

“Jesus' Love”
Exodus 33, 34
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Several years ago, Ron Nikkel and Charles Colson of the Prison Fellowship organization, visited a maximum security prison in Zambia, Africa.

Ron's and Chuck's guide, named Nego had been incarcerated in that same institution.

He described for them a secret inner prison built to hold the worst offenders.

To Nego's amazement, one of the guards agreed to let Nego show Ron and Chuck that inner prison.

Ron Nikkel described the experience:

He said, "We approached a steel cage-like building covered with wire mesh.

Cells lined the outside of the cage, surrounding a dirt area - about 15 by 40 feet.

Twenty-three hours of each day the prisoners are kept in cells so small they cannot all lie down at once.

For one hour each day they are allowed to walk around in a small circle in the "postage stamp-sized" courtyard.

Nego had spent twelve years in those cells.

“When we approached the inner prison, we could see sets of eyes peering at us from a two-inch space in the steel gate.

And when the gate swung open, it revealed squalor unlike any I had seen elsewhere.

There were no sanitation facilities for 120 men.

“The blazing African sun had heated up the steel enclosure unbearably.

And I could hardly breathe in the foul, stifling atmosphere of that place.

I wondered to myself, "How can human beings possibly live in such a place."

And yet here is what happened when Nego told them that we were Christians from Prison Fellowship.

Eighty of the 120 prisoners went to the back wall and assembled in rows.

At a signal they began singing - hymns, Christian hymns in beautiful four-part harmony.

Nego whispered to me that 35 of the 80 men singing had been sentenced to death and would soon face execution.

And yet they sang.

How could they sing in such a place?

I soon discovered these men were captured by the love of Jesus.

In a certain way, the typical celebration of Christmas does a great disservice to people's idea of Jesus.

Too many Americans have a sentimentalized idea of Jesus in a manager - meek and mild.

We connect Christmas with all virtues, soft and sweet, and forget that Jesus' birth was not to emphasize home, motherhood, warmth, and hospitality but His birth was **the coming of God to earth** - God became a man.

And his coming was the supreme manifestation of grace - or as the Apostle John wrote it, 1 John 4:10 "This is love not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

The pre-existent, eternally-existing Son of God, Jesus, was born into our world. He came into our world because he loves us.

I want you to look with me in the Bible to the Old Testament text of Exodus 34 to see a great description of Jesus – the God who also became man.

In Exodus chapters 20-32 we find the record of God giving to Moses the law to protect and purify the children of God - the Israelites.

But while Moses was on Mt. Sinai, the people grew impatient and made a god for themselves out of gold - a golden man-made god to

worship.

God's anger burned hot against them but for His own name's sake and out of grace he forgave the people.

So impressed was Moses with God's mercy that Moses in Exodus 33:18 said, "Now show me your glory."

And the Lord said, (verse 19) "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence."

Now what Moses was about to see was something of who God is - he was going to get a glimpse of something that would reveal what God is like - he was going to see the glory of the Lord.

Moses said, "Show me your glory."

When the Apostle John was describing Christmas, the birth of Jesus, he described it this way: "**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only...**"

The same God who came to earth, at Christmas, revealing his glory is the same God who revealed his glory to Moses in Exodus 34.

That is how I could say that in this passage in the Old Testament we will see the glory of the Lord Jesus.

So, we learn, in Exodus 34, that the next morning Moses went up the mountain and then (verses 5 & 6) "Then the Lord came down in a cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate, and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...'"

The passage doesn't tell us exactly what Moses saw with his physical eyes but so overwhelmed was Moses by the significance of what he saw and heard that he immediately dropped to the ground in worship.

While we aren't told what was impressed upon Moses' eyes that day,

we are told what was impressed on his heart - **he saw the glory of the Lord** - and the words describe that **he saw the love of the Lord**.

I. Look at that 6th verse, if ever there was a description of Jesus' love it is here.

First of all he calls himself the "compassionate God".

In this he is describing his **tenderness** toward us.

When Jesus approached Jerusalem centuries later it is recorded that he wept over the people of that city - his heart was moved.

Have you ever felt your insides hurt for someone else?

This week I sat in the hospital room of a young woman of our church who delivered a stillborn child.

When you have sit by a friend who is racked with pain or grief doesn't your heart just hurt for them – mine does and did?

