hands of your lovers...that is the pagans...and they will tear down your shrines, demolish your high places, strip you of your clothing, take away your jewels and leave you naked and bare." This is describing what happened in the three great deportations into the Babylonian captivity culminating in 586 B.C. with the final deportation.

"They will incite a crowd against you...verse 40...and they will stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords," which is exactly what the Babylonians did when they came. "They will burn your houses with fire, they will execute judgment on you in the sight of many women. Then I will stop you from playing the harlot and you will also no longer pay your lovers, so I will calm My fury against you and My jealousy will depart from you and I will be pacified and angry no more." God will satisfy His wrath with this judgment. "Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, you enraged Me by all these things. Behold, I in turn will bring you conduct down on your own head, declares the Lord God, so that you will not commit this lewdness on top of all your other abominations." And mark it, from the time that Israel went into the Babylonian captivity, the final deportation of 586 B.C. and 70 years later came back under Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem, to rebuild a temple, to this present day the Jewish people have never followed idols...never. This was it, God said. You will not do this again.

Then in verses 44 and following, and I'm not going to read all of it, all the way down to verse 59, He says, "You're like Sodom and Gomorrah who were in the land before there was a nation, before Abraham came, your wickedness outstrips Sodom. Your wickedness outstrips Samaria." Samaria was in the north, a wicked evil pagan city. Sodom was in the south, a wicked evil pagan city. He says Sodom is your sister and Samaria is your sister, you're of that family. And the railing goes on against them because of what they had done.

Now that gets us down to verse 60 and this is what I want you to see. First word in verse 60 is "Nevertheless...nevertheless, I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you."

God had made a promise and God would keep it. "Then when that time comes, you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both your older and your younger, and I will give them to you as daughters, but not because of your covenant, thus I will establish My covenant with you and you shall know that I am the Lord."

In other words, the day is coming when you will know that I am the Lord. Sodom will be destroyed. Samaria was unredeemed. Israel is worse than Sodom, Israel is worse than Samaria but God is going to restore Israel. Why? Because He made a covenant with them so that, verse 63, "You may remember and be ashamed and never open your mouth anymore because of your humiliation...listen to this...when I have forgiven you for all that you have done, the Lord God declares."

Wow! Israel is worse than Sodom. Israel is worse than Samaria. Sodom is destroyed already. Samaria is destroyed and left unredeemed already. But Israel, now constituted in Judah, is a special object of God's love. He will not recover Sodom and He will not recover Samaria, but He will recover Judah and Israel because He made a promise, He made a covenant.

In Jeremiah 31 verse 3, the Lord appeared and said, "I will be God of all the families of Israel and they shall be My people, thus says the Lord, the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness, Israel when it went to find its rest, the Lord appeared to him from afar saying, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have drawn you with everlasting kindness.'"

Why is any Jew in the nation Israel drawn by God by His loving kindness? Because He has a covenant of love that He has established. God had every reason to hate the nation with a perfect hatred, but within that nation of Israel there is a remnant. Why does God treat them this way? Because He made a covenant. One day He will forgive you for all that you have done.

He set His love upon that nation and the people within that nation that He determined He would love savingly.

Romans 11:5 says, "At the present time...even during Paul's time, as now, as all through history...there is a remnant in Israel according to God's gracious choice, a remnant in Israel according to God's gracious choice." And some day in the final end, there will be a larger remnant, I believe, than ever when two thirds of Israel, the rebels, will be purged out, the one third constituting the final remnant. And Romans 11:26 says the Deliverer will come from Zion and remove ungodliness from Jacob. The greatest revival that will ever happen, Isaiah 45:17 refers to it, as Israel being saved with an everlasting salvation.

"This is My covenant," God says in Romans 11:27, "when I take away their sins." There is then a promise of a final great and glorious salvation of a remnant of Jews in the end days. And the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable, Romans says, we're moving toward that. But in the meantime in all ages there is this remnant. God has not rejected His people which He foreknew, but He has chosen them and all along through human history He has chosen and the rest were hardened, says Romans 11:7. God has determined by His own sovereign purpose to penetrate unbelief, rebellion and sin, corruption, ingratitude which would be true of all of us, to penetrate that with saving, transforming love and He does that for whom He chooses.

Turn to 2 Samuel 12, let me show you another. Second Samuel 12, this is a very poignant statement, 2 Samuel 12...verse 24, very interesting statement. "David comforted his wife Bathsheba, that's an illicit kind of comfort, by the way. Went in to her and lay with her." It's not his wife, right? At first...the whole relationship was foul from the beginning. And she gave birth to a son and he named him

Solomon.” And look at the next line, David was sinful, Bathsheba was sinful. Solomon was born out of this illicit union. But the next line says, “Now the Lord...what?...loved him.” Why? Did he deserve it? Was this a reward for adultery and murder? The Lord loved Solomon?

The prophet Nathan even gave Solomon a nickname in the next verse. “Sent word through Nathan the prophet and he named him Jedidiah, he gave him a nickname, Jedidiah.” What does that mean? Loved by God. The Lord loved Solomon. When Solomon was only an infant, not a believer, yet the Lord set His saving love on him and declared it at his birth. Was Solomon worthy of such love? Did he earn it with his vast incomprehensible sexual sin? His multiple wives? His dabbling in idolatry? His foolish behavior? God set His love on him because God determined to do it. He was delighted to love Solomon graciously.