That's something of the emotion of tenderness Jesus feels for you.

A few years ago, Cynthia MacDonald wrote a poem entitled "The Leper". In it she captures the essence of Jesus' compassionate tenderness for us.

It's the story of the socially shunned leper who came to Jesus even as a crowd of people vied for Jesus attention.

MacDonald describes it this way:

"Trapped within decaying flesh and deadened nerves and likewise deadened hope, while swirling crowds pressed close in joy at seeing Jesus near, the leper came.

No fanfare here. No words for him, no touch - his bell rang out "unclean".

How did he dare to raise his head?

He would have seen no eyes, but only shoulders turned away and clothing gathered tightly in to avoid the stench of death.

He knelt at Jesus feet.

As others shrank away from him, he shrank within himself.

With muffled voice, numbed hope awoke,

"I know that if you will, he pleaded, you can make me clean."

That "if" loomed big. Would Jesus dare?

Would Jesus risk disease and court rejection by the crowd who also needed him?

Would he dare take death upon himself? For one?

But Jesus said, "I will".

He reached through shame and filth and loneliness and touched the man with love.

He restored the life that sloughed away, and gave him back the world.

(Discipleship Journal, Nov 1986 Vol 6 #6 p23 - used in 89 also)

In a world without a "God who came" I would have had as little hope as that leper - BUT GOD DID COME!

In compassion He reached out to me one day.

Not to me as a nameless face in the multitude,
not to me as one among many,
but to me, me individually, - on **me** he had compassion.

And he likewise came for you with that kind of compassion.

II. But in Exodus 34:6 God also describes himself as a "gracious God".

This characteristic of his love speaks of **his sovereign choice** of you.

The Apostle Paul wrote that before the foundation of the world God fixed his love on you, he chose you.

When we think of Jesus' love being eternal, we most often think of it as being everlasting - that his love will never end.

But Jesus' eternal love also speaks of his love going backward in time - meaning there was no beginning to his love for you -

Before time began He fixed his love on you.

Like an adopted child, no one can call you an accident, an unplanned child. - You were sovereignly chosen.

And chosen **not** for any merit found in you, **not** for any beauty in you that attracted him to you or purchased his attention - But you and I were **chosen purely by grace**.

And he chose you and me not only when we had not earned his love but **when we deserved his wrath**.

Think of Saul of Tarsus.

He was a bitter and bloody persecutor of the early church.

He was determined to slaughter the disciples of Jesus.

The havoc he wreaked and the innocent people he ruined didn't satisfy his vengeful heart.

The more persecutions he carried out, the more he needed.

It was only because he lacked the power that he didn't kill more.

The heart of Osama Bin Laden or Joseph Stalin were no more wicked than Saul's.

But Jesus in his grace, chose Saul, forgave Saul, and admitted him into God's family and called him to service and loved him with an everlasting love.

It was Jesus' sovereign choice of Saul that turned him around.

Isn't that true of you?

Didn't he first love you and choose you?

Didn't he set his love on you and bring you to himself?

That's the grace of Jesus.

III. In Exodus 34:6 we also see that Jesus' love is "slow to anger".

Theologian A.W. Pink wrote, "The patience of Jesus is that excellency which causes him to sustain great injuries without immediately avenging himself." (Pink p 62)

I'm convinced we don't begin to understand the patience of Jesus until we know something of his holiness and justice.

Why should a holy and just Jesus tolerate our sin and rebellion for one minute?

That is patience - that his is a love that is slow to anger.
He chooses to restrain himself because he loves us.

This is one man who will be eternally grateful that God chose not to slay me but to patiently draw me to himself.

- I was born in rebellion - why didn't he slay me then?
- I ratified my sinfulness every day of my childhood and youth - why didn't he destroy me then?
- I have ever since, far too often, disregarded his sovereignty - why doesn't he be done with me?

Because his love is patient - Jesus is slow to anger.

But the Scripture is clear that we are not to presume upon his patience.

The Lord said, Genesis 6:3 "My Spirit will not contend with man forever."

Both Isaiah of the Old Testament and Paul of the New wrote, "now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your patience today.

IV. The next words in Exodus 34:6 that God uses to describe himself are that he is "abounding in love".

Another translation of that word "love" which is a little more particular

is the word "kindness".

Our Lord Jesus is abounding in kindness.

Bob Boardman of the Navigators wrote of a reunion of WWII buddies of which he was a part.

He said at the reunion we were sharing experiences in front of a fireplace in a comfortable room.

When my turn came, I told the story of June 17, 1945 when two of our tanks were hit by anti-tank fire just outside of a small village in Okinawa.

This event, which changed my life, took place just four days before the end of the last battle of WWII.

Of our crew of five, one was killed before we could evacuate the tank.

Four of us, including our badly wounded commander - Jerry Atkinson, managed to escape the burning vehicle.

Almost as soon as two of us began to carry Jerry toward our own troops on the next ridge we were cut down by enemy fire.

Escape seemed impossible.

Two of the men, we learned later, made their way back to our lines but Jerry and I were left for dead.

At that point, another man and Bud Brenkert spotted me trying to move, and with great difficulty they picked me up and put me on the back of their tank to carry me to the ridge.

There, corpsmen field dressed my wounds and I was placed on a stretcher again on the back of the tank to be taken through a no-man's valley to a battle aid station.

Riding through the valley, Bud Brenkert got out of the tank and lay across me, shielding me with his body against enemy sniper fire.

Although the badly battered tank broke down in the middle of

the valley and we were transferred to another tank, Bud never stopped sheltering me until we reached safety. - That's kindness.

As I finished telling the story to these old buddies, I again thanked Bud for his willingness to die for me.

Then I asked him, "If I had been your enemy, would you have been willing to die for me?"

Tears streamed down Bud's cheeks as **he understood the point of my question** and shook his head "no".

Bud Brenkert showed kindness but the kindness of Jesus infinitely exceeds Bud's kindness.

For while we were enemies of God, Jesus died for us.

That's why He came to Bethlehem - God sent his son into the world that through him the world might be saved.

That's how much he loves you and me.

V. Lastly this morning from Exodus 34:6 I want you to see the love of Jesus defined by his "faithfulness".

This word has to do with the complete dependability of Jesus.

Vows are broken, promises aren't kept, contracts are violated - dependability is the missing ingredient in many of the world's relationships.

But Jesus will never fail us.

The Apostle Paul wrote,

Romans 8: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the Love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

He is faithful.

Ron Nikkel writing of that day in a Zambian prison finished his story this

way:

On the walls behind where those 85 men stood singing I could make out an elaborate charcoal sketch drawn on the wall.

It showed Jesus, stretched out on a cross.

The prisoners must have spent hours working on it.

And it struck me with great force that Christ was here with these convicts.

He was sharing their suffering and giving them joy enough to sing in such a place.

He would never leave them.

Oh, the love of Jesus!

And His love for you and me is just as great.

He is compassionately tender toward you.

He has sovereignly chosen you.

He is patient with you desiring your repentance and trust.

He is abounding in kindness and

He is fully and eternally dependable.

Do you know Him?

The baby in the manger is God who came to be your savior.

On the front of your bulletin is a poem by Luci Shaw that I think powerfully captures the truth of the incarnation – God with us in the person of Jesus.

Shaw starts with the thought of the angel's announcement to Mary that "the holy one to be born will be the Son of God."

- Poem on next page -

“Made Flesh”
by Luci Shaw

After the bright beam of hot annunciation
fused heaven with dark earth
his searing sharply-focused light
went out for a while
eclipsed in amniotic gloom:
 his cool immensity of splendor
 his universal grace
 small-folded in a warm dim
 female space—

the Word stern-sentenced
to be nine months dumb—
infinity walled in a womb
 until the next enormity—the Mighty,
 after submissions to a woman’s pains
 lay helpless on the barn-bare floor
 first-tasting bitter earth.

Now, I in him surrender
to the crush and cry of birth.
 Because eternity
 was closeted in time
 he is my open door
 to forever.
 From his imprisonment my freedoms grow,
 find wings.

Now part of his body, I transcend this flesh.
From his sweet silence my mouth sings.
Out of his dark, I glow.

My life, as his,
slips through death's mesh,
time's bars,
joins hands with heaven,
speaks with stars.

John 1:14,12 "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory the glory of the One and Only, who came down
from the Father...

"To all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives
the right to become children of God...born of God."