Years after Solomon, after his life was over, Nehemiah returns from Persia to rebuild the walls from Persian Babylonian Empire. Nehemiah comes back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. When Nehemiah discovered, when he got back, that Israelites who didn't go off in captivity, who had kind of escaped the captivity and were still back in the land, were intermarried with foreign pagan people, idolatrous people. They had married idolatrous women. He outlawed those marriages between Jews and pagans. And he said, “Did not Solomon, king of Israel, sin regarding these things?” Yes he did, he married all kinds of pagan wives. “Yet among the many nations...says Nehemiah, Nehemiah 13:26...there was no king like him and he was loved by his God.”

Really an astounding reality. In the midst of holding up Solomon's sin as a negative example, not to be emulated, Nehemiah affirms that this sinner was loved in a special way by God. What an illustration that God loves whom He will in spite of themselves. When He chooses to love redemptively and eternally, He fully forgives and will never release the loved one from that love.

Solomon, by the way, despite his sin, came to a place in his life where he responded to the love of God. I think it was later in his life that's why in Ecclesiastes he says, “If there's anything you need to know, it's this. Remember your Creator in the days of your...what?...your youth.” But 1 Kings 3:3 says, “Now Solomon loved the Lord.” Now Solomon loved the Lord. Despite of the fact that He sacrificed and burned incense on high places. God set His love on him and God enabled him to love in return. And even though he sinned, he was forgiven by that sovereign saving love. God's saving love penetrates through rejection. It covers sin. It applies grace. It forgives forever. And it turns the heart of the sinner to love in return. First John 4:19, “We love Him because...what?...He first loved us.” This is a momentous reality, this kind of love. And that is the kind of love that we experience as believers. That's why he meant in John 13:1 when it says He loved him to the max, beyond what is physical, beyond common grace, beyond what is temporal that is limited to this life, to love them spiritually and to love them everlastingly.

We don't deserve forgiveness any more than the next person, right? It is purely an act of sovereign love. This is incomprehensible to us. As I've often said, it is darkness to our intellect why He has chosen us, but sunshine to our souls, right? But it never happens in a life that doesn't reciprocate. I'm so glad that it says in 1 Kings 3:3, "Solomon loved the Lord." God initiates the love and we respond. When He sets His saving love on anyone, that life is regenerated, that soul is transformed and begins to love in return. We sing about it, "O how He loves you and me," and we sing in response to that, "I love You, Lord." That's what it means to be a believer. But we love Him only because He first loved us.

In the councils of eternity, He determined who He would love savingly. And it is for those that He determined to love savingly that Jesus went to the cross and paid in full an actual penalty for their sins. This is what Scripture teaches.

When Jesus was on the cross dying in Luke 23:34 He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Just exactly who was He praying for? Forgive who? Who's them? "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." What was He saying, forgive all the Romans and bring them all to heaven? I don't think so. Was He saying, "Forgive all the Pharisees and scribes and members of the Sanhedrin and Sadducees and priests who railed against Him and stirred up the crowd, was He forgiving all the people who cried 'Crucify Him.' Was He forgiving all the nation who were complicit in His death. What did He mean, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they're doing?" What was the prayer and how could it be answered?

Well you can see how it was answered. He was simply affirming the purposes of God to give forgiveness to sinners, even the sinners who were involved in His death. Don't let that change the eternal purpose. And the prayer was answered immediately. One of the two thieves was in Paradise that day, right? He was one forgiven. One of the Centurions who tradition calls Longinus who was in charge of the crucifixion said, "Truly this was the Son of God." The Lord saved a Roman and a thief and if you get into the book of Acts it says, "Many of the priests believed on Him."

He was praying for the forgiveness of God to be given to those upon whom the Father had set His everlasting love and that the horrendous crime of all crimes, sin of all sins would not alter that forgiving love. There were some in the blood-thirsty mob that were forgiven. There was at least one among the Romans and maybe more because the soldiers agreed with what the Centurion said. And there was one of the two thieves that experienced that forgiveness.

When we think about the salvation that we possess, we give all the glory to God, right? Because it is totally His plan. And yet the tension comes because sinners bear the responsibility for the rejection and we always have to say, "How God resolves that in His own mind, we don't know, but what is clear is that salvation is totally a work of God for which He is to be praised." We give ourselves no credit, He gets all the glory.

Father, we thank You for the time that we've been able to spend tonight looking at this very often overlooked reality of what it really means to be loved savingly. What can we say? This is staggering truth to us, that You would have determined to love us with an everlasting love before anything was ever even created and that we are here and we belong to You because of that sovereign love. Fill us with gratitude. May we never be like Israel. May we never show one moment of ingratitude, one moment of disobedience, one moment of lovelessness toward You. How can we do less than love You with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and we have been so loved. Produce that love in us, Shed it abroad in our hearts, by Your Holy Spirit we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